

Pastoralia

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 June 2021

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] I'm sure you'd all agree, and it's something surely to which we all aspire, that the whole life of the Christian is to be marked by continual prayer.

The whole life of the Christian is to be marked by continual prayer. As the Apostle Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6, 18, our lives are to be characterized by this description.

Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and all supplication. And again, in 1 Thessalonians 5, 17, pray without ceasing.

But Paul himself is only reflecting the mindset of Jesus when in Matthew 26, 40, he commands his disciples saying, watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.

The whole life of the Christian is to be marked by continual prayer. But what is true for the individual Christian must also be true for the church of Christ.

[1 : 08] But the whole life of the church of Christ is to be marked by continual prayer. The early church clearly thought that way.

We find them in Acts, gathering together on a daily basis to pray. Their church life was marked by unceasing prayer. Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and all supplication.

The book of James begins with prayer. In James chapter 1, verse 5, James calls upon those who lack wisdom to ask God and he will give generously to all.

In James chapter 4, verses 2 and 3, James attributes many of the internal fights and quarrels of the church to its prayerlessness. You do not have because you do not ask.

Now as he approaches the end of his letter, James proceeds to challenge his readers to put their faith to work. Not the least in this area. That their lives both as individual Christians and as a Christian church is to be marked, are to be marked, are to be characterized, are to be dominated by prayer.

[2 : 30] Some churches say they are not so good in prayer, but they are good at social action. But you know, action without prayer is like a sailing boat with no sail.

Some churches say they want to focus on mission. But mission with no prayer is like a fishing boat with no nets. Still others say that they are good at community.

But community life with no prayer is like a car with no engine. The complete church, if there is such a thing, is to be marked, characterized, and dominated by prayer.

Robert Murray McShane, that famous 19th century minister from Dundee, once said, What a man is upon his knees is what he really is, and no more.

What a man is upon his knees is what he really is, and no more. Today's church speaks much about innovation, but very little about intercession.

[3 : 41] Much about strategies, but little about supplication. Much about programs, but little about prayer. A regrettable sign of progression in the church today is the ditching of the congregational prayer meeting.

Surely that's not progress. Surely it's regress in mission, community, and social action. The whole life of the complete church, if there is such a thing, is to be marked, characterized, and dominated by prayer.

Now James, as you know, is writing mainly to a Jewish audience, and so he chooses the example of Elijah. When we think of Elijah, perhaps we think of a mighty prophet, or a miracle worker, or perhaps even we think of his breakdown.

But when James thought of Elijah, he thought of a man in prayer. We did in verse 17, Elijah was a man of like nature to us.

It's not as if any of us can hold Elijah up as a superhuman. Elijah had everyday problems, and the same kind of issues we have. A man who struggled with the hostility of what was going on outside

him, and the hostility of his own mindset.

[5 : 07] Unlike our Lord, Elijah was a sinner just like us. This is a man to whom we can relate. And James goes on, he says, You can read about these things in 1 Kings 17 and 18.

And when we're reading these chapters, often we're drawn to the miraculous power of Elijah, and to the mighty prophecy of Elijah. But perhaps we need to read them more in the context of Elijah's fervent prayers.

Just like earlier in the passage where James references the prophets of the Old Testament and the patriarchs as examples of patience and suffering, so in this passage, he references Elijah as an example of fervency in prayer.

Or to use James' own words, the fervent prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Through prayer, Elijah caused the rain to stop, and then the rain to fall.

Through prayer, God raises the sick and forgives our sins. Through prayer, God gives strength to the sufferer and healing to the broken.

[6 : 30] James' sequence of words in verse 16 is most telling. Prayer, righteous, power, working.

And so once again I say, the whole life of the complete church, if there is such a thing, is to be marked, characterized, and dominated by prayer.

Prayer, I have entitled this sermon, Pastoralia, or to put it another way, Issues Involved in Pastoral Work.

When I was in Free Church College, or ETS as it is now, myself and my fellow students would speak to each other about what, where we went as ministers we would like to do, and what priorities, what our priorities would be as ministers when we got there.

If I had more carefully read James 5, 13 through 18, or even drawn lessons from the life of Elijah, perhaps I would have prioritized more the life of prayer of this congregation.

[7 : 44] That rather than first deal with all the pastoral problems we faced at the time, I would do what I could to engender within us a healthy culture of collective prayer.

