

# Pray for One Another

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[ 0 : 00 ] I add my word of welcome to Dan's and on this Palm Sunday, it's great for us together to look into God's word. This last passage in the book of James, which Pat read so well for us a moment ago.

If you turn to it, James chapter 5, page 1013. And I want to say how thankful I am to the way God has worked amongst us through this book of James.

I think we've discovered it's a book that sings and stings. And there's been, I think, a fresh humility and a fresh desire for God. And it may be partly related to the fact that James has got our number. And he has not held back from exposing all the subtle ways pride works for us as Christians. From the special temptations of the wealthy to hoard, defraud, live a life of luxury.

To the way we give preferential treatment to the people who we think we can get something from. To our impatience and our lack of love. To the great spiritual power of the tongue, both for good and for evil.

[ 1 : 13 ] And if you were James, writing to churches in this precarious situation, how would you finish the letter? Would you give them a final blast from the furnace?

Or an encouraging word, signing off, go for it? Well, James does neither. What he does from 13 to the end is he gives us the fullest teaching on prayer in the letter.

He finishes the letter because he wants to connect us to God, reminding us of our dependency on him and of the privilege we have in prayer.

And he wants to connect us, secondly, with each other as well. He sets the teaching on prayer squarely within the Christian community. Just scan your eyes down the verses.

Verse 13, is anyone among you? Verse 14, is anyone among you? Verse 14, the elders of the church. Verse 16, confess your sins to one another, pray for one another.

[ 2 : 14 ] Verse 19, anyone among you? James wants us to read this as a community, as a Christian community together. He's talking about the ongoing work of restoration in us and the place of prayer.

And in a letter that's had so much to say about the power of the tongue, he comes here to the end and dwells on what is the highest and most vital form of speech in the Christian community, prayer. This is our work together as a Christian community. We cannot live a life of authentic faith apart from prayer. We can't do that apart from each other. But just scan down right to the end, to the last two verses.

And look how he signs off. He says, my brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings them back, let that person know that whoever brings back a sinner from their wandering will save their soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

Here is true pastoral care. It's not reserved for the professionals or for clergy or elders. This is brothers and sisters, anyone among you.

[ 3 : 26 ] So as he finishes, James gives over the spiritual pastoral care for each other to one another in the congregation. He says we are basically saving one another from spiritual death.

We so desperately need this ministry, don't we? I mean, we all wander. It can begin intellectually and it can begin morally. It doesn't really matter because if we keep going, our wandering jumps the gap between the two and becomes both.

It can be something as simple as missing church for a couple of weeks. Here's the thing. James wants us and calls on us to be engaged in rescuing each other. He says the stakes could not be higher.

It has to do with saving our souls from eternal death. And covering a multitude of sins. And we cannot do that on our own. And that's why we need one another. And that's why we need to pray.

So he finishes his book by teaching on prayer. Not technique. Basically, he just says pray. Because, as Wesley said, God does nothing except in response to believing prayer.

[ 4 : 36 ] Now, just to pause for a moment. If you've been a Christian for a while, you will know that verses 14 and 15 of this passage have been a bit of a battleground in Christian churches for different positions on sickness and healing.

My view is that the different positions have hijacked the verses a bit. You know, on the one side is the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that tries to find a basis here for the sacrament of extreme unction.

As part of the last rites when someone is dying, the priest takes oil that's been specially consecrated by a bishop, takes it to the dying person, and dabs the oil on five parts of the body, giving an official pardon for sin with the hope that the person may escape purgatory and go to heaven.

And I don't want to get sidetracked, but this cannot be what James has in mind, because here the person who's prayed for, it's not preparing them for death, but it's a prayer for the restoration of the person to health in some way, shape or form.

On the other side, many have taken verse 15, the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, as a kind of a magic bullet. And if we just have enough faith, we can heal any sick person of anything.

[ 5 : 53 ] And if we pray for someone and it doesn't happen, either our prayers are not using the right formula, or there's someone in the church who doesn't have enough faith. I've been part of those sorts of meetings.

It's terrible. And it gives rise to a phenomenon we call as faith healers today, to churches promoting healing services which can go the same direction. And I don't think that's what James is dealing with either.

So what we want to do today is we want to put these beautiful little verses back into their context and to see what their point is. Because the passage, and you can't miss this, the passage is about prayer.

Seven times in the passage, nine times if you count synonyms, James mentions prayer. It's our true point of weakness. It's our true point of strength.

And he talks about prayer, small prayers, big prayers, and middle-sized prayers. So they're the three points I'm going to make today. If that's okay, just nod.

[ 6 : 58 ] Thank you. Small prayers, big prayers. Let's look at small prayers to begin with. Verse 13. Is anyone among you suffering? Any form of difficulty?

