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James 5:13-20

14th Message

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PRAYING THROUGH THE PRESSURE

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

All Christians agree on the importance of prayer, yet there is a lot of confusion among believers on this subject. We could well agree with the words of Jacques Ellul: "Prayer is a word we hear often, but most of us don't do it very well."

Perhaps you have heard about the minister who called the children to the front of the church each Sunday to tell them a story. Once he brought a telephone to better illustrate the subject of prayer. "You talk to people on the telephone and don't see them on the other end of the line, right?" he began. The children nodded yes. "Well, talking to God is like talking on the telephone. He's on the other end, but you can't see him. He's listening, though." A little boy piped up and asked, "What's his number?"

It is true, we cannot see God, but most of us would like to have his telephone number, especially when we are facing a crisis. More often than not, however, we feel that when we call God, no one is home or we get a busy signal. We wonder why God doesn't have call waiting. Why he doesn't have a pager or at least a cellular phone?

This morning we come to our final study in the book of James. We have already seen that this letter, written by the brother of Jesus, helps us understand the purpose behind the pressures of life and how we should respond to them. According to the apostle, God uses trials and suffering to shape our character. God's goal for us is not that we have a problem-free existence, but that we come to have a Christ-like character. However, responding with the "wisdom from above," to use James' phrase, is hard for us, because we must respond by God's grace, which is contrary to our normal reactions.

We have examined some common responses to life's problems. We can become angry or we favor the rich; we are tempted to jealousy, pride, friendship with the world, self-exaltation, and attaining wealth. But the promise of this letter is clear: the one who endures under the burden of suffering will be blessed. He or she will develop spiritual character and enjoy intimacy with the Father—the sweetest thing that one can experience here on earth.

In our last study we talked about responding to trials with patience. Instead of being consumed with "divine" wrath we are to put wrath far from us. Rather than selling out to the world we are to strengthen our hearts. Rather than complaining against one another we are to wait until the coming of the Lord. Rather than seeking a way of escape we are to stay under the pressure and allow God to have his way.

This leads to the question: What do we do while we wait patiently for the Lord's return? Are we totally defenseless? Today we will examine the two great weapons of prayer and love. These are the elements that will help us persevere under the pressures and temptations that come from trials. These are what will encourage the body of Christ to endure together as a community, to remain pure and wait patiently for the Lord's return. So the answer to our question is, yes, there is

important work to be done while we wait patiently for the Lord's return.

First, we will look at James' call upon the brethren to pray, beginning in verse 13 of chapter 5:

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them 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. 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 might not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit. (James 5:13-18 NASB)

Very simply, prayer is communication with God. And, like all good communication, prayer involves both speaking and listening. Good communication, especially in marriage, helps us to grow in intimacy with another person. When a couple takes time to talk and listen to each other without hurry or distractions, they learn to enjoy one another at a deeper level. In the same way, prayer is communication with God that causes us to grow in intimacy with him.

Eugene Peterson put it this way: "Praying is that act in the life of faith which consciously and deliberately enters into a speaking/listening attentiveness before God—his relationship with his creation and creatures and their relationship with him. Whenever we concentrate, focus, and attend, we pray. Prayer is the coming into awareness, the practicing of attention, the nurturing and development of personal intensity before God."

In the context of trials and suffering, James lists three occasions for prayer. The first two are general, the third specific. The first occasion for prayer is when someone is "suffering." The word means suffer misfortune or hardship; to be in a sorry situation; to be in trouble. The idea is "to experience something that comes from outside." This fits perfectly with the context of trying circumstances not directly caused by ourselves. On two occasions in 2 Timothy, Paul uses the word for circumstances in which hardship is associated with belief or faith in Christ. As is the case here in this letter, the apostle's exhortation is to endure the suffering. We have already noted that James' letter was written to exiled Jews who were being severely oppressed by their rich landlords; and the fact that they believed in Jesus didn't help.

Christians talk a lot about prayer, but do we actually pray? That is the question raised by this text. At times, when we are facing difficult circumstances the last thing on our minds is to spend time talking with and listening to God. It is much easier to become active

and seek remedies to our predicament. It is natural to seek release from pressure. If things don't improve, however, we start complaining about it to other people, enlisting their sympathy.

But James' word gives us a vision to enter into prayer as a means to persevere through the pressure rather than try to escape it. God wants to hear from us and he wants to speak to us. Instead of dwelling on the problem, therefore, we are to concentrate on God. When we accept that the suffering we are experiencing is designed by him to shape us and bless us, then we are much more likely to attend to him. If we need language to help us express our feeling and our fears, we can read and pray through the psalms. Many of the psalms are verses born out of suffering, especially the sufferings of David. These beautiful prayers can help us through the dark nights of the soul.

