

Pray for One Another

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Date: 13 April 2014

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[0 : 00] So we're in James, and this is the last little bit of James. And what a wonderful book this has been, and throughout this book, James has been talking about a real living faith, a faith that produces a life that is demonstrably different.

And he's given us these enormous challenges, these enormous sort of, these great examples, these are piercing examples. He says things like, you know, are your tongues bridled for God's purposes? Do you care for the most vulnerable in your community? Are you worldly?

In last week's passage, he talked about living lives of patient endurance, and said that our hope should be placed in Christ's return. And now this week, James says, real faith, praise. Real faith, praise. And the structure of the passage is quite simple. He begins with two circumstances, which he deals with very quickly. He says, are you suffering? Or are you happy? And then another circumstance, which he spends a lot of time on, and this is verse 14, and he says, are you sick? So what I want to do, let me just quickly chat about the first two sort of quick things he brings up. Verse 13, is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.

Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. So James is basically saying, whatever's happening in your life, the right response is prayer. And it's not always our gut response, of course, when suffering. From our unhealthy parts of us, we can respond in ways which aren't great.

We could perhaps say things like, look, I'll sort this out. I don't want to bother God with it. I'll just, look, I'll sort this out. And that's, of course, pride. Or maybe from a point of disillusionment, we are sort of like, you know, I've had a lot of pain in my life and I've prayed and it hasn't made any difference. It doesn't work. So I'm not going to pray because it's just, nothing changes. Sort of like, you know, breaking up with your first girlfriend or boyfriend and saying, you know, I will never love again. You know, that kind of thing.

[2 : 31] And Jesus is saying, you know, like, so if you're suffering, James is saying, if you're suffering, no, why would you not come to the, you know, the king of comfort? Pray. Bring it to God.

And when you're happy, pray as well. Again, it's something we might not think to do, to thank God. I suspect some of us are programmed to think that prayer is only for emergencies.

Or, perhaps we don't pray when we're happy because, you know, life is going so well, we're just not mindful of God. I spoke to somebody recently who said their biggest problem was that life was really good. So good, in fact, that they're just, they're just going to push God to the edge. Because they don't really need God, of course, because, you know, they've kind of made their life really good. I mean, it's not a good thing to do to forget God in your life, of course. Hebrews 13, 28 to 29. Let me read this to you.

Therefore, let us be grateful. I think this is the right response, of course, when life is going well for us, when we're cheerful, when we're happy. It's gratefulness, isn't it? Therefore, let us be grateful we're receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe for our God as a consuming fire.

You know, thankfulness is a defining characteristic of Christians. So in a verse here, just right at the start, just one line, James says, from joy to pain, the proper response is prayer.

[4:11] Calvin says this wonderfully. He says, there is no time where God does not invite us to himself. Okay, those are the, those are, that's the short examples at the start. And now James lays out this quite long example, which takes up the rest of the passage. Is any among you sick? It begins. And what follows that verse raises many, many questions. For example, what does James mean by sick? And what's, what's the, what's the anointing with oil? Like anointing with oil in the name of the Lord. What's that about? And then it talks about the prayer of faith. It says, the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick. Like every time?

Is it like, because it makes it sound like it's like pretty guaranteed there. And then he brings up sin. Confess your sins. It doesn't sound like great bedside manner. Somebody's kidneys failing and you're like, ooh, what have you done wrong? I actually, I used to room with a guy who, whenever I was sick, he'd always say to me, Aaron, you know what causes sickness, don't you? Sin. So, not a lot of chicken noodle soup from that guy when I was sick. So it talks about sin when, it seems, that seems interesting, doesn't it? And then it talks about confession. It says, if you're sick, do these things, anointing with oil. And it says, confess your sins as well. And then towards the end, it talks about Elijah praying for the rain to stop. And then the last few verses, it talks about saying, if somebody's left the faith, bring them back in. It's like, how do you join all these things together, all these ideas together? Well, actually, there is actually a very coherent theological line being followed here. And it all actually makes sense if you understand what James means by the word sick. That word sick. So let's do a little, a very short word study for this word sick. Okay, verse 14. If anyone's sick, what is sick? The Greek word, so the New Testament was written in Greek originally. Okay, so the Greek word, *asthenio*. Now, it can mean physically sick, as in Matthew 25. I was sick, and you visited me. Or it can mean weakened faith as well. It can mean weakened faith. Romans 8. You know this passage, this example, right?

So there's a Christian church, and there's some folks, Christians in there, who are eating meat that's been sort of dedicated to idols. And Paul is saying, you can eat it. It's fine.

It's just meat. Don't worry about it. But if there's someone in your community who that's going to really trip them up, really throw them off, then don't eat it. Why would you cause this person to stumble? And it talks about them as, it says, that weaker brother or sister.

