

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JAMES

PRAYING THE PRAYER OF FAITH II

Read James 5:16-20

Introduction

Over the course of this brief letter, James has discussed key themes to help Christians mature in the faith:

- Standing firm during trials and temptations,
- Living out the Christian faith in practical ways rather than just studying or hearing it,
- Loving selflessly,
- Taming the tongue,
- Humbling oneself before God,
- Trusting in God rather than in wealth, and
- Exercising patience.

He concludes these traits of a disciple with a call to praying with faith.

Each circumstance of life is a time to pray - trouble, happiness, and sickness -- all are an occasion for prayer and worship (James 5:13). James spends most of his time, however, discussing prayer in time of physical infirmity. How does one pray when it is difficult to pray for oneself?

We continue with this topic of “Praying the Prayer of Faith” from where we stopped at our last lesson. James brings us into what we should expect when the righteous prays:

The Power of Confession

“Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed...” (v16a)

James reminds us that mutual confession and prayer brings healing, both physically and spiritually. Confession can free us from the heavy burdens (physically and spiritually) of unresolved sin and removes hindrances to the work of the Holy Spirit. Confession to another in the body of Christ is essential because sin will demand to have us to itself, isolated from all others. Confession breaks the power of secret sin. Yet, confession need not be made to a “priest” or any imagined mediator; we simply confess to one another as appropriate. Confession is good but must be made with discretion. An unwise confession of sin can be the cause of more sin.

Noting from the context, sin should especially be confessed where physical healing is necessary. It is possible — though by no means always the case — that a person’s sickness is the direct result of some sin that has not been dealt with, as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 11:30.

Real, deep, genuine confession of sin has been a feature of every genuine awakening or revival in the past 250 years. But it isn’t anything new, as demonstrated by the revival in Ephesus recorded in Acts 19:17-20. It says, many who believed came confessing and telling their deeds. This was Christians getting right with God, and open confession was part of it.

Prayer of a Righteous Man

“The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.” (vv16b-18)

In writing about the need for prayer for the suffering, for the sick, and for the sinning, James points to the effective nature of prayer — when it is fervent and offered by a righteous man. The idea of fervent in this context is strong.

Much of our prayer is not effective simply because it is not fervent. It is offered with a lukewarm attitude that virtually asks God to care about something that we care little about. Effective prayer must be fervent, not because we must emotionally persuade a reluctant God, but because we must gain God's heart by being fervent for the things He is fervent for.

Additionally, effective prayer is offered by a righteous man. This is someone who recognizes the grounds of his righteousness reside in Jesus, and whose personal walk is generally consistent with the righteousness that he has in Jesus.

Elijah as an Example

Elijah is a model of earnest prayer that was answered by God. His effectiveness in prayer extended even to the weather! Yet this shows that Elijah's heart was in tune with God's. He prayed for the rain to stop and start only because he sensed it was in the heart of God in His dealings with Israel.

However, James has just opened the door for all Christian believers to be involved in this ministry of confession and prayer for healing – both spiritual and physical. It is as if James can feel your reluctance, as if you were saying, "I'm not spiritual enough to do that. My prayers aren't anything special." So, James draws your attention to the prophet Elijah who spoke a word that caused a three-year drought, and spoke another word that ended it.

Wow! Powerful! I could never