

A Faith That Works: The Prayer of Faith

James 5:13-20

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on August 23, 2020

Introduction

- ❖ As many of you know, I have an affinity for great preachers in church history. I've learned so much from the sermons of these powerful heralds of God's Word. I'm thinking of the 20th century's Martyn Lloyd-Jones; the 19th century's Charles Spurgeon; the 18th century's George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards; the 17th century's John Bunyan and Thomas Brooks; or the 16th century's Martin Luther and John Calvin. Over the years, you've heard me quote or reference these great preachers in my preaching.
 - This morning I want to go further back in church history to the 4th-century – to the city of Antioch in ancient Syria. I want to introduce you to a man described as the greatest preacher of the early church. His name was John of Antioch, but he's better known as **John Chrysostom** (348-407), which is Greek for “the golden-mouthed”.

- ❖ **Listen to what this golden-mouthed preacher had to say about one of the most powerful forces in the world.** This force is so powerful, so potent that it has – *“subdued the strength of fire, it has bridled the rage of lions, hushed anarchy to rest, extinguished wars, appeased the elements, expelled demons, burst the chains of death, expanded the fates of heaven, assuaged diseases, dispelled frauds, rescued cities from destruction, stayed the sun in its course, and arrested the progress of the thunderbolt.”*
 - What is he referring to? What kind of force, what power, what authority could do all that? **John Chrysostom was preaching about prayer.** Prayer is that force, that power, that can *subdue the strength of fire* and *bridle the rage of lions*. And he's not exaggerating. He's not overstating his case. He's simply alluding to story after story in Scripture where the prayers of faith on the lips of faithful saints have caused such powerful effects. That's not just fancy preaching. That's biblical teaching.

- ❖ **The prayer of faith has great power – the power to heal the physically sick and the power to save the spiritually lost.** That's what we'll see in this morning's text. But if that's true – if prayer is *that* powerful and *that* effective – then why don't we see more evidence of that great power in our life together?
 - Could it be that one of the most powerful practices in the life of the church is also one of the most neglected? It's a puzzling fact, and yet sadly, a true one. We give far too little attention to prayer in our personal lives and within church life. **It's inexcusable how the power to *expel demons* and to *burst the chains of death* lies dormant within sleepy congregations scattered throughout our land.**

- ❖ We saw, in the beginning of chapter 5, James issuing woes to the unrighteous rich who were hoarding their wealth and failing to use it for its God-intended purpose to serve the good of others. Church, do you see how that same charge could potentially be laid at our feet? **Could we be accused of hoarding the precious gift of prayer, failing to use it for its God-intended purpose?** Let that not be said of us! May we not be found, on that day of the Lord, sitting on a stockpile of divine power, letting it go to waste. Instead let us be found on our knees, putting prayer to work – exercising true faith, a faith that works.

- ❖ That's been the theme of this series in James. **We've been talking about a faith that goes beyond mere words, mere assent to biblical claims; a faith that goes beyond good theology and consistent involvement in church life.** True faith, according to James, is faith that works itself out in good works, in generous compassion, and in vibrant prayer.
 - That's my prayer for us – that vibrant prayer, in particular, would mark our lives in our life together in Christ. That's what this morning's passage is about. We're going to see James address two issues: (1) **the occasions for prayer** within the life of a typical church and (2) **the power of prayer** that's available to all believers.

The Occasions for Prayer

- ❖ Let's start by considering the **occasions for prayer** that James assumes will be available in a healthy church. Now James has in mind four occasions: (a) when anyone is suffering, (b) when anyone is rejoicing, (c) when anyone is sick, and (d) when we gather.
 - Let start in v13, "*Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.*" **So the first occasion for prayer is when anyone in the church is suffering.** James concludes his letter by returning full circle back to the beginning of chapter 1 where he talked about facing trials of various kinds. He knows these believers are going through hardship. When he asks if there is anyone among you suffering – it's clearly a rhetorical question. He knows there are plenty in pain.

