

Teach Us to Pray - Part 3

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[0 : 00] Well, please turn your Bibles to James, chapter 5. And this morning our attention will be directed to verses 13 through 18.

! It is a passage that is prominently featured in almost any discussion about praying for the sick and is the basis for much debate and disagreement among Christians.

The Roman Catholic Church bases its erroneous sacrament of extreme unction on this passage. And for those of you who may not know what extreme unction is, it's when a person is near death or even dead.

They would call for the priest and he would anoint their feet and eyes and hands and everywhere they think you can commit sin and they would pray that sins will be forgiven if they were committed with these members of the body.

And clearly, I believe you will see as we look at this passage that there is no basis of support for that practice in this passage.

[1 : 35] But this passage is also used by many faith healers who claim to be faith healers. And they say that it is the basis upon which we have a guarantee that all faith-filled prayer will result in healing for those who are sick.

And then others use this passage as a case study for anointing people with oil. But exactly what is this passage about? Is it about those things or is it about something else?

Let's read it and then let's ask for God's help in opening this passage for our understanding and our benefit. James chapter 5, starting in verse 13.

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

[2 : 46] And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed.

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours and he prayed fervently that it might not rain.

And for three years and six months, it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain and the earth bore its fruit.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you this morning for your word. And Lord, more than that, we thank you that with your word you have given us the Holy Spirit.

[3 : 52] And we ask this morning that you would grant us illumination through your Holy Spirit as we open your word this morning, as we consider this passage before us.

Father, I pray that you would give us all open and receptive hearts. I pray that you would grant me grace to be faithful, to stay within the four corners of the text, and also, Lord, to be safeguarded from error and from excess.

Lord, there are particular ones, no doubt, who are in need of hearing from you more than the rest of us, although we all need to hear from you concerning this passage, because of personal experience in their own lives.

But Lord, you know all of us, and you know our circumstances. So we ask that you would superintend the preaching of your word and apply it to our hearts according to your knowledge and your wisdom.

So we ask for your help this morning. In Jesus' name. Amen. But despite the use of this passage to support the glorious teachings like the Roman Catholic Church's Sacrament of Extreme Unction and the Faith Healers' claim that all sick Christians are guaranteed healing through prayer, here's what James is saying in this passage.

[5 : 28] This is a summary of what James is saying in this passage. This is a summary of what James is saying in this passage. Followers of Christ are called to a life of faithful communion with God, praying in life's sorrows, and praising in life's joys.

That's what James, I believe, and I think you will see that as we go through it, that's the message that he is proclaiming. It's always easy to go in a message and extract one piece and say that this is what he was really saying and it ends up being a misrepresentation because it's taken out of a broader context of what is being communicated.

Perhaps you've had that experience where you said something and someone took one part of it and they re-quoted that and it was a distortion of what you actually said.

But James is saying in this passage, whatever circumstances a believer may face in life, he or she must reference God, praying to him in their sorrows and praying and praising him in their joys.

Let's consider how James makes this point and we will do so under two headings. The first is a life of faithful prayer. A life of faithful prayer.

[7 : 01] James begins by asking three questions. And in the first two questions, every one of us this morning can locate ourselves.

Look at verse 13. James writes, The King James Version reads, Is any among you afflicted?

Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing psalms. So whether singing praise or psalms, our praise and our psalms are really directed to God.

So the prayer obviously is directed to God, but also praise and psalms are to be sung to God. So in both directions, we're looking to God. But to expand on James' question, let me ask you, when you evaluate your life right now, when you think about your life broadly, is your life marked by suffering?

Are you facing trials and challenges and temptation and unrest in your soul?

[8 : 22] Or is your life, your present circumstances marked by happiness of heart? Not necessarily the absence of trouble, but is it marked by this cheerfulness of spirit?

When we summarize James' response to each question, he's essentially saying, whatever your situation is, whether you are suffering or cheerful, faithfully commune with God.

Commune with him in prayer if you're suffering and commune with him in praise if you're cheerful. But the truth is, all of us this morning would find ourselves in one of these categories.

And I know the line may be blurred for some of us, but nonetheless, there is a particular response that we are to be having towards the Lord in whatever circumstance we find ourselves this morning.

Now there are some people who do exactly what James is saying. When they're suffering, they pray. They turn more to God. But I would venture to say, and I think you would agree with me, that that is not our natural response, generally speaking.

