

## **“Effective, Fervent Prayer”**

**James 5:13-18**

June 5th, 2022

A man took his small son with him to town one day to run some errands. When lunch time arrived, the two of them went to a familiar diner for a sandwich. The father sat down on one of the stools at the counter and lifted the boy up to the seat beside him. They ordered lunch, and when the waiter brought the food, the father said, "Son, we'll just have a silent prayer."

Dad got through praying first and waited for the boy to finish his prayer, but he just sat with his head bowed for an unusually long time. When he finally looked up, his father asked him, "What in the world were you praying about all that time?" With the honesty of a child, he replied, "How do I know? It was a silent prayer."

“Prayer” is the theme of today’s passage of Scripture. Before us this morning is **James 5:13-18**. This passage is saturated with occurrences of the words “pray” and “prayer” - mentioned 7 times in 6 verses! Evidently, the Lord doesn’t want us to miss this!

*Have you ever stopped to think that prayer is one of the greatest of privileges God has given to believers in Christ Jesus? Maybe you haven’t because you’ve been caught up in the rat race of culture?* Christopher Gordon notes in his *Tabletalk* article from June 2020, “People complain of the busyness of their lives. Families are pulled away from the dinner table to sports practices and games, music lessons, and a variety of other activities. We have the best of modern conveniences, and yet we run ourselves ragged with never-ending “appointments.” The restlessness of our age is an indication of priorities gone wrong. We spend time doing what we value the most, but prayer is not at the top of the list.”

Prayer is a means of God’s grace. It is a means for you to enjoy God as you were created to do. *Given the truth of these statements, we must ask ourselves how we are doing as pray-ers?* Even though I pray many times a day in various settings, prayer is an area of my ministry I could improve. It is tragic that many professing believers in Jesus Christ don’t pray at all, or they pray very little. Martin Luther wrote, "To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."

James offers us some help in today’s passage, a sermon I’ve titled, “Effective, Fervent Prayer.”

**James 5:13-18:**

**“13** Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. **14** 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. **15** And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. **16** Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. **17** Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. **18** And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.”

A visiting farmer stopped at a city restaurant to eat lunch. When he was served his food he bowed his head and gave thanks to the Lord. Some teenagers sitting at a nearby table noticed the farmer's prayer and shouted, "Hey, pops, back where you come from does everybody pray before they eat?"

Their laughter was silenced when the unmoved farmer answered, "No, the hogs don't."

In today's sermon text, James introduces us to:

- 1 - the praying individual Christian (vs 13);**
- 2 - the praying elders (v. 14-15);**
- 3 - the praying friends, (v 16a);**
- 4 - and the praying prophet (v. 16b-18).**

**Verse 13 introduces us to the praying individual Christian.** "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms." If troubled, we pray. This stands in direct opposition to the grumbling James confronted earlier in the 9th verse of this 5th chapter of his letter. This 'trouble' isn't confined to physical suffering. It could be opposition from others, or it could be grief over loss, or even marital breakdown. "It is any ill circumstance which may come upon us, any trial, anything of which we or an onlooking friend might say "That's bad." (Motyer, 187)

On the other hand, James asks, 'Is anyone cheerful?' Warren Wiersbe notes, "God balances our lives and gives us hours of suffering and days of singing. The mature Christian knows how to sing while he is suffering." (Wiersbe, 382)

The great Reformer Martin Luther once wrote, " When I cannot pray I always sing."

Anyone can sing after the trouble has passed. If happy, we praise. This means broadly "to be in good heart." It doesn't necessarily mean that we are trouble free; but it does mean to be buoyant - happy, light-hearted, glad, merry, joyful. Whatever the circumstances, it is to be happy in spirit.

Whatever happens, these sentences teach - we are to go to God in prayer.

**Verses 14 and 15 present the praying elders.** “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. **15** And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.” James here associates the healing ministry of prayer and anointing with local church leaders. Even with such medical technology and advances in medicine, the care of the soul is still very necessary! Effective hospitals and medical systems know this, and they develop a chaplain’s ministry or spiritual care department.

