

“The Power of Prayer”

“I do it every morning, but I don’t have it figured out yet. The more I’m blessed by it, the less I understand just what it is. The more God fails to give me what I desperately beg for, the more assurance I have that God understands me, suffers with me, and will carry me through. Of course, I’m talking about my prayer life.”¹ Here in the Bible, the letter of James tells us, “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”

Again this week we consider life lessons found in the Bible specifically from the letter of James. You recall that in weeks past we have learned from James that, “Every generous act of giving, is from above...” and that we are to “...welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save [our] souls.” We also learned to be slow to speak and slow to anger, and to be *doers* of the word. Genuine Christianity expects confession to be followed by performance. Then we learned about the power and danger of the tongue and speech, and that all Christians are held accountable by God for what they say. Finally, last week, we saw how true wisdom is exhibited in humble living, and how pride and envy can get in the way if we do not allow Christ to guide us in living.

This week we learn about that most important of Christian activities: prayer. For ages people have asked for help in praying. Jesus’ own disciples asked him how to pray. Many people attend church for years, and except for prayer time in worship, they may not be familiar or comfortable with praying.

Prayer and the Church

If any in the church are suffering they should pray, says James; they should not say they are being tempted by God, or seek to retaliate against the source of distress, but should let one’s cries go up to God. If you get sick or experience ill fortune, anger and resentment toward God or any person won’t really bring healing. You must get yourself into the presence of the great Physician by means of prayer. Those who are feeling good and receiving blessings should give expression to that truth in song, recognizing that God is the giver of every good and perfect gift. The Christians of James’ day came together weekly for a shared meal and worship. James is reminding them that their gathering is not like the banquets and parties of the ancient world, where arrogant and bawdy songs were common. Rather, their meals ought to be characterized by hymns and songs that praise God for His blessings (see Eph. 5:18f).

If any are sick they should not shy from asking elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. [Acts chapter 6 describes some decisions made by the growing church in Jerusalem. By about A.D. 35 (Acts 6:1-6) it says that a group of seven was selected to care for the growing number of Greek speaking Christians in the fellowship. This looks like the establishment of a group of elders. Later in Acts we find that the group of elders had a permanent place in the Jerusalem congregation, alongside the apostles (Acts 11:30; 15:2; 16:4; 21:8). Paul and Barnabas selected and ordained elders in the congregations of Asia Minor (Acts 14:23). Other places in the N.T. show elders being responsible for congregational administration (Acts 20:4, 28; 1 Pet. 5:1-5), ordination (1 Tim. 4:14), preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17-19). In the letters of 1 Peter, and 2 & 3 John, the writers refer to themselves as elders.] The elders were for the most part laymen, who had outside employment or businesses, while playing a leadership role in the congregation. In this present passage of James the elders are described as having gifts in prayer and healing. It may have been that leaders were selected on the basis of spiritual gifts.

¹Tony Campolo, *Following Jesus Without Embarrassing God*, p.53

It is probably no accident that James uses the term *ἐκκλησία* – church or assembly – here for the first time in this letter. The Christian community is threatened by illness. How will Christians respond?

Since sickness was attributed to sin, as in the Old Testament and contemporary Judaism, it posed a serious problem for the early church in its self-understanding. Forgiveness of sins and new life through Jesus was their proclamation, so if any were ill questions arose in their minds, and in the minds of non-believers, as to the truth of the gospel. Was Jesus a healer or not? If all our sins are taken away why do Christians still get sick? This is the same question we still ask at times. O God, what did I do to deserve this? We hear of those who are cured of a serious illness and say that prayers were answered, and we ask ourselves then why doesn't He heal me, or my son, or my friend? James does not address this question but simply instructs the leaders of the church to pray for the sick and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord J.C., that is, on behalf of the Lord J. C.

Anointing with oil is a not a magical practice, but rooted in Jewish custom where wounds were treated with olive oil. James reiterates that it is because of the prayer to the Lord, the One who can heal, not because of the oil, that healing is expected. Though miracles of faith do not happen every time, they *do* happen and were expected by early Christians.

Since the view persisted that illness was a consequence of sin, it was necessary to confess one's sins and receive forgiveness, as stated here in James. It is the duty of all to confess their sins and pray for one another so that illness can be overcome. These days we do not generally believe that any illness we contract is directly attributable to our sins. There are many conditions that can come upon us that have no connection with anything we have done or said (see John 9; Jesus and the blind man in). Nevertheless, confessing one's sins and prayer for cleansing is a healthy practice. The congregation should practice mutual confession – leaders and members, elders and laymen.

