

The Duty and Delight of Prayer

We are at the end of the book of James and our series, "Faith that Works". I trust that, over the past 12 weeks, you have been encouraged and challenged as James taught us what genuine faith looks like in everyday real life and how it's not seen in what we claim only, but also in how we live. We see how to respond to suffering and trials, injustice and conflict with others and temptation within ourselves. We have been taught how to respond to everything from poverty to wealth to planning our lives and patiently enduring injustice. James has shown us what our hearts and tongues are really like, but more than that, I hope that you have caught a greater glimpse of the faithfulness of God, and that you realize that we can trust Him in all things because He is good!

So, church, how do we respond to all of this? In short, we respond in faith by applying all that we have heard in order to bring God glory, and in doing so, we will find our joy in obeying. You may be thinking that this all seems to be so hard and overwhelming to do, and if you're thinking that, then you would be right. Apart from Jesus, it is not only hard and overwhelming, but downright impossible. This is why we should not be surprised to see that James ends his letter with an encouragement to PRAY!

Prayer is nothing more than personally communicating with God. Prayer is admitting that, without Jesus, we can do nothing. Prayer is always turning away from depending on ourselves and turning towards God in confidence that He will provide everything that we need to do everything that He has called us to do. We pray, and God responds. Only the desperate and needy will pray, which is why this is such a good indicator of genuine faith. The faithful respond in prayer. If we don't pray, often this is generally an indication that we don't believe that prayer accomplishes much, or worse yet, that we don't really know Jesus.

James 5:13:

¹³ Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

We all have heard it said, "When all else fails, pray." That is not what James is teaching us here. Suffering?.....PRAY! Cheerful?.....PRAY! This is to be the normative response of the believer. Life is anything but consistent. There are different seasons of life, and where you are right now is not where you will always be. If you live long enough, you will feel the full range of life, the ups and downs and the highs and lows. You will have days of sunshine where it seems all is right in the world, and then nights of darkness where it seems nothing is going your way. Life is ever changing, but God remains the same, and our response is to bring it all before our Father in Heaven, whether in prayer or praise. It's always a good time to pray!

Is anyone among you suffering? This suffering could include all types of problems that we encounter in life from spiritual, physical, emotional, financial, relational, and/or the trillion other ways that we suffer in this broken world. We are all cracked pots living in a broken world. No matter the reason you are suffering, the thing we are to do is simply.....PRAY! Question.....Is that where you go to first? If you do, then praise God, because that is a work of the Spirit. That is not the automatic response of the human heart. Many times, we run to many other things that offer no help, like grumbling, complaining, or we may throw ourselves a big ol' pity party. Instead, let us PRAY!

Are you spiritually weak and depleted? PRAY!

Are you physically hurting? PRAY!

Are you emotionally a wreck? PRAY!

Are you financially strained? PRAY!

Are you in conflict with those you love? PRAY!

Here is the thing, though, don't just pray that God would make it stop. ALTHOUGH YES, pray that it would stop, but then pray that God would help you endure with joy, as you keep your eyes fixed on Jesus during the storm. Pray to suffer well as you represent King Jesus. Pray that the works of God would be displayed in and through this trial for God's glory and your ultimate joy and good. Pray that you'd grow to be more like Jesus and less like yourself. Our suffering should drive us to pray, and it is such a privilege to pray and God wants us to pray because prayer shows our trust in God. It is an amazing thing that we sinful and fallen humans can go to our Sovereign God through the blood of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit, and our Father in Heaven listens. Not only does He listen, but He cares, and not only does He care, but He can act on our behalf and He is in control at all times as He seeks our ultimate best. Because He is for us, not against us.

Ok, so that is what we do if we are suffering, and quite honestly, that may be the times we pray the most. How about the other end of the spectrum? Is anyone cheerful? Let him SING PRAISE! This is praying with a tune, and may seem like a natural thing to do when you're happy! Right? Well, not always. Many times, when things are going really well, we have a tendency to forget God. Let us not let this happen to us, church! Let's be a people who SING PRAISE! No matter the season of life, Praise the Lord! This has always been a mark of God's people. Just listen as I read,

Psalm 150:

Praise the LORD!

