

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: our heritage of faith

Together with all Your people of past generations, Lord God, lead us through suffering and distress to a place where we may praise You. Lead us through our trouble and strife to a place of peace. Lead us through inadequacy and failure to a place of progress. You have led your people through countless trials and troubles in past generations, Lord God, so now, bring us through our times of testing so that together with all the saints, we may have life eternal! **Hallelujah!**

For myself

Speak to the Lord; tell Him with openness and honesty what is on your heart today.

For others

Pray for those in prison, and for the security and effectiveness of the prison service in your country

Meditation

Prayer is speaking to the great God who made all things;
Prayer is silence in the humbling presence of the Almighty;
Prayer is being honest and stumbling towards the Lord;
Prayer is all-sufficient joy when the heart is raised up high.

Prayer is music within the heart that loves and honours Christ;
Prayer is inexpressible tongues of love lifted up to the Lord;
Prayer is freedom of spirit within the Throne-room of Grace;
Prayer is utter stillness before the awesome Cross of Christ.

Rejoice! For prayer is one of the greatest of treasures;
Rejoice! For prayer flies safely in the wind of the Spirit;
Rejoice! For prayer is a light that shine in darkest;
Rejoice! For your prayer is communion with the God of love.

Hallelujah!

Bible Passage

James 5:13-20

¹³ Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Are any among you sick? They should call for the church elders and let them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will lift them up; and any who have committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶ So confess your sins to each other, and pray for each other, so that you may be healed. The petition of a righteous person is effective, and achieves much.

Review

This is a much quoted passage of scripture, because it contains some powerful and pertinent comment about healing. It is something of a relief to read this clear advice at the end of James' letter, because for much of it, James has pursued his readers relentlessly, castigating the church for wrongful attitudes (2:1-7), and chastising them over the inappropriate use of the tongue (3:5f.) and other sins (4:11f.). Whatever the problems, however, James offers something a solution here in commending the Gospel gift of healing ministry.

Overall, these verses summarise much Biblical teaching about healing and prayer, and also about anointing and the forgiveness of sins; they also describe healing ministry as the responsibility of Christian leaders. Healing forms a large part of Jesus' own ministry, and as we have frequently seen, James reflects the ministry of Jesus in much of his teaching. His advice here is also concise and easy to recall, and applicable to God's people in a wide variety of circumstances. It therefore deserves being studied in depth so that the ministry of healing can indeed be a feature of Christian ministry today.

The passage starts by asking three questions about the pastoral life of a church community (15:13,14), about suffering, cheerfulness and sickness. This is an interesting set of pastoral issues, because although the focus is on what James says here about healing, he begins with more general comment. Suffering, cheerfulness and sickness describe a wide variety of human life experience, and all of us will experience one or other of these, at any one time. We may be either happy or downhearted, or perhaps have some suffering in our lives that causes unhappiness; perhaps illness has made us unhappy. So James advises the Christian to offer all life's experiences to God; suffering should be submitted to the Lord in prayer, joy should be turned into praise, and the sick offered to the Lord in prayer. This is basic pastoral care, and James assumes that every believer wants the Lord God intimately involved in every aspect of life.

Firstly, James tells those who suffer to pray (5:13). The beginning of his letter was addressed to people who were suffering. We do not know exactly what manner of suffering, whether persecution by the authorities, or troubles within the church, but the letters tells us that all of it should be brought before the Lord God in prayer. The Father is interested in His people and is concerned for them, and will bless those who open their hearts to Him in faith and truth. In this, James' teaching is similar to that of Jesus, who taught that all who followed Him in the path of discipleship would have to suffer by taking up their 'Cross' to follow Him (Matt 10:38, Mark 8:34 etc.). James does not teach any specific forms of prayer, as Jesus does (Matthew 6:1f.), but he urges people to ask for pray and urges leaders to respond, and in that, the

spiritual roots of healing are established. Prayer is the mark of true discipleship and it is a proper response to all forms of trouble and distress.

Secondly, James suggests that those who are cheerful should sing praises to God. Now it is easy to be happy and not mention this to God, let alone praise Him! But the soul that truly seeks the Creator will want to turn to the Lord when things go well, to offer thanks and worship in genuine praise. In the Bible, the word 'praise' means an attitude of heart that is consciously directed towards the Lord God, whatever the circumstances. Psalms is the great 'praise' book of the Bible; it describe almost every condition of the human heart and places this before God in 'praise'.