There is still more to James' use of the term *ἐκκλησία* – church or assembly. It has to do with the Christians' self-identity, their calling of God, and their witness within the wider community.

In ancient Roman cities it was not uncommon for periodic waves of pestilence and epidemics to overwhelm populations. Often, during those times, neighbors would foreswear contact with neighbors, fear overtook many people, and those who were sick found themselves with no one to help and comfort them. Perhaps James instructions about the elders anointing the sick and praying over them is also an admonition to the church about how they treat one another during times of widespread illness. Will the Christians rally around the sick ones, trusting the Lord Jesus, or will they, in fear, isolate sick ones and suspend their love for one another? Isn't that a challenge we face as well? Oh sure we face those contagious – we have flu going every year, and this year there seems to be more attention given to H1N1 flu. Before that there was SARS, and Legionnaires disease, and various others that we can take precautions against. But when one of our number is ill, can we still not visit and pray? And what about one of our number who may suffer from a mental illness? Can our trust in the Lord overcome our fear in those cases?

A number of years ago sociologist Rodney Stark, wrote a fascinating book in which he describes how Christianity survived and grew in ancient Rome.² One reason was the Christians' higher survival rates during epidemics. He goes on to describe how Christian social networks fostered their survival, while pagans died at a higher rate. Part of the irony is that the admonition to "love one another" and to visit and pray for the sick, turned out to have practical consequences. More Christians survived the epidemics because of brothers and sisters in Christ who cared for them, and more Christians developed immunity to illness because of their exposure by way of caring for the sick.

²Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, (1996, Princeton Univ. Press).

Intercessory Prayer

James reminds us all that intercessory prayer is powerful. Intercessory prayer, of course, means praying for another's needs. Praying with and for one another is a powerful expression of faith and source of power for living. We do this almost every Sunday here during "the prayers of the people." We might be guilty of talking about it more than we actually do it. Yet I am very grateful for those who diligently pray for one another and for the prayer teams we have at this church. These are dedicated people who take up the prayer needs shared in worship each Sunday and lift them up to God. I know that many of these prayers have been answered and that many lives have benefited. (We also encourage all our people to become confident pray-ers. In fact during this month and next there is a Wednesday night class "Teach Us To Pray" for that very purpose – to help you become a confident pray-er). Prayer within the community of believers is an expression of truth, recognizing that God is sovereign.

Now when James says, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective," he may not be referring to just any good person in the congregation. Rather, as he mentions Elijah in the next breath, he may mean the person who is able to intercede effectively because of what he or she has gone through with God. He mentions, Elijah, a human like us, using the Greek word ὁμοιοπαθης, which translates "like in every way," and also implies suffering in service and faithfulness to God as Elijah did. The power of Elijah's prayer (see his prayer found in I Kings 17-18) comes through the trials and tribulations that his faithful service of God have entailed. If he could call forth heavenly grace through prayer, then a righteous and holy man of the church can also pray for God's healing power to come upon a sick person. (In this regard the sick person is like the dry earth that needs rain from heaven in order to recover and yield fruit; see I Kings 17-18). There are many good and faithful men and women in church, and we are grateful for them all. Among them are some who have really gone through much, precisely because of their faith, and there is a depth of character and pathos in them that makes their praying so powerful. Often it is those who have suffered for the faith, or who have served as missionaries in faraway and difficult places.

That All Might Be Saved

Finally, in all that James says to us, the aim is the same as Jesus' mission: to seek and to save the lost. In Jewish and early Christian tradition it was considered a great and righteous thing to save a soul from destruction. One might interpret the phrase "covers a multitude of sins" to mean the sins of the individual who rescues an erring brother or sister. More likely, though, this refers to the multitude of sins within the community: the salvation of those that err prevent the continuation of numerous sins in the community or in society. Proverbs 10:12 carries this meaning ("Hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers over all wrongs."), and this use is also found in 1 Pet. 4:8, ("Above all love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins.") James writes this in the same context as the earlier parts of his letter – seeking the salvation not simply of those who are sick, but also of those Christians who may be in error (as he previously noted) through their speech and actions that cause dissension, or their involvement in violent social unrest.

James' desire is that as many as possible may be saved from destruction. That must be our desire as well. That is why his letter concludes with this section urging us to lift our prayers to God as we follow the example of our Lord in seeking out and saving the lost. That is our purpose.