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THE GOD-DEPENDENT COMMUNITY

James 5:13-16a

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James Lesson 23

The God-dependent Community James 5:13-16a

I begin this message with a disclaimer that applies to the next message as well, namely, that I do not claim to be an expert in the practice of prayer. It is a constant struggle for me and I do not want to convey that I have arrived. But I want us all, wherever we're at, to join together in the pilgrimage of becoming a God-focused, God-dependent community of praying believers.

Prayer is the obvious theme of verses 13-18, with the noun or verb occurring in every verse. With the mention of suffering (5:13), James brings us full circle back to 1:2-3, where he opened the book with the radical command to consider it all joy when we encounter various trials. The only way that we can do that is to view every difficulty through a God-ward perspective and to depend on God through prayer.

We have to do this first on an individual level, of course. We must mentally process everything that happens to us, from the trivial to the significant, through the grid of God's sovereign love toward us in Christ. That is James' point in verse 13. But then verses 14-16a take on a strong community focus. We are not on individual, isolated spiritual journeys, where we only cross paths with one another here and there. Rather, we are pilgrims *together* with other saints. Thus James is saying here that...

All of life should be lived with a God-ward, God-dependent focus, shared together with God's people.

1. All of life should be lived with a God-ward, God-dependent focus (5:13).

James fires off two short questions (a third follows in 5:14), with crisp, short answers. These two questions run the gamut of life's experiences: "Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises" (5:13). All suffering and all blessings come from God for His glory and our ultimate good. So in every situation, we must learn to live with a God-ward, God-dependent focus.

A. Suffering should drive us to prayer (5:13a).

The Greek word for “suffering” refers to any difficulty. James used the noun in 5:10 to describe the suffering of the prophets (see also, 2 Tim. 2:9; 4:5). James’ readers were suffering because of their Christian testimony. But the word may refer to all types of problems that we encounter in life, whether spiritual, physical, emotional, financial, or relational. As we’ve seen, becoming a Christian does not provide you an exemption from trials!

If you’re going through trials of any sort, James’ answer (a single word in the Greek text) is like a rifle shot to the bull’s eye: “Pray.” It’s easy to sit here and nod in agreement, but the question is, “When you encounter difficulties, *is prayer your first response?*” It’s certainly not the automatic response. If left to the flesh, the automatic response to suffering is to grumble or complain or to throw a pity party. Or, we question God: “Why is this happening to me?” But James counters all this with the single word: “Pray!”

When you get into a conflict with your wife or children, do you shoot up a prayer for wisdom and a calm spirit? Do you pray that you will be an example of godliness to your family? Do you ask God to check your anger? Do you pray that each family member would grow in Christ through the difficulty?

When you face a problem at work, do you silently send up a “Nehemiah prayer”? Remember, when he talked with the unbelieving king about his request to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, in between the king’s asking him what he wanted and his response, Nehemiah states, “So I prayed to the God of heaven” (Neh. 2:4). It couldn’t have been more than a quick, “Help, Lord” kind of prayer! But it shows that his knee-jerk response was to pray.

I could go on an on. When your car needs repair, do you pray for the mechanic to do good work? When you need medical care, do you pray for the doctor to have wisdom? When you need to make a major purchase or you face financial problems, do you pray for wisdom to be a good steward of the resources that He has entrusted to you? When you gather with lost family members for the holidays, do you pray for opportunities for witness? In every situation of life, God sends problems so that we will learn to depend on Him in prayer.

We often pray as the *last* resort, after we've done everything that we can do to try to fix the problem. We scheme, we plan, we work hard, and then maybe we remember to pray, "God, bless my efforts." You can do more than pray *after* you've prayed, but you shouldn't do anything *until* you've prayed. Prayer acknowledges that you are totally dependent on God. Prayer admits, "Lord, I can't even draw my next breath without You. If You don't work for Your purpose and glory, my most competent efforts will fail!"

