

Prayer

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[0:00] It's my privilege to preach God's Word to you today. And since we have a passage on prayer, let's read that now. And then I'm going to pray from a little book that I will highly recommend! If you're looking for a Christmas gift for somebody.

It's a very wonderful book. So, James chapter 5. And we're going to read 13 to 20. 13 to the end. So, James chapter 5. Is anyone among you suffering?

Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 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. 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. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed.

[1:09] The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain.

And for three years and six months, it did not rain on earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

My brothers, if anyone among you wonders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover over a multitude of sins.

Now, this passage is all about prayer. And so as we come to look at it together, I'm going to start off by reading a prayer.

I've mended it a little bit, but a prayer from this book, The Valley of Vision. If you don't have it, it's a collection of prayers from Puritans. We're really very devotional Christians from a few hundred years ago.

[2:13] And this is a really great devotional tool. I find it often prays for things that I don't think to pray for and expresses things that I wish I could express it like that. And so it's quite a helpful tool if you're looking to really grow in your prayerfulness.

It might make a good Christmas gift as well if you're looking for one. I'd highly recommend it. So I'm going to pray from that, and why don't you pray with me? Oh, Savior, help us.

We are slow to learn, so prone to forget, so weak to climb. We're in the foothills when we should be on the heights. We are pained by our graceless hearts, our prayerless days, our poverty of love, our sloth in the heavenly race, our sullied consciences, our wasted hours, our unspent opportunities. We are blind while light shines around us. Lord, take the scales from our eyes. Grind to dust the evil hearts of unbelief.

Make it our chiefest joy to study you, meditate on you, sit like Mary at your feet, lean like John on your breast, and appeal like Peter to your love, and count like Paul all things done.

[3:32] Give us increase and progress in grace, so that there may be more decision in our characters, more vigor in our purposes, more elevation in our lives, and more fervor in our devotion, more constancy in our zeal.

As we have positions in the world, keep us from making the world our position. May we never seek in the creature what can be found only in our creator.

Let not faith seek from seeking you until it vanishes into sight. Ride forth in us our King of kings and Lord of lords, that we may live victoriously and in victory attain our end.

Amen. Well, brothers and sisters, how are you going this morning? It's the classic greeting. You're often asked at church, and maybe you've already been asked, but if not, I'm sure you will be after the service.

And I suspect you can expect a few answers, can't you? Some will go for the, yeah, good. Others might go for, all right. Or some prefer the, not too bad.

[4:40] Not very telling, are they? I wonder how many times, though, we've responded to a question like this, but actually the reality was the furthest from the truth. Personally, I can remember times when I've been asked, how are you going?

And I said, oh, yeah, good. That was my reflex. But the reality was that I'd experienced horrible things that week, and I felt dreadful. I also know someone who had a great week, and their response was, yeah, it was all right.

And that's the understatement of the century. Now, this is a bit of an exaggeration, but I think this instinct that I think lots of us share is the reason we're going to struggle to obey James chapter 5 today.

It's a simple passage here in James chapter 5. The point's really explicit. It's the most repeated thing in the passage. Pray. Specifically, pray for one another.

But friends, today we're going to need God's help. Because if we struggle to greet one another with honesty, we're really going to need God's help to pray for one another when we meet trials of various kinds.

[5:51] In verse 16, James says that the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. And my hope is that we will see how powerful and transformative prayer is, and the huge impact it could have if St. Lucia Bible Church was characterized by this kind of prayerfulness.

So with God's help, let's listen to God's Word in James. Our passage really is one big section, but I think we're going to tackle it in three sections.

The first section is sort of a bit of a simple summary point in verse 13. The next section we're going to spend most of our time in, in verse 14 to 18, praying for the sick or weak. And our final section will be in 19 and 20 and praying for sinners.

So let's look together at verse 13, our first section. Let me ask you, how are you going again?

Because whatever your answer is, James has a response for us.

So let's see what he says. Are things tough for us today?

