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James 5:13-20

Eleventh Message

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THE WISDOM OF PRAYER

SERIES: FAITH THAT WORKS

The epistle of James has been referred to as “the Ouch! Book,” because it is so pointed. As a caring pastor, James gently but forcefully calls brothers and sisters in Christ to a life of holiness. Genuine Christian faith is not simply a belief that God exists; it is giving ourselves over to him in heart, soul, strength, and mind.

As we come to the end of his letter, it’s appropriate that we take a brief look at what James has said so far. He has written that true faith in God transforms us from the inside out. By humbly accepting the Spirit of God and his word planted in us, a harvest of righteousness will blossom within us individually and collectively. This genuine faith frees us and strengthens us to put away the moral filth that easily entangles and destroys us, and instead brings forth from the well-spring of our heart a love of God and of our neighbor that finds expression in an abundance of good works to those both inside and outside the church.

A genuine faith is alive not dead. It is a faith that works, offering hospitality and generosity to strangers and those in need. It pours forth in purity of speech and patient endurance even in the most difficult of circumstances.

James is well aware that we are not able to live this way on our own strength, so it is no surprise that as we come to the closing words of his letter he repeatedly asks us to pray. Prayer can easily become stale for many of us. We pray before meals, and pray before bedtime, that’s about it. How easily we fall into the trap of believing the lie that prayer is something we do only when everything else fails. Prayer seems like such a small, ineffectual activity, but James makes it clear that prayer is essential for us individually and collectively to persevere in a life of faith.

He begins by saying we must pray constantly.

A. Pray constantly

Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. (James 5:13 TNIV)

Suffering and cheerfulness: in these two words we find the extremes of our life experience. Life is filled with peaks and valleys, triumph and tragedy, sorrow and joy. When trouble and pressures come, our natural response is to explode with anger or self-pity. But James says it must lead us to prayer.

In extremely bad or good times we are tempted to turn away from the Lord and rely on our own resources. But James encourages us that to persevere in our faith through every cir-

cumstance of life we are to turn to God. If we are suffering, instead of growing in anger or wallowing in self-pity we are to go to the Lord and pray for his support and strength to persevere. If we are cheerful, then we are to go to God and praise him, for he is the giver of every good and perfect gift.

When we pray we mimic the priorities of Jesus who, as Luke says, “often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16). If Jesus recognized his need for prayer, how much more should we! Jesus told his disciples, “at all times they ought to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1). In his time of tremendous anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). This is the essence of prayer – going to the Lord in recognition of his sovereignty and love, pouring out to him all that is within our heart, and submitting to his will. “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6).

Some of you might be intimidated by prayer, but don’t be. Throughout the Psalms we are reminded that our Heavenly Father knows our every need, yet deeply desires to hear from us. He invites us to call upon him in our time of trouble (Ps 50:15). We can pour out our soul to him (Ps 42:4) because he surely listens and hears our voice in prayer (Ps 66:19).

It’s such great news that the Lord is not confined to the parameters of our words or desires. He is “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:20). Our words are insufficient to capture the essence of our heart and mind anyway; that is why it is such a blessing that the Holy Spirit “intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom 8:26).

Prayer is not something we do just every now and then when the situation seems to call for it. Prayer comes from the constant disposition of our heart and mind to bring every situation before the Lord. As the apostle Paul puts it, we are to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). James agrees. Whether we are suffering or cheerful, or anywhere between, we are to constantly go to our Heavenly Father in prayer.

Next, James says we are to pray collectively.

B. Pray collectively

Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will

raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. (5:14-16a)

Have you ever noticed how many “one another” commands there are in the Bible? Our life of faith is not to be a solitary journey. From the very beginning of time we were made to be in community. We are a much-needed gift to one another, especially when we are weak physically or spiritually.