The second occasion for prayer is when anyone is "cheerful." Now here is a positive note. In this book that deals with the pressures caused by trials and temptations, there is the hint here that life is not always filled with pain and suffering. We are to regard these occasions as opportunities to sing praises to God. This is a form of prayer too—attending to God with thanksgiving and praise. So prayer is not reserved solely for times of stress and suffering.

Sadly, however, we are less prone to pray when things are going well than when we are in trouble. As the trouble dissipates we tend to forget about God altogether. The point that James is making is that we are to focus on God not only when we need to be delivered from evil, but also when we are appreciative of good circumstances. And again, if we don't know what to say to God, we can turn to the psalms for inspiration. Many of the psalms are exclamations of praise, delight and thanksgiving.

If the first two occasions for prayer are general in nature, the third is quite specific. James says: "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them 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."

The word "sick" here refers to someone who is very ill, is disabled, has a terminal illness or a chronic condition of some kind. This verse is not directed to someone who has a bad cold. The one who is sick is instructed to call upon the elders to anoint him with oil and pray over him. Oil is a symbol of the healing power of the Holy Spirit. Beginning in A.D. 852, this verse was used in the church to institute the practice of giving the last rites. This seems to be inconsistent with the text, however. The last rites, which are initiated by a priest, prepare one for death. But according to the text, the prayer that is offered here is for life, and it is initiated by the believer.

The important questions that need to be asked are, what is the cause of the illness? and, how is the person healed? There are two possibilities as to the cause. The cause of the illness might be unknown, as in the case of Job. One of the trials that is common to mankind is severe physical illness, such as cancer, multiple sclerosis or disability of some kind. In these situations it is right to call upon the elders and have them pray.

However, there is another cause for the kind of sickness mentioned in our text. It may have been caused by unconfessed and unjudged sin. There seems to be a clear link between sin and sickness. James says: "And if he has committed sin, it will be forgiven." The word "if" here indicates a high probability that sin is the cause of the illness. That is the primary thought in James' mind. He is not talking

about a one-time sin or failing, but about sin that has been persisted in and not dealt with.

It is true, of course, that sin causes every illness. When Adam sinned, death entered the world. Sin is what causes our bodies to decay and die. But when we consciously allow personal sin to remain unchecked, severe physical problems can result. There is a strong correlation between our physical and spiritual health. A Jewish proverb says that no sick man recovers until his sins have been forgiven. Illness is one means by which God gets our attention. And when we are willing to confess our sin and repent, then we are to call on the elders and be anointed with oil. The result of praying in this way is that the sin is forgiven and healing occurs.

This leads to the question, how is the person healed? The promise is that if the elders pray, there will be healing. But, a problem arises when physical healing does not follow. What about that? God is perfectly capable of healing those whom he desires to heal. Job is our example here. The words "restore" and "raise up" can apply to physical healing. However, they can also imply spiritual restoration. The word "restore" means "to save"; it is associated with salvation; while "raise up" is associated with resurrection. So the elders' first concern is to pray that souls will be saved and bodies resurrected at the coming of the Lord.

Jesus did not heal everyone who came to him with physical ailments. He healed only to authenticate his ministry, so that people would understand his power to forgive. When he healed the paralytic in Mark 2:2-11, he said: "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'arise and take up your pallet and walk?' But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins... I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home." Jesus always offered spiritual healing in the present to everyone he came in contact with. That was his primary concern. And he always offered physical healing too, but not always in the present. All of us will be healed physically at last, but that is a matter of time. The journey of Joni Eareckson, described in her book *A Step Further*, is helpful in this regard. I especially like her picture of an empty wheelchair with a "for sale" sign.

One danger we must be alert to is the distortion of faith that can result from a physical healing. Healing may not be the best outcome in a given situation. People love the miraculous but, as we see in the gospels, even a sign or a miracle will not inspire them to believe in God. Years ago, our pastors were in Indonesia, and after a service one evening we were summoned to a home to pray for a woman who was desperately ill. We prayed for this woman, but the thought occurred to me that a healing in that spiritually dark place, which is under Islamic influence, could have caused great confusion. People would have been attracted to Christianity for all the wrong reasons.

So when someone is sick, we are called to prayer. But we must be careful. God may choose not to heal the person we have prayed for. Paul prayed to be healed from what he called a thorn in the flesh, but to no avail. God's response to him was: "My grace is sufficient for thee." Try as we might, we cannot stop the process of decay in our bodies. Eventually, this body will die. Why would there be so much Scripture written about enduring patiently under suffering if healing were always the outcome? God may be using the suffering to bring about a greater glory.

Our own Pat Patmor is an excellent illustration of this word from James about restoring the one who is sick. I have asked her to come and share her story with us this morning.