[7:04] Friends, we have a Father in heaven who delights in our prayers. And because of our great high priest, Jesus, we do not need someone other than Jesus to come before our God and pray.

As children, whatever is going on right now, however tough, God wants us to come to him in prayer. Our Father hears our prayers.

And he's a good Father who answers them. So friends, if you are suffering today, pray. Maybe you're on the other end of the spectrum.

Maybe you're doing well today. And are there things to praise God for? See, in this verse, what James wants us to do is erupt with songs of praise and thanksgiving.

So let's be encouraged. If today we're going well, if this is us, in the songs that we sing after the sermon and throughout the rest of today, let's sing with thankfulness and joy.

[8:06] Sing with gusto. Let's praise our wonderful God for Jesus Christ, our Savior King. Imagine if each week we overflowed with the thankfulness for all the good blessings of our God and we sung like that each Sunday.

Can you imagine in your head the resounding warmth in this hall that that would ring out if each Sunday we sung with that kind of thankfulness that James is calling for? So friends, let's praise our God if we are cheerful.

Verse 13 is a bit of a catch-all. The point is, however you're going, go to God. If things are hard right now, pray. If things are going well, praise.

But in our next section, James wants to drill down into a specific situation. And I want to flag here that there's a couple of big questions and pitfalls in verse 13 to 18.

So we're going to spend most of our time here again. But the point is simple. Pray together because prayer is powerful. So let's read from verse 14.

[9:13] Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church and let him pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

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'll be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed.

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Now I'm sure you might have some questions from these verses, but the punchline is really clearly marked out in verse 16 by the therefore.

Did you see that in verse 16? Confess our sins and pray for one another. And if we pray, powerful things will happen. So if we come away with any other conclusion than this today, we're missing James' point in these verses.

But before we tackle the big question, I want to go on a few asides on what this passage doesn't mean. James 5 is sometimes misused, and with so many of us in the room, I'm certain that there are people struggling with serious illness and frailty.

[10:31] And maybe you've even had people use James 5, and that's caused some significant hurt. And this passage is actually here to restore faith rather than hurt faith.

So I want to be a bit clearer, as clear as I can, on what James isn't saying. The first one is just to say what elder means.

James means the father figures of the church, the representative old men. There's a few reasons why, including just the word *presbyteros* means old man. Another that they're elders of the church. Do you see how it says that? It says that they're of the church. So they are the ones that sort of belong to a part of the church. And finally, and this one's a little bit harder to see in English, because we don't have a plural for you, unless you want to say yous, which I'll try.

But in verse 16, it goes something a little bit like this, if we can give the principle behind verse 14 and 15 and verse 16. It says, So in verse 16, it's very general to the whole church.

[11:51] It's a church-wide call to pray for one another. But having the elders pray is actually one way in which they represent the church body to the people who they pray for.

So that's what the therefore is how that connects them. And so it's actually the elders are the representative father figures of the church. The second thing is that it doesn't mean that the oil in this passage is necessarily sacramental or medicinal.

We are told no more about an oil anointing like this. There's possibly one other reference to oil and healing in Mark. But even then, we aren't given details that you would expect if this was a sacrament we were meant to do.

Rather, I think it's a symbolic way of reminding people that they belong to God, that they are set apart. A way of reminding the person who is in this situation that they are loved and belong to God through a symbol of setting priests and kings and others apart in the Old Testament, the oil anointing.

And that's certainly therefore no justification for sacramental approaches or assuming that the oil is sort of magical or something like that. And thirdly, and I think this one is often missed, is the prayer of faith.

[13:14] Pay attention to that prayer of faith. Whose prayer of faith is it? Have a look. Whose prayer of faith is it? See, I wonder if you have heard people say that, oh, if you had enough faith, problem X, Y, or Z would be healed.

You just need enough faith. Some of us in the room might have been quite hurt by statements like this in the past. But I want to help us see what James is actually saying, because notice who's praying.

It's not the person who's, you know, sick in this passage. It's actually in verse 14, the elders who are praying for the person.

