

PRAYER AND FELLOWSHIP



James 5:13-20

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Note: Sickness and healing
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses
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Introduction to the passage

The subject of prayer follows naturally James' concern for those who are in trouble. Instead of yielding to the temptation to be irritable with other people (5:4), or even to utter impetuous oaths (5:12), the right thing is to pray. Then, as is normal with James, one thing leads to another so the thought of prayer opens up to various aspects of prayer in our experience, and the effect of this on our fellowship with our fellow church members.

What these verses mean

Verse 13

Is any one of you in trouble? ¹ He should pray.

It is natural for a Christian believer who is in any kind of trouble to talk to the Lord about it. This does not mean that the problem will certainly go away; it may do, but if not, prayer will certainly change our attitude to it, and

The original Greek word for trouble used here is made up of two words, "evil" and "to suffer". The meaning then is "to suffer the evil blows of the outside world". James is speaking of all the blows that come upon the Christian as he lives out his life in an alien world. These can be natural troubles, physical, mental, spiritual and special troubles. (John Blanchard, *Truth for Life*).

give us strength to endure. It is distinctive of Christians that we take everything to God in prayer. We learn not to despair in the face of trouble and not to be over-elated in times of joy, but to be contented in the Lord (Phil.4:10-13).

Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

We need to take note of the original Greek word used for happiness. The meaning is not a superficial euphoria, but a deep inner sense of well-being. The root of this word is used elsewhere in the New Testament and it is interesting to see the situations in which it is used. Firstly when Paul is before Felix (Acts 24:10) and in the shipwreck on Paul's journey to Rome. These are not events that one would look upon as being joyful. Yet the Christian finds inner peace, contentment and enjoyment of life in the midst of the turmoil of this world, just as Paul did. God does give believers material blessings, but this should not be the basis of the happiness James speaks of here. There is a natural tendency for us to turn to God when in trouble more than when things are going well. This is because when things are well we can so easily gain that feeling of independency. Material things that make us happy can draw us away from the Lord, so we should remind ourselves that they are gifts from God. The point James is making is that in times of pleasure and enjoyment we should not forget God. If there is a reason to make you genuinely happy then praise God. Do this by singing praise unto him. It identifies you as a Christian as you lift your heart in praise to him. It will help to stop pride. Instead of a person's being satisfied with their own success they will recognise it as of God's goodness.

Verse 14

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church

This verse has given rise to many false ideas, so it will be good for us to consider it carefully. James is addressing the person who is sick. Again we must give attention to the original Greek word used by James. It means "without strength". So we are not talking about minor ailments, but a relatively serious condition where the probability is that the person is too ill to leave his or her bed. The point that matters is that the person is not well enough to go and receive help. What ought such a person to do? Call the elders of the church.

There has been a wide abuse of James' instruction. It should not be used as an excuse to add unnecessary burdens on church leaders. It should not be used to justify public healing services, because the elders must go to the patient, and the whole setting is the home and privacy. There is no mention anywhere in the New Testament of healing services. Elders, not professional healers, are to be called. It should not be used to justify any kind of priestly function such as "the last rites", because those called are elders and not

priests, and as we shall see, the assumption is not that the patient will die, but will recover!

to pray over him

The elders of the church are to pray over the sick person who has called them. We see here the pastoral rôle of elders as they are to come to the sick person. They are to attend the place of suffering and pray within the sight and hearing of the sick person. Praying beside the sick person becomes more intimate and fervent than at a distance in another place. The sick person benefits as they become conscious of the effective power of prayer.

and anoint him with oil

The elders are to anoint the sick person with oil. This does not imply some kind of magical spell accompanied by a mystical form of words. It may be the oil had a medicinal purpose where this was needed. In our times this means that we accompany the doctor's efforts with prayer. Another suggestion is that the oil provided a kind of focal point for the patient's faith, but was not in itself necessary for the healing, as, for example, our Lord's use of mud in John 9:6. Whatever the explanation of the use of oil, it is clear that it was not of the first importance, and that the emphasis here and in the next verse is on the prayer.

in the name of the Lord.

This and the following phrase are the key to the meaning of these verses. The oil is symbolic as it does not contain the properties required for what is to follow. It is the power of the Lord that makes the difference and so prayer and anointing with the oil is done in his name. "In the name of the Lord" must mean at least two things;

1. reliance on the Lord's power (and not on the prayer or anything else that was done) and
2. submission to the Lord's plan or purpose.

