

Pray!

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[0 : 00] Okay, well, so the question that these verses ask us, I think, is something like this.

Will we pray? Will we be people who pray? So knowing that we have an almighty, good, giving God, and knowing that he's a father who knows us personally and gives without finding fault, will we be a bunch of people who open our lips and speak to him? Will we pray? This is James chapter 5, end of it, and our final Sunday in the book of James. And James tells us that God is 100% committed to the good of those who love him, and he would have us live for him with 100% love and loyalty. So what that means is you can't mess about with God at the edges of your life. You're meant to go all in. You're meant to be devoted to him as he is to you. And so in James comes wave upon wave of wonderful commands. This is what it looks like to live for him with real faith. Count your trials as joy.

Be quick to listen and slow to speak. Bridle your tongue. Look after orphans and widows. Don't pick favourites. Give people food and clothing if they need them. Don't be selfish and ambitious. Deal with your anger and humble yourself. Don't slander one another or boast about your plans. You're meant to behave like this, like Jesus. And actually the way that we behave shows what we really believe in here.

And the healthy kind of God-pleasing way to live only comes from a heart which is humble before him, which sees and treasures God as judge and Lord and lawgiver and father. And this morning, as James finishes, he zeroes in on one subject, prayer, which is the heart of a relationship with him. Now as James talks about prayer here, he doesn't want to tell us off and make us feel guilty.

[2 : 11] Probably virtually every adult and every child might say, probably I should pray a bit more. And we know that and James knows that. James isn't trying to force us here to pray more, nor to you for not doing it. Rather, he wants to say to us really positively, pray. Go on.

Like by yourself or with your family or with the person next to you, be someone who opens their lips and prays. Because when you put your faith in Jesus, you have open access to a father who listens and cares and who's good and powerful. So pray. So here we go. We're going to look at it together. As James says, whatever's going on in your life, wonderfully good things or terribly bad things, pray to him.

So look at the start of verse 13, if you've got it open, where James says, are you in trouble? Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray.

In trouble doesn't mean you've got in trouble for doing something naughty. Rather, it means, is there anything in your life that's causing you distress or hurting you or making you suffer? A few verses beforehand, we met Job who suffered, had his possessions stolen, his finances wiped out, his family members died and painful illness. Or think of other troubles, stress or family breakdown or someone being cruel to you in the playground or depression or injustices you've suffered or infertility. Are you in trouble? Says James. Pray. Go to your room, shut your door and speak to your Father in heaven. No one will see, no one will know. It takes time. You could be doing all sorts of other things, but instead, put your hands together if you like, like you do at home around the table and pray.

Now, that's the first thing, James, maybe sounds very basic. Of course, that's what you're meant to do. But it's such an amazing thing to do in life, to pray. I was watching a football match on the telly a while back and there was a grumpy ex-Liverpool player called Mark Lawrenson who was commentating. And England were losing 2-0 and the camera went round and so there was an England fan there in the stands who was sitting there with their hands clamped together. And Mark Lawrenson, the commentator, I won't try his Liverpool accent. It was something, no I won't, it was something like he said, the fans are praying now. Well, that's what it's come to. Which is like prayer is the last thing that you do when everything fails. Might as well give that a go. But this is different.

Are you distressed? Very first thing that you do, look up to your father, your God and speak to him. [5 : 15] I don't know, adults and children, aren't there other many other ways that we respond to trouble? What do you do when you get in trouble or something bad happens? You might complain and hit someone, you might grin and bear it, you might grumble, you might go silent. Or if you're in trouble you might turn to something else to kind of help you. You might be someone who likes to go out and buy new clothes. Oh life's so hard I'm going to go and get something. Or you might be someone who says, life I get in trouble, I'll go and have a glass of whiskey and maybe I'll feel better. Or you say, I'm really in trouble, life's hard, I'm going to scroll on my phone for half an hour and maybe I'll feel better.

Or you might go and do some sport because then maybe I'll feel better. Or you might just have some choccy because when you have chocolate things feel better in your life. Nothing wrong with buying some clothes or having some choccy, nothing wrong with having a glass of whiskey. But well what kind of thing should you be doing? Actually let me ask you, don't tell me at the front but just say to the person next to you if you can think of this, when life is hard and I'm in trouble and stressed, what is the kind of thing I try to do to help me? Can you say that just to each other? Children when you get trouble and you're all stressed, what do you try and do to make things a bit better? Or adults? Go on, just for 30 seconds.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you.

