



Sermon Transcript August 29, 2021

Our Life Together Pray for One Another James 5:13-18

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on August 29, 2021 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
James 5:13-18

13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.

Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

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. 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.

Introduction

“Encourage one another” . . . “Love one another” . . . “Greet one another” . . . “Accept one another” . . . “Have fellowship with one another” . . . “Serve one another” . . . “Speak truth in love to one another” . . . “Show hospitality to one another.” These are the “one another” commands we have considered this summer. These eight “one another” commands are just a sample size of the thirty-six “one another” commands given to us in the New Testament. These “one another” commands are given to teach us how to relate to “one another” within the church. We need to *encourage one another*. We need to *serve one another*. We need to *accept one another* . . . and so on.

Hopefully, you have seen through this series that these “one another” commands are not given to us as a “to do list” for us to accomplish in our own strength and power. On paper, many of these “one another” commands seem very accessible to all of us. *“Encourage one another” . . . “Love one another” . . . “Accept one another.”* These commands are not too different than what you might find in a secular book on proper etiquette. But these commands are given to the church. And life in any church family is not always nice and neat. It is hard. At times it is difficult just to *accept one another*. So hopefully what you have seen through this sermon series is that the power to keep these commands is anchored in the gospel. We need to keep coming back to Jesus.

Paul makes a rhetorical statement in Philippians 2:1. *“So if there is any encouragement in Christ.”* He is not questioning whether or not we have any encouragement in Christ. Instead, he is affirming that there is encouragement we gain from Christ. Therefore, what do we do? We *“encourage one another.”* We *“accept one another”* because in Christ, we too have been accepted in spite of all our shortcomings. We maintain *“fellowship with one another”* because *“our fellowship is with the Father and the Son.”* Our “life together” as a church is empowered by the grace we have in Jesus.

It is with this in mind that we come to our final “one another” statement for this summer sermon series. Our final “one another” statement is the application to what James says in James 5:13-18. As you will see in a moment, the main issue James is addressing in this passage is prayer. And so James begins verse 16 with the application of everything he has to say here about prayer. Here is what he is calling us “to do” in light of what he says about prayer. He begins verse 16 with the word *“Therefore.”* It is a word that indicates that this is the conclusion of the matter. *“Therefore . . . pray for one another.”* As we consider our “life together” as a church family, one thing we are called to do is to *“pray for one another.”*

Well that sounds simple enough. *“Pray for one another.”* It is a ministry that is accessible to all of us. Even though James addresses the elders in verse 14, he widens the application to the entire church family in verse 16. As a church family, we are to *“pray for one another.”* Our church family is blessed with some really good and faithful intercessors. I tend to know who they are. They tend to show up when we gather for prayer. They also tend to be good encouragers. I often find that to be byproduct of a praying life. And yet, as simple as prayer seems to be, many in the church would confess to struggling with prayer, myself included. The message this morning is pretty basic and quite simple, *“pray for one another.”* And yet it seems to be a ministry that often eludes us.

Why is that? I am sure there are a lot of reasons why we might find prayer to be difficult. In his book, *A Praying Life*, Paul Miller suggests that one of the barriers we face with prayer is that we lose sight to the fact that there is mystery to prayer. He calls prayer a “Divine Dance.” In our western, logical minds, he says that we often want to be able to put our finger on it and prove how prayer works. When we don’t see prayer “working” the way we think it needs to work, we get discouraged. We stop praying. Why pray? Miller says, “The only way to know how prayer works is to have complete knowledge and control of the past, present, and future. In other words, you can figure out how prayer works if you are God.”¹ So if you want to enter into the “Divine Dance” of prayer, you need to surrender your desire to be in control and you need to trust God. One of the things that James makes very clear in our passage this morning it that God works through the prayers of his people. He affirms in verse 16, *“The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”* While there is mystery to how God works through our prayers, you can be sure that when God’s people pray, God is at work. And we are invited to embrace the mystery of it all.

I understand that because many of us struggle with prayer, as soon as you hear we are going to talk about this topic you can feel the guilt rise within you. I am not here to guilt you into prayer. Rather, I want to bring prayer under the bright light of the gospel and the prospect that prayer anchors us in relationship with the living God. To that end, I want to point out three things about prayer.

The Priority of Prayer: It is God

The Posture of Prayer: It is Dependence

The Power of Prayer: It Changes Me

Even as I get ready to share these thoughts with you about prayer—what it is and what it does—I submit to you once again this thought. There is mystery to prayer. And yet this Divine Dance ensures us that God is at work when we pray.