[9 : 41] When we suffer, we tend to complain. When we suffer, we tend to talk to others more than we talk to God. And so many times, when God in his sovereignty brings suffering our way, one of his goals is to draw our souls in closer and more constant communion with him in prayer.

And when we understand this, this will be the result of it. When we understand this, we would recognize that our trials and the tests and the sufferings that we have, we would recognize that God is using them to draw us nearer to him.

Now if you hold the erroneous view that all suffering is from the devil, as some people do, then instead of accepting the sovereignty of God in our lives and seeing his plan and purpose and using our suffering to draw us to him, we rebuke the devil.

We ignore God and we rebuke the devil and we don't pray to God. On the other hand, there are believers who are cheerful.

They're on the road that the sun is shining on and everything is wonderful as far as they are able to see, at least the things that really matter. They're happy in their souls. But instead of praising God for his goodness and for his blessings and for his grace, they become complacent and lazy and self-sufficient.

[11 : 12] And they don't connect the dots that the enjoyments of life point back to God. And they should be lifting up praise to him instead.

And so many a cheerful soul need seasons of suffering to cause them to look to the Lord. And some even rebel against God in times of adversity instead of praying to him when God would have turned the circumstances.

Now it's important to note what James is not saying as we try to understand his overall point. It's important to note what James is not saying. James is not saying that the suffering must only pray.

And he's not saying that the cheerful must only sing praise. No. We who suffer can praise God as well. And in the midst of singing our praises to God, we can certainly pray.

But what James is saying to us is these things should primarily mark us when we find ourselves in these circumstances. If we're suffering, prayer and communion with God in that way should primarily be what we are doing.

[12 : 33] We should carve out more time to do that. When our lives are filled with the blessings of God and we are cheerful, we should be more intentional to praise God and lift up our voices to him in praise and thanksgiving for his blessings.

But notice that James doesn't tell us specifically what we should pray. He doesn't tell us specifically what we should sing to God. But in each case, he wants us to talk to God.

And that's the point that he's making. He wants us to be communing with God whatever the circumstances, whether suffering or cheerfulness. So I want to ask you to consider this morning if suffering best describes your circumstance, are you praying to God?

Are you intentionally carving out time to pray to God to bring that circumstance before him very specifically? And if you are, I commend you.

And I pray that God will meet you in powerful ways as you pray. But if you're not, I encourage you to heed Scripture's call to pray. And if you're cheerful, are you singing?

[14 : 02] Are you lifting your voice to God in song? And there's no excuse to say, well, I can't sing. I, you know, don't sing. But if God has blessed you and your life is marked by cheerfulness, then the only times that you sing should not be like when we gathered this morning.

It should not be only when we are in care group. It should be, your life should be marked by thankfulness to God and a joyful song being raised up from your heart to God.

Now, verse 14, James turns his attention to those who are sick. And I would add, very sick. This is a part of the passage over which there's much debate.

And again, it is clear that James is addressing someone who is very sick. And the impression is that this person is confined to bed or so sick that he or she is at home and therefore has to call for the elders to pray.

So this would not be the response for a headache or a toothache of you bucked your toe. This would not be for that. This sick person is suffering and if they're able to pray, should obviously be praying.

[15 : 27] But calling for the elders to pray is a further expression of a commitment to pray to God in the midst of suffering because it invites others to join the sick person in prayer.

And here James tells us that the elders are to do two things. He says that to pray over the sick person and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord Jesus. Now those who give a lot of attention and even sometimes more attention to the oil than to the prayer but clearly the oil is incidental.

The oil is by the way. It is the prayer of faith in the name of the Lord that we are told will save the one who is sick not the anointing oil.

And in addition to that in James' time the oil was used as medicine. And it was probably a more visible expression of healing and I think it continues to serve that visible expression for us as well.

I think you all are aware that there are some churches that the only oil they use is the oil that the bishop has prayed over or some person who claims to have special powers has prayed over and that's the only oil that they would use.

[16 : 52] And that's really more about superstition. believing in the bishop and his oil or whoever in his oil more than faith in God and in his power.

And in verse 15 James tells us that the outcome is that the prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise him up. But the reality is not everyone gets healed.

It's the reality. Now again faith heals will tell us well you didn't have enough faith that's why you didn't get healed. But I believe that that is a very simplistic response to a more complex issue.