Because when all of us are on our knees before God in prayer, not one of us is taller than any other. Collective prayer is the great equalizer and energizer of the church.

And so in this section, James 5, 13 through 18, where James is dealing with three pastoral issues among his readers, it is no surprise to find that prayer is front and center of his agenda.

The study of pastoral issues in the church must begin, continue, and end with the prayers of the people of God. This is true faith at work, when our life as Glasgow City Free Church is marked, characterized, and dominated by prayer.

If you're looking for new ideas, you're probably in the wrong place. There is nothing new to see in Glasgow City Free Church.

[9 : 01] Just people praying, just people working, just people working, just people praying. If a life of prayer is something to which we aspire as individual Christians, then surely we aspire as a church to begin and end our pastoralia with prayer.

James writes, the prayers of a righteous person has great power as it is working. In our staff meetings, we were reading through Paul Miller's book, The Praying Life.

You can pick up a copy downstairs in the church library from the West Corridor. Written from the American perspective, in American context, There is much about Miller's book which really doesn't translate well into our culture.

And Walter and me, we hated it. But one statement from Paul Miller hit home like a hammer to a nail. He said, The best parenting we can do is done in prayer.

The best parenting we can do is done in prayer. That although we'd love to step in and sort out our child's life, the best way to parent them is by prayer.

[10 : 18] If James is right and the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it's working, praying for our children is the most powerful tool in our parenting arsenal.

With that in mind, let me say that it's good for us to say that Cammie Stephen and Michael Alla and Madeleine McDougall have now all graduated from the Bible class, but that does not mean to say they graduate from our prayers.

Paul Miller has done us a great service by reminding us of this. Our best parenting is done in prayer, but not only our best parenting, our best pastoring also.

As in prayer, we hand over the reins of our concerns to God. We're putting them into more loving and powerful hands than ours. And although praying about something doesn't preclude working

towards something, our best parenting and our best pastoring will always be done in prayer. That's one reason the apostles appointed deacons in Acts chapter 6, to give them time to devote themselves to the word and to prayer.

[11 : 38] In other words, the best pastoral work we can engage in, the best way in which we can care for one another as fellow believers in this family we call Glasgow City Free Church, it's unseen work.

It is the work of personal and corporate prayer for and with each other. You might wonder to yourself, what pastoral work has been done among us during this COVID pandemic? Have you heard the prayers of other Christians on your behalf? That is always where the best pastoral work is done. So, bringing us back to the text, James writes, The prayers of a righteous person has great power as it's working.

And he provides three situations or levels at which this is true. Where the family of God is to be marked, characterized, and dominated by prayer. First of all, prayer in circumstances, verse 13. Prayer in sickness, verses 14 through 15. And prayer in sin, verse 16. Remember, if our individual lives as Christians are to aspire to a life of continual prayer, then our church's life must aspire to the same.

[12 : 55] First of all then, prayer in circumstances. Prayer in circumstances. You'll know this. Life is full of ups and downs. Our life as a congregation is full of times of joy and also times of grief.

And so James asks the question, Is anyone among you suffering? Or is anyone among you cheerful? It's a normal fact that in any church family, some will be suffering, and some will be celebrating.

And yet, although their circumstances differ from one another, they're joined in this. They both pray. They pray when they suffer. They pray when they celebrate.

Suffering doesn't stop them praying. Celebrating doesn't stop them praying. In all circumstances, they are men and women who put their faith to work by handing over the burdens of their hearts to God in prayer.

And so James says, Is anyone suffering? Let him pray. For the Christian, suffering is not an excuse to run away from God.

[14 : 06] Rather, it's the reason we run to God with all those issues that together make up our suffering. That is what we call prayer. To pray is to run to God.

And what better time to run to Him than when we're struggling with homesickness or with grief? The particular word James uses, we translate as suffering, means to suffer misfortune, to bear hardship. Perhaps we shouldn't think of it so much in context of bodily suffering, in this context. Perhaps more along the lines of our employment, or our mental health, our relationships, our possessions, our friendships.

All of us, to one extent or another, know about this kind of suffering, hardship, or misfortune. You're bullied in school. You've lost your job. You're struggling with your bills.

You've got stresses in your relationships. And James says, under whatever circumstances you find yourself, pray. Turn all these things over to God, hand them to Him, praying that He would give you His grace, wisdom, and peace to keep going.