When James uses the term “sick,” he actually uses two different words. Together they describe those who are so weak physically or spiritually (or both) that they are on the brink of losing heart and giving up. In addition, the words “restore” and “raise up” that James uses have also been used in the scripture to describe both physical and spiritual healing. All these facts taken together lead me to believe that in this passage James is addressing both physical and spiritual weakness. He is encouraging those of us who are beaten down physically or spiritually to seek out the prayers of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

James assures us that if we find ourselves within the grip of such debilitating physical or spiritual suffering we can find help in our church community. He encourages us to invite the elders, caretakers of the flock, to come alongside us in our weakness, listen to our troubles, pray for us, and anoint us with oil that symbolically and tangibly reminds us of the presence and healing power of God. If our weakness is due to our sin, we confess it and receive the forgiveness of our Heavenly Father.

Notice it is not the elders and not the oil that restores us and raises us up; it is the Lord himself who heals us, renews us, refreshes us, and forgives us. He is the only one who is able to make us whole and complete. Yet James makes it clear that we play a part in healing one another: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed.”

As James suggests, our isolation from one another is not good, it is not healthy.

This truth hits home to me because I am definitely more of an introvert than an extrovert. Extended social interaction with others drains me, and time alone re-charges me, so I have a tendency to keep to myself. The other day as I was doing the laundry it became clear to me in a new way why I need to be more available and open to the intimacy of community. Have you ever noticed how in the process of being washed, all the individual clothes get all tangled up? As I was moving a tangled knot of clothes from the washer to the dryer, it became a powerful illustration to me of how we function properly as a church. We enter in individually and dirty, but in the act of being washed, we get all tangled up. That kind of close connection is a good thing for us as brothers and sisters in Christ.

In our connection with one another confession takes place. As in a court of law, to confess means to admit that we are guilty. Confessing our sin is the opposite of trying to hide or cover up our sin. We don't try and defend it, downplay it or ignore it. As the apostle John reminds us, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:8-9).

We know that we are supposed to confess our sins to God, but why does James encourage us to confess our sins to one another? Dietrich Bonhoeffer has wonderful insight in this matter. His book, *Life Together*, is his inspiring account of his unique fellowship with about thirty other men in an underground seminary during the Nazi years in Germany. In the closing chapter he describes just how important the fellowship of confession is in the Christian community. Here is part of what he says:

It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy.

In confession the break-through to community takes place. In confession the light of the Gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. As the open confession of my sins to a brother insures me against self-deception, so, too, the assurance of forgiveness becomes fully certain to me only when it is spoken by a brother in the name of God.¹

Our struggle against sin is an ongoing issue for all of us, so confession is to be more than a sporadic occurrence. Within the context of committed relationships in the Christian community we find such intimacy and accountability. There we can honestly reveal our sins and invite others to not only ask probing questions that uncover our blind spots, but also to remind us of the truth that we are beloved children of God, recipients of his mercy and grace, and forgiven through the blood of Christ Jesus.

If you do not have a close brother or sister in Christ you feel you can go to in your time of need, I suggest you begin by praying that the Lord would provide you with such a companion and confidant. Keep your eyes open for those whom you encounter at church that you can invite into such a relationship. Our bulletin and information booth provide information on a number of small groups that meet regularly. Take the initiative to be a part of such a group that shares life together.

Who knows, maybe the Lord will even lead you to start a new group that gives you the opportunity to care for each other in the way James suggests.

Our Christian community is a gift. It is a place of healing and restoration, a place where God works mightily through the prayers of his people. To illustrate this point further, James brings to mind the example of Elijah.

C. Pray confidently

The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit (5:16b-18).

James is referring to a prominent and familiar episode in Israel's history. Ahab, king of Israel, did more to provoke the Lord to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him. He abandoned the Lord's commands and worshipped Baal, enticing the people of Israel to do the same. So Elijah the prophet prayed for "neither dew nor rain" to come upon the land of Israel for a few years. This is exactly what the Lord did as a sign of judgment upon Ahab and a testimony to the people of Israel that it is the Lord, not Baal, who is God.

