

Prayers that Change Things: James 5:13 – 20

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Well this week marks the end of our 11 week sermon series in the book of James.

I hope and pray that it has been an encouragement to you, and that the lessons you have learned will continue to mould and shape your life as we mature together in Christ with our faith issuing in works done in gentleness.

Much has happened locally, nationally and internationally since the 19th of April when we began this sermon series with great changes occurring across areas of health, the economy and our own church leadership.

These and other changes have affected us in different ways, and I know from talking to people in church that many of you are feeling isolated, many of you are feeling uncertain about what the future holds, many of you are feeling utterly worn out.

Today in our final study, James concludes his letter with a question that addresses difficult seasons of life – *“Is anyone among you in trouble?”*

The word for trouble is the same one that James used in verse 10 and can be used to mean suffering, afflictions or trials – *are you in trouble at this point in time?*

Last week Shane helpfully expounded that in the face of such suffering, our response is to be *“patient and stand firm. Because the Lord’s coming is near.”* James 5:8. The same Lord whose proximity to us, James describes as, standing at the door, is also the one who is coming, to bring about his Kingdom promises.

But what does James exhort the church to do with this knowledge of Jesus’ close proximity to us and His expected return?

At the close of this letter James says that, if *“anyone among you is in trouble. Let them pray.”* Verse 13.

So, our God who is coming to us, God who is close to us, is a God who we can engage with in prayer.

It might sound a little obvious and not very earth shattering, but through prayer we can have access to the living God! We can commune with Him and as this passage teaches, we can participate with God in changing life outcomes for the better – who isn’t excited by that?

This final instruction to engage with God in prayer brings to completion one of the main themes in the book of James and that is the importance of a relationship with Jesus.

In the opening of his letter, James' first exhortation to the church is for wisdom. How is this wisdom obtained? Well, not by googling or dusting off the old encyclopedia Britannica, but by asking God for it!

“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” James 1:5

How do you ask God? Through prayer! We petition God for the things that are missing in our life, the Godly wisdom that God desires to grow in us.

In the same way that we ask God for wisdom, we are to pray to God if we are in trouble, suffering or facing trials of any kind.

So, engaging God in prayer forms the bookends of James' letter and provides the foundation that authentic, Christ like faith, is a faith that stems from and is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ - a relationship that is nurtured and sustained through prayer.

But prayer isn't just for wisdom or our troubles, as important as that is, prayer is for all seasons of the Christian life!

In verse 13 also, James encourages those who are happy to sing songs of praise!

Our prayer lives can easily go by the wayside when life is going well, but James encourages a response of singing songs of praise for such times. The word for praise here is closely related to the word for Psalms, so the singing that James encourages, is a form of prayer.

The point James is making at the close of this letter is that prayer is for all seasons of life – the good and the difficult AND what more, prayer can change things!

James highlights this teaching by focussing on the subject of illness. An area where we can sometimes feel, and often for very good reasons, that things can't or won't change.

Into this difficult area, James is unequivocal - if anyone is sick, they are to call the elders of the church and have them pray over the ill person, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. Verse 14.

Depending on your experience of church life, this may sound strange, but there is good pastoral guidance here as you would expect.

- The ill person takes the initiative to call on the elders.
- The elders pray over them, which may imply the laying on of hands.
- The elders are to anoint the sick person with oil *in the name of the Lord*.

The anointing of oil is symbolic and not inherently powerful in itself, remembering that anointing people for God's service was commonplace in the Bible and in this case also, functions to set the person apart for God's healing and transformation that the elders are asking for in the name of the Lord.

So it is the prayer of faith in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ that has the power to affect change in this life, for James writes, that the, *“The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up...”* verse 15

We see this in Acts 3 when the Lame Beggar is healed by God when Peter prays this prayer, *“Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”* Acts 3:6

Healing is not only limited to physical infirmity of course, but the ultimate transformation and healing that someone can undergo is their conversion to Christ by being set free from sin and death and receiving a new and eternal life in Christ. This is only because of what Jesus Christ has done for us on the cross and the power in His name.

So towards the end of Peter’s speech at Pentecost, he invites the hearers to receive this new life through repentance in Jesus Christ’s name, *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”* Acts 2:38

Healing of infirmities, healing from sin. Both are possible, because of the salvific power in the name Jesus Christ, who alone has the power to save.