We must bear these two principles in mind as we go on to the next verse.

Verse 15

And the prayer offered in faith

The prayer has to be offered by the elders in the name of the Lord (first key phrase) and also in faith (second key phrase). This means that the prayer offered is in the definite conviction that it has God's approval. Where something that is done without a conviction (faith) of its approval by God then it is sinful (Rom. 14:23). How do we gain a conviction that something is approved by God? There are a number of references in the New Testament to promises of prayers being answered. The promise is always governed by one thing, namely that prayer must be in accordance with God's will. In other words, we cannot alter God's will by the way we pray, whether it be

loudly, with great fervour, persistence or clever argument. We cannot claim something that God has not promised or designed to do. If it is not God's will then neither medicine nor prayer will achieve the result that we want. Jesus did not heal everyone. In his sovereign purpose he physically healed some and allowed others to remain ill. Therefore prayer offered in faith is not something man can produce at will. It comes as a gift from God and can only be prayed when God gives assurance that its content will be answered in accordance with his sovereign purposes.

will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.

The consideration of our two key phrases "in the name of the Lord" and "prayer in faith" will now help us to continue with this verse, which has created difficulties for many. This is because the two previous key phrases are not understood and the verse is taken to mean that the sick person will certainly be cured. The confusion then arises due to our experience where sick people are not always healed. Some have tried to resolve the problem by claiming that where healing has not occurred it is because of a lack of faith either in the patient or the elders, or both. Far from helping, this proposed solution is often untrue and causes much distress. It is better to ask ourselves what is meant by the promised healing (will it make the sick person well?). It can mean a complete cure from the illness, but it can also mean a strengthening to bear the distress. Not only so, we should not exclude the possibility that the Lord's purpose in the process is to help the sick person's transition from here to glory. We will see this principle worked out in verses 17 and 18 with the example of Elijah.

If he has sinned he will be forgiven.

This does not mean that illness is always caused by sin, nor even that it is often the case. But there are times when God shows his displeasure with us and our illness is one way by which he lovingly leads us to repentance. There was certainly a connection between sickness and sin in the two incidents recorded in Mark 2:1-12 and John 5:1-15. But our Lord denied it in the case of the man born blind in John 9:1-5 and the mention of sin in this passage may well indicate a direct connection with the sickness of verse 14. When elders are called, it is part of their ministry to encourage repentance by the sick person for known sin. Such repentance will receive the Lord's pardon (1 John 1:9).

Verse 16

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

Since the Lord readily forgives those who confess their sins to him, we must in turn be sure to be open with one another, seeking pardon and forgiving one another. This has nothing to do with the practice of confession of sin to

a priest. For one thing, the sin here is in a personal relationship, and no other person, including a priest, is involved. For another thing, this is not one person such as a priest receiving the confessions of many people, but many people involved in a spiritual relationship with each other. This text has sometimes been used to justify the public confession of sins and faults. Such public confessions frequently lead to an unseemly exposure of immoral behaviour causing embarrassment, or to sinful self-advertisement. The confession James advocates is person to person, and he almost certainly had in mind our Lord's teaching in Matthew 5:23-24, and he would include the need to forgive others when they offend us (Matt.6:14-15). The healing here is best understood in terms of a return to harmonious relationship – a healing of divisions and hurts.

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

James may be referring to the healing of the sick, or of spoiled relationships within the fellowship. In both cases prayer is involved and here James puts the emphasis on the prayer, not on any kind of ritual or of anointing with oil. A righteous man is a Christian by reason of his faith in Christ. Perhaps it also means one who is living consistently as a Christian. God works through prayer and it is one of the ways he brings about his sovereign purposes in the world. James illustrates his meaning here in the next verse.

Verse 17

Elijah was a man just like us.

For his case study James turns to Elijah. He was a man just like us, experiencing the sufferings and trials of this world like we do today. We read of Elijah running away, being frightened and depressed. Yet it is in his weakness that the incident to which James now refers took place. It happened on the mountain when Elijah opposed the prophets of Baal. James highlights two incidents.

He prayed earnestly that it would not rain,

Elijah prayed that it would not rain. Actually there is no record of Elijah praying this. We have the Old Testament narrative in 1 Kings 17:1 that Elijah told Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, whom I serve, there will neither be dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." How could Elijah have known this? God revealed his intentions to him.

and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.

