

Pray and Pursue (James 5:13-20)

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The longer you live the harder it is to maintain the illusion that we control the circumstances of our life. When you're young, you feel invincible. The world is before you. Choose your major. Choose your employer. Craft your resume. The opportunities are manifold. It feels as though life is whatever you want to make it.

But as the years add up, so do the number of experiences where suffering comes crashing in without warning, reminding us once again that we're not in control, no matter how much money we have. A family member dies. A friend betrays you. Your boss laid you off just before you hoped to retire. Chronic illness ravages your body or causes your spouse's mind to crumble. Maybe waves of depression or experiences of injustice threaten to sabotage your faith in God.

In those moments it's good to remember that the Lord reigns. Nothing will ever happen to us, whether good or bad, that has not first passed through the hands of God. We must also remember, however, that in every situation we have a choice to make. How will you respond to what is happening around you and within you? We don't get to choose our circumstances. We do get to decide how we will respond to our circumstances.

James has spent the last five chapters teaching us how we should respond as Christians to all sorts of situations, suffering included. After all, genuine faith in Jesus isn't a passive thing. It's a faith that works, a trust that obeys the Lord by responding his way instead of our own way. And as we reach the end of the book, James concludes with two final exhortations which illustrate the essence of how we should respond to whatever circumstance comes our way next.

In every situation, we need to turn in two directions. We need to turn toward God. And we need to turn toward God's people. No matter what's going on, wisdom always turns upward and outward. What do we naturally tend to do, especially in suffering? We tend to turn inward, away from God and away from his people. In the final verses of his letter, James exhorts us to do the exact opposite and to do it for this reason.

We turn toward God and one another in all circumstances because God accomplishes his saving work through the prayers and pursuit of his people. No matter what's going on within us or around us, brothers and sisters, we need to stay focused on doing two things: (1) Praying together with confidence, (2) Pursuing one

another with diligence. Why? Because God accomplishes his saving work through the prayers and pursuit of his people. Let's consider each of those responses in turn.

1) PRAY TOGETHER WITH CONFIDENCE

In v. 1, James speaks to the bookends of human experience. If you're suffering, if life is really hard, what should you do? You should pray. You should turn to God and talk with him about what's happening. Pour out your sorrows. Plead his promises. Trust his faithfulness. Don't turn inward in stony silence. Turn Godward with a cry for help.

How about if life is going really well, if things are good, and you're experiencing prosperity on every side? What should you do then? Look back at v. 1. "Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise." Open your mouth, loosen your tongue, and give all the credit and honor for what is going well back to God in a humble prayer of thanksgiving.

In other words, whether things are going really badly, really well, or somewhere between, we always keep looking to the Lord. We keep turning to the Lord. We refuse to treat him like a 911 dispatcher – nice to know he's there if you need him. No. The absence of prayers of praise in prosperity will shrivel your soul no less than the absence of prayers of intercession in adversity.

Both are equally necessary because we were made to live all of life *coram deo*, in relationship to God. He's our Creator and Savior, the one from whom all blessings flow. So whether we are waiting for them or have already received them, we look to him. Our entire life should be characterized by continual movement toward God in prayer.

The Lord has been using my youngest son to provoke my wife, Aliza, and me in this regard. When obedience is hard or something is frightening, he has started running to one of us saying, "Hey mom, hey dad, can we pray?" It's provoking because he'll ask in situations that don't seem like a big deal to me. I find myself thinking (to my shame), "Son, is this really something we need to stop and pray about?" Lord, help me.

And when something really exciting happens, guess what he does the moment I walk through the door after work? "Dad, dad, I got new football cards and one of them is a 2020 James Conner. I'm SO excited." What's he doing? He's living out James 5:13 in his relationship with me. Well did Jesus say in Luke 18:17, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." The humility of faith seizes every moment as an opportunity to relate to God, to turn toward the Lord in prayer.

Having established the basic principle, James pivots in v. 14 to linger on what turning to God looks like when you're physically sick. "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church..." In context, does that strike you as odd? James has just finished saying no matter what's going on inside of you or around you, turn to God in prayer. So why would he say, "But if you're sick, don't call upon God, call upon the elders"? Do the elders, the pastors, of a church possess some sort of special power to heal or access to God's ear that ordinary Christians lack?

Of course not. James encourages the sick to call elders for two reasons. First, as the Great Shepherd, Jesus calls us as pastors to express his care for his people in a personal way. That's an incredible privilege. Second, and even more importantly, one of the most important ways we turn toward God is by turning toward his people. If you're a Christian, you are part of God's royal priesthood. You're an ambassador for Christ. And he has commissioned all of us, not just pastors, to speak, care, encourage, exhort, correct, serve, strengthen, and provide for one another one his behalf.