It doesn't have to be three alarm bells. Any form of difficulty. What's the complicated thing to do? Let him pray. Is anyone among you cheerful, feeling good, good in heart?

Let them sing praise. So James takes both ends of our human life and experience and everything in between, our daily circumstances, and he says, bring them to God.

Refer them to God. Bring your life into the presence of God. Because there is no circumstance in which God is not involved and there is no circumstance in which God is not interested.

He's our Heavenly Father. He knows what's happening before we do. And yet he wants us to tell him and to pray to him whether it's bad or whether it's good. I think it was Karl Barth who said, in prayer, God invites us to live with him.

[ 7 : 59 ] We'll never enjoy fellowship and living with God without constantly praying to him. You think about what happens when we don't pray these little prayers, these quick prayers.

When difficulty comes along, they can become occasions for self-pity or for self-assertion. When good things come along, they're occasions for spiritual amnesia or complacency.

We make this, I think, much more complicated than it really is. Prayer is speaking to God. There it is.

We hear from God through his word and the Holy Spirit applies it to our heart and conscience. And we pray, we speak to God. And there is nothing in our experience that doesn't concern God.

There is no time in which God does not invite us to himself. And I think these small prayers that we pray all the time, all the day, they're the antidote to cynicism.

[ 9 : 02 ] Because the real reason we don't pray small prayers is because we doubt the active goodness of God. We think God only has time for the really, you know, the level four issues.

So we toil away by ourselves and we increasingly have a sense of struggle and defeat and weariness. And, you know, in our culture, it's easier to grow cynical about God and each other and

ourselves than it is to pray.

You see, in our culture, if we don't pray these small prayers, we gradually move from being engaged to being observers. We move from being those who encourage others to those who are commentators and then critiques.

Critiques. Critiquers. We criticize. Critics. Critics. Thank you. Do I hear a critic? Critics. See, what undercuts cynicism is just the simple prayer of thankfulness to God.

Now, do this today. At the end of the day, sit down, take out a piece of paper, and think of five ways in which God has blessed you or answered your prayer today. Before long, it'll become 20 and then it'll become 40.

[10:20] As if our lives are marked by unthankfulness and a lack of gratitude, God is nowhere on our radar. We've replaced God with something else. Here is the invitation in small prayers.

God is not happy just to be a part of life. He wishes more and he wishes to give us more. Any among you in difficulty? Pray. Do it now. Any of you cheerful?

Sing praise. Do it later. Together. Okay. So much for small prayers. Big prayers. And here we drop down to verses, the end of verse 16, 17 and 18 to Elijah.

James takes, as an illustration, the Old Testament prophet Elijah. Why? Well, it's true.

God wishes us to bring him all the details of our lives. But the purpose of prayer is not so that I would be happy and my difficulties be solved. The purpose of prayer is to advance the only cause worth giving our lives to.

[11:27] And that's the cause of God and his name and his kingdom. And we devalue prayer if we make it only about what I want. Hasn't James already touched on this back in chapter 4?

Just cast your eyes to chapter 4, verse 2, the last phrase of that verse. Here is a church full of people who are fighting and quarrelling with each other. And he says, you do not have because you do not ask.

And the reason they didn't ask and the reason we don't ask is because we already know what we want to do. So we don't pray about where we're going to live or where we're going to have a summer because we don't ask. Verse 3, you ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions, your hedonism.

We pray for an easy, pleasurable life or for more money. Not so that God would use us toward others, but for your own selfish lifestyle. So why does James take the illustration of Elijah?

I mean, what did Elijah pray for? He prayed for the weather. He prayed for the weather to change and it did. And then he prayed for the weather to change and it happened again. Now what's going on?

[12:33] Well, we know that Elijah prophesied at one of the darkest periods of Israel's history. When the king and queen were leading Israel, Ahab and Jezebel, were leading Israel into idolatry and away from the word of the Lord.

Elijah was by no means perfect. In fact, James tells us he a man exactly the same nature that we have. He was given to self-pity himself regularly. But the Lord taught him to pray.

And it was through Elijah's prayers that God did things of massive impact and power. God spoke to Elijah and told him to pray for drought on the nation of Israel to bring the nation to its knees so that they might come back to God.

See? So our final passage begins with small prayers and then it ends with these big prayers. And Elijah's weather prayer was not so that he might have a happy picnic.

As Dick Lucas pointed out, in those days, in that context, if you prayed for no rain, you're praying for economic ruin. And that's what he did. So that the people might turn back to God.

[13:47] It would be like you and I praying for economic ruin in Canada so that people would come to faith in Christ. Would you pray that? Or for economic ruin in Vancouver so that people might turn to the word of God.