The words came true. The rest of 1 Kings 17 is set in the drought that followed. Chapter 18 begins with the words, "After a long time, in the third year ..." and Elijah is instructed to go and see Ahab again.

Verse 18

Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

In the instruction Elijah receives in 1 Kings 18:1 to see Ahab, God states that he will send rain upon the land. We then have the incident on Mount Carmel unfolding in the rest of chapter 18 when the rain did come. The whole point about Elijah mentioned by James is that having received God's revelation Elijah praised God in prayer and earnestly asked that all would be fulfilled. Elijah was harnessing his prayers to the revealed will of God. The challenge is therefore for us to live close to God, to learn how to know his will, and so to pray effectively for God's will to be fulfilled.

Verse 19

My brothers,

James starts his final comment of his letter with a phrase that he has used nearly twenty times. He is not writing to people outside of the church but to Christians. His parting words are a warning of the danger that all Christian believers face. The consequence of this danger is very serious. The concluding words sum up the practical nature of this whole letter and show the pastoral concerns of James.

if one of you should wander from the truth

The danger is wandering away from the truth. This means allowing irregularities to arise in our understanding of doctrine and consequently our Christian lives. This danger is subtle because the word "wander" does not describe a deliberate digression, but a slow slipping away. Backsliding never begins with an outrageous, scandalous sin. It always begins slowly and quietly. All Christians are vulnerable, from the experienced preacher who has been a Christian for a long time, to the novice. This warning from James also stresses how important truth is. There are many in the Christian Church who think that doctrine does not matter. It certainly does, otherwise we would not have this warning about wandering from the truth. What we believe and how we live are interconnected. If we lose sight of the doctrine of sin, then our ethical and moral standards are lowered. If we neglect the doctrine of the Holy Spirit we begin to work in the energy of our own flesh and our power in service is lost. We can list many biblical doctrines and trace the consequences upon the life of the believer if they are neglected and ignored.

and someone should bring him back,

Our concern should be aroused when someone in the church strays from sound teaching, because we know that this will often lead to wayward conduct. Other references in the New Testament suggest that the person helping a backslider needs himself to be walking closely with God (see Galatians 6:1 as an example). James is addressing all Christians, not just the church leaders. It is a responsibility of duty for all members of the local congregation to be vigilant and caring. This is not the same as being negative

and critical, having an unloving spirit to those we think are going backwards. This is a mutual ministry where we all need to be concerned for each other's spiritual health.

Verse 20

remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Having dealt with the danger and the duty to be alert, James now informs us of the consequence and rewards of this duty. The person who has wandered from the truth will be saved from death and his many sins will be covered. This is not an easy phrase to work out and can cause some to think that a Christian can be denied (or lose his) eternal salvation. Such a conclusion goes completely against the teaching of the Bible and would contradict statements such as Jesus made, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:28). We will consider three explanations of this verse, all of which would fit biblically.

1. If the wanderer is a true Christian, then the death from which he is saved when he is restored is possibly physical death to which waywardness can sometimes lead (1 Co.11:30-32).
2. The wanderer may be a professing but not genuine Christian. In that case, we have here a rescue from eternal death (Rev. 21:8) and in Christ his sins are covered. This interpretation goes outside the text because James is addressing Christians. However, a false Christian may come to realise their falseness by having their wrong understanding of Scripture and subsequent lifestyle put right and as a result come to true faith.
3. This is probably the interpretation that sits the most comfortably with the text. James is writing from the point of view of our fellow Christians observing our lives. When they see us wander in the way we talk and live, it raises in their minds the question whether we can truly be a Christian. God knows the true condition and that if the person has been saved already they cannot be saved for a second time; he or she is eternally secure. If I, as a back-slidden person, am restored, then people looking in from the outside would say that my soul has been saved from death. In their eyes that is where I was heading in the state that I was. The final words "and cover over a multitude of sins" would fit, because the restored person confesses their "wandering" sins, seeking God's forgiveness. This is part of the continuing need for Christians to daily confess their sins.

The rescue of the wandering Christian is the work of Christ, but it is clear that he uses us in the process. What a wonderful and practical conclusion to James' letter.