[15 : 22] For the Christian, suffering is not an excuse to run away from God, but a reason to run to God with all those hardships which together make up your suffering.

James continues, is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. You know, a far bigger danger than a suffering Christian turning away from God is a cheerful Christian becoming complacent and falling away from God.

No longer do they feel they're in need of God. They're successful. Things are going well for them. And so rather than take their successes to God in praise, they take their successes to their friends in boasting.

The phrase, let him sing praise, constitutes only one word in the original language, the word psalm. We tend to think of the psalms as places you go when you're struggling to find expression for the way you feel.

But for James, the psalms were also a place to go when you want to give expression to your joy. Perhaps in our Scottish Presbyterian tradition, this is an aspect of the psalms we have downplayed.

[16 : 42] And if we have, it's to our considerable detriment. When a new child is born, can we not give expression to our joy using the words perhaps of Psalm 4-7 where the psalmist writes, you

have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound.

The psalms are a mountain of riches. Each golden coin a prayer of praise to God who has so worked out our circumstances to make us cheerful.

In all our successes, in all our celebrations, don't forget God. So life, you see, as you know, it's full of ups and downs.

We perhaps had more downs in the last while than ups. But prayer is the common factor for the Christian. The whole of our lives taken up in prayer. The bad times and the good times, the up times and the down times, pray about them.

Pray of them. Pray through them. This is James' righteous pastoral advice to us all. Second, in verses 14 and 15, prayer in sickness.

[18:05] Prayer in sickness. Over the centuries, there has been much written on these verses. The practice of anointing the sick with oil was sacramentalized by the Roman Catholic Church into what's called extreme unction.

However, the emphasis in the original language here is not on the oil, but on the prayer. Let them pray is the active verb, anointing them with oil, the qualifying participle.

It is appropriate that a very seriously ill Christian should invite the elders of the church to come and pray with him or her. It's an elder or minister's privilege and duty to serve his people this way.

He visits the sick. He prays with the sick. Now look very carefully with me at this text for a moment because it is one of my bugbears. It is the sick person who calls the elders to him, not the other way around.

Far too often, elders and ministers in our tradition have been blamed for not visiting. They have been blamed when the truth is, according to James, it is those who want to be visited who bear the primary responsibility for asking an elder or minister to visit.

[19:31] If you're struggling in any way, shape or form at all, pick up the phone, invite an elder or minister around and we'll come.

for those of us who are elders or ministers like me in this congregation, don't give yourself a guilt trip about not visiting when you haven't been asked to visit.

And for members and adherents of this congregation, if you're sick and you want to visit, don't expect the elders and the ministers to be psychics.

you have to let us know and then we'll be there. Anyway, back on point. The main emphasis in these verses is on prayer.

Let them pray over him. It is not on the anointing with oil. The word the ESV translates as anoints perhaps would be better translated as oils.

[20:32] The elders oil the sick patient with oil. The olive oil used here has no supernatural miraculous healing power.

It is not sacramental in any way. In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, remember this? The Samaritan rubs oil into the wounds of the man that he's found beaten and robbed.

In the world of the day, oiling with oil was a technical term for medicinal soothing. Helping to alleviate suffering, discomfort and pain.

In other words, the elders come round not just with a view to look after the spiritual well-being of that sick Christian but with a holistic concern for the Christian's physical and bodily well-being also.

We are not gnostics, we are not docketists, we believe that the body matters. If it didn't matter, why did Jesus heal the sick and make the lame walk? And so we elders in our pastoral issues, we must be concerned not just for the spiritual well-being of those we serve but also for their every other aspect of their well-being.

[21:50] Elders must sometimes act as deacons. It's our duty, it's our privilege. The anointing with all of this context, it's got no supernatural or sacramental benefit.

It is purely medicinal, it is purely therapeutic, it is the plate of faith which is the active element.

Though it may be hard and very hard indeed, there are few greater privileges for the elder or minister than to pray over a sick Christian and yes, sometimes a dying Christian.

It gives them great comfort of heart and mind. It might help to serve, it might help, it may serve to help them deal with previous sin or guilt and lead to God's forgiveness of their sin.

But then in verse 15 we're told that this prayer of faith made by the elders praying over that sick Christian will save the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up.