Pat Patmor:

On a December morning eighteen years ago, I sat down with a Bible and a concordance to do a word study on death. I needed to die. Physically, I couldn't go on any longer. Six years earlier, as a non-Christian living in a hard, abusive marriage, I was diagnosed with ankylosing spondylitis, a chronic, crippling arthritic disease of the spine. Specialist after specialist used me as a guinea pig to try different new medicines. Finally, they settled on the least toxic: thirty-five to forty aspirin a day. Taking aspirin for the next six years allowed me to sleep for perhaps two hours each night.

Back to that morning eighteen years ago. A new friend in Christ, Joan, knocked on my door. She smiled, and asked me why the Spirit had led her to my house instead of the grocery store. I shared my word study with her. Her tender, prompt response was to direct me to James 5:13-14, and encourage me to go to the elders for anointing and healing.

A week later, my husband and I went to the elders' meeting. They made me feel very comfortable with their friendly chatter, at the same time they asked a lot of questions about my six-year journey with doctors and medications. Ray Stedman then me asked if I had anything to confess. At that moment I spoke publicly of what I had never realized before. My abusive first marriage had wedged a deep hatred in my heart for my first husband. That sin of hatred had made me ill. Tears flooded my soul, and a deeper cleansing was mine.

The elders and my husband gathered to lay hands on my spine. Just before Ray anointed me, he paused and asked who Jesus would be to me if I was not healed. My reply was quick that indeed, Jesus would still be my Lord and King. He would just go to "plan B", I said. Satisfied, Ray prayed for healing if that was the Lord's will for my life. I was instantly healed! I went home and slept for fifteen hours and have been "sleeping" ever since!

Last spring, I underwent a number of medical tests, one of which determined the bone density of my hip and spine. The numbers are supposed to come out the same on both, but mine did not. My spine was too good to be true! The doctors told me I must be "bionic," because they had never seen a spine as strong as mine. God had, of course. He wanted life for me, not death. Amen.

What a wonderful testimony to the inspired word of James.

These verses about healing the sick are a word to our elders as well, of course. Prayer for the flock is one of the most important tasks and one of the highest callings of an elder.

We could sum up these verses by saying that we are to "pray without ceasing." We should pray both when we are suffering and when we are rejoicing. And we are to call upon the elders when we are very sick and we realize that we have unconfessed and unresolved sin in our lives.

Verse 16 follows right on the heels of this: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much."

To prevent sin from going too far so that a sick person will have to call upon the elders for healing, we as believers are instructed to confess our sins and pray for one another so that we might be healed. Healing here may refer to physical healing, but it also applies to the wounds caused by sin. Sin can really damage us, externally and in-

ternally, but confession and prayer within the body restores us and keeps us healthy.

Most of us understand the notion of preventive maintenance. We take our cars to the repair shop because if we don't, they will fall apart. We maintain our homes for the same reason. If our body hurts, we go to the doctor. James says we maintain the purity of our souls through confession and prayer. In the Catholic church, beginning in A.D. 1215, confession was limited to priests. But here, it is clear that confession is the work of the entire body. We are to confess to one another and pray for one another.

We don't like the idea of exposing our deepest secrets, though. But the word "confession" is simply a legal term, a statement of fact. When we confess in this way, we share openly and honestly, without unnecessary guilt or fear of having to do penance. Actually, confession is praise. When David confessed his sin in the psalms, he experienced the joy of release and he praised the Lord as a result. Confession frees the soul and releases guilt and fear. Once our secrets are exposed, they lose their power over us. The light of the Lord brings healing on its wings when we open up the dark recesses of our souls, and we find that we are loved and accepted and prayed for.

This is why it is important to be involved in home fellowships or small discipleship groups where we can share together and hold one another accountable. When we go to the therapist's office or the pastor's office we divulge our deepest secrets. The idea here is that we are to be connected within the church so that this can take place within the body.

The healing power of forgiveness cannot be exaggerated. Listen to this word from John Claypool:

We all have shadows and skeletons in our backgrounds. But listen, there is something bigger in this world than we are and that something bigger is full of grace and mercy, patience and ingenuity. The moment the focus of your life shifts from your badness to his goodness and the question becomes not 'What have I done?' but 'What can he do?', release from remorse can happen. Miracle of miracles, you can forgive yourself because you are forgiven, accept yourself because you are accepted, and begin to start building up the very places you once tore down. There is grace to help in every time of trouble. That grace is the secret to being able to forgive ourselves. Trust it.

In verse 17, James gives a principle and an example that reveals the nature and power of prayer. When Elijah prayed, it didn't rain for three and a half years; then he prayed and the heavens opened up.