Note: Sickness and healing

How does the text that we have in 5:14-15 stand up in the modern technological world of today? Were the words that James wrote only relevant for his day? Would it be more sensible today to call a doctor rather than the elders of the church? The answer is that these verses apply to us today as they did in the early days of the New Testament church. Medical and technological advancements have not changed the principal reason for people recovering from sickness. They have greatly helped and it is true that today people are recovering from illnesses that only a few years ago they would have died from. In considering such matters our starting point is with God who is the creator and re-creator of all things. In every instance of healing he is the one who heals, whether he acts directly through unknown laws or directly through known laws² Healing can be ascribed to a whole number of reasons. The complex healing of the mechanism of the body is a gift from God. The effect of fresh air and sun are gifts from God. Vitamins, protein, medicines are gifts from God. So are the diagnostician's and surgeon's skills. All these are means that God uses to restore health. God does use miraculous ways which defy all known laws of nature, but this must be seen alongside the known laws that account for the majority of cases of healing that takes place.



Summary

James' letter was written specifically to Christians to challenge any disparity that existed between what they believed (faith) and how they lived (works). In our present study, which forms the final part of the letter, James brings together the two factors of life's changeability and the Christian's attitude to life. The changeable factors are trouble and sickness. Every Christian is affected, but how do they respond to these factors? As James describes a condition he then gives advice as to how Christians should respond. The theme that runs through this section is prayer; prayer for ourselves in both sorrow and joy; prayer in times of physical weakness and prayer for one another in the course of Christian fellowship. The prayer has to be offered in faith and in the Lord's name for results to

² Dr. Henry W. Frost *Miraculous Healing*



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take place. Things will happen, not because the Christian prayed and persuaded God to act, but because the prayer will be in harmony with God's will and purpose. This James demonstrates through the example of Elijah. Whatever results from the troubles, sickness and care of the congregation for each other, all will have one thing in common – the glory of God. This will be the desire of the Christian believer and will govern his attitude and daily walk. That then should match up with his professed belief.



A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses

Theme: Practical Christian fellowship

Church life is more than gathering for meetings. The life of a church is in its relationships, first with the Lord expressed in prayer and worship, and then with each other.

1. **The relationship between the leaders and the people**

The caring of elders is expressed in many ways and covers every aspect of the members' lives. Here the trust of the members in their leaders is seen in their calling for the elders' help in a time of extreme need.

2. **The relationship of the members to each other**

Again, this is expressed in all kinds of ways, but here it is in a sensitivity to one another's feelings, and an awareness when one has hurt another. Readiness to ask for forgiveness and to forgive is often very hard to achieve: it is a test of real love.

3. **The relationship with wayward brothers and sisters**

We have a natural reluctance to 'interfere' in other people's lives, and we naturally fear a rebuff if we try to warn those we fear are wandering. But Scripture provides for a rescue ministry. In addition to these verses, there are Colossians 3:16 and Hebrews 10:24-25. Illustrations are provided in Matthew 7:3-5 and John 13:12-15.



Focus Point: Elders

These were the leaders in the New Testament churches. There was no longer a place for anyone to function as a priest, offering animal sacrifices as in the Old Testament. This was because Jesus Christ had offered himself as the one sacrifice "for all time" (Heb. 10:12). Now, all believers are priests having direct access to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:9) and offering sacrifices of spiritual worship (Rom.12:1-2; Heb. 13:15; 1 Pet.2:4-5).

Elders were appointed as soon as possible after churches were formed (Acts 14:23), to direct the affairs of the church. These men were committed to preaching and teaching (1 Tim.5:17). Paul gives qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. In the same chapter he identifies deacons, whose task was to assist the elders, relieving them of work which would divert them from the more spiritual aspects of church life, after the pattern of Acts 6:1-6. Paul instructs Titus on appointing elders in the churches on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5-9).

Elders are called "overseers" (Acts 20:28; Phil.1:1; 1 Tim.3:1-2); and they are seen to exercise a pastoral or caring ministry (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet.5:1-4 shepherds of God's flock). A study of all of these references will show that there were often a number of elders in each local church sharing leadership responsibility. Other names used for elders are "bishop" and "presbyter". All these different names describe the same function of leadership of the local community of believers (i.e the church).



Over to you

What emphasis is there upon prayer in your church? In what spirit do people pray? How much is God's will sought in prayer?

Are you afraid to speak to your members personally when you see signs of spiritual decline in them?

Are you so quick to warn them that you cause resistance and resentment?

To get that balance right do you ask the Lord to make you wise and sensitive in every aspect of your pastoral care?