After a few years of drought, the climax came when Elijah summoned the people from all over Israel to witness his confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. There Elijah prayed again and God answered his prayer in dramatic fashion by bringing fire upon the water-drenched altar and then with rain upon the drought-stricken land. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The Lord – he is God! The Lord – he is God!"

It was an amazing act of God. The point that James is making is that God accomplished his mighty work through the prayers of Elijah, who was a human just like us. He had all the limitations and weaknesses that we have, and yet mysteriously and miraculously God chose to turn the hearts of the people of Israel back to him through the prayers and actions of this one man.

What a tremendous encouragement for us to pray confidently, not because of our impressive nature but because of the generous nature of God. This passage is a rebuke to my small-minded prayers. I tend to pray for what seems to me to be reasonable or manageable for God. This text encourages me to pray for what seems to me to be improbable and impossible, especially as it relates to those in my life whom I have given up on as too far from the Lord. James is adamant that no one is a lost cause.

In verses 14-16 we saw how one in trouble sees his need and takes the initiative to ask for help. But what if a brother or sister in Christ is wandering from the truth and does not know or admit his need. What do we do then? In verses 19 and 20, that James invites us to reach out boldly to those who do not even see their need for help.

D. Reach out boldly

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (5:19-20)

James urges us to be attentive to the spiritual condition of those in our midst. If someone within the circle of our fellowship has strayed from the truth, pursued their own way, and surrendered to a life of sin, we are not to turn our back on them, but take the initiative to reach out to them and help them find their way back to the Lord.

In Deuteronomy we are told to rescue and bring back our neighbors' wandering animals so that no harm may come to them. If we do this for animals who have lost their way, how much more we should do it for one another? As the apostle Paul wrote, "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:1-2).

If we truly love one another we will not turn a blind eye to the sin of our close brothers and sisters as it devastates and destroys them. Instead, we will help carry their burden. It may be difficult to approach one another in this way, but it is the loving thing to do. "Wounds from a friend can be trusted... As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (Prov 27:6,17). It is the truth from which they stray, and it is the truth that will bring them back. But we must speak the truth gently. As the apostle Paul tells Timothy, "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will" (2 Tim 2:24-26).

Those enslaved by sin are victims of the evil one who has taken them captive to do his will. So we are to approach our wandering brother and sister not in an accusatory manner, abrasive and coercive, but gently and humbly speaking from a heart filled with compassion. Our love for our wandering brother or sister comes from a heart that is intimately aware that we are all sinners saved by the mercy and grace of our Heavenly Father. "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:3-7).

When we speak, we speak the truth of God's mercy and grace. We speak the outrageous good news that God's love "covers a multitude of sins." Jesus Christ paid the price. In him, all of our sins, every single one, have been forgiven. No matter how far we have strayed from the truth, the Lord wants us back. His love and grace is poured out to us beyond measure. His love draws us to himself, leads us to repentance, moving us from the path of death and destruction to abundant and eternal life.

Hearing these words from James, maybe you have come to realize that you have wandered from the faith. Your past does not define you, nor must it condemn you. Salvation is available to all. No matter how far you have strayed, God loves you and desires that you return to him.

All of us are invited to participate in the life, love, and forgiveness offered by our Heavenly Father through Jesus Christ his Son. The gospel is not intended to save isolated individuals and so perpetuate our loneliness, but to unite us in the new community of Jesus. Through him all our relationships are radically transformed. It is my prayer that our PBCC community will reflect James's vision of Christians praising God joyfully, praying for each other lovingly, and reaching out boldly to those who are wandering from the truth.

Father, thank you for your word to us this morning. Thank you for the book of James that has rebuked us, encouraged us and shown us the way of faith, wisdom, humility, and holiness. Thank you for the gracious reminder that we must not isolate ourselves, but live together in intimate community. Help us to be a loving fellowship, open and honest, sharing each other's burdens. We know that you are the One who gives us both the will and the desire to obey, and we thank you Lord for your power and presence within us to love others as you have loved. In Christ's name, Amen.

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1954), 110.

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