As Christians, our eyes must always be on the Lord when we are undergoing some kind of health procedure, or are enduring any form of health malady, injury or crisis. God is able to heal directly and immediately, as well as through the technology and skills of the medical staff. Calling upon the elders to pray with us helps us to keep our perspective biblical. “On no occasion should a Christian approach the doctor without also approaching God.” (Motyer, 193)

Back to the subject of the elders. Notice it is the sick person who initiates the prayer of the elders. The illness is likely serious in order for the sick person to reach out to his/her spiritual leaders. The elders then are to pray over and anoint the sick believer with oil. Ideally, that means the elders congregate at the home of the ill person, and they pray together for the well-being of the one calling.

The presence and use of oil is mostly symbolic. Jesus didn’t use oil to heal the sick. In the Book of Acts, the apostles healed the sick on a number of occasions, but they didn’t use oil, either. So, the emphasis is on prayer, not the oil. Though it certainly couldn’t hurt to use oil; it has a way of focusing one’s prayers. In churches I have served as a pastor, when the elders are called to pray for someone, we use oil.

The elders pray, collectively as a prayer of faith, God is able to use to save the sick. The Lord will raise up the sick according to His will. One thing needs to be understood here. If you’ve been praying and praying for the healing of another believer in Christ, it may be that person *doesn’t* recover or achieve healing in this present life. Sometimes, God chooses to call our loved one to Himself even in the face of congregation wide, presbytery wide, or denomination wide prayers. That can be a wearying experience; even so, we remember that for the beloved Christian we’ve prayed for, his/her death is the portal to glory in the life hereafter. God is not, and will not, be locked into human expectations or efforts contrary to His will.

**Verse 16a reveals praying friends.** “Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” Regarding prayer, God has given us a powerful means to minister to each other. I have heard some of you pray aloud for me and others, and it has strengthened my soul against the fiery darts of the evil one!

On the other hand, unconfessed sin blocks the pathway of prayer to God and is a daunting obstacle in our relationship with others. *Prayers not being answered? Have you considered the sin you are harboring in your life?* We must confess our sins to God, and to the persons injured or suffering loss because of our sins. For Pete's sake, take the initiative and ask them to forgive you!

It is hard to pray for someone you are angry at or disappointed with. It's also hard to forgive someone who has made life difficult for you. God's Word says here in **James 5:16a** that we are to pray for one another, so that we may be healed. This is addressing those broken or breaking relationships Christians are supposed to enjoy, and not merely endure or tolerate. How disappointing this can be when people love themselves more than they love anyone else, and they argue and pressure until they get their way.

God has privileged us to love those we find unloveable. Think about that...

**Verse 16b through 18 highlights the praying prophet.** "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. **17** Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. **18** And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit."

In choosing Elijah as his example of the praying prophet, James asserts that Elijah was a just and righteous man whose prayers God used for great good. Elijah was no super human, he was a person like us. Even so, Malachi regarded him as the forerunner of the Messiah. Elijah prayed earnestly (seriously, steadily, with intensity). When he prayed for no rain, it didn't rain for 3 ½ years; when he prayed for rain, it rained!

James says that any believer whose sins have been forgiven and who prays in faith is righteous. When they pray, their prayers are "effective and fervent."

Thomas Lye was a Puritan, Anglican minister in the 1600's. Listen to what he said about the topic at hand, "I had rather stand against the cannons of the wicked than against the prayers of the righteous."

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In December 1944 rain and snow were hampering U.S. war efforts in France. A frustrated General George Patton contacted his chief chaplain James O'Neill and asked for a prayer for good weather that would improve the chances for victory.

The chaplain provided this prayer which was distributed to the troops along with a training letter. "Almighty and most merciful Father, we humbly beseech Thee, of Thy great goodness, to restrain these immoderate rains with which we have had to contend. Grant us fair weather for Battle. Graciously hearken to us as soldiers who call upon Thee that, armed with Thy power, we may advance from victory to victory, and crush the oppression of wickedness of our enemies and establish Thy justice among men and nations." Some 250,000 soldiers had O'Neill's prayer in their hands. The results-the weather cleared for the next six days.