

Faith That Works: The Effectiveness of Prayer
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 65:1-8; Matthew 6:5-15; James 5:13-20

Our final Scripture reading today is from James 5:13-20. May God bless the reading of His perfect, infallible, trustworthy word. “Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.”

How connected are you? The modern world has made it so that connection through communication has never been easier. We have cell phones that travel in our pockets on which we can send videos, emails, texts, tweets, and chats around the world. Not 25 years ago, a long distance call would set you back 15 cents a minute; an international call could be a dollar a minute or more. Now, we can talk to friends in Taiwan for nothing but the cost of an internet connection. We have generational gaps now in communication – if you’re under 45, you prefer texts to phone calls 4 to 1. And if you’re older, you might use Twitter or Facebook; if you’re younger, you’re probably on SnapChat or Instagram. No matter if you’re old or young, you are available all the time, and you can communicate with others all the time.

All that communication technology doesn’t make us better connected, however. Our conversations tend to be shorter and less meaningful. We may think we’ve gotten our point across when we haven’t. And all this technology means we often forget about the people right around us. We’re not having a conversation at the dinner table because we’re texting someone at work. We’re not engaged with what the family is doing because we’re busy with a Facebook rant. And perhaps most importantly, we are losing the ability to focus on one person at a time for a meaningful period of time. All our multi-tasking comes at a cost. And the most serious loss is if we forget about the most important form of communication of all – prayer.

There is no greater thing for a Christian to do than prayer, to stay in touch with our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer and to be listening for His voice. It’s hard to hear that voice amid all the competing chatter. But this is not a new revelation. As James ends his letter, he gives us a powerful summons to pray, not only encouraging us to pray but assuring us of the effectiveness of prayer. He reminds us that our first and primary calling as Christians is to keep our communication lines with God open in all circumstances. And while it means a change in communication priorities for us, it meant the same thing for those in the ancient church too.

In the opening of this section, James says, “Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.” James covers the gambit of situations with these two phrases. *No matter what your situation, be in touch with God.* Each week, either in person or by text, I’m always asking for worship, what are your prayer requests and your praises? In general, at least in my own life, I tend to think of prayer requests first. We go to the Lord about the things that makes us worried or nervous or are in some way beyond our control. We approach God when we don’t have the answers and want His intervention.

But praise and thanksgiving is the other part of prayer. It’s recognizing all the wonderful things God has already done and the interventions He has already made. It’s taking the time to be thankful during our days. And James’ call to sing songs of praise reminds us that prayer is not just a specific set time in the morning or before bed or whenever – though having that pattern is really helpful and sets our schedules to be mindful of God throughout the day. If prayer means just heads bowed, eyes closed, then I certainly can’t pray while I’m driving! I can’t pray when I’m working. Prayer is shut out of many situations.

But if prayer is a constant attentiveness to God, singing songs of praise in the car, keeping that praise in the back of my mind while I teach my class or figure my numbers or design a new car part, it takes on new dimensions. God becomes part and parcel of our days in a meaningful way. And when troubles come and when we pray for help and deliverance, we’re much more in tune with God’s desires and not ashamed to come into His presence after a long absence.

Now we come to the area that gets tricky – the area that overwhelms most prayer times. It’s prayers regarding the sick. It’s what many of us think prayer is all about by the typical prayer list in most churches. But what James says about prayer for the sick may make us rethink how we approach this kind of prayer.

James advises that the sick “should call the elders of the church to pray over (them) and anoint (them) with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.” The Greek word here isn’t about every little condition but incapacitating illness that interferes with work and has painful and dangerous potential. Not that we can’t pray over a cold or a headache; again, if we bring everything to God, we bring those minor inconveniences too.

But the leadership of the church should be actively involved in prayer when congregants are genuinely and seriously ill. And James talks specifics – prayer over them, maybe laying hands on them, and anointing them with oil. We might think, “what does that mean?” There’s both a spiritual and physical component. Oil was commonly used in the ancient world as a cure for everything, and so there’s a medicinal aspect. There’s no sense in Scripture that we shouldn’t use the medicines God has made available to us through the natural world.