It's not a trivial prayer. And in these prayers, it concerns the great purpose of God that he would bring the light of his knowledge to people. And there is nothing more important that we could pray for than the purposes of God.

I mean, isn't that how Jesus taught us to pray? We've already prayed the Lord's Prayer once in the service. And yes, we pray for our daily bread. But before we pray for our daily bread, we pray for his name and for his kingdom and for his will.

It's the great privilege of prayer to be caught up, not just talking about our little things, but in the great things that have to do with God and his purposes. And, you know, through our prayers, even after we die, we pray for the future and they continue to be answered.

There is no power on earth that can do that. And I think here is a telltale sign whether we have God's concerns at heart in our prayers. I call it the so that at the end of the phrase.

[14:57] Do you know what I mean? You know, praying for peace in Syria is a really good thing to do. But it's even better to pray for peace in Syria so that the knowledge of God would spread.

It's good for us to pray for a church building, which we do. It's better to pray for a church building so that the purposes of God might move forward. Otherwise, our prayers just stop and become middle class.

We have the most remarkable privilege entering into the presence of God and laying before him our concerns. And as we do that, he changes our concerns.

They become his concerns. And we're caught up in the purpose of spreading his glory. And the reason James says he's a man just like you and me is because we too can pray these big prayers for God's big purposes.

It's not just reserved for the big names in the Bible. God invites us to pray prayers, not just small prayers, but big prayers as well. And he will continue to answer them long after we've gone to be with him.

[16:03] So there's small prayers and big prayers. And now we come to middle-sized prayers. Verses 14 to 16. Are you with me still?

Good. I think the nine o'clock started to drift here. We're not going to have any drifting. I think as we come to these verses, it might be helpful to say that God, our Heavenly Father, answers prayers for physical healing in miraculous ways today.

And here at St. John's, we have seen God answer our prayers in a number of cases with those who are utterly beyond medical help. And God has instantly restored those people to full help.

They've been simply miraculously healed. There can be no other explanation. But we've also seen God not answer our prayers in the way that we wished.

There are others we've prayed for in exactly the same way. And they have died. I think as we come to this little middle section, it's crucial for us to see.

[17:12] It's placed between small prayers and big prayers. And it's a transition passage. And what's so very interesting about it is James deliberately uses words in this middle section that can refer either to physical suffering and physical healing or spiritual suffering and spiritual healing.

And the key, I think, is that we keep these together. We keep wanting to separate the two. The first camera I bought was, I think, in 1980.

And it had three lens settings on it. Close-up, portrait and mountain. Those of you who are old enough to remember that phones didn't just come in cell phones. Sorry, cameras didn't just come in cell phones.

I think you know what I'm talking about. So I'd like to do that with the passage. Close-up, portrait and mountain. Is that all right? Is that okay? Okay, let's look close up at the passage.

Verse 14. Is anyone among you sick? The word sick can mean physical ailment. Weakness, sickness, bodily incapacity.

[18:24] But it's also used very widely in the New Testament in a figurative way to speak about any kind of weakness. Those who are weak in faith in Romans 14. Or Jesus Christ who became weak for us.

Or the weakness of the law. Or how God's power is made perfect in our weakness. Or the fact that we are, through our sin, we are weak before God. It's a broad word.

And one form of weakness is physical. But it also refers to our inner poverty and our inner incapacity. Look down at verse 15.

The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick. This is a different word. This word means weary, worn out. It describes a lack of motivation and fatigue of heart and soul.

And then at the end of verse 15 and into verse 16, James gradually changes focus towards sin and forgiveness and praying for one another.

[19:26] So, my first little point on this is that close up, James is using terms that are intentionally ambiguous. And he's gradually moving us through physical things into spiritual things.

Secondly, let's look at the portrait. Step back a bit. What's going on? Well, here is a sick person, whether physical or spiritual.

They summon the elders of the church, the leaders of the church. And the leaders come to where the person is, likely their home, for private prayer. There's nothing of a big healing event here. Nor is there anything about a person who has the gifts of healing.

And they pray over the person who could be lying down or kneeling down before them. And they use some oil, good old olive oil, that's what the word means, as a sign that this person belongs to God.

And then James says, and the prayer of faith will save them. Again, every time James has used this word save and salvation in his letter, it always means salvation from eternal judgment through forgiveness of sins.

[ 20 : 30 ] James is not trying to give us a magic formula to force God to do what we want. He's teaching us to bring what's really important to us, either physical or where we are spiritually, before him in prayer.

He wants us to bring this in the presence of God with the leaders of the congregation. And then to move us on to what's really important, into salvation and resurrection, which is why he turns to sin and forgiveness.