When you encounter suffering, what should you pray? Don't answer too quickly! We often assume that we should pray, "Lord, get me out of here *now!*" Sometimes when I'm asked to visit someone in the hospital, the one asking will say to me, "Please pray for him!" When I respond, "*What* should I pray?" they look at me as if I'm not all there. "Pray for healing, of course!" But, maybe God has other purposes for this trial. Is the person living under the lordship of Christ? Maybe this illness is to bring him into submission. Maybe there is some other purpose.

So, when you or someone you love encounters a trial, pray for wisdom (James 1:5 in context). Pray for the ability to endure with joy. Pray for a godly attitude through the pain. Pray that the works of God may be displayed in this trial (John 9:3). Pray that God would use this crisis for His purpose and glory (John 11:4). Pray that the fruit of the Spirit would grow in the lives of everyone involved (Gal. 5:22-23). Suffering should drive us to prayer. Then James goes to the other extreme:

B. Sufficiency should drive us to praise (5:13b).

"Is anyone cheerful?" Again, James shoots a one-word (in Greek) answer: "Sing!" I have not verified this, but I have heard that the most frequent command in the Bible is, "Sing!"

You may think that singing when things are going well is easier than the command to pray when you encounter suffering, but it's not. The response of the flesh is to forget God when things go well. That's why Moses warned the Jews as they were about to enter the land (Deut. 6:10-12):

Then it shall come about when the Lord your God brings you into the land which He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you, great and splendid cities which you did

not build, and houses full of all good things which you did not fill, and hewn cisterns which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant, and you eat and are satisfied, then watch yourself, that you do not forget the Lord who brought you from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

For the same reason, David talks to himself in Psalm 103:2, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits." And for the same reason, the church is exhorted to *remember* the Lord's death through frequent observance of the Lord's Supper. The natural response to sufficiency is to forget the Lord and all His benefits. So James says, "When things are going well, when your soul is satisfied with God's sufficiency, sing praises to Him!" John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p. 354) puts it, "There is no time in which God does not invite us to himself."

While I enjoy many of the praise choruses, especially when they reflect sound doctrine, I would also encourage you to learn the great hymns of the faith. The words of those hymns have sustained God's people through suffering and sufficiency for many generations. One of my favorites, "How Firm a Foundation," concludes with these words that poetically capture Hebrews 13:5:

The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake!"

The two extremes of James 5:13 show that God does not expect us always to be bouncy, cheerful, and upbeat. James allows that sometimes you will be down because of suffering. His directive: Pray! But when you're cheerful, sing! I would echo John Piper, though, in saying that when you're down, you've got to fight for joy. One way that you do that is through prayer. Sometimes when you're down, the way out of it is to sing. If you can't express it yourself, put on a CD of some great hymns or uplifting praise music. James' first point is that all of life, whether suffering or sufficiency, should be lived with a God-ward, God-dependent focus.

2. Our God-ward, God-dependent focus should be shared with God's people (5:14-16a).

A God-ward focus does not mean that we are to suffer in isolation. Verse 13 shows that we must walk with God on the private, individual level. The battle with trials must start there. But beyond that, God has made us members of Christ's body. If we do not share our needs and struggles with others, they cannot help bear our burdens and they will not rejoice when God answers.

- A. If you have a serious illness, call for the elders to pray over you (5:14-15).

Verses 14 & 15 are difficult to interpret and apply correctly. They are the basis for the Roman Catholic sacrament of extreme unction. For sake of time, I can't comment except to say that I am baffled at how the idea of a priest anointing a dying person so that his soul will be ready for heaven ever came out of a text about healing, not dying.

A few commentators (Ron Blue, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. by John Walvoord & Roy Zuck [Victor Books], 2:834-835; John MacArthur, *Moody Founder's Week Conference Messages, 1988*, pp. 103-113; Douglas Moo mentions a few more, *The Letter of James* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 236, note 45) argue that these verses are not talking about physical healing at all. Rather, they argue that "sick" (5:14) should be translated "weak," referring to spiritual weakness. They observe that James uses a word here for "anoint" that refers, not to ceremonial anointing, but to more everyday anointing. Thus they interpret the anointing with oil to refer to the Jewish practice of using oil as a means of bestowing honor or refreshment, especially on guests. They point out that the word "sick" in verse 15 is literally, "weary."

