

## **“The Prayer of Faith”**

James 5:13-20

We’ve come to the final message of our study from the book of James. It’s been an intensely practical study, giving us a lot to work on as we live out a “Faith That Works.” I remind you again, that nowhere in this epistle does James suggest that we earn our salvation by the things we do. However, he does argue, if our salvation is genuine, then we will think differently, act differently, and look differently than the unbelievers. And, he gives clear instruction on how that can be done.

Our text for today is the final verses of James chapter five. They deal with a very important subject; prayer. Prayer is a vital part of a working faith. John Bunyan, the author of “Pilgrim’s Progress,” once said, “You can do more than pray, after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.”

A Puritan preacher adds this counsel, “When people do not mind what God speaks to them in His Word, God doth as little mind what they say to Him in prayer.” These quotes highlight a unique aspect of prayer. Prayer is primary. Prayer is powerful. Prayer makes a difference. But only for those who obey God’s Word.

In our study today, James speaks about “The Prayer of Faith.” I’ve taken that phrase for the title of the message. Our text is James 5:13-20. Listen carefully now as I read those verses.

### **James 5:13-20**

Prayer makes a difference because we are connecting with and communicating with the greatest and most powerful being in the universe; God Himself. As we look into this text we observe several RESULTS that follow “The Prayer of Faith.”

The First RESULT is,

#### **Prayer Brings Comfort**

Prayer brings comfort to those who are suffering hardship or trouble. If you're a Bible-believing Christian, like me, you accept the doctrine of God's sovereignty. We believe He controls not only the physical universe, but also the circumstances of our lives. Nothing comes to us without His approval, or at the least, His permission. In the previous message in this series we looked briefly at the life of Job, a very obvious example of God's sovereignty in the affairs men. Job was at a distinct disadvantage compared to us because He did not have the revelation of God through the written Word and the Holy Spirit. Yet in spite of those limitations, he was faithful.

Since we believe God controls the events of our lives, and, that He knows all about us, one might ask, "Why bother to pray?" Yet, James instructs us to pray in times of trouble. There are several reasons for praying. First, prayer acknowledges that we're not in control of the situation; that helps to eliminate pride. We know we need outside help; human, divine, or both.

When we experience difficulty, especially when we're in a position where we can do nothing, that's often a motivation to evaluate our lives. Many a person has thanked God for an experience that took them out of the routine of daily activities, put them flat on their back, and gave them time to pray and seek God's face. During that time they realized where the road they were traveling was taking them. And they decided it was really not where they wanted to go.

Prayer also gives us access to God's resources. Paul says in Hebrews 4:15 and 16, "*For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.*" We have a representative, Jesus Christ, who has suffered everything we have suffered or will suffer. Yet in all His sufferings, temptations, and trials He did not sin. Because of that, we are invited to come boldly, with confidence, to His throne to find mercy and grace.

In addition, prayer brings comfort to those who are physically sick. James instructs those who are sick to call for the elders of the church. Why is this important? Do the prayers of the elders carry special weight with God? Not in the sense that they are better than the members of the church, or even necessarily more spiritual. But as we read through the Scriptures we cannot help but see how God works through divinely established structures of authority. One can see this principle clearly in the account of the Gentile centurion in Matthew chapter eight.

I also believe that involving the elders of the church highlights the often ignored spiritual dimensions of physical sickness. Now please, do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that all sickness is a result of personal sin. Jesus' disciples made that mistake in John chapter nine when they attributed a man's blindness to his sin, or his parent's sin. And Jesus promptly told them that this man's blindness was not a result of anyone's sin. Having said that, see how James notes this dimension by saying, "...and *IF* he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him." In many cases there are physical consequences to both sins of the body and sins of the spirit.

In all of this praying, we must acknowledge the possibility that God will not heal the sick one. While that fact is not specifically stated in this text, we must keep the larger context of Scripture in view. Adam Clarke states there are some cases where, "God sees it will be prejudicial to the patient's salvation to be restored; and therefore all faith and prayer on such occasions should be exerted on this ground: "If it be most for thy glory, and the eternal good of this man's soul, let him be restored; if otherwise, Lord, pardon, purify him, and take him to thy glory." But even in the event of death, there is comfort in prayer as we are reminded of the blessedness of those who die in the Lord.

The prayer of faith also brings the assurance that we are pure before God. The Holy Spirit is faithful and will assure our hearts if we are in a right relationship with God. But, if there's sin in our lives, a prayer of repentance brings rejoicing as we experience cleansing by of the blood of Christ and the restoration of peace in our spirits. I can tell you from experience that some of the sweetest moments of fellowship I've experienced with God, have come after times of repentance and cleansing. Experiencing the unconditional love of the Father is a tremendous comfort.

The prayer of faith comforts us in our afflictions; spiritual, emotional, and physical.

The Second RESULT is,

### **Prayer Brings Strength**

In verse 16 James exhorts us to confess our faults to each other and pray for each other. Notice the condition attached to this command. "*Confess... and pray... that you may be healed.*" Can we infer from this statement that healing is dependent on our confession and prayers?

I remind you of Paul's words in I Corinthians 11:29-32. They are in the context of observing the Lord's Supper, but the principle is the same as addressed here in James. *"For he that eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. [Or, many have died] **For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.**"* Confessing our faults [our sins] to each other and praying for each other brings the strength and comfort of the brotherhood along with the blessing of the Lord. The healing can be both physical and spiritual.