Yet oil is also a sign of God’s covering, presence, and approval. The kings of Israel were anointed for the role. When we read or recite the 23rd Psalm, we say, “You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” In 1 John 2, it says that true Christians have been anointed by God and have knowledge of Jesus through that anointing enough to reject those who misrepresent Christ.

We've anointed the sick with oil in our church services. In our modern era, knowing that it doesn't have a specific medical purpose, we do it because we're told to do so. It's not thinking that the oil is magical or has healing properties – it's trusting that God's Word is faithful and that we act in faith even when we don't understand why God asks us to do certain things. But the larger part of this is having the elders pray for the sick person. It's coming together in agreement and faith, lifting the person and their healing up to the Lord.

When we read a passage like this, though, we often wonder – why isn't everyone healed? If we focus on the “faith” aspect of the prayer, we might get the wrong idea. We might think that the prayer isn't answered because it wasn't made in enough faith.

And yet look closely at what else James says. The prayer will make the sick person well – will literally save him; the Lord will lift him up; if he has sinned he will be forgiven. There is a physical and spiritual promise made here. If it is the Lord's will, the sick person will have a full recovery. And yet, the language here is also spiritual – God will save the person who will be raised up, language reminiscent of Jesus talking about His resurrection. Their sin will be forgiven, removing the obstacle that would stand in their way of eternal life. James goes on to say, “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” Confession and prayer are meant not just for physical healing but spiritual healing.

This is why, when I pray for those going through pain and suffering, whether from sickness or some other circumstance, I pray that God would make Himself real to that person and their family and friends during that situation. It is my sincere hope that those difficulties would lead them to Christ or strengthen them in their faith. Because there is no greater tragedy than someone experiencing the healing of God physically but staying dead spiritually, without the hope found in Christ. And so we pray that the will of God might be to save them body and soul, that every part of them might be redeemed and made whole by God. For various reasons, it might not be God's will for them to experience physical healing. But we pray God's will be done first and foremost, knowing His will is always perfect.

James goes on to give an example of the power and effectiveness of a righteous person's prayer. He gives the example of Elijah, whose prayers God answered, who by answered prayer held back the rain and brought it back again. What might be most important here is James' statement that “Elijah was a man just like us.” We hear of the prophets and we think, “Wow, they did amazing things, I could never do that.” But the point is, the prophets did what they did not through their own special powers but through petitioning God to use His power in mighty ways. And God was pleased to do so.

Disney recently released a live-action remake of the film *Mulan*. It's gotten so-so reviews at best. And one of the chief complaints about the movie is that they've made Mulan into a superhero. She doesn't become skilled because she trains hard or works more than her peers. No, she's basically got chi, some mysterious mystical Chinese energy working for her. In a sense, that makes her unrelatable. Instead of any young woman being able to become like Mulan with effort and discipline, no one can be.

The same issue is at play with the prophets. If Elijah is naturally blessed by God with superhuman abilities, he's unrelatable. And if God only answers prayers from a chosen few special people He happens to like, then there's little point in us praying. But that's the thing: Elijah was just like us. He didn't have anything unique going on with God. He simply talked with God on a regular basis, long before crisis hit, and God answered His prayers.

The only thing that might, and I say might, set apart Elijah is righteousness. Earlier in his letter, James warned about the prayers of those who were self-seeking, who were asking God to fulfill their pleasures rather than seeking after the heart of God and listening for Him in prayer. Those prayers aren't answered, James says, at least not as we'd like. And this leads us to a core question that we should ask ourselves, that we should examine in our lives.

Why do we pray? James has established that in every situation, prayer is the right answer. Communicating with God is always the proper response to everything that comes at us in life, good and bad. I'll admit, the hardest thing to do for many of us is to keep that constant communication with God going. Our prayers are usually for major life events or illnesses. We sometimes feel like we're bothering God by going before Him with small things. And yet God has numbered every hair on our heads, Jesus says. The tiniest details about us matter to Him.