Asking the elders to pray, in other words, isn't an alternative to the command in v. 1 to turn to the Lord in all circumstances. It's a practical way we obey the command in v. 1. As author Ed Welch says, we say help to God by saying help to one another. And notice what James tells the elders to do. They should pray "over" the one who is sick, "anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord." Two clarifying remarks are in order.

First, the Bible is filled with examples of Jesus and his followers healing people without using oil, which suggests anointing with oil is a helpful practice, but not required in all circumstances. Second, the oil was symbolic, not sacramental. It doesn't have any power to heal in itself. It's a physical symbol of the favor and blessing of God. Akin to its use in Old Testament, oil reminds a sick believer they have been consecrated or set apart by the Spirit as a beloved child of God, which is why James says they should be anointed "in the name of the Lord."

So what does James say will happen when the elders pray over the one who is sick? Look at v. 15. "And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up." Friends, do not discount the power of prayer for physical healing. Does Jesus care first and foremost about the eternal health of your soul? Absolutely. But he created our bodies too. He spent a tremendous amount of time caring for physical bodies when he walked the earth. And he's still in the business of healing our physical diseases today through the prayers of his people even as we wait for him to heal us completely in heaven.

Mind you, our prayers never override his sovereign will. There are times we pray for healing and for reasons we do not understand, God chooses not to heal. When that happens, we shouldn't conclude that if God didn't heal us because either we or the believers praying for us lacked sufficient faith. Our faith isn't sovereign. God is. Yet when God does choose to heal, he has purposed to do so through faith-filled prayer, which means faith is absolutely necessary. Dan McCartney helps us understand why. "Faith is that which connects a person to God and characterizes a relationship with God. It is this relationship to the healing God that secures answers to prayer."

It's not your faith that heals people, friend. God heals people. Yet the means God has chosen to use, the faith-filled prayers of his people, is so significant, so important, that James can still speak of the prayer of faith as saving "the one who is sick." Think of it this way. "And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick" strengthens our eagerness to ask for prayer and pray for one another. "And the Lord will raise him up" keeps us humble as we do so, knowing God is ultimately the one who heals in his time, in his way, by his power.

And praise God that his healing power isn't limited to our physical bodies! Look at the very end of v. 15. "And if he (the sick person) has committed sins, he will be forgiven." James doesn't assume disobedience of God's commands is the underlying cause of every physical illness. He simply recognizes the collective witness of Scripture that in many situations, both physical and spiritual issues are in play at the same time.

We need the Lord to heal our bodies. And we need the Lord to restore our souls, to forgive and cleanse us from the sin that so easily entangles. The good news is that we don't have to parse it all out. Our Heavenly Father knows both are in play and to the degree they are, is eager to deliver us through the power of prayer if we're willing to ask for it. V. 16, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed."

So whether we are physically weak, spiritually wayward, or a combination of both, what should we do? We should turn toward one another by asking for prayer, confessing our sins where the Spirit grants the gift of conviction, confident that as our brothers and sisters in Christ pray for us, the Lord will be faithful to heal us.

So often we're reluctant to confess our sins, let alone ask for prayer in the greatest struggles of life. We ask for prayer for a new job. We ask for prayer for our great-grandmother's gallbladder. When was the last time you asked for prayer to conquer the power of lust, greed, selfishness, laziness, self-pity, or a lack of love for your friends who don't know Jesus? Friends, v. 16 is a precious promise. If you're willing to ask for prayer,



if you're willing to confess your sin, God will use the prayers of his people to bring holistic deliverance in your life.

We should be quick, not reluctant, to ask for prayer. And when someone asks and we have the privilege of praying for them, whether for a bodily need, a spiritual need, or a combination of both, we should pray with tremendous confidence. Why? V. 16, because "the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." Exhibit A? The story of Elijah in 1 Ki 17-18.

The nation of Israel during the reign of King Ahab was plagued with pagan idolatry from the top down. Elijah prayed it would not rain, that the nation might recognize the futility of their sinful way and turn back to the Lord. After a climactic battle with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, the people finally admitted, "The LORD, he is God!" On that very day Elijah prayed for rain, and after more than 3 years of drought, it began to pour.

"Of course it did, Matthew. It was Elijah. He has a special phone line to God. I'm just little old me over here asking the Lord to intervene in my friend's body or my child's heart. I feel like I have as much a chance of seeing God move in response to my prayer as I do getting a real human being to pick up when I call my credit card company."

Look at the beginning of v. 17. Elijah was what? "A man with a nature just like ours." Remember, what sort of prayer does James say has "great power" in v. 16? It's "the prayer of a righteous person," not the prayer of a super-saint or a pastor. It's the prayer of a man or woman, no matter how old, who is trusting Jesus' work on the cross to make you right with God and following him accordingly. That prayer, your prayer, Christian, doesn't just have a little power. It has great power.