But what are we to say to persons who would have followed this and called for the elders of the church to pray and anointed them with oil and healing did not follow.

Well I've this is a difficult passage and I have benefited tremendously from J.A. Mortius very wise commentary in his in the book of his commentary on the book of James and I want to share with you this morning some of the thoughts that he has on this whole issue of praying for the sick and why some may be healed and why others are not healed.

[18 : 34] and the reason I share these quotes with you extensively this morning is because I don't think I could improve on them myself. Now there's several quotes they're pretty lengthy and I will rarely do this.

I don't like to use very lengthy quotes but I pray that they would be helpful for you this morning. So here's what Mortius writes.

It cannot be accidental that in speaking of the prayer of faith James both uses an expression not found elsewhere in scripture and also departs from the usual Greek word for prayer in favor of a word rarely used with this meaning.

A writer as sure-footed in his Greek as James and as sensitive to the task of getting the right word in the right place must have intended to signal to his readers that he was bringing something special before them.

See, this is one of the benefits that we have from Bible scholars who would have given themselves to careful study of God's word not just in our English Bible but also in the original text that it would have been written in the original language that it would have been written in.

[20:10] So what Murchia is saying is he's saying that though we can't see this in our English Bibles he's saying in the Greek James and he points out that James was short-footed in other words he says when you study the writing of James and they were able to do this because the different gospel writers had different facilities and different abilities and God used them all and some of them had stronger grammatical grasp of the languages they were writing in and James is one of those where they say he understood the Greek language so Murchia's point is James understood the Greek language sufficiently!

that if he chose another word he must be signaling something to us to say I'm bringing something special to your attention he goes on this whole passage verses 13 through 18 is about prayer and the central truth about prayer is a deliberate but peaceful acceptance of the will of God but when he writes of the prayer of faith James seems intentionally to direct our gaze not into the hearts of the praying elders but to the result that such prayer produces it will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up in other words he seems to speak of faith not as a commitment to the will of God but as a conviction that it is the will of God to perform this healing and on this point he goes on to talk about the seriousness with which the elders must approach this invitation to pray for a sick person and to ponder and to ask the

Lord whether he is granting a special unction of faith whereby in praying for healing they can also believe that they will have what they ask for I think that will be clear as we move on he further writes the majority of our prayers are in fact prayers of rest and rightly so we often do not know what to ask either for ourselves or for others whether through lack of wisdom to know what is right or knowledge to know what is needed and we are glad to fall back on that great plea Lord bless the word bless is a conscious shorthand for Lord I do not know what to ask but you know what is needed and further he says nowhere is a spirit of jaunty confidence more misplaced than in the sick room it is no time for unconditional predictions of what the

Lord will do precious in his sight is every affliction of his people Psalm 56 verse 8 not just their death Psalm 116 verse 15 and he keeps his secrets to himself in ordinary common or garden matters we find that we are too often misled by our convictions of what the Lord will or will not do and the tender spirit of the sick must be protected from rather than exposed to the brashness of confident prognostications it's very wise advice that he's giving us in a nutshell he's saying in the sick room whether it's at someone's house or in a hospital it is uncaring and it is unwise to prognosticate over that person what God will do or not do because it would only add to their difficult situation that they find themselves in and truth be told you may be one of a number who have done that to them and dash their hopes and cause them to be disillusioned he goes on we need to turn therefore from what a unique phrase may mean to what the whole verse must mean prayer is a commitment to the will of

God and all true prayer exercises its truest faith in patiently waiting to see what he is determined to do the unqualified statement that the prayer of faith will save the sick stands alongside many similar affirmations regarding prayer in fact it is the standard way in which the Bible makes its prayer promises we think for example of Matthew 18 19 if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask it will be done for them by my father in heaven or John 14 13 whatever you ask in my name I will do it such promises are intended to bring us with confidence into the place of prayer they speak to us of a God who can do all things who is so generous that he will withhold nothing that is good that he will withhold nothing he will withhold from us not sorry that he will withhold nothing from us that is good and whose heirs are open to our every word but the one thing the promises do not encourage or allow is that we should come into the place of prayer in a stubborn insistence that we have got it right and that our will must be done he goes on and writes in the prayer faith our faith is not that the promises will be fulfilled just like that it is the faith which rests trustfully in the will of a sovereign faithful and loving