So it's actually the faith of the elders that matters, not the person being prayed for, and actually the church, since the elders represent them.

So for any faith healers who want to go around saying that James is saying you need to have enough faith to heal, I want to say no, read more carefully.

[14:16] It's actually the elders who matter, or the church, the faith of the church. What matters is their faith. And I think that's kind of the whole point of the ordeal anyway, because you're asking someone to pray for you, aren't you?

And so you, in this situation, are asking others to come. It's worth noting, though, that James 5, as far as I could find this week, is the only prescriptive passage, not descriptive, prescriptive passage, so telling us what to do, passage in the New Testament about healing.

And this doesn't actually reference the faith of the sick person, which I think should change the way we look at a lot of faith healing approaches and things like that.

Fourthly, not all sickness is because of unconfessed sin. Notice that at the end of verse 15, the comment of sin just kind of comes out of nowhere.

You're not expecting it. That's intentional. Because not all cases come from unconfessed sin. Only sometimes is that the case. James is adding it as a possibility, not a certainty.

[15:30] However, sometimes people will sort of use this to say that the sickness is always because of unconfessed sin and that we should sort of like dig around and try and find it. But I don't think that's the sort of investigation that James is calling for either.

The way James just sort of adds it on at the end of verse 15 seems to suggest that the sin would be obvious or known to the person. There's also no indication or command to dig around and try and find what sin is lurking beneath.

On the flip side, though, there is a connection, sometimes at least, between sickness and specific sins. I mean, theologically, there's always a connection between sickness and sin, isn't it?

Because of the sin of Adam in Adam, all sin exists. But sometimes there are specific sins that result in sin. And that's practically obvious. We all know this.

I mean, if somebody has an affair and gets an STI, that sickness is caused by the sin. And that sickness is a judgment of God upon them.

[16:42] But also, we don't want to make it purely biological. We mustn't be materialists. It is possible that there is a connection between specific sins and some physical or spiritual issue.

And that aren't necessarily directly related biologically like the example I gave. But either way, I think in the case of what James is talking about, it won't be a surprise.

I suspect it will be continual, unrepentant sin or sin amongst fellow believers. And he's commanding that we confess that. In fact, as verse 16 reminds us, look in verse 16, he just says, confess your sins.

He's sort of saying, we should always be doing this. We shouldn't wait until we need to call the elders because we're sick or weak or something like that. Friends, we ought to confess our sins to one another and pray together for it.

And this leads us to the main question of the passage. Having dealt with what it doesn't mean, it's a big question raised here about what these verses do mean.

[17:50] The key debate that people often have, and you might have heard it previously, is between whether this should be translated sick or weak. So there's two different words used here.

And it could mean physically sick or it could mean sort of a spiritual weakness, you know, troubled faith or something like that. And there's all sorts of key distinctions that people make.

Really, a lot of the battleground is around the two different words that James uses for sickness or weakness. There's one in verse 14 and one of those 15. And it's a bit tricky because in verse 14, the Gospels use this word to always, always mean sickness.

But in Paul, it always, always means weakness. And the one in verse 15 is only used one other time in the New Testament in Hebrews, and it means weak there.

But actually, we have tons of other writings elsewhere that clearly mean sickness for this word. The ESV goes for sickness, I think, partly because the way James describes it sounds like the person's lying down, you know, they're praying over them, and the sick person is raised up, presumably from a sickbed.

[19:06] And if they're sick, therefore, they're clearly really sick. And I've been rattling this around quite a lot this week, looking at various commentaries, looking at the grammar and the original languages and stuff.

And my conclusion is, that I'm just not sure. And I'm actually not even really sure if it matters that much for a couple of reasons.

I mean, for one, if they are sick, I think James' point is that they're the kind of sickness that makes people go, God, why me?

What is happening here to me? So in other words, it's the kind of sickness that results in questions of faith and spiritual weakness or trials. And I'm sure that there are some amongst us that might be feeling this way even right now.

But one of the most significant reasons I think it doesn't matter that much is sort of practically in obeying this passage.