Here we see four things about prayer. First, prayer accomplishes much. Prayer changes circumstances. But even if the circumstances don't change, prayer can change us. Our hearts become still; we rest from anxiety and worry; we endure and persevere through trial.

Second, prayer energizes God. The word "effective" qualifies the verb "accomplishes," not the noun "prayer." Our prayer energizes or affects the working of God. At times God is waiting for us to get involved; he holds back until we pray. Remember James' word earlier: "You have not because you ask not."

Third, prayer demands faith. Notice, the prayer is not righteous, but the man who prays is. The one who is praying believes God is in control and that he is working out his plan in human affairs. James has already instructed: "If any man lacks wisdom let him ask of God...but let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the

one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.”

Fourth, prayer consists of asking for the will of God. The prayers of Elijah, a man of faith, accomplished much in that they energized God's working. But there is something we need to note here. It wasn't Elijah's idea that it would or would not rain; it was God's idea revealed to Elijah. What a wonderful clue as to what we are to pray for: we are to pray for the will of God, what he reveals to us, things like salvation, forgiveness, wisdom, maturity, peace. There are many matters to pray for other than changed circumstances.

Of one thing we can be certain, and that is that prayer is a tremendous weapon to help us persevere under trial. Listen to the words of Ray Stedman:

The greatest thing anyone can do for God and man is pray. It is not the only thing; but it is the chief thing. The great people of the earth today are the people who pray. I do not mean those who talk about prayer; nor those who say they believe in prayer; nor yet those who can explain about prayer; but I mean those people who take time to pray.

Finally, James issues a call to care. Love is another great weapon to help us persevere under the pressures of life. Verses 19-20:

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, let him know that the one 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)

The purpose of love is to return one who has strayed from the truth. When we see someone wandering away from the fold and becoming entrenched in the grip of sin we are to have a heart that cares enough to go after that lost sheep.

The result of such love demonstrated is that we can save a soul from death. The word “save” here is the same word used in connection with prayer, in verse 15. Just as the prayer of faith saves one who is sick, so love demonstrated by a believer can save a soul from death, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. Love allows sins to be covered and a life to be redeemed. The last phrase is a quote from Proverbs 10:12: “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions.” Love draws a veil over sin.

In the body to which James was writing, suffering was causing internal strife and division resulting in anger, hatred, conflicts and quarrels. Believers were seeking to exalt themselves and they were judging one another. James calls upon the brethren to refrain from this and love each other instead.

When we see a brother or sister being dragged down by sin we are called to speak to them for the purpose of turning them from the error of their ways—not to chastise them, put them down or vent righteous anger toward them, but to return them to fellowship with God and redeem their life.

While we are waiting for heaven, while we are in the midst of suffering ourselves, there are important things for us to do. We are called to pray, to love, and help redeem souls. We share in the sufferings of Christ, yes, but we also share in his work of reconciling the world to the Father.

The common thread in both of these calls is sin and salvation. “Sin” is mentioned four times in the text, “save” twice. There is great temptation to sin in the midst of suffering and trials. The unfairness of it all makes us angry. At times we think that personal suffering affords us the opportunity to justify our sin; while oppression offers an excuse to condemn the sin of others. But James says we are to view sin as something that leads us to prayer and to acts of love. As he has already said, “pure and undefiled religion is to remain unstained, unblemished by the world.”

In our last study we referred to the mystery of suffering and the fact that even in the most stressful and unjust circumstances we can experience the compassion and mercies of God. But here, James unfolds another mystery. No matter what we have done, no matter what kind of sin we have committed, we can also experience God's wonderful faithfulness and love. What an amazing thing! I can understand God allowing someone who does all the right things to experience suffering so that he can reveal himself to him in deep ways, but God goes one step further. Someone who does all the wrong things can experience the same compassions of God if he will but turn to him. Every one of us can be part of that process if we will love and care for those who are caught in the entanglements of sin. A brother or sister can be experiencing famine, but when we pray, God pours forth the rain from heaven that refreshes the soul and allows the land to become fruitful.

Peter sums up James' final point in these words from his first letter: “The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another because love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:7-8).

So we come to the end of our studies in this most practical of letters. This is not the easiest letter to take into our hearts because it penetrates our souls and causes us to take a close look at how we are responding to the pressures and struggles of life. And yet, if we have ears to hear and if we have teachable spirits, James has set forth how God uses difficult circumstances to mold and shape our character. The things that we fear will come, but God actually uses them for our good. In the midst of everything, James calls upon us to endure, wait patiently, humble ourselves, love, pray, care for the orphans and widows, and become doers of the word.

This is no easy task. The road will be painful. We cannot make it in our own strength. But, as James has shown, the Lord is compassionate and merciful. And the rewards are glorious: The one who endures will be blessed with the crown of life. Amen.

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