Praise God in his sanctuary;

praise him in his mighty heavens!

² *Praise him for his mighty deeds;*

praise him according to his excellent greatness!

³ *Praise him with trumpet sound;*

praise him with lute and harp!

⁴ *Praise him with tambourine and dance;*

praise him with strings and pipe!

⁵ *Praise him with sounding cymbals;*

praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

⁶ *Let everything that has breath praise the LORD!*

Praise the LORD!

YES! Church, look to Jesus and think over the good news of what He has accomplished through His life, death, and resurrection, and as you drink deeply from this fountain of grace, allow these beautiful truths to affect your heart and emotions until it burst forth in SINGING PRAISE!

Here is the thing: in our culture it is strange for some people to sing, particularly men. I have many thoughts as to why that may be, but I know why that was the case for me growing up. First, there was my elementary school chorus teacher who will remain nameless for the sake of hurting feelings. I distinctively remember, one time in 5th grade, her coming up to me in class and saying, "Scott Rising, you sing just like your mother and that is not a compliment!" Oh! Well, thank you, Miss Encouragement!

Just so you all know, the encouragement didn't end there, by the way. Oh, no! There were times when I would spend the weekend at my Pap's, and he would take me to church with him and my grandma. I had the greatest grandparents in all the world, but I still don't have pleasant memories of going to church with them. First of all, I had to wear a suit that was made for a man 5 times the size of me, and from 50 years earlier, and then it was always hot and boring, but that is beside the point. When we would get ready to sing, I was encouraged to stand up straight and sing quietly because I didn't have a good voice, and any who have had the privilege to be near me, I'm confident, would agree. **BUT STILL, WE MUST SING PRAISE!** Our God is worthy to be praised! You cannot think on the wonders of the Cross and not sing!

And yet, I've had men tell me that this is not something that men do?!?! Oh, really? Jesus sang! Jesus sang a hymn with the disciples at the conclusion of the Lord's Supper, just before He set out to pray on the Mount of Olives. In their fellowship, Jesus lifted up his voice and sang! So, men, there is no greater picture of masculinity than Jesus, and He sang! So, we should lead the way in our families and in the church and sing!

Know this: at the end of time, all of God's people will join in eternal praise of God. Revelation 22:3 tells us that, "*No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him*" With the curse of sin removed, those who are with the Lord will forever praise the King of Kings in perfection. It has been said that our worship of God on earth is simply preparation for the celebration of praise that will take place in eternity with the Lord. Ok, just to make sure we are clear, **God's people should respond to all situations of life with prayer.**

Alright, we just gotten through one verse! The application is to pray and sing praise to God! Let's move on, and at this rate, we will be done in 10 hours.

James 5:14-16a:

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 one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

This section of Scripture is difficult to interpret correctly, and so with this and all of the Bible, we must come humbly and ask the Holy Spirit to teach us and embrace the ambiguity that sometimes exists. If not, then we can lend ourselves to some real hurtful and even harmful teachings. For instance, some Christians believe these verses teach that, if only one prays with enough faith, healing for the sick person is guaranteed. The challenge with that, then, is that if they don't get well, then it's based on their lack of faith. And if your faith is good, then no believer should ever die! Yet, many Christians do die from disease or injury every year, but this doesn't mean they are lacking faith, or that those praying for them lack faith. Does it?