[20:08] Because if it's one, either way, shouldn't we do the same in the other case? Like, especially if they're often go hand in hand and related.

Like, whether it's about spiritual weakness specifically or not, God gives us people like Roy and Josh and Ian and many more to pray with us and remind us of where we sit with Jesus in our spiritual weakness.

Maybe using oil to show us and support one another together as we endure to that final day. That's exactly what God has given us, isn't it? And if it's about sickness or not, does not Jesus call us to visit the sick in the Gospel of Matthew?

Should we not support the sick brother and sister as they face illness and frailty and, of course, the spiritual trials that follow such sickness? As the doubts and questions might arise as they face various trying sicknesses.

Of course, we should call for the church to pray with us. But I think there's a bigger issue than this distinction in having to choose between one or the other.

[21 : 19] See, even if it's only one, even if it's just one of the specific cases that James has in mind, would we do it? If we should draw the line in the sand over one of them and stake our claim, you know, it's sickness, it's faith, or whatever it might be, if we had a sickness or a faith crisis today, would we call Roy?

Maybe that's happened to you already, and what did you do? Did you call over Ian Gentle and Peter Young to pray with you? Would this be our response?

I want us to think about that. I think, personally, my tendency is to downplay whatever's going on and just pray privately. I wonder if you're the same.

Because, friends, we're missing out. This misses the beautiful blessing of the church family that God has given us. Imagine if we were a church that prayed like this together.

However, I suspect that God delights in answering the prayers of a church that prays together and that does this, rather than just praying individually.

[22 : 36] I'm sure He loves hearing any prayers, but I'm sure He delights in the prayers of His people together. This then raises another question, though.

What are we to make of the saving and the healing in verse 15 and 16? Now, I want to say that God can absolutely bring physical healing, and that is a great thing to pray for.

But prayer, curiously, is not always the solution to sickness in the Bible. I wonder if you've noticed this before. Timothy is not told to pray, but to drink some wine for his stomach. And if this, in James, is a certain promise of healing, then surely Paul should be instructing him to pray and not to drink some wine.

Or also, we know that Epaphroditus in Philippians or Erastus in 2 Timothy were sick. And if all Paul needed to do was pray with them, since he was there with them, it seems, why does Paul even mention the sickness?

Since Paul's even healed miraculously many times before. If anyone should be able to pray a prayer like this that promises healing, Paul should be able to do it. But no, he's worried about them.

[23 : 48] So this passage, by implication, does seem to suggest that God can heal, but I don't think it's a blanket promise for physical healing.

And I think there's a couple of hints in James for this and what he's really concerned with. I think he's got a much bigger concern, more than just temporary healing that will ultimately still result in death.

Notice the connection in verse 15, for example, between saved and forgiveness. Now, saved could indicate healing, it does in many places, but the forgiveness definitely points us towards eternally significant promises.

And I think this is most exemplified by the example of Elijah. So we're going to have a look at that just in a moment. If it was about only recovering from illness, why did James pick the rain and not the widow of Zarephath?

You know, her son was dead. But I think this is actually brilliant. This prayer for rain wraps up the whole book together.

[24 : 59] It sort of concludes the way that James began. Elijah is actually praying for the double-mindedness of his people amidst trials.

So let's remember the beginning of James. I wonder if you remember chapter one. It sort of opens with, as they face various trials, they are meant to pray for wisdom and not be double-minded.

But what if you are double-minded? Well, I think Elijah helps us see how this prayer comes to its conclusion and as James concludes his letter. So let's read 1 Kings 18.

Would you like to flip there with me? 1 Kings 18. Oh, sorry. Before we read that, I'm going to read from James just to read what James writes.

But keep looking in 1 Kings 18. So James says, Elijah was a man with a nature like ours and he prayed fervently that it might not rain. And for three years and six months it did not rain on earth. [26:02] Then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain and the earth bore its fruit. So James points out that Elijah was like us. In other words, I think he's saying that he's righteous like we are with the connection to verse 16, righteous by faith.