Thirdly, James turns to illness and sickness, and commends the principle that God's people should pray for the sick (5:14). At this point James says more, and goes on to recommend some specific practices of healing ministry. He famously asks those who are sick to '*call for the church elders and let them pray over them*' (5:14). Obviously, The elders will not know who is sick unless this fact is communicated! Certainly, in today's more private world where we do not expect others to know what is happening inside our homes, we cannot expect ministers and pastors to know when to turn up to pray for the sick unless people are willing to let it be known when they need such prayers! It seems an obvious point, but as a minister, I know how frustrating it is to find out that someone is ill long after to would have been good to have prayed for them.

As we continue the reading into verse 15, we find that James goes on to describe the consequences of prayer for healing; he says, '*the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick ... and any who have committed sins will be forgiven.*' (5:15). This reminds us that in scripture, there is a close connection between healing and the forgiveness of sins. It is not that God's Word assumes that all sickness has its roots in some sin committed by those who suffer. It is more that scripture always presents humanity as fallen and in need of forgiveness before God, and therefore, forgiveness is an essential part of the package of healing ministry. Jesus frequently heals people and at the same time confronts their need for forgiveness of sins. He said to the paralysed man who was brought to Him on a mattress, '*son, your sins are forgiven*' (Mark 2:5f.), and the man stood up and walked out of the room!

It is wise to remember that this connection is a powerful one, but the general Biblical principle is this; everyone is a sinner before God and needs His forgiveness, whatever the circumstances. Then, in addition to this, Scripture frequently attests that sins can indeed cause sickness, but not all sickness is caused by sin. With these in mind we can minister to those who are sick and pray that their sins are forgiven, without making them think we suspect their sins are the cause of their sickness and they ought to accept this. The book of Job is all about people who make precisely this mistake.

James' advice comes to an end with some straightforward advice about prayer; '*confess your sins to each other, and pray for each other, so that you may be healed*' (5:16). His wisdom here is not often recognise, because in this sentence, those who are healed are those who have been open enough to confess their sins to each other! I suggest that it is common in many parts of the church for people to keep their sins to themselves, so when this private approach to faith is broken down and people share with each other the important spiritual truths of life, then the Holy Spirit will indeed be able to do powerful things!

Discipleship

Application

James' advice about prayer for the sick

There is much more to this passage than I can write in this brief review; it deserves our deeper study if we are willing to give it. For example, the model of leadership used by James here is not singular but collective, because the elders are called to come together to pray for the sick.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of this passage is simply its insistence that we should pray for the sick. The instruction seems simple enough, but the logistics are not so simple. What sicknesses warrant calling out the elders? And should the believer be content to pray about minor illness alone, or always seek the prayers of others for everything from colds or influenza to cuts and bruises?

If we remember that in ancient times illnesses were far less understood than today, and in general, illness was something that brought people closer to the possibility of severe trouble even death. We are protected from such fears today by medicine, which is a great blessing. However, I am inclined to suggest that James' advice about calling the elders is appropriate today whenever people are concerned that an illness is serious and has fundamental implications for a person's life, certainly their quality of life and perhaps even their death. For example, a diagnosis of cancer, or even a diagnosis of chronic disease that will change someone's life. In general, prayer for healing is always appropriate where there is sickness, but the elders should certainly be called when it is 'serious'.

Anointing

This passage also mentions the practice of anointing, which is a symbolic 'washing' with oil, normally by placing oil on the head. In the Bible, this practice is one associated with the blessing of God on the individual for something important. Some say that the anointing is for the healing of the individual, but a study of scriptural 'anointing' will indicate to us that it is almost always not about bringing something to a conclusion (such as an illness) but about preparing someone for something new. Anointing is therefore best thought of as a pointer towards health and healing and the freedom of the individual to do God's work again, rather than something to be done to simply indicate God's blessing and healing.

Ideas for what to do

- If you have not prayed with someone else before or are cautious about so doing, discuss this with a close friend, and pray with each other.
- If you are used to praying for others, continue this ministry but make sure you do not do so at the expense of sharing your own vulnerability with others; if this happens your ministry may be compromised.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. If you are sick, would you think of asking the leaders of your church to come and share prayer with you and anoint you? If not, why not?

2. If you are sick, would your church leaders be willing to come and pray for you? If not, why not?
3. Have you ever been in a fellowship in which people have confessed their sins to each other; what effect does this have on a fellowship?

Final Prayer

Lord God, in whom the whole world finds its truth and its destiny; lead us who live now to honour everything You have done in the past and all you will do in the future, by working for the Gospel of Salvation today. May we demonstrate the Gospel in our lives, and therefore show others its eternal truth: AMEN