You might remember Jesus' warning in Matthew 7 that many will be condemned who go to God saying, "Didn't we perform mighty miracles in your name, casting out demons, prophesying?" and He will reply, "Go away, you workers of evil – I never knew you," because they didn't do God's will. The last thing we want on the last day is to know who God is but not be known by God. How do we come to know God and be known by Him? We read the Scripture, we learn, but we also pray regularly, drawing near to Him, asking Him to take charge of our lives. We approach Him daily as daughters and sons. We come to Him not because He doesn't know everything we need and desire, but because we need to learn who He is, to do His will, to be known by Him.

Our goal, then, with prayer, is ultimately to be in touch with the God who truly loves us. That's why James starts this section the way He does. If we are regularly in prayer, then coming to Him with every burden and every blessing will not seem out of place. If we approach God daily, we will be looking for His answers and expecting in faith for Him to reply. And if we are living as He commands – which we are more likely to do if we are following after Him daily – then He will be more than happy to grant us what we ask in His name, following His will.

That brings us to James' final comment, which at first might seem on a different subject but is right on target. "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins."

Not directly about what we've been talking about, right? James sometimes seems to have a form of spiritual ADHD. And yet, James encourages us to try and correct, rebuke, and steer back to the faith those who have wandered away from truth and faith. And yet it dovetails back into the concern James expressed earlier for the spiritual health of those in the congregation. Physical health matters, sure, but spiritual health is what is so incredibly important.

Don't be afraid of spiritual confrontation when a person has left the security of the faith passed down to us. Whether that's in blatant sin or getting distracted by the pleasures of the world or wandering deeply into doubt and disbelief, we want to gently steer them back to Christ. Will it always succeed as we would like? No. But the results are in God's hands. Our role is to be the means that Christ can use to bring wandering sheep back to Himself. We care about the spiritual health of others.

And how best do we care for the spiritual health of others than to pray for them? Before we confront a single soul, before we lead a single person back to the right path of Christ, prayer is the way we connect with God to do this well. Because these are His people, His sheep; He loves them far more than we ever could. Prayer brings the wayward to the throne. Through prayer, we are encouraged that we can indeed make a difference in the lives of those who are far from God. Through prayer, we are empowered for the task. Through prayer, we are reminded that we are God's own children, so that the attacks of the evil one that might come through a wanderer would not do significant damage to our faith and walk.

And when we draw people back to faith, we cover over a multitude of sins and save them from death. That's amazing, isn't it? We know it's God that does all these things, not us in our own power. And yet, when God accomplishes His purposes through us, when we are willing to let Him have His way and work out His will through us, God gives us credit! We receive a portion of the glory! We have the opportunity to participate with God in the salvation of others. What a blessing for us! And really, all it takes on our part is to stay rooted and abiding in Jesus, our source and our salvation, through prayer, and willing to reach out to make God's love known – to the unbeliever, the wayward, and the faithful alike.

Throughout James' book, we've been pointed to faith made real in action. Today, James gave us practical guidance for the healing of the sick and the restoration of those wandering from faith. James' call to constant prayer in good and bad, sickness and health, to be connected to God and seeking His will on a regular, daily basis is no less practical and no less faith in action.

James closes by reminding us that prayer, what we often take as impractical, is the most practical thing we can do. Prayer is only impractical if God isn't there, isn't listening, or doesn't intervene. But we believe that God is there, that He is listening, and that He intervenes in human history on a moment-by-moment basis. For all the work we do, it is nothing if the Lord isn't behind it and blessing it. But if we are prayerful, healing will come. Renewal will come. Forgiveness will come. May we be people of prayer, who turn to the Lord always, and rejoice when we see how our great God answers our requests and blesses us not only with great answers but also with His graceful, merciful, loving presence as that communication line of prayer stays open.