But the power in Jesus’ name is not free for just anyone to call upon. We see this in Acts 19 when the sons of the Jewish priest try using Jesus’ name to drive out evil spirits.

If you’ve not read it – “Spoiler alert” it didn’t go very well, because they didn’t believe in Jesus.

So, believing in Jesus whose name we call on is an essential part of God exercising the power and authority contained in His name.

This leads James to say in verse 15, *“The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.”*

The inclusion of the, *“and anyone who has committed sins”* touches on James’s view of not only the relationship between sin and sickness but also that the state of unforgiveness is a terminal diagnosis. Paul says this plainly in Ephesians 2:1 *“As for you were dead in your transgressions and sin...”* in describing the state of an unredeemed life.

Praise be that God has not left us in this state and can redeem and restore both unforgiveness and bring healing to His people.

Whilst we know that there was no sickness or death prior to the fall and Jesus’ return will be marked by an end to death, mourning, crying and pain (Rev 21:4), the Bible cautions us against making simplistic and harmful correlations between someone’s sickness and sin.

Jesus himself warns against this in John 9 when he corrects the disciples who see the man’s blindness as a result of either his or his parent’s sin.

Jesus was having none of it, teaching the disciples to turn from a position of making false judgements to actually participate in *doing* the works of God and to *expect* that these works might be revealed in his life.

This teaching of the doing and expecting the works of God in people's lives is consistent with James' expectation that the prayer of faith will bring healing and people will find forgiveness.

But what if your experience is that prayer hasn't changed things?

This was a question that we've been wrestling with as a family in the wake of the sudden death of Ruth's uncle - Rev'd Peter Holmes.

Peter was hospitalized having contracted Covid 19 and there would have been hundreds of faithful people, praying for his healing. In the end, he sadly died. So what are we make of that? Did God ignore the prayers of the faithful for his healing?

I believe the answer to this question is well illustrated in a poem written by his sister – Anthea Day...

“And now on his promotion, eternally released from human limitations, rocks on, unfettered, joyously with Jesus - His eternal celebration.”

Even though he died, our prayers for healing were answered, perhaps not as we expected and as difficult as it is for his direct family members as they face doing life without him - they were answered entirely.

For the Christian truth in this matter is contained in Colossians 3:1-4,

“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.”

This poem and passage reflects the truth that as Christians, our lives are hid with Christ's life and so death, when it comes, is not the end but part of the journey through which we are healed and one day, soon to return with Jesus.

But there is one more pastoral step that James encourages us to take to enable effectiveness and that is another kind of prayer - the confession of sins. Verse 16.

This part of the passage is tricky in terms of who he is directing this instruction to, but it's likely, that with the aim being people being healed on the one hand and the identification of the prayers of the righteous being powerful and effective, on the other, that James is inviting the confession of sins on the part of both the pray-ers and the ill alike.

As James has done often in his letter, he dips into the Old Testament to find that exemplary person to best illustrate his point and this time he finds it in the prophet Elijah – an ordinary man, but a man whose prayers were answered including those that brought back to life the widow's son in 1 Kings 17.

This might be a fruitful area of exploration, particularly if you are feeling as though your prayers are going unanswered – are you right with God?

To complete his letter, James' focus extends to those who wander from the truth.

Taken with those who are ill, James' pastoral heart for the sick and the lost are a challenge for churches who can sometimes ignore or forget people in these positions, either because we feel out of our depth, or maybe it's a case of out of sight and out of mind.

Again, we are reminded to not retreat but to participate in doing the works of God who in this case, takes the initiative to seek and find the lost.

What is consistent with the character of God in working to bring the sinner back home, is to be found alive and active in the life of the believer in Jesus.

This is a message for all of us, brother and sister alike, an extension of our saving faith in Jesus Christ and a revealing to the world, what an authentic Christian faith looks like.

Do you have an authentic Christian faith?

If not, Jesus is at hand. Can I encourage you to pray to Him who alone has the power to save your life. In Him you will find forgiveness for your sins, a new life and a new family – the church!

Come and join with us as we seek to live into an authentic faith in Jesus Christ, a faith that issues in works which brings God's transformation and change, God's Kingdom, to the world around us.

Amen.