- ❖ We've seen how many of these believers have been displaced from their homes in Judea. They're part of the Dispersion (1:1), that great scattering of Jews that occurred in the 1st-century. Many of them left their wealth behind and now are poor (1:9; 2:15). And not only that, they're being oppressed by rich, unrighteous landowners (2:6; 5:6).
 - **James is speaking to the poor and oppressed and calling them to pray.** But what does he expect them to pray for? For a sudden windfall of cash? For swift vengeance on their oppressors? For a full and immediate recovery? Now though it's not inherently wrong to pray for any of that, it's not likely what James expects us to pray.
 - Based on last week's passage that stressed patience through suffering, **we can deduce that he expects those in suffering to pray – not just for escape from their trials – but for endurance *through* those trials.** That's one way to tell that you're growing in your faith, in your prayer life. It's when you're no longer just praying for relief or escape – but now you're praying for strength and perseverance to withstand your sufferings and to endure those trials.

- ❖ So suffering is the first occasion for prayer. **The second occasion is when anyone in the church is rejoicing.** "*Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.*" James has in mind the good times, times of joy. These are times that call for prayer. **This reminder – to turn to God in the good times – is even more necessary than in times of suffering.** In times of trouble, we instinctively drop to our knees in prayer. No one needs to remind us to pray.

- ❖ But in times of cheerfulness, prayer is often the last thing on our minds. **We're so focused on the joy itself that we take for granted the Joy-Giver.** We're too busy enjoying the good things of life – that we forget to praise the One whose gracious hands provided it all. That's another way to tell that you're maturing in the faith – when you're turning to God in the good times and not just the bad.
- ❖ Now notice how James specifically says to “*sing praise*”. That's paralleled with the prior command to pray, suggesting that there's little difference between the two activities. **Singing praise to God is simply another form of prayer to God.** That's why I've always found it so confusing when you're in a church service, and a worship set has just concluded, and the pastor or some other church leader is about to lead in a time of prayer – and says something like, “*That was a wonderful time of praise. Now let's turn to God with a time of prayer.*”
 - Wait, *now* we're turning to God to pray? So what were we doing for the last 10 minutes? Just singing to each other? Church, let's not lose sight of what we're doing when we're singing praise – it's pure prayer. If we don't see our worship singing as a form of prayer, then we've missed the point. Praising is a form of praying.
- ❖ So those are the first two occasions for prayer found in v13 – when anyone is either suffering or rejoicing. Now if you look in v14, you'll find a third. “*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.*” **The third occasion for prayer is when anyone in the church is sick.**
 - In these occasions, James assumes there is a plurality of elders in place, serving the church as shepherds, caring for God's flock. Particularly, in this case, through the ministry of prayer over the sick. Now the fact that this ministry was readily assumed to be present is a real indictment of the contemporary church – where this kind of ministry of prayer over the sick is quite foreign and sounds a bit strange.
- ❖ I think we'll benefit from spending more time on this point. Let's consider the basic elements of this ministry that involves the elders of a church. **Notice with me first that there is some degree of initiative on the part of the sick person.** He is to “*call for the elders of the church.*” That doesn't mean the elders can never take the initiative and approach the sick themselves, but it does mean that the sick person needs to be someone who is seeking help from the Lord and the Lord's appointed shepherds of the church. It means he's someone suffering, and therefore someone praying, according to v13.
 - **So it's not as if these elders have tapped into some divine power and can go around healing sick people regardless of the state of their heart.** We're not talking about faith healers. We're talking about church elders (shepherds) who are called upon by their sheep to pray over them – to add their prayers of faith to the individual's own prayer of faith.
 - So don't expect to see your church elders walking the halls of the local hospital laying hands and praying over any sort of sick person. But if you yourself are sick, and you've been praying but have yet to recover – if you call for your church elders, you should expect them to come and pray over you.