The Priority of Prayer: It is God

James begins this passage by affirming that no matter what circumstance you happen to be in, prayer should be a part of it. It is our priority. Whether things are tough or things are good, prayer is a constant part of our lives. J. C. Ryle said that this is one of the characteristics of the godly.² The godly are those who “*call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” This is what Christians do as a way of life, no matter what our circumstances happen to be. We pray. We are a praying people.

James begins in verse 13 by referring to those who are *suffering*. Is this your circumstance? “*Is anyone among you suffering?*” I am quite certain there are those who are here with us this morning who are suffering. What should we do if we are suffering? James says, “*Let him pray.*” We get this, don’t we? Our suffering often leaves us no other recourse but to cry out to God in prayer. Psalm 50:15 encourages us to cry out to God when we suffer. God says, “*Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.*” It is true that when we suffer, we often wrestle with our feelings. We can feel anxious, afraid, overwhelmed, angry or even self-pity. But we have a way to address both our problems and our feelings. James says, “*Let him pray.*”

But then James is quick to remind us that prayer is not just for when times are bad. It is also something that should be present with us when times are good. Is this your circumstance? He asks, “*Is anyone cheerful?*” In other words, are things going well for you? If so, what should you do? “*Let him sing praise.*” The word translated as *praise* is actually the Greek word for *psalm*. “*Let him sing psalms.*” Of course, psalms are nothing more than prayers that praise God for who he is and for what he has done. And so, even when things are good, prayer should be part of our normal activity.

Paul Miller observed that “American culture is probably the hardest place in the world to learn to pray.”³ There are several reasons for this. We are more inclined to “get to work” than to sit and pray. We are distracted by constant entertainment, what C. S. Lewis called “the Kingdom of Noise.” We don’t know how to be quiet and still. And furthermore, we tend to “have it so good” that we don’t always feel we need God. Miller put it this way, “Because we can do life without God, praying seems nice but unnecessary. Money can do what prayer does, and it is quicker and less time-consuming. Our trust in ourselves and in our talents makes us structurally independent of God. As a result, exhortations to pray don’t stick.”⁴ So prayer guards us from despair when we suffer and it guards us from self-sufficiency when we prosper. No matter what the circumstances are, whether good or bad, prayer is our constant way of life. We pray.

Now James brings one more circumstance to light in this passage. He asks, *“Is anyone among you sick?”* If so, what should this person do? Before we look at what James tells the sick to do, I do want to observe the repeated phrase *“among you.”* *“Is anyone among you suffering . . . Is anyone among you cheerful . . . Is anyone among you sick.”* That phrase *“Is anyone among you . . .”* informs the application James makes in verse 16, *“Therefore . . . pray for one another.”* It is not just instructing the person who is suffering to pray for himself or herself. It is not just instructing the one who is cheerful to sing praises by himself or herself. *“Among you”* has a corporate feel to it. And so we pray for each other. We rejoice with each other. And we see this clearly in the instruction given to those who are sick. They are to take their need to the church. This is how we care for each other. We pray for one another.

“Is anyone among you sick?” If so, what should he or she do? *“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.”* By calling the elders, the assumption is that the person is seriously ill and the elders will know how to communicate this need to the congregation so that the congregation can also pray for the one in need. It is not uncommon for us to pray for the sick. Often our weekly prayer sheet lists those who are sick and in need of prayer. But there have been times we have been asked to come and prayer over a person and anoint them with oil, just as James calls us to do. There is nothing medicinal or magical about the oil. Kent Hughes reminds us that in the Bible when someone is anointed with oil, they are set apart or consecrated for some kind of service. Here the oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit and *“applying the oil to the sick is a rich symbolic act—setting the sick apart to be ministered to in a special way by the Holy Spirit.”*⁵ But once again, it is another occasion for the church to pray.

Are you suffering? Pray! Are you cheerful? Pray! Are you sick? Pray!

What this implies is that God is with you in all these circumstances. I think one of the struggles we have with prayer is that we make prayer the focus of our prayer. Praying becomes about saying our prayers. But the focus of prayer is not prayer. The focus of prayer is relationship with God. Jesus makes a wonderful invitation in Revelation 3:20. *“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him, and he with me.”* What if we saw prayer to be more like the dinner table, the place where we are sharing the activity of our days because as a family we are in relationship. At the table we tend to share the good and bad things of the day. The focus around the table is not the conversation. The focus is the relationship. Prayer is the vehicle for relationship with God. Prayer is not the

priority here. God is! Prayer is not a means to an end. It is an end unto itself. It is sharing our life and its varied circumstances with God. So this is what we do. We pray.