Elijah was a man who prayed fervently and his prayers were effective and that backs up James' main point, remember, that the prayer of the righteous person has power as it's working. But as we look through 1 Kings 18, what I want you to notice is actually that even in verse chapter 17, when it sort of kicks off, Elijah's never said to pray. And then even at the end with the rain, we won't read that section, but go back and read it later.

He doesn't pray there either. At least he's not said to pray. He probably does pray. But there is one prayer that we will look at that is not explicit in James, but I think is really key to what he's talking about.

So in chapter 16 of 1 Kings, we've got Ahab, the king. We've been reading through 1 Kings. Ahab was very evil and turned people to Baal. Elijah comes up on the scene and there's no rain.

[27:10] But in chapter 18, we're given the reason why there's no rain. It's sort of not explicit until chapter 18 that there's no rain in Israel. And this in chapter 18, verse 20.

Do you want to read verse 20 with me? Listen to what he says. So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathering the prophets together at Mount Carmel.

And Elijah came near to the people and said, how long will you go limping between two different options? If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Baal, then follow him.

And the people did not answer him with a word. Do you notice how the people are double-minded? Israel is double-minded, as James would say.

They limp between God and Baal. Now, if you know the events, what happens here is pretty gruesome, but also a fairly satirical event, humiliating idolaters.

[28:10] But look at the conclusion of the event in verse 36. This is Elijah's prayer in these two chapters. In verse 36, he says, And then I've done all these things at your word.

Answer me, O Lord. Answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.

Upon this prayer, God does an incredible display of his power, and God himself turns Israel's hearts back to God.

And so the rain comes. That's the next thing that happens. And the rain in 1 Kings is connected with this fruit of repentance.

Israel's repentance is the reason for the rain. And so repentance is a common biblical picture with fruit, like repentance as fruit. And I wonder if that is what James is referring to in verse 18, when he says the land bears its fruit.

[29:30] Flip back with me to James chapter 5. But see that this event concerning rain is about God's power, God's power to turn back the hearts of the double-minded Israelites.

And so if in chapter 1 we felt like the double-minded person, I think this is James' answer for us. God himself turns back the hearts of the double-minded and helps them in repentance.

So friends, I think the outcome that James wants for the prayerfulness of chapter 5 is for reconciliation, for exalting the weak, forgiving the sinner, and ultimately restoring the double-minded.

That might look like physical healing. Might not. But it certainly looks like restoring the double-minded. Whether the double-mindedness is caught us by sickness or weakness or anything else.

Friends, if we prayed like this together at St. Luke Bible Church, imagine the single-minded faith that we would have amidst hardships. Imagine how much more we would face trials together as a church with wisdom and godliness.

[30:41] Let's pray together. Because God has given us one another. And this brings us to our final section, and we'll go through this fairly quickly. This is often thought of as quite a random sort of finishing few verses to James.

But I think if we understand the Elijah events and the double-mindedness, then this connection is pretty simple. If the sick or weak person might have some double-mindedness, you know, they're questioning things, this final person is wayward.

They're heading towards a single-minded awayness from God, or waywardness from God. But they're not quite there yet. They've still got one foot sort of back in the camp.

It's sort of the next progression of double-mindedness, or the big principle underneath. So in verse 19 and 20, let's read it together. My brothers, if any among you wonders from the truth, and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering, will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins.

If anyone departs from the word of truth, as James would say in chapter 1, the gospel, and someone brings him back, his soul will be saved from the wandering, and he'll be forgiven.

[31:57] And see the common conclusion to previously? It's about sins being forgiven. Wandering from the truth, and departing from the gospel, and from the clear teaching of the Bible is the problem.

And literally in verse 20, it says, whoever brings back a sinner from the way of error. And that doesn't always look like them becoming an atheist, does it?

Sometimes people have called themselves Christian, yet they reject the gospel. They reject the orthodox teaching of the Bible. And this really hurts when someone walks away like this, doesn't it? Church is left mourning and grieving the soul of a beloved friend, brother and sister. And so the question is, how do we bring back this sinner?