- ❖ Now the thought of elders praying over the sick might not seem strange to you, but you might be unfamiliar with this practice of anointing the sick with oil in the name of the Lord. **There are three interpretations of the significance of this oil.** The first is a **sacramental** view. The Roman Catholics have used this verse to justify their sacrament of **extreme unction** – where a priest anoints and prays over a Catholic who is at the point of death. The anointing is seen as conveying sacramental grace to remove the remnants of sin and to strengthen the soul for dying. We obviously have disagreements over the theology of sacraments, but there’s also nothing in this verse limiting this practice to those about to die.
- ❖ The second view sees **medicinal** value in this anointing oil. Proponents would point to Luke 10 – to the parable where the Good Samaritan applied oil, as a healing balm, on the wounds of that man on the Jericho road. **In ancient days, oil was the go-to cure for everything from toothaches to paralysis.** It’s like how my grandma would use *Tiger Balm* for any ailment. When I was a kid, if I had a fever, she’d rub *Tiger Balm* on my chest. If you’ve got muscle ache or twisted an ankle, rub some *Tiger Balm* on that.
 - So with oil having medicinal value in the eyes of the ancients, one could say that these elders were coming to the sick, armed with spiritual and natural resources. **That means turning to prayer and turning to medicine are not incompatible actions.** There’s no biblical justification for arguing against the use of medicine or seeing a doctor – as if that suggested a lack of faith in God’s power to heal you. No, to draw a distinction between God healing you through prayer versus a doctor healing you through medicine – would suggest that you have a very small view of God’s providence, of his providential hand working in and through all things.
 - Yes, there are times (in the past and the present) when God has healed through supernatural means in response to prayer. **But he ordinarily heals – both sinners and saints – through natural means such as medicine and medical procedures.** Let’s not take his ordinary means of common grace for granted.
- ❖ So there is something to be said about this medicinal view, but there’s a third interpretation that’s even stronger. It’s the **symbolic** view. This view interprets the anointing oil similarly to the way that priests or kings or holy objects were anointed with oil in the OT. **It’s the idea of setting apart (consecrating) someone or something to the Lord.** Considering how steeped the book of James is in OT references, it makes sense that these elders are anointing the sick in order to set them apart (to consecrate them) for God’s special attention in prayer.
- ❖ **But if we keep reading in v15, we’ll see that the emphasis here is *not* on the efficacy of the anointing oil.** There’s no power in the oil. The stress is on the efficacy of prayer, of the prayer of faith. “*And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.*”
 - Now that word for “*save*” is used throughout the NT in reference to spiritual salvation – salvation from sin. But depending on the context, it could refer to physical healing, such as here in v15. Because notice how spiritual salvation (the forgiveness of sins) is separately addressed at the end of the verse.

- ❖ Look at the second half of v15. “*And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.*” So **James is making a connection between sin and sickness, but notice how it’s not a one-to-one correlation.** He used the word *if* – suggesting that not all our sicknesses are related to our sins – but we shouldn’t ignore or deny the possibility.
 - **The book of Job and John chapter 9 are the best arguments for caution to not draw a straight line between sin and sickness.** Sometimes, in God’s sovereign will, we experience sickness (or even succumb to it), and it has no correlation to a specific sin in our lives. Do not be quick to draw a sharp, straight line between the two.

- ❖ **But there are other places in Scripture where sickness is a byproduct of sin.** Just think of **1 Corinthians 11**, where Paul explains that the reason “*why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died,*” is because of the sinful divisions among the Corinthian believers and their guilt for taking the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner (11:27-30; cf. Ps 32:4-5).
 - This is why James suggests for elders to come prepared to deal with both **physical sickness** due to disease (which involves prayer and medicine) – and potentially **soul sickness** due to sin (which involves prayer and confession). That’s why there’s mention of confession and prayer in v16. Look there, “*Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*”
 - **So to sum it up, we can say that this practice of anointing and praying over the sick is primarily aimed at physical healing.** But also with the consideration that sin could be lurking in the background, and elders would be wise to shepherd the sick, in those cases, towards confession and repentance.