That weaker word? Weaker? Weaker? Weaker? That's the sick word. Isn't that interesting? I find that very interesting. It gets more interesting. Okay, the word for sick in verse 15, the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick. That word is a different Greek word for sick. That's the Greek word *kamno*. And it's a very rare word. It's just used a couple of times. And in sort of most of the times, up in all the times, it means worn down. Just worn out, worn down. A few more words to look at. The word save in verse 15, when it says the prayer of faith will save the one, right? In the Gospels, when that word is used, *sozo* in Greek, it relates to physical healing. But in the epistles, it's mostly used with regard to spiritual salvation, from talking about somebody being rescued spiritually. Okay, the word healed in verse 16, you will be healed. Confess your sins, you will be healed.

[8 : 21] Using the Gospels and epistles as both a physical healing, but it also talks about a spiritual restoration. Okay, the oil part, the oil, the oil and the anointing part. Oil is used, you know, medicinally as like a sort of a salve thing. But it's also used for consecrating things and people. Jesus' feet were anointed with oil. Priests were anointed. Men of God were anointed when they were sort of consecrated, re-consecrated or consecrated to do something for God. Sick people were anointed. Dead bodies were anointed. Visitors, they'd come to your house, you'd anoint them with oil. It wasn't really anointed, but it was like you put oil on them, right? All that to say, taking into account all of that stuff right there that I've just said. When James says, is any one of you sick, he doesn't necessarily have physical healing in mind. Now, I think he's trying to get the idea of both across, but I think primarily, James is talking about people who are weary from trying to live out the Christian life. They're just weary. It's just hard. And that makes a lot more sense. Because you can read this passage, if you read all through James, you would come to this and go, oh, what's that doing? Why is that there? It actually makes a lot more sense of the larger context, right? So after five chapters of James saying, real faith looks like this, we have James finishing with this wonderfully tender and sweet end to the letter. He's saying, Christian life, you're doing hard yards in the Christian life. And if you're thinking about trying in the towel, folks, ask the elders, the church to come and anoint you and pray for you. That's the larger context. It actually makes sense of the immediate context. You remember last week's sermon, right? It was all about trials. It was all about this encouragement to endure during trials. So to encourage prayer for those who are really worn out by trials. I think that makes a lot of sense. It makes a lot of sense of the Elijah examples, because that's a bit random. Let me remind you of the Elijah verses here. Elijah was a man with a nature like us. That's nice. I think that's lovely they put that in there. He's just like one of us, right? 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. If the passage, well, it's the last bit anyway. If the passage is primarily about praying for people with, uh, for physical healing, if that's all it's about, the main thing it's about, there is a better Elijah example to use. In, in 1 King 17, Elijah prays for the dead son of a woman who is, and this, and this boy is raised from the dead. Surely if this is about physical healing or just about physical healing, that's the famous go-to example.

But no, James uses the rain example. Now the backstory of the rain, the rain thing is, is that the people of God had turned away from God and were into Baal and, and, and this drought came as a punishment and the rain only came back on Mount Carmel as the Israelites were restored to God. So the Elijah example is about the power of prayer in restoring people, because that was Elijah's big ministry. You know, he was about stopping people who were kind of like restoring people who are faltering in their faith. And if it's about the spiritually sick primarily, about the weary, about the worn out, then it makes a lot more sense of the last two verses, doesn't it? That begin with my brothers and sisters, if any among you wanders from the truth and bring someone back. So I'll say it again. I think James' primary concern here is this, if you're worn out, you feel like you're just, you know, like doing doggy paddling against a current, a strong current, ask people to pray for you. And what a beautiful way to end this letter that is filled with these very challenging imperatives.

And I think it's a relevant thing for many of us. Now there is of course a lot more to say about this passage. First thing I'll say is this, I am all for praying for people who are physically sick, and James is of course. In my, in the previous church that was more charismatic than St. John's, was like a, like a charismatic, Pinto kind of church, right? We're always praying for people that were sick. So I love that stuff. I think it's wonderful to do it. Fantastic.

But in its, at its worst times, there was this unhealthy sort of feeling that if you just believed enough, um, you could make someone get better. When we do pray for people who are sick, we should, we should know that it's not always God's will to heal physically.

This is more of an aside here. Uh, there are of course a number of prominent Christians in the New Testament who live with sickness and who weren't healed. And it seems that in some cases, in many cases, God decides to move his glory forward in another way, in a way that does not involve miraculous healing. Uh, I have this probably, I don't know, mentioned it before. I have Crohn's disease, which is like a chronic kind of gut thing. And why hasn't God healed me? I don't know. I pray for it. And it hasn't happened. But it's really important when I pray that I pray, God, your will be done. Even if that's not a phrase in my prayers, that that's, that's at the base of my prayers, that God's will would be done in this brokenness.