I personally know people who are haunted by texts like this, and I'd be lying if I said that, at one time, I was not one of them. Growing up, I was not raised in a Christian home, however there were many traces of spirituality, most which could be traced back to the Bible. So, when my sister was diagnosed with "Hodgkin's Lymphoma," which is generally a very curable cancer, it was not surprising to hear many people saying that they were praying. We even had different pastors come into our home and offer encouragement through prayer to the Lord. I don't remember all the details, as I was in 6th grade when this all began. However, after a couple of years of radiation and chemo, my sister's health was not better, but actually was decreasing. At this time, I remember one pastor, in particular, talking with me. He had asked me if I was praying for my sister. I told him, no. He looked at me and told me that I needed to start praying, and that if I just had enough faith, God would heal my sister. So, as you can imagine, I went home that evening and began praying. I prayed often because I loved my sister dearly, and I so desperately wanted her to live. The crazy thing is that I didn't even know who I was praying to, but I continued to pray. It wouldn't be long after all of this that my sister would die and I was left with a trillion questions, such as, was my faith not good enough? Did God not hear me? Did God not exist? Did God not care? This left me confused, hurt, angry, and frustrated.

So, let's look at this section with careful eyes and seek to learn. First of all, we see that the sick person is to call for the elders, not the other way around. Elders are not all knowing! We don't always know when you need prayer, even if it was posted on Facebook. Don't assume that we know. Tell us! And notice that it says to call the elders, not the deacons, friends, or some self-promoted miracle worker. This doesn't mean that those people are not to pray, as we will see in a moment, but the elders are to be called to the sick person's bedside. This is not because we are particularly gifted as healers, but because we are called to shepherd the church that is in our care. I know that the elders of this church take it as a distinct privilege to care for the church in this manner. So, call!

Also, it is safe to assume that when it says, "sick person," this doesn't mean someone with a runny nose or some chest congestion. It is much more likely that this sickness is of a much more serious nature than a routine illness. This is why it warrants the ministry of the elders, because I have never met a bored elder. These men are busy with many things, but the care of the church is what we are to be about. What do the elders do, then? First, we see that we are to pray over the person who is sick. This could mean because they are bed ridden, or just over them in the sense that we lay hands on them as we pray.

We also see that we are to anoint with oil in the name of the Lord. Is this some special olive oil from Jerusalem, or is this 10w-30 racing oil? I don't know, but notice James doesn't explain the significance of the oil, and so I'm not going to spend much time on this. Just know that we are to anoint with oil in the name of the Lord. There is no supernatural or magical power in the oil, or in the elders. My best guess is that the oil is the symbol of God's presence, but I know that prayer is the means for tapping into the power and authority of Jesus Christ!

James then adds this astonishing promise that, *"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.* This promise of healing for the sick offers encouragement, and even a much needed corrective, for those of us who have trouble praying boldly, for fear that God will respond. God always does what is good, and we can trust that, so pray and pray boldly!

Hebrews 4:14-16:

¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Because of this wonderful truth, we ought to pray boldly and with confidence, believing that He is a God of power and love, and that He delights to listen to the prayers of His children. All the while, we also know that God chooses how and when He heals, as Paul reminds us in,

2 Corinthians 12:8-10:

⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The Apostle Paul, who was a man of great faith, pleaded three times for relief from "a thorn in the flesh," and yet Paul did not receive what he prayed for. That didn't mean Paul lacked faith. God, however, had His perfect reasons for choosing to answer in a different way, as we see in verse 9. Remember, our perfect and complete healing never occurs in this life. We must remember that ultimately God is more interested in our eternal well being than our temporal physical health. James is not teaching that amazing miraculous healing must take place. He never says specifically how the Lord will heal, however, those who are in Christ have their sins forgiven and will receive perfect and complete healing when we go to be with Jesus, or upon His return.

This leads us to a second promise that we see in this section. *"And IF he has committed sins, he will be forgiven."* We see here that James leaves open the POSSIBILITY that sin may have caused the sick person's illness. I tend to find that people are at either end of the spectrum. One, if you're ill, then of course you have sinned, OR that there is no way that you're ill because of sin because God wouldn't do that!

Notice that James does not assume that the person is sick because of sin, BUT he does indicate that it MAY be the cause when it says, *"if he has committed sins."* So, prior to the sick person calling for the elders, he or she should search his or her heart and confess all known sins to the Lord. He or she should also be prepared that the elders will ask if he or she is aware of any unconfessed sins in his or her life? Again, we must be careful. Not all sickness is the result of sin, and the Bible cautions us against always connecting the two. We must make no assumptions, and to do so is not only wrong, but also cruel.