The Posture of Prayer: It is Dependence

There are two statements in this passage that shape our posture when we pray. In verse 15, James talks about “*the prayer of faith.*” In verse 16, he mentions “*the prayer of a righteous person.*” These two statements help us understand the posture we take when we pray. It is a posture of dependence.

So first of all, James says that when the elders pray over the sick that “*the prayer of faith will save this one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up.*” So right away we are faced with a challenge to our understanding of this passage. At face value, it may seem to indicate that if the *prayer of faith* is offered then the person being prayed for will be healed. But we also know reality and we all know people we have prayed that God would heal and they have not been healed. So what is this *prayer of faith*?

There are some who teach that healing is tied to the amount of faith a person has when they pray. The dangerous implication in all of this is that if you are not healed then you didn’t have enough faith. The other danger in this way of thinking is that the power for healing rests in the person and not God. That is not what is meant by the *prayer of faith*. Here is where we are faced with the mystery of prayer.

In James 4:2-3, James identifies two dangers when it comes to prayer. The first danger is to not believe in the power of prayer and so you simply don’t pray. He says, “*You do not have, because you do not ask.*” So when the elders come to pray over a person who is sick, they pray the *prayer of faith* when with childlike faith they ask God to heal this person. It is faith that recognizes that God has the power to heal and so we pray to that end. Could it be that we don’t see God heal because we don’t ask God to heal?

But then James identifies another danger with prayer. He says in James 4:3, “*You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*” We don’t always know what God wants in a situation and when we demand that God does something—thinking that is a display of faith—we are not surrendered to God. So part of the *prayer of faith* is trusting the will of God. Hence the mystery of prayer.

I have shared this statement with several people this summer and I really think it describes the *prayer of faith*. “If God is sovereign, then he is in control of all the details

of my life. If he is loving, then he is going to be shaping the details of my life for my good. If he is all-wise, then he is not going to do everything I want because I don't know what I need. If he is patient, then he is going to take time to do all this."⁶ I think this invites the elders—and you and me—to come boldly to God with our prayers. He delights when we express how helpless we are in ourselves and how we are turning to him with childlike faith. We depend on the sovereign, loving, all-wise and patient God to work his purposes in us for his glory. The *prayer of faith* is a posture of dependence.

I think it is the same thing with *the prayer of the righteous person*. James says in verse 16, "*The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*" The question I have been asking this week is who is *the righteous person*. Again, on face value, it feels like James is talking about the super-spiritual person—the one who has their spiritual act together. That is the one, we might think, who prays with power. Scripture does indicate that our sin can hinder our prayers. 1 Peter 3 tells me that if I mistreat my wife it hinders my prayers. But then I like how James closes with the illustration of Elijah, the Old Testament prophet. James is quick to remind us that Elijah *was a man with a nature like ours*. That is one way of saying that Elijah's prayers weren't effectual because he was a spiritual giant. Instead, he was a regular person like you and me.

Have you noticed in this passage how the confession of sin is coupled with prayer? It is implied that the person asking for the elders to pray over him is also encouraged to confess their sin. It says in verse 15, "*And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.*" And then, the concluding application of this passage is not just an invitation to *pray for one another*. Look what it says in verse 16, "*Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed.*" This gets to the heart of who James is referring to when he says, "*The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*" It is not the person who is trying to be spiritual. It is not the person who seems to have it all together. It is the person who comes to God with their spiritual mask completely off and they come in their own mess. It is the invitation of Jesus. "*Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.*" The mature Christian—the *righteous person*—is the person who sees more and more of their sin, and consequently, they see more and more of their need for Jesus.

When the two men came to pray at the altar, the one man beat his chest and said, "God have mercy on me a sinner." The other man, looked at the guy next to him and said, "Thank God I am not like him." Jesus asked: which one do you think went home forgiven? Which one do you think prayed with power? Which one is the *righteous person* who has great power in his prayers? It is the one who is humble, honest, helpless

and completely dependent on Jesus.