Let's not be blind to the plain reading of this verse summarized by the words save, raise up. to use technical terms, these are eschatological words.

[23 : 15] They don't necessarily refer to the sick person being cured in this life. There may be times when according to the will of God he chooses to use the elders, the prayers of elders to restore a sick person to health.

But the plainer way to read these words is to see them in the context of what Jesus said in John chapter 6 verse 40. Everyone who looks to the son and believes in him shall have eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day.

Let's put it even plainer. What's the worst that can happen to you if you should invite the elders to pray over you when you're sick? God may cure you then and there of your illness.

He may. God may not cure you then and there of your illness but be sure having had your sins forgiven by the gospel he will save you and raise you up at the last day to new and eternal life. Greater than the promises of extended life here and now is the promise of eternal life there and then. God shall save us and raise us up on that last day.

[24 : 27] this is very much part of the comfort that an elder brings when he prays over a sick person that though this illness may result in death death is not the end of life.

Death is the beginning of eternal life and what awaits the Christian beyond death is far greater far brighter and far better than anything we can here imagine.

I've been at the bedside of many terminally ill Christians and prayed fervently for them. They looked pale, they looked gaunt, they were either sleeping, coughing, or delirious.

I've been with some of them as they drew their last breath on this earth and it's been guy hard to stay with them and pray through it all with them. But I've learned that God's will is always best and that when life has gone from their bodies and the end has come they have gone to be with Jesus which is better by far.

But the prayer of faith, the prayer offered in faith, it achieves really so much, not the least of which is that the heart of that Christian man or woman is eased as they go from this world to the next.

[26 : 04] You can't teach this in a classroom. It is the pastoralia of real life. Well then thirdly and finally and more briefly, prayer in sin, prayer in sin.

Confess your sins to one another. Pray for one another that you may be healed. The reference in this verse seems to me anyway to be the healing of relationships.

Last week we saw the importance of truth in relationships. Truth builds trust. But when a relationship breaks between two Christians, what can we do?

Rarely do relationships break down on only one side. As Colin Mackay often wisely reminds me, there are three sides to every story. There is his side, there is her side, and there is the truth.

Do you have any broken relationships in your life? I do. And it causes me great pain. God's prescription to our broken relationships is mutual confession and mutual prayer.

[27 : 21] Not just one side confessing sin to the other, but both confessing to each other the wrongs that they have inflicted upon each other, and then mutual prayer for one another.

It's very difficult to hold a grudge against someone when you're praying with them, and you're praying for them. Again, you can't teach this in a classroom. It's real life.

When two people are disagreeing with each other in the church, get them together. Get them to confess their sins to each other. Get them to pray with each other, and for each other. This is God's way of repairing and restoring broken relationships between brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Deal with the break. By mutual confession and mutual prayer. Here it is, James 5, 16 in black and white. If this is true, and I have no doubt it is, then our church, then any church, must be marked, characterized, and dominated by prayer.

Because for sure up until now, as you will all know, Presbyterianism in Scotland has had the reputation of being marked, characterized, and dominated by division.

[28 : 41] Well, as I close this evening, I want to remind you that James, the author of this book, had a nickname by which he was more commonly known by the early Christians.

After the early church fathers, we may call him James the Righteous, but his contemporaries gave him a rather less flattering name. They called him camel's knees.

Camel's knees. For those of you who have ridden on a camel, you will know a few things about a camel's knees. They are very knobbly indeed.

Very knobby. I'm not sure they called James camel's knees for that reason. After all, to my knowledge, he never wore a kilt, so we would never know whether he had knobby knees or not. But more importantly, camels lie on their knees. And because of that, their knees become calloused and hardened.

[29 : 41] That's why they called James camel's knees. It was a reference to how much time James spent on his knees in prayer. He spent so long in prayer on his knees that his knees became calloused and hardened, just like those of a camel.

So when James is talking about prayer, he's talking about something he knows a great deal about. His life was so marked and characterized and dominated by prayer that the skin on his knees had become calloused and hard.

When it comes to pastoralia, the discipline of loving, shepherding and discipling one another, we must aspire as individual Christians and as a church to have camel's knees.

To have camel's knees. Wouldn't it be great? Wouldn't it be something if we as a church were known for our camel's knees rather than for our model's face? families? Whoops. d duckling