Okay, that's it, time's up. I wonder what the kind of thing is you do to. You can sort of escape by making make yourself feel better with something. Sometimes when tough times come you can lose yourself in study or work to try and cover your troubles with busyness. But that's tragic and useless. [7 : 54] James says, pray. When we suffer, when we're in trouble, we have a child. You can cry on your bed or you can cry to the Lord. This may sound very, very simple. Christian believers, grown-ups and children. We know that actually when things are hard in our lives, praying can be such a struggle.

As though when life closes in on us, so easily we pay attention to ourselves, the emptiness and pain that I feel and how dry life is and God can feel so far away in trouble. But the truth is he's not. He's a giving father who is there and does care. He's not looking for super rock solid victory prayers. Just one of his children, nine-year-old children, 59-year-old children, saying, Lord, would you help me, please?

That is real living faith, turning to him my true refuge. Now, here's the second thing. Prayer is not just for the hard times. So see how verse 13 goes on. Verse 13 goes on, is anyone happy? Are you happy? Then sing songs of praise. So here's what you do when you're happy. I wonder if anyone might just come out and hold my happy face. Akira, do you think, Akira, do you want to come out and hold this? Hold the happy face, that's the kind of thing you like doing. Right, yep, turn it around and show it to us.

[9 : 28] There we go. Are you happy? So keep holding it there if your arms are okay. If you just prayed when times were hard, you would be treating God like calpol or paracetamol. I only go to him when I want to feel better. But you shouldn't. He's the Lord of giving goodness and every good thing we have right now comes from him. So if you're happy this morning, and if you're on good form today, that's his doing, that's his kindness.

And if you believe that, what are you meant to do? You're meant to sing songs of praise to him. You can put it down here if you want, so you don't get stretchy arms. There we go. Isn't that a brilliant command here in the Bible?

Why? Because sometimes when we're happy, we can forget God a little bit. Let me ask this. There are no particular wrong answers, but turn to the person next to you and say, what are the kind of things you like to do when you're happy? How do you, when things are happy for you, what do you do to celebrate being happy?

Turn to someone next to you and say, say, do you want to keep holding it? I, you can maybe do a little happy dance. A little happy dance, okay. What's your kind of happy dance?

My, my dad said a happy dance when you feel bad, and then he was saying a bad word. Oh, I see. Okay, there we go. Let's come back together.

[11 : 00] What are the, what are the kind of things you do? A carer just said to me, it's okay. She said, when you're happy, you can do a little happy dance. That's a nice thing to do. What do other people do when they're happy?

Anybody want to say? What's going with you? I said, there's someone shouting. I said to someone this week, I talked about being happy, and he said, if you're happy and you know it, clap your hands, or you dance around a bit, or you celebrate, or have a piece of cake, or something like that, that's all fine. God says here, when you're happy and you know it, sing songs of praise to him, because he's the God from whom all blessings flow.

Isn't that good? If you've spent, let's just hold that to us on there. If you've spent years and years going to church on a Sunday morning, maybe it just feels normal to be here at 10.30 and sit down and clear your throat, and then all creatures of our God and King. But actually in our world today, it's such a striking thing to do. Today is Sunday morning, there's about 45 of us here now, and lots and lots of people are in bed, or washing the car, or off to Ikea, or catching up on their administration, or something like that. And there are lots of people just around here who have never, ever lifted up their voices to God. But that's what we do. It's what we're meant to do. Our songs, when we sing, they're not time fillers before we get to the talk. This is living faith, where you praise the God who sees us and gives us everything and loves to hear us. So that's verse 13. Are you in trouble? Are you happy?

Are you anything in between? You can keep your lips shut, make your own way in life, suffer by yourself. That is fake Christianity. Or you can open your mouth and pray and sing to this God and Father in whose presence we live. Thank you very much. You can go sit back down again.

Except, except here's the thing, sometimes the struggles of life can become so extreme that praying for yourself becomes almost impossible. Have a look down at verse 14. Is anyone among you ill?

[13:15] If anyone is among you ill, then what are you meant to do? So I wonder if, these are very serious verses, but it would just help to have someone, I wonder if there's someone who might come and just pretend to lie down and be ill. You'll be lying on a pillow with a blanket over you. Anybody young who would like to do that? You get, Charlotte, you'd like to. Yeah, come on.