I think the Elijah sort of events are the key connection to this section. And it's through prayer that Israel were brought back.

[33:00] And I think similarly, the theme is continuing. We pray with these people. And it's not just for them as a church, although that's really good and we should do that, but as we're able with them also.

Now, it's going to require teaching and instruction, and we need to care really seriously about orthodoxy and holding to the truth of the gospel. James doesn't want people wondering from the truth to just feel welcomed and sort of stay around anyway, as if that made an eternal difference. No, James is not calling us to be a little lenient on that doctrine because we still want them to go to a church. No, friends, notice what James is saying. He's interested in restoring the double-minded wanderer, restoring them.

And what does restoring look like? It's bringing them back to what? Not church. He's not saying bring them back to church. He's saying bring them back to the truth. Do you see that?

In verse 15, it's about bringing them back to the truth. So we need to hold fast to the truth, don't we? And not give way. But it's worth mentioning that prayer is actually not mentioned in verse 19 or 20.

[34:12] Because of the connection to Elijah, I think the double-mindedness here is still about praying. I don't think James is done with praying. Just like Elijah's prayer that brought repentance to Israel, our prayers alongside teaching can restore the wayward.

God uses that. But if today someone you know is departing for the truth, or maybe that's you, let's pray. Urgently, friends.

Urgently call the elders to pray with us. To meet with this person and pray and look at the Scriptures together. But as we wrap up, I want us to imagine what St. Lucia Bible Church could look like if we did this.

If we prayed for one another at every turn, like James is asking us to. Imagine how much stronger our faith would be, and with so much less double-mindedness amongst us.

Wouldn't it be nice to see less people walking away from the faith? And picture a church who, because of their prayers that strengthen one another, they boldly proclaim the gospel. And they also see much fruit from that preaching.

[35:22] Imagine if the sick, as they faced trials and even death, they faced it with confidence in their Savior, because they had the joy of a church family praying, and supporting, and loving them.

I think one thing that James gestures at here, that actually, if we did this, we would understand the forgiveness of Christ better. If we confess our sin, and pray for one another, confident that Jesus has forgiven us, friends, what peace we often forfeit amidst trials and sufferings, because we do not pray for one another.

One way we might move towards this will actually be next year at growth groups. On a Wednesday night, both services are going to meet here at Ironside, and first, pray together.

Now, it's not all of the examples that James is talking about, but it's a step towards prayerfulness together, as both services. That would be a wonderful thing. Imagine this whole room, packed out with people, from morning and evening church, praying together.

I think that'd be lovely, and really, really great. And I actually think that, the forgiveness of Jesus would be even clearer to us, as we continue to delight in God's family, and the forgiveness of Jesus, through prayer.

[36 : 39] So let me encourage you to, think about how you can make Wednesday nights, free next year. But more specifically to this passage, let's be better at praying for one another. If today you fit in that weak or sick category, it's worth inviting the elders over to your house to pray with you.

You can do that either over morning tea, or maybe text Roy or Josh. Or one way is you can remind, if you can remind us, Roy, on our connecting form.

If you write on your connecting form, that you'd like this to happen, someone would certainly get in contact to you over that. They say, no one is an island. And I think it's worth knowing, that Jesus gave us a church.

This church. Look around. These are the people, that Jesus gave you, me, all of us. So let's pray for one another, friends. And if you're someone who doesn't know what to pray, maybe you're a bit nervous about praying, or maybe, if like me, you want to grow in your prayerfulness, one way is to use tools, like this book that I mentioned at the beginning.

Another way is to pray through prayers in the Bible. So we're going to do that now. I have got this prayer out of 1 Thessalonians 3, verse 11, and I'm hoping that it will be a bit of an example of how you might pray through the Scriptures together.

[37 : 59] Father, I'm not an expert on it, so bear with me. I think what Paul asks for here is fantastic, so I think we should ask for that as well. Father, may the Lord make us increase and abound in love for one another and for all, so that you may establish our hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, with all his saints.

Amen.