When someone confesses a spiritual struggle or tells you about a physical illness, do you feel rather inadequate? Do you find yourself thinking, "Man, I sure wish I could do something to help them. I bet the pastor would know what to say right now. Maybe they should set up an appointment with him?" Maybe they should. But Christian, in that moment, whether it occurs on Sunday morning during a formal "ministry" time or in the Sheetz parking lot at 9:00pm, you have an opportunity to do the one thing that matters most. You have an opportunity to exercise the formidable weapon of prayer.

It's not a back-up option. It's not a second-class response. It's the most loving thing you could ever do for them. It is the most significant gift you could ever give them. Your Father in Heaven has given you the unspeakable privilege of asking him to intervene in the life of your brother or sister in Christ and has chosen to exercise his physical and spiritual power through your prayers. He is eager to act. He has promised to act. So let's

be faithful to confidently ask and faithful to confidently pray, expecting the Lord to answer.

He is eager to act. He has promised to act. So don't wait for the perfect moment. Don't even wait to be asked. Offer to pray and do it right then and there, before you forget. Pray for physical healing, pray for spiritual healing, and expect the Lord to answer. We turn toward God and one another in all circumstances by praying together with confidence. But there's a second way the Lord accomplishes his saving work through us, a way that involves prayer, but isn't limited to prayer.

2) PURSUE ONE ANOTHER WITH DILIGENCE

The exhortation in vv. 19-20 is a fitting conclusion to a letter devoted to urging us to obey God's commands in very practical terms. It would be easy to stay focused at this point on how we're doing. Am I being faithful? How do I need to grow in obeying God's commands? James closes by reminding us that our responsibility as Christians goes further. You have a holy responsibility, Christian, to not just do all the Lord instructs you to do in this letter, but to help your brothers and sisters in Christ to do the same.

If a fellow believer starts drifting away from living what they claim to believe, we should go after them! We should do everything in our power to convince and help them to turn back to following Jesus. Why? Because following Jesus isn't a religious preference issue. It's a life and death issue. V. 20, "whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

We like to think of our relationship with God as a private thing, don't we? The choices I'm making, the ways I'm obeying God's Word or not obeying God's Word, are between God and me. Mind your own business. God says that's foolish. Why? Because our hearts are deceitful.

We desperately need to love one another enough to be willing to ask hard questions and say hard things. If you see me walking in clear disobedience to the Word of God, please don't stop with praying for me. Pray for me, but come talk to me too. Sit down with me and speak the truth in love. Tell me where I'm wandering. Tell me where I'm straying. Urge me to turn back. Remind me of the consequences of continuing on the path of disobedience.

Don't stand far off in the name of not wanting to "upset" someone while they run off a spiritual cliff and destroy their soul. Be gentle. Be patient. But pursue them. Chase them down the way a shepherd leaves the 99 to run after the 1 sheep that is lost. We live in a



world that says the worst thing you can ever do to someone is offend them. That's nonsense. The worst thing you can ever do to someone is shrug off an opportunity to save their soul from death and spare them from a multitude of sins.

When someone joins our church, they join all of us in promising to uphold our church covenant. There's a reason we promise in our covenant to exercise "affectionate care and watchfulness over each other" and to "diligently encourage, exhort, and admonish one another with a spirit of gentleness and meekness in our battle against sin." The eternal destiny of our souls is on the line, brothers and sisters.

If you don't see a fellow member for a few months on Sunday, call them. Find out what's going on. If it seems like a fellow member is struggling spiritually, set aside time to get lunch or coffee with them. Don't say, "We'll get back to pursuing one another after COVID passes." We need the comfort and correction of biblical community now more than ever because sin thrives in isolation.

Will your pursuit be well-received? I hope so. But don't assume a negative reaction means you did something wrong. Helping a car stuck in the mud to get back on the road is a dirty business. But it's worth it, friends, even when it's hard, even when you don't know what to say or don't get the response you wanted. Why? Because our God remains mighty to save and he delights to accomplish his saving work through the prayers *and pursuit* of his people.

CONCLUSION

As we finish our study of James, ask yourself two questions. First, in whatever situation you find yourself right now, how can you turn toward God? Do you need to pray for his help in the midst of suffering? Do you need to thank him for his blessing in the midst of prosperity? Maybe you need to turn toward him by turning toward his people and asking them to pray for you, whether for a physical illness or a spiritual struggle.

Second, in whatever situation you find yourself, how can you turn toward God's people? It might mean asking someone to pray for a bodily or spiritual weakness like I just said. It might also mean getting more involved in a relationship with a fellow believer you know is struggling and risk rejection for the sake of speaking the truth in love.

We need to keep turning toward God. And we need to keep turning toward one another. Ultimately, it's not two different responses. It's one response. We turn toward God by turning toward his people. May the Lord make us a church that is faithful to pray together with confidence and pursue one another with diligence. That's how faith works.



And that's how we fulfill the mission Christ has given us to follow hard after him and help one another to do the same, for his glory and our good.