But we do know for sure that some sickness can be part of God's discipline, and therefore we must always humble ourselves and allow ourselves to ask the difficult question of whether there is a particular sin that we've been unwilling to repent of? If so, drag it into the light through confession and repentance, because concealed sin keeps us from delighting in God. *"Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed."*

I want to quote a section from a commentary that I used in my time of study. "Since the prayer for healing offered in faith accomplishes so much and since God is anxious to forgive the sins of his people, the whole community should be encouraged to confess their sins to one another and to pray for one another. By so doing, the health of the community will be insured." (Doug Moo, pg. 245)

In other words, confession and repentance is a church or family concern. We all must have Jesus loving people in our lives to whom we can share our struggles. We all need to have people in our lives to whom we can confess major and constant sins. We should all have people close enough to us whom we allow to ask difficult question for our own well being. James and the Bible makes it abundantly clear that the Christian life should not be lived apart from community. **God's people are to be marked by a life of confession and repentance in the context of the local church.**

1 John 1:9:

⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Yes, we are to confess our sins to God, and yes we are all struggling against sin, and we need one another in this battle. This is because sin that no one deals with becomes sin that everyone will have to deal with if it goes uncared for. We need to help one another as we fight for joy, and as we seek to be more like Jesus and less like ourselves. It is good to confess all known sin to the Lord and to ask for His forgiveness, and to reveal any sins of which we are unaware. It is even appropriate to pray like David did in Psalm 19:12, "*Declare me innocent from hidden faults.*" The beauty of our God is that healing is not always automatic, but our forgiveness of sins is, and that is of much greater importance. Prayer is a duty and a delight! We must never forget the importance of prayer, and we all play a vital role in this as a church! It has been said that, "a church that does not pray is dead." I would totally agree because prayer is powerful, and that is where James goes next.

James 5:16b-18:

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.¹⁷ 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 the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

God works through our prayer! Remember that James has already told us that you have not because you ask not. Prayer can actually do things! Our prayers can change things! Believe that! God's people have the opportunity to make a huge difference in the lives of others. To prove this, James gives us Elijah as an example, and I love that he says, *Elijah was a man with a nature like ours!* WHAT?!?! This seems like crazy talk because Elijah was like some spiritual ninja! Right? If these Jewish kids had action heroes, they all would have wanted an Elijah figurine!

James teaches us that, "*The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working,*" and he uses Elijah's prayer life as an example. However, It is not the miraculous miracles of Elijah in which James is pointing us to, but rather the prayer of Elijah. James

reminds us of two prayers in particular.....first, *he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. AND, Then, he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.*

God delights to do extraordinary things through seemingly ordinary people that are faith-filled and passionately persistent in prayer!

PRAYER IS POWERFUL! So, the question is: why don't we pray? I'm sure there are many reasons, but it has been said, "One of the main reasons so many of God's children don't have a significant life of prayer is not so much that we don't want to, but that we don't plan to." I know that this is true for me. Prayer is always hard work, and often an agony. Yet, we must wrestle with this and grow in our prayer lives.

Church, we must not forget that, without Christ, we can do nothing. If we could all only see this reality, then I know we'd pray much more. In a sense, it's like we are all spiritual quadriplegics. Imagine with me that you are paralyzed from the neck down, and you can do nothing. You must have someone who does everything for you, BUT that only happens if you ask with your voice. This is so close to our state of not doing anything of eternal value.

So, blood dipped children of God, let us draw near to our Father through Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit and PRAY! Pray humbly! Pray expectantly! Pray boldly! Pray trusting and knowing that we have a good, good Father in Heaven who delights to give good things to his children! Church, be committed to prayer! It is both a duty and a delight, and if you don't know where to begin, take some advice from one of the Puritans, "PRAY UNTIL YOU PRAY."