[26 : 40] God neither the sick person nor any of the elders is there to insist that his or her will be done but to put the sick one within the total eternal!

security of the unchangeable gracious will of God now there are name it claim it people who would say to us that it shows a lack of faith when we pray thy will be done but here's how Moitra responds in a very wise and winsome way and this is the final quote final of my lengthy quotes thanks for bearing them I trust they've benefited he writes to say thy will be done does not impose a restriction on what we ask rather it lifts all earthly restrictions and we must say that this is if anything more important in the case of a sick person than in almost any other case the disposing of the welfare of the child of

God cannot be left with greater confidence anywhere else than in the father's hands nor can any solution of the plight be more fitting beneficial and glorious than that which he has in mind that is very well said the sick person is to call for the elders of the church the elders are to pray over him anointing him with oil and leave the specific result up to God I believe that theologian Douglas Moo sums it up best in his commentary when he writes these words prayer for healing offered in the confidence that God will answer that prayer does bring healing but only when it is God's will to heal sorry only when it's God's will to heal will that faith itself a gift of God be present what he's saying is the prayer of faith does bring healing but it only brings healing if it is God's will to bring that healing what God does is he supplies the faith to result in that healing and he makes the point that the faith itself is a gift of

God and this is one of the other errors where you have people who believe that they own the faith it is their faith and they can just go around and do whatever they want to do and I always say to those people go to the princess margaret hospital be very generous and heal everybody there if you possess that kind of healing faith go to doctors hospital go to princess margaret hospital and just clear it out with your faith but that's the point that he's making that God when it is his will to heal he grants this faith and so the prayer of faith will heal the sick and God will raise them up and so what Moitra was saying the point he was making is when elders are called to pray in these situations one of their sober duties is to pray and to try to discern God is this one of those situations where you will give this gift of faith where when prayed for this person will indeed rise up and thank

God that there have been times where the sick have been prayed for in this way and they have been raised up but James goes on and in verse 15 he concludes with these words and if he has committed sins he will be forgiven this statement as well is one of much speculation because some people would connect the sickness to sin and it's clear that that's not James's point because he says if he has committed any sin if he has committed sin in other words there is obviously then the possibility that the person is sick but may not have committed any sins so there's no definite correlation although we must admit that there are times when sickness when sin is connected to sickness so they they are in conjunction but

[31 : 32] James's point is that God would heal if that is his will and certainly the repentant person the person who has committed sin the repentant person that person will also be forgiven we should not think that what he is saying is that without repentance without confessing your sin I'm going to heal you anyway that's a stretch in the text we assume the general witness of scripture that this is a person who would be repentant and with that repentance God would grant the forgiveness as they promise that he will be forgiven but notice in verse 16 that James makes it clear that prayer is not just the right of the elders he calls the whole church to pray for one another and to confess their sins to each other and to pray for one another that healing may come here again we can see this hint of the connection sometimes of sin and sickness but again not in every single case and we should not try to read people's lives and try to discern oh you must have done something that's what

Job's friends did and we all know that they were totally wrong and here James is not implying that we go around confessing our sins to every single person he's not applying that at all what James is saying to us is that we must confess our sins to those we have sinned against and in most cases those we have sinned against know we have sinned against them James is not talking about a situation where you may have had an ill thought towards a person that you go to them and say hey you know yesterday I had an ill thought against you and the person is saying really I didn't know why you had an ill thought against me and you revealed information to them that they did not know James is talking to us about confessing unknown sins and he's not telling us that we are to confess sins we have committed against person A to person

B if I sin against Alexian I'm not going to go to brother David and confess my sin against Alexian to him I will confess that to her pray with her receive forgiveness from her now if it's a pattern something that is ongoing I may reach out to him and confess that to him and ask him to pray that I would repent truly repent and that there would be change in my life but this is what James is addressing and I know that some people take this and they go in another direction where they almost become like a Roman Catholic or an Anglican priest and having people confess all their sins to them and they're not even connected to the situation further on in verse 16 James encourages us to pray by reminding us of how powerful the prayer of a righteous person really is and I think for many of us we tend not to think of ourselves as righteous because we are so aware of our many sins and our many shortcomings but James cannot and is not thinking about righteousness from a personal point of view but he's thinking about the righteousness that we have in