- ❖ So we’ve seen three occasions for prayer in the church, but there’s one more to highlight. It’s when members get together. **The fourth occasion for prayer is whenever we gather.** Notice, the *therefore* in v16. In light of these considerations about the power of prayer and its contribution to both physical and spiritual healing – the natural conclusion, the logical progression, would be to pray even more, particularly with “*one another*” in corporate prayer.
 - Just as James readily assumes there exists within churches a ministry where elders are called to anoint and pray for the sick, **he also assumes there exists many occasions for corporate prayer.** And not just within families, not just within small groups, but between congregation members – coming together to confess sins and pray for each other. Whenever you read these “*one another*” commands in the NT, they’re always in the context of the whole congregation.
 - **So as a congregation, we need to ask ourselves whether we’re giving due attention to this apostolic command to gather together corporately to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another.**

- ❖ It’s great to see how, during this pandemic, we’ve started a congregational prayer meeting on Wednesday nights over Zoom. It’s convenient now, but will it still be a priority when we return to the church building? And even our convenient online meetings are still not well attended, considering how we have over 250 members in the English congregation.

- I wonder what James would say if he were writing to us. **Would he be shocked that his assumptions of our church are proven wrong – that we don't have regular occasions for corporate prayer?** Let it not be said of us! Let's make it a priority to gather and pray. If Wednesday nights don't work for you, let me know and perhaps we can schedule more prayer meetings that can accommodate more.
- ❖ Friends, the main thing I want you to notice is how attention is shifted, in v16, from elders to the congregation. **That's a needed reminder that the power to heal does not reside in the office of the elder or within any gifted believer – but in God.** And all believers collectively have access to God's power as we pray for one another corporately.

The Power of Prayer

- ❖ That leads to our second point. We spent a good chunk of time considering the occasions for prayer in the life of a church, but now let's talk about how **the power of prayer** is available to all believers. That's the point James stresses in vv16-18. Listen to the second half of v16, "*The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*"
 - **Now let me say a few things about the power of prayer.** That phrase is thrown around quite often among non-Christians, people of other religions, or even those who call themselves non-religious but spiritual. So we, as Christians, talk about the power of prayer, we're not suggesting there's power in the practice of prayer itself. Going through the motions or saying the words – is powerless. **The power lies not in the practice of prayer but the object of prayer.** In our case, it's the Triune God.
 - This is why James said in v15 that it's not just prayer who will save the one who is sick – but the prayer *of faith*. Implied there is faith in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.
- ❖ **We also need to stress that the power of prayer is not found in the strength of your faith but the object of your faith.** It's not about how strongly you believe God will heal a person – but about how strong you believe God is as a healing, saving God. I hope that's a huge relief for you. When we talk about prayers of faith, we're not referring to prayers without doubts, without uncertainties. The father of the boy with an unclean spirit in Mark 9 cried a true prayer of faith though it was tinged with doubt. "*I believe; help my unbelief!*" (9:2)
 - **So when the elders or the congregation is praying for the sick, their faith is not in the certainty of the healing – but in the certainty of God's sovereign purposes to do good and to do all things well.** That means every prayer for healing should be offered with the humble acknowledgment that God's will will be done. And sometimes he does not will a healing (2 Tim 4:20; Phil 2:27; 2 Cor 12:7-10). Faithful elders and faithful congregations will submit to God's sovereign purposes.
- ❖ If we look back at vv16-18, we see that James' point was to encourage all believers to pray prayers of faith, trusting that the same great power is available to all – since it's not about the individual strength of our faith. **But I know when it says the prayer of a righteous person has great power, you're wondering if that describes you.** Are you a righteous person?