[14 : 44] Because otherwise I'm praying for my will be done, aren't I? And that's a bit, that's a silly prayer. You know, God, my will be done. My will be done in the world. My will be done in my life. I mean, my wisdom is far too frail to be put in charge of, to have that kind of responsibility. God has a plan for my illness. I don't know what that is. Perhaps I will never know this side of you. My daughter is disabled. She has Down syndrome, my youngest daughter.

And so she has, her brokenness is very visible to most people. Now, it would seem that in God's amazing wisdom, he uses broken situations for his purposes in wonderful, wonderful ways.

And I can see that, I can see glimpses of that in my daughter, because her disability provokes a humanity in others. It provokes a Christ-like response to her. And it's wonderful. She has a ministry that is very rare and beautiful. See, God can use our brokenness. It is not God's will to heal us always. It is wonderful when he does. But when he doesn't, we should be attentive to what God is doing in our hearts. I mean, if it was God's will to heal us all physically, goodness.

We have, you know, we have 2,000 years of dead Christians, right, to explain. So, let me tackle a few of the questions I had at the start, and then finish up.

So, I've said here that James is primarily, I think, talking about people who are just worn out with the trials of life. But what's the point of the oil? What's that about? Because that's, you know, that's there. It talks about doing it. As I've said, the oil was used in a variety of ways, and in the situation here, I mean, clearly, I don't have to say, oil's not magical, right? It's not like a magic thing. There's no efficacy about this oil.

[17 : 16] The Roman Catholic Church, this is their go-to text for the Catholic Sacrament of Extreme Munkashim, you know, like the last rites, and where you put oil on the various points of the body of somebody that's dying. And, I mean, the text simply doesn't bear the weight of that sort of practice there. And also, the whole, if it is about, if this is actually about physical healing, then surely we're anointing them and praying that they get better, not that they die, you know.

So, should we use oil when we're praying? If someone's sick, spiritually, physically, should we use oil? Should you? Sure, I don't know, if you like. I mean, there's nothing magical about it. It's a symbolic act that points to a spiritual reality. If you think it would be helpful, fantastic. That's all I'll say about the oil. Next question, what about this prayer of faith? Verse 15, and the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise them up. It sounds like we could just, if we just believe enough, it'll work. We can work some miraculous thing in the physically sick person. But, of course, we can't force God's hand. We can't get a miracle if we just believe enough. And I know you sort of know this. However, if I'm right, and this is mostly about a spiritual renewal, then yes, we can pray the prayer of faith with great confidence. When people with penitent hearts are reconciled to God, and we pray for them, God will raise them up, God will restore them.

We can pray that prayer with great faith, with great confidence, because we know that is the will of God. Okay, what about the confession part here, verse 16? Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed. What's going on there? Well, it makes sense if it's talking about a spiritual fatigue, isn't it? Spiritual fatigue caused maybe by a sin in your life that you just can't seem to keep tripping over. But what does this practice actually look like?

Well, you know confession is practiced in the Catholic Church, and in some Protestant churches, like high Anglican churches practice it. We do it together. I mean, you've actually already done it in this service. We've confessed together our sins corporately. Here, I think, the passage is more about the reconciliation of people who have sinned against one another, who should put things right, who should go to the person and say that they're sorry, and they should pray together.

And it's wonderful, wonderful healing stuff. In general, though, confession, get into it. Get into it.

[20 : 04] You know, being open to having somebody inquire in your life, to your spiritual health about where you're at, I think it's a fabulous thing. Being honest with where you're at in your life, what you're up to, and praying about it, that's fantastic. You should get into that. That's great. We should, we should hate sin, shouldn't we? Don't we hate sin? Don't we want to hate sin? Shouldn't we hate sin in our own life? Shouldn't we hate the sin in our friends' lives? Shouldn't we do what we can to support them?

And one of the ways that we can do that is by being in intentional relationships where we care for each of us spiritually? Let's finish up here. This is such a wonderful way for James to end his short book.

Christianity is hard. It's hard. And we really need each other. And we need each other when we're happy, because our hearts become turned in on themselves. And we, of course, we need each other when we're sad, and during trials, and when we're troubled, to encourage each other. And here in particular, James says, we need each other when we're fatigued, when it's just hard work, when we've had a lot of pain, and when we feel like throwing in the towel. Here, James says, gather around you people that you trust, and ask them to pray for you. What a wonderful way for James to end his letter.

Folks, you know, we have a fantastic prayer ministry here at St. John's, in the morning and the evening services. And during our offering, I'll remind you again at the offering, but our offering, we have folks over here who would love to pray for you. And nothing weird will happen. If you have something you want to pray about, you go over to them, and they will say to you, how can I pray for you? They're not going to, they're not psychologists or counselors. They'll say, how can I pray for you?

And you say this, they will pray for you. This is not an option for Christianity, praying for each other. This is central.

[22 : 24] This is central to our faith. Let's get into it. Amen.