You happy to do that? It's a little bit hard, the bed. Do you want to put your head up this end? I'm going to get you a pillow. There we go. Put your head on that. And would you like a, oh, it's not quite big enough for you. Do you want to go back a bit that way? Go back a bit onto the pillow.

There we go. Right. Very good. We're going to put a little blanket over you. Is that okay? Right. Turn your head that way instead. So there we go. And here we are. So here's someone who is ill and not smiling.

The word ill here, sometimes it can, in the Bible, it can mean you're spiritually weak. But here, as far as I can see, it means you're physically ill. So not a kind of common cold, but the kind of serious, painful illness that makes praying, saying a prayer very difficult.

It means you need to ask someone else to come to you at your bedside and pray over you. And if that point comes, you see what it says here? James says, let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. Now listen, do you know, by the way, we live in a society now where more and more people live by themselves and get ill by themselves, with family a long way away and no friends and no one to care for them.

[15:01] So how good it is here to belong to a church family and a community of people where we're committed to each other, among whom you don't need to and you will not go unnoticed.

So if you are ill, there are people who will come and care and pray for you. And here in verse 14, what you're meant to do is call the elders, the church leaders, and they will come and anoint you with oil.

So some oil like this, where you might put it on someone's head like that. And the oil really sort of sets someone apart for God's special care and attention.

And the elders will pray over you words that you're not able to say to your father yourself. And that is what we are meant to do as a church. Like I remember a few years ago, someone asking me to come.

They were very ill and to anoint them and to pray. And then look at this, verses 15 and 16. You okay there? Yeah. Then, verses 15 and 16.

[16:04] The prayer offered in faith will make the ill person well. The Lord will raise them up. If they've sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so you may be healed.

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Okay, adults and kids. We're just going to slow down a little bit here. Because these verses are a bit less simple than verse 13, I think.

And they not only cause, well, sometimes Christians disagree about what they mean, but sometimes they can cause heartache and guilt, these verses. Have your pillow back. Head up. There you go.

James is talking about physical illness here. And the ill person being made well, the Lord raising him up, that is the language of the Gospels where Jesus makes someone better and they're raised up from their sickbed.

But I guess you can imagine, I can imagine the questions we're thinking. Really? The prayer will make the ill person well, but many people aren't healed.

[17:07] Is that because they don't believe enough? And what about sins and forgiveness? Surely God doesn't make people sick as a punishment for being bad, does he?

I ask these questions because they might be quite personal and sensitive for us, grown-ups and children. Let me say two brief things. Firstly, about sin and sickness.

And then about prayer and healing. First, there is some kind of link here in the verses, isn't there, between sin and sickness. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.

So confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so you may be healed. This is not Charlotte, but for sure, if, for example, you are greedy and lazy and you eat too much and drink too much and live on the sofa, your blood pressure will rise and you might be in line for a heart attack. Sin can lead to sickness like that. But there are also times in the Bible where sickness is how God responds to us when we sin, sometimes.

[18:14] In John 5, Jesus heals a man who couldn't walk for 38 years. He says, see your well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.

God can cause us to be ill if we eat and drink the Lord's Supper in a way that we shouldn't, in 1 Corinthians 11. Sinning can lead to God making us ill.

But it's very much not always like that. It's really not. Job didn't sin when he got sores all over his body. And many times when we're ill, we're just ill.

You know? Did you see the little word in verse 15? If they have sinned, they will be forgiven if. So sometimes we're ill just because we're ill, because everyone comes back from the summer holidays and everyone gives everyone else a cold.

And yet sometimes in his stern kindness, God could afflict us because of a particular sin. So he could send us to our sickbed if that's what it would take to move us to turn back to him.

[19:30] You could respond to sickness by being bitter towards God. You're cruel. I hate you. But, well, children, did you know this? There are many believers who have discovered that real illness can be a painful moment where you ask, is God teaching me something here about myself and him?

As I lie here sick, are there things in my life I should confess and change? And it would be wonderfully merciful, wouldn't it, if through the illness that I suffer, I come to a deeper sense of my sins and his grace.

As a church family, from verse 16, we should confess our sins to each other and pray for each other, especially when sickness comes. Second comment, just about prayer and healing.

Verse 15 says, verse 15 says, The prayer offered in faith will make the ill person well and the Lord will raise them up.

Which looks very clear cut. And certainly sick people can be made well. Here's a person here who's ill and a prayer over her in faith. And can you sit up, sit up, and be well.

[20:44] Up she gets. She's been raised up and made better. Sometimes for good and sometimes for a while. And sometimes it might be a total miracle that she's been healed.