Jesus Christ it doesn't mean that we are careless with our lives it doesn't mean that we are negligent as we as we live life neglecting the clear teachings of scripture but the truth is that if we have any sense of ourselves we are aware that in and of ourselves we are not righteous in and of ourselves we fall short but clearly James has the one who makes it possible in view and that is the Lord Jesus Christ whose finished work on the cross gives us a robe of righteousness that is imputed to us by God and he says the prayer of a righteous person avails much or as powerful as it is working again to encourage us to pray well that's the first point believers are called to a life of faithful prayer let's now consider the second and final point an example of faithful prayer unlike the first point this one is brief

James seems to have anticipated our despair when we don't think of ourselves as naturally being righteous and I think truth be told you may have been in this situation before where maybe you sinned in some way that you're conscious of you've asked for forgiveness you've sought to make it right but the guilt of it still lingers the awareness of it still lingers and then you're called maybe to pray with someone or there's a situation where you know that you need to pray and you just don't feel you have the heart to pray you don't feel you're worthy enough to pray see that is a clear indication right that should be a clear indication to us right there that we have a works orientation that if we had not committed that particular sin we would have had more faith to go before

[37 : 36] God to pray about that situation and truthfully what we're doing is we're depending on looking upon our own righteousness and not the righteousness of Jesus Christ if I sin in this moment and I ask for God's forgiveness forgiveness and I sincerely ask and he's not going to play games with us he says if you confess your sins I'm faithful and I'm just I'll forgive you of your sins I should be able with confidence to go and pray and you know what even if I feel dejected and everything else and the accusing voice of the enemy is coming against me I do it because God is going to hear me not based on my own performance he's going to hear me based on the truthfulness of his word and the reality that the only standing I have before him is in Jesus Christ on my best day that's true on my worst day that's true but James seems to be aware that this is our thinking that we oh I can't expect this from

God I can't approach God in that way and so he offers us the example of Elijah and he says to us Elijah was a man with a nature like ours and when you evaluate Elijah's life which we find primarily in 1st Kings 17 18 and 19 it will show that Elijah was not a very consistent person he was sometimes up and sometimes down he was a moody person he was prone to depression we see him exercising great faith and challenging the prophets of Baal and then the next day Jezebel sent a message to him just a message and scripture says he took off running running for his life and he prayed that he would die and we see him in despair and depression and self pity and he says God I'm the only one who's serving you but you know what in spite of all that he was right with

God and God heard him when he prayed brothers and sisters it's clearly not just Elijah that he is pointing us to but he is trying to point us also to ourselves as well this is about us with all of his faults Elijah was still a man of prayer and with all of our faults and our many shortcomings we too can still be men and women of prayer and because of indwelling sin if we allow our awareness and consciousness of our many sins our many shortcomings and how we fall short we will not have faith to be people of prayer we will never do it because if we are waiting to feel right and in good standing before

God to truly be a person of prayer to pray to him and to expect him to hear us and to answer our prayers we will never get to that place because of indwelling sin and so we must learn to accept the realities!

He's pointing to us Elijah was a man with like nature just like us he prayed to God and the point therefore is that we need to pray to God as well James is encouraging us to remember that human prayer human prayer from less than perfect people sinful people like us who depend only on the righteousness of Jesus Christ brings divine results as I conclude this morning let me ask you are you a person of prayer one who lives all of life with reference to God bringing its sorrows to him in prayer and bringing its joys to him in praise will you embrace the privilege to pray that you have as a believer in Christ or will you leave it to the leaders of the church and to the faithful few and brothers and sisters

[42 : 10] I encourage you not to hear these questions in a vacuum not to hear them detach from your own reality if you're saying I will be a person of prayer and your circumstance is that you are for example able to be a part of corporate prayer or a part of pre service prayer and you're not availing yourself of that there's a disconnect between how you're thinking about being a person of prayer there's a disconnect if we say yes I will be a person of prayer but have no intention of actually exercising that and living it out what scripture calls that is deceiving ourselves may the Lord help all of us to see that we can be and must be people of prayer who commune with God in all of the seasons of life so my prayer for us this morning is that the

Lord will help us to hollow every pleasure in praise and to sanctify every pain in prayer and if we do that whatever circumstance the sovereign Lord brings our way if it's suffering we'll pray if it's cheerfulness we will praise and in doing so we will commune with him let's pray together