Edith Schaeffer was the wife of a well known evangelist and philosopher, Francis Schaeffer. She was once asked, “Who is the greatest Christian woman alive today?” She said, “We don’t know her name. She is dying of cancer in a hospital somewhere in India.” What makes her a great woman of faith? She is helpless. Paul Miller writes, “She is weak. She can feel her restless heart, her tendency to compare herself with others. She is shocked at how jealousy can well up in her. She notices how easily the world gets its hooks into her. In short, she distrusts herself. When she looks at other people, she sees the same struggles. The world, the flesh and the Devil are too much for her. The result? Her heart cries out to God in prayer. She needs Jesus.”⁷ This, I would suggest to you, is the mark of the *righteous person* who is effectual in their prayers. It is the person who knows they need Jesus and so they have a posture of dependence.

When we went through our elder training, this is the first responsibility we looked at. And we called it “Dependence.” “As elders, we have a collective commitment to seek the Lord through extraordinary prayer and to lead the church to become a house of prayer through our example.” That dependence is rooted in the fact that we believe God answers prayer and God heals and so with the prayer of faith, we ask God to do the miraculous. But we also trust God and his purposes. That is the *prayer of faith*. But we don’t believe we have an inside track to God because we are elders. Instead, we come humbly, fully aware of our need for Jesus. We come confessing our sin and our helplessness. We come just like you, knowing that our Father loves to answer the prayers of his children. “*The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*” (By the way—every third Thursday of the month the elders are gathering to pray and it is open to anyone who would like to join us. We will make sure to bring the oil and we will be happy to pray over anyone in need of prayer.)

The Power of Prayer: It Changes Me

James ends this passage with a testimony to the power of prayer. He refers to the story of the Old Testament prophet Elijah. James writes, “*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. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.*”

Now this is fascinating. Again, this example James uses speaks to the mystery of prayer. If you go back to 1 Kings 17-18 and read the story of Elijah, you discover that the

decision to not send rain for over three years and then after that time period to send rain originated with God. When Elijah announces to King Ahab that it is not going to rain for several years he anchors this news in God. He says, “*AS the LORD the God of Israel lives . . .*” In other words, this news comes from God. In fact in the next verse it says, “*And the word of the LORD came to him.*” And then when it was time to send the rain, God said to Elijah, “*Go show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth.*” Clearly God is the one who is sovereignly at work.

And yet, when it comes time for God to send rain, Elijah is on the top of Mount Carmel and it says that “*he bowed himself on the earth and put his face between his knees.*” Then he went to see what was happening. Nothing! Seven times he did this and after the seventh time he saw a small cloud rising over the sea. Here is the mystery. God was using Elijah’s prayer to accomplish the purposes of God. James tells us that Elijah prayed *fervently* and those prayers contributed to what God was doing.

Praying the prayer and promises of Scripture is one of the most important ways we can pray. When you make a prayer list, include Scripture in your prayers. We know that God wants people to come to him. We know that God has chosen the church to be his presence in this world. We know that we are to *encourage one another* . . . “*love one another*” . . . “*greet one another*” . . . “*accept one another*” . . . “*have fellowship with one another*” . . . “*serve one another*” . . . “*speak truth in love to one another*” . . . “*show hospitality to one another . . . confess our sins to one another and pray for one another.*” But how does God accomplish these things in us? The power of prayer plays a big part in the accomplishment of God’s work in us.

I have come to believe, in all of this, the power of prayer is seen in how it changes me. Often we approach prayer with a desire to “change God.” We are often appealing to God to fix something or make something better or remove some hardship. But as I turn to God in prayer, what I discover is that God is changing me. That is the power of prayer.

Conclusion

There is a mystery to this Divine Dance called prayer. But instead of trying to figure it all out, I would recommend that . . . you pray. That is what we do.

No matter what your circumstance happens to be . . . pray! Build a prayer list and *pray for one another*. Pray the *prayer of faith* and the *prayer of the righteous* . . . a posture of

dependence. Watch God work through your prayers in the lives of people. Keep track of answered prayer. You will be amazed at how God uses your prayer. That is the point of this passage. When a man works, a man works. But when a man prays, God works.”

Is anyone among us suffering?
Is anyone among us cheerful?
Is anyone among us sick?

To each of these questions the answer is “yes.” And so, we pray for one another.

¹Paul E. Miller *A Praying Life* (NavPress, 2017) 112

²J.C. Ryle *A Call to Prayer* (Laurel: Audubon Press) 5

³Miller, 3

⁴Ibid., 3

⁵Kent Hughes *James: Faith that Works* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991) 256

⁶Miller, 9

⁷Ibid., 43-44