I deeply appreciate the brothers and sisters God has given to me in our local congregation. I greatly enjoy and benefit from our times of worship and fellowship together. And yet I have told them, "If, in the course of a week I must miss a service, I would rather miss a Sunday service than miss our mid-week prayer meeting." Do you know why I feel that way? Because it is in this more informal time that we as brothers more freely confess our faults to each other and pray for each other. I know my brothers are praying for me and they aren't going to take my confessions and use them against me. There is great strength in united prayer.

Oh my friend, if we would only understand the tremendous potential in praying for each other. During World War II, Hitler commanded all religious groups to unite so that he could control them. Among the Brethren assemblies, half complied and half refused. Those who went along with the order had a much easier time. Those who didn't faced harsh persecution. In almost every family of those who resisted, someone died in a concentration camp.

When the war was over, feelings of bitterness ran deep between the groups. Finally they decided the situation had to be healed. Leaders from each group met at a quiet retreat. For several days, each person spent time in prayer, examining his own heart in the light of Christ's commands. Then they came together. Someone later asked a friend who was there, "What did you do then?" "We were just one," he replied. As they confessed their hostility and bitterness to God and yielded to His control, the Holy Spirit created a spirit of unity among them. Love filled their hearts and dissolved their hatred. They confessed their faults and prayed for each other, and were healed.

James caps off verse sixteen by this declaration; “*The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*” To illustrate his statement he points us to the life of Elijah. We often tend to look at the patriarchs, the prophets, and even the apostles as being some super-spiritual saints. But James reminds us that Elijah was a man who had feelings and desires just like we do.

If you read through the account of Elijah’s life, he had his ups and downs. Because of the wickedness of King Ahab, God instructed Elijah to pray earnestly that it would not rain; and it didn’t rain for three and a half years! Then, after his showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, he prayed again, and God sent rain. What a marvelous answer to prayer, what a tremendous victory for the God of heaven. But the next scene finds Elijah huddled in a cave in fear of his life because of the threats of wicked queen Jezebel. You and I can identify, can’t we?

The active, earnest, supplication of a person in right standing with God has incredible power. There is nothing that can stand against it. It’s no wonder Mary, Queen of Scotland, said of the Scottish Protestant Reformer, John Knox; “I fear [his] prayers more than an army of ten thousand men.” Prayer brings strength.

The Final RESULT is,

### **Prayer Brings Repentance**

Several times in this epistle we’re reminded of our tendency to revert to our sinful lifestyle. This issue surfaces again in the last verses of our text. James reminds us that within our hearts are desires that can easily lead us astray. He also shows how we can guard against that.

I see a connection back to verse sixteen. As we walk in unity with our brothers and sisters in the Lord, we will be able to see when one of them is getting off-track. Or they will be able to see when we are drifting. There is a need for mutual accountability. Faithful prayers and loving confrontation are a necessary part of our local congregations.

From his vantage point as a leader in the early church, James could clearly see the need Christians have to pray for each other. He said, if anyone goes astray from the path of truth, and someone comes after you, turns you around, and brings you back, be assured they have done you a great service. That one rescues a soul from death and hides a multitude of sins.

What did James mean in this last verse? So often when a person is walking away from God, they've been deceived. They've refused to acknowledge and embrace the truth and God allows them to be deceived. Deception is often a consequence of disobedience. They do not see clearly where the road they are on is taking them. And if Satan has his way, they will never see it until it's too late.

But if you are faithfully praying for them, you lovingly come along side them and say, "Brother, do you realize where the road you're on is taking you?" Through your prayers and concern God can use you to bring them to the place of repentance. What a wonderful privilege to be a tool the Holy Spirit can use to rescue a brother or sister from destruction. You may rescue them not only from spiritual death, but from physical and emotional death too. This is particularly true of sexual sins. Sexual sins have devastating spiritual, emotional and physical consequences. And they have a far-reaching impact on relationships.

Beyond that, not only is this person rescued from destruction, but a whole multitude of sins that they would have otherwise committed if they'd stayed on that path, are now covered. That is, they're not going to take place. They have repented, turned around. Now they're walking again in obedience to God's Word and finding joy and blessing in that obedience.

As we close, I quote from Adam Clarke in reference to the final verse of our text. "As one immortal soul is of more worth than all the material creation of God, every man who knows the worth of his own should labor for the salvation of others. To be the means of depriving hell of her expectation, and adding even one soul to the Church triumphant, is a matter of infinite moment; and he who is such an instrument has much reason to thank God that ever he was born. He, who lays out his accounts to do good to the souls of men, will ever have the blessing of God in his own. Besides, God will not suffer him to labor in vain, or spend his strength for naught. At first he may see little fruit; but the bread cast upon the waters shall be found after many days: and if he should never see it in this life, he may take for granted that whatsoever he has done for God, in simplicity and godly sincerity, has been less or more effectual."

My friend, the prayer of faith is a powerful tool in securing a faith that works. Let's exercise that prayer of faith right now as we recommit ourselves to faithfully living for the Lord.

Merciful, Heavenly Father, Sovereign Creator of the universe, you condescend to hear our prayers. And not only do you hear, but you answer. If we tried to list all the answers to prayer you've provided, we wouldn't have time or space to record them all; and even if we could record them all that would not be adequate praise to you.

Father, we understand that your desire is for us to be fully committed to you. And in that way, we express our appreciation and thanks as we live out that relationship in every facet of life. Now bless my friend and me as we daily exercise the prayer of faith, for Jesus' sake, Amen.