I mean, just think about this for a moment. If James was just focusing on the physical, he uses the wrong illustration from Elijah's life, doesn't he? I mean, right in the middle of the praying for the weather and the drought and that sort of thing, Elijah is in the house of a widow who is outside of Israel, a pagan woman who has no contact with the living God, and her only son dies.

And Elijah is told by God to pray over the boy, and God raises the boy to life. And the mother says, now I know you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.

Now, wouldn't that be a much better illustration for James to take? No, because you see, in our physical frailty, in our sickness and in our weakness, James wants to keep drawing us towards God's priorities.

[ 21 : 54 ] Close up, portrait, let's go back to the mountain. Did you notice, between verses 15 and 16, James moves us out of the private home into our own lives, the lives of all of us here in the congregation?

From the ministry of the elders to one person, to all our ministry to each other. Verse 15, if the person the elders are praying for has committed sins, they'll be forgiven by God.

Well, that does not mean that all sickness is the result of sins we have committed, although it can be. Here is a person who wants to come clean and confess their sins before the elders.

And then verse 16 is one of the most beautiful pictures of restoration within the community of God, when someone has done something to hurt or to wound another Christian member, and they heal the rift.

Let me just read 16. Therefore confess your sins to one another, to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

[ 23 : 01 ] Have you ever done this? You've sinned against another person, you might have grumbled against them or gossiped or wounded them. You've done something, you haven't loved them as they should. James says you need to go to that person, the person who you've sinned against, seek them out, confess what you've done, and ask them to forgive you.

And then James says, pray together. Because it's in prayer, it's bringing our wounds into the presence of God that any breach can be truly healed. I say again, have you ever done that? You ought to have. I can't believe we haven't sinned against each other. Have you had someone come up to you and confess their sins to you?

They've sinned against you. It can be a bit of a surprise sometimes. We need to be ready to forgive those people, to look for the restoration of the fellowship and to pray with one another. See how precious the fellowship of the Christian community is to God.

We need to treasure it. But we can only continue in fellowship if we're willing to confess our sins and to pray with one another. I don't mean the general confession, which is very important.

[ 24 : 12 ] But I mean this is when two Christians are sitting down, confessing their sins to each other and praying for one another. Things happen when you do that. And I need to finish.

If we just step back, and it's clear I think from this last passage, that James is describing a community of contrast that has three marks to it.

The first, it's a community that hates sin. See, sin divides. It splits. It splits me in myself. It splits me from you. And it separates me from God. This is a quote from a book on prayer by Paul Miller. He says, All sin involves the splitting of the personality, what James calls being double-minded.

If we become proud, we have an inflated sense of self that's lost touch with who we really are. If a husband watches porn and then warmly greets his wife, he has created two people, one public, one hidden.

[ 25 : 14 ] If you talk about your friends disparagingly behind their backs, you've created two personalities, the loving friend and the gossiping friend. Try to keep the personalities separate by telling those to whom you gossip, please keep this in confidence.

But repentance, you see, brings the split personality together and thus restores integrity to life. The real self is made public. When the proud person is humbled, the elevated self is reunited with the true self.

In contrast, he says, cynicism focuses on the other person's split personality and their need to repent. We need to be a community that hates sin. Secondly, James says, a community that has a deep and genuine care for each other.

He's so concerned about this, James, this is where he finishes the letter by, as I said before, handing over our spiritual care for each other to each other.

What's quite stunning in verse 20, if you have a look at it, is that it's almost as though God delegates his entire work to us. We are given the responsibility of saving souls from death and covering a multitude of sins.

[ 26 : 30 ] I just want to point out how counter-cultural that is. People call our culture post-modern and there's lots and lots and lots of books, as you know. Robert Bork has written one and he says the two chief cultural influences in the past 60 years are radical individualism and radical egalitarianism.

And radical individualism says, I can do whatever I want. And radical egalitarianism says, you don't have the authority to tell me not to.

You see, to reach out in the way that James says here is going to cut across the grain. It may be that the person who's wandered doesn't even welcome your advance. But I tell you, as one of those who has wandered, it's a wonderful thing to have someone come after you spiritually.

And we need to do it for each other. A community that hates sin, cares for each other. And thirdly, a community that prays. Small prayers, big prayers, middle-sized prayers.

The weakest one of us, the weakest faith to the most powerful God. As prayer begins in heaven, it starts with God. He moves us to pray. We pray. We pray. God answers our prayers for his own glory.

[ 27 : 48 ] And that is why we know that when God is going to do a great thing among us, we will be moved to pray in a particular way. So let's bow. Let's kneel. And come before the Lord in prayer now.

Thank you.