- And James goes on to use Elijah as an example of one who prayed fervently and mighty things happen – his prayers had the power to shut the sky (1 Kg 17:1). That’s a hard comparison. We’re suppose to pray like Elijah?
- ❖ But notice how James’ whole point is that the prophet shares “*a nature like ours*”. He too was a man. He wasn’t superhuman. Elijah shared in our weaknesses and in our sin. And yet God still used his prayers of faith to accomplish mighty feats. Why?
 - It’s not because of Elijah himself. It’s because of what was in Elijah – or I should say *Who* was in Elijah. **The stories of the prophet in 1 Kings paint a clear picture that he was just a man – but a man filled with the Spirit of God.** It was the Spirit at work in him who made those prayers powerful and effective.
- ❖ Well, the good news of the gospel – of the New Covenant that Jesus established by his blood when he died on the cross – is the promise of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised to give his Spirit – not just to prophets and kings – but to all of God’s people.
 - **Every Christian – from the oldest, maturest, wisest believer to the newest, weakest, lowliest among us – all who are in Christ have the Spirit of God in them.** The same Spirit that empowered Elijah’s prayers to do mighty feats. The same Spirit resides in you – if you are in Christ. So when we speak of the power of prayer, **remember that power is not found inherently in you but in the Spirit of God who resides in you and powerfully works through you and your prayers.**
- ❖ The same applies when you read that phrase “*righteous person*”. The prayer of a righteous person has great power – that promise doesn’t apply to only perfect people. **That righteous person that James has in mind is not a super Christian, but simply a believer who has been filled by the Holy Spirit and covered by the righteousness of Christ.** Those are two gifts of the gospel, received by grace alone through faith alone. **So, yes there is power in prayer, but it’s not grounded in your righteousness but in the righteousness of Christ.**
- ❖ Let me give an image to help you grasp the biblical concept of prayer. **Picture a newborn.** That baby can’t do anything for himself. He’s totally helpless. He’s totally useless. **He can’t do anything but cry. But it’s that cry that moves the heart of his mother to come to his aid and cradle him in her loving arms.**
 - Friends, what did you think prayer was? Did you think prayer was an accomplishment on your part? **Did you not realize that prayer is essentially how we cry to our loving Father who is in heaven?**
- ❖ That’s why it’s powerful, even on the lips of the lowliest believer. **The sickest, the weakest, the frailest Christian can still whimper a cry for help. And that’s all it takes to call down the most powerful force in the world.** The Lord of hosts – he hears and responds to the cries of his children (5:4). That’s the kind of gospel promise that drives us to our knees.

- ❖ Now if we look back at vv19-20, **James concludes his letter with an exhortation to be on our knees for the sake of the spiritually sick and dying.** For those who have wandered away from the faith. Let me read that, "¹⁹*My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*"
- ❖ **We're talking here about a person who previously belonged to the community of faith, that is, at least he or she, at one time, outwardly identified as a Christian.** That's implied when it speaks of bringing this person back. So where did they wander to?
 - This idea of wandering from the truth could mean they've come to embrace false teaching or wicked behavior or both – serious enough that it's tantamount to apostasy. They've left or rejected the faith.
 - Now it's important to remember if someone has wandered from the faith for good – **then their wandering proves that their profession of faith was false in the first place** (1 Jn 2:19). Scripture teaches that the born again are eternally secure. The Good Shepherd may lose a sheep every so often, but he goes after them and always finds them. No Christian will ever wander away for good.
- ❖ **That truth – the doctrine of eternal security – is what gives us the confidence to pray for and to warn the wanderer.** Knowing that our humble efforts to bring back a sinner from his wandering could be the humans means by which the Good Shepherd will find and bring home his lost sheep.
 - The point of ending the letter with a concern for spiritual lostness puts everything in proper perspective. **Sickness is a serious matter, and praying for healing is of grave importance. But a lost soul should burden us infinitely more.**
- ❖ **Maybe some of you listening are new to Christianity.** You're still trying to figure out what you believe. And perhaps the search you're on was triggered by some need, some problem that you're hoping to resolve. It could be health-related. Maybe relational or financial. And you're open to prayer because you're really hoping God will come through for you.
 - I encourage you to pray for that healing. Pray for divine intervention. Pray for God to alleviate that physical or emotional suffering in your life. **But, friend, do not overlook the needs of your soul. Don't ignore the reality of eternal suffering for those who have not turned to Christ for the saving and healing of the soul.** Come to Christ today. His love can cover a multitude of sins.