So the idea is that a person who is spiritually weak and weary would call for the elders. They would anoint him with oil (modern application: encourage and refresh him), pray with him, and the Lord will restore the one who is weary and raise him up. If he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. So they interpret this as spiritual restoration, not physical healing. I admit that this interpretation is attractive in that it gets us off the hook with a difficult interpretive problem, namely, that the common interpretation of verse 15 seems to guarantee physical healing.

But almost all commentators and Bible translators understand this text to refer to physical healing, not to spiritual restoration. When the verb “weak” is used to refer to spiritual weakness, it is made clear by some qualifier, such as, “weak in conscience” (1 Cor. 8:7) or, “weak in faith” (Rom. 14:1, 2). Also, in the Gospels, where James draws most of his vocabulary and theology, the word always denotes bodily illness (Moo, p. 237). While the verb, “anoint,” is used of common anointing, it is also used of the disciples’ ceremonial anointing of the sick in their healing ministry (Mark 6:13). So, while I would agree that through prayer elders should encourage and refresh those who are spiritually weak, I’m not convinced that that is what this text means.

But, that leaves us with a difficult problem, namely, that this text seems to guarantee healing for those who follow the procedure. Before I address that (I’ll warn you now that I don’t have an easy answer), let me make several observations.

First, note that it is the sick person who is to call for the elders, not vice versa. The elders are not omniscient! Don’t expect that we should know when you need prayer! Tell us! Second, these verses intertwine physical illness with sin. James does not assume that the person is sick because of sin, but he indicates that it *may* be a cause (“*if he has committed sins*”). So before the sick person calls for the elders, he needs to search his heart and confess all known sins to the Lord. He should be prepared that the elders may ask, “Are you aware of any unconfessed sins in your life?”

Also, because the sick person is calling for the time of busy men (there is no such thing as a non-busy elder!), this should be reserved for serious matters, not for routine illness. Galatians 6:2 says that we are to “bear one another’s burdens.” The word used there refers to excessive burdens. But Galatians 6:5 says, “For each one will bear his own load.” The word “load” refers to normal burdens or responsibilities. If your illness or injury is something that affects your entire life (life-threatening, or chronic pain or weakness, or it prevents you from working or fulfilling other duties, or one that is overwhelming you spiritually), then you should probably call for the elders.

James (5:14) directs the elders to “pray over him” (“over” may imply laying on of hands), “anointing him with oil in the name of

the Lord.” There are several interpretations suggested. Some say that it refers to the ancient medicinal application of oil to wounds, such as the Good Samaritan did with the wounded traveler (Luke 10:34). Thus, they think the verse means, “Pray and use medical means.” While I agree that we should use medical means, I am not convinced that James is saying that.

Others say that the oil was a physical expression of concern that was used to stimulate the faith of the sick person, much as Jesus used mud to anoint the eyes of the blind man in healing him (John 9:6-11). That is possible, but I prefer the view that the oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, who is the divine agent in healing. James says that it is the prayer of faith that heals, not the oil, but obviously, it is not prayer, but God, to whom we pray, who heals.

But now we must deal with the questions, “What is the prayer of faith?” And, “Is James guaranteeing healing in every case?” Some resolve this by saying that the gift of miraculous healing was limited to the apostolic age, and so this doesn’t apply anymore. While *the gift* of healing may have been only for that period, that gift is not in view here. Obviously, God can and does heal miraculously in every age when it is His will to do so.

Others go to the other extreme and say that it is *always* God’s will to heal. If you aren’t healed, you must not have prayed in faith. This view is not only false, but cruel! If this were true, no faithful believer should ever get sick or die. But that doesn’t square with either reality or the New Testament. Paul was not healed of his thorn in the flesh and he did not heal Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25-30) or Trophimus (2 Tim. 4:20). He urged Timothy to drink a little wine for his frequent stomach ailments (1 Tim. 5:23), not to claim his healing by faith. And, we all eventually get sick and die.