That's what it seems like. And sometimes it's hard to know, well, what about the prayers and the pills and the physio? I don't know what did it, but God was involved. And that happens.

Let me go back down again. Back down again. No one here, yeah. And yet sometimes healing doesn't come. And sometimes for us months turn into years.

And then on top of pain can come guilt too. Because it says here that the prayer offered in faith will make the ill person well. Did I not believe enough?

Does the vicar, the church, not believe enough? That's a painful question. It says in verses 17 and 18, Elijah was a human being, even as we are.

[21:41] And he prayed earnestly that it wouldn't rain. And it didn't for three and a half years. And again he prayed and the heavens gave rain and the earth produced its crops. So am I not being

faithful enough when I pray?

Or righteous enough? Or earnest enough? You know, if we have living faith, we who are Christians, we will want to ask day by day, will we grow in our trust in him, this God of ours?

Will we pray earnestly, Father we trust you, please raise this person up. That's what we should do.

And yet there is a desperate wrong track to go down.

Where if healing doesn't come, you keep on sort of scraping out your insides till you're bruised and raw, desperately trying to track down hidden sins and faithlessness.

Don't do that to yourself. Don't do that to yourself. Because the thing is, God isn't bound by us. A faithful prayer over a sick person is not a coin in a slot machine and boom, perfect health.

[22 : 48] Sometimes ongoing illness might be part of God's mysterious will. Do you know the Apostle Paul? Full of faith.

He famously had a thorn in his flesh. He pleaded three times with God that it would be taken away. And God said, I won't. God, my grace is sufficient for you.

My power is made perfect in weakness. And so it could be for a person like Charlotte here, pretending, that sunk in the fertile soil of sickness, God can grow a person of deep and stunning likeness to Jesus.

And a deep grasp of God's love that only healthy believers can only dream of. So this is the sick person. Do you want to stay there just a moment?

Charlotte's going to stay there. Let me just draw things together. Where have we got to in these verses? Do you know, there is such a thing as false faith, grown-ups and children, where you attend church, because mum and daddy, you say the right things, and yet in reality, when no one's looking, your life stays the same, your lips stay shut, you don't pray to him, you won't sing to him, you don't relate to him.

[24 : 11] And James would say, if that's us, wherever we stand today with the Christian faith, don't go knit, don't be like that. Truth is, we are dependent creatures.

I love this picture a lot. We're dependent on God. And God has made us for a real daily living relationship with him, where, well, a bit like this skeleton here, or imagine like a sunflower.

You are constantly turned towards the sun. That's what a sunflower does. I was clearing out our flat in London yesterday, and strangely, in the cupboard, I found a picture of a sunflower.

You know what a sunflower does? Sunflower is always turned towards the sun. And God would have us be believers who, like a sunflower, your face is always turned towards him, whatever the weather.

So you place your faith in his son, Jesus, and you know God as your good father, and at every moment you turn towards him.

[25 : 20] Are you in trouble? What are you going to do? Pray to him. Are you happy? What are you going to do? Sing praise. It's all gift from him.

Are you ill? What are you going to do? Call others to pray, and then trust God to do what's best. A whole entire sunflower life lived facing towards him and with him.

This is this morning's question. Will we pray, or will we not? Not naughty us for not praying. This is encouragement here. As grown-ups and children, will we say to him, we trust you, and will worship you through thick and thin, and we'll live the life of faith we're made for.

Or, will we shun him and ignore him and take our chances? And at the end of James, James would say to us, let's not wander from the truth, as a church.

Let's not wander from our God. Round your breakfast table, by yourself, with your friends, as a church, let us help one another to pray to and live for our God and Father.

[26 : 35] As Charlotte just stays there for a moment, I'm going to read the final verses of James, then I'm going to pray, and then we're going to sing. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth, and someone should bring that person back, remember this, whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death, and cover over a multitude of sins.

Our Lord and God, thank you that you have made us, we who trust in Jesus, your people, you are our Father, we belong in your family, we are brothers and sisters.

We thank you for this letter of James, for hearing of your wonderful devotion to us, and your call for us to be devoted to you.

For all of us, from the youngest to the oldest, may we, in our lives this week, look to you, may we pray to you, and sing to you, and trust in you.

And please help us to be a group of brothers and sisters who help one another. And if we should ever wander from the truth, or turn away from you, make us those who bring one another back, so that we might live with you forever.

[27 : 57] We pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.