Some argue that the prayer of faith is a special subjective assurance that is given to the elders that God will heal in *this* situation. My problem with that view is that it’s very easy to be mistaken, and if you give someone false hope that God will heal, but He does not heal, you have just added to the person’s misery.

Every prayer should be a prayer of faith, because we should not ask anything of God unless we believe that He is able to grant it (James 1:6-8; Heb. 11:6; Mark 11:22-24). But—and here, for me,

is the difficult thing about applying this—we do not know God's sovereign will in advance. If I had been one of John the Baptist's followers, praying for his release from prison, I would not have thought it to be God's will for the drunken King Herod to lop off John's head. But it was His will. With Peter, I would not have thought it to be God's will for Jesus to get crucified. But, thank God, it was His will! I would not have thought it to be God's will for five young, dedicated missionaries to get murdered in the jungles of Ecuador. But it was God's will.

So my understanding of this verse is, if you are seriously sick or have an injury that is debilitating, call the elders for prayer. We will come and talk to you about your situation. We may ask if you are aware of any sins that you need to confess. We will anoint you with oil as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, who is mighty to heal. We will pray with you, believing that God can and does heal. But, we must submit to His sovereign will, which we seldom can know in advance. If He chooses to heal you, give Him the glory, because it wasn't the oil, it wasn't our prayers or faith that healed you. It was God! James has a concluding thought here:

B. If you are struggling with sin, find a godly saint to share with in mutual confession and prayer (5:16a).

"Therefore" shows that this is a conclusion. The idea is (Moo, p. 245), "Since the prayer for healing offered in faith accomplishes so much (v. 15a) and since God is anxious to forgive the sins of his people (v. 15b), the whole community should be encouraged to confess their sins to one another and to pray for one another. By so doing, the health (in the broadest sense) of the community will be insured."

Confession, like prayer for healing, has also been taken to unwarranted extremes. Some never do it at all, but others may indiscreetly share things in public that should never be shared. I once had a man in a Sunday School class share in front of the entire class (with his wife present) that he had lusted over another woman in the class! James is *not* encouraging such a thing!

Generally, the confession should be as public as the sin. If it is a private sin, confess it privately, or find a godly, trustworthy saint who will keep your confidence and confess it to him or her (men

with men, women with women). If your sin hurt specific individuals, confess it to those people and ask their forgiveness. If it affected the entire church, then ask the elders for an appropriate time and place to confess it to the church.

The Roman Catholic Church uses this verse to justify the practice of confessing your sins to a priest. But they seem to ignore that the practice is to be mutual ("to one another"). I doubt that the priest would appreciate it if the one doing the confessing said, "Okay, it's your turn"! James wasn't thinking of confession to a priest, except in the sense that every believer is a priest. Rather, he is acknowledging that we are all struggling against sin, and we need one another in the battle. We need to help one another as we fight to establish and maintain a God-ward, God-dependent focus.

Conclusion

There is plenty of application here for us all! None of us would say, "My prayer life is all that it should be." So God is asking us all to work at prayer in all things.

Not many of us could say that we are up to par in the praise category. It may sound contradictory, but it's not: Work at singing praises to God every day.

Perhaps someone needs to call the elders for prayer about a debilitating illness. Before you do, examine your heart before God and ask Him to search you to see if there may be some wicked way in you (Ps. 139:23-24). Some of you may need to find a godly brother or sister to confess your sins to and to pray with, so that you may be healed. As God puts it on your heart, respond in obedience and you will be blessed.

Application Questions

1. What has motivated you the most to pray more?
2. Shouldn't praise be spontaneous? How then can we work at it?
3. Is it a compromise of faith to pray, "Your will be done?" Why/why not?
4. How can we know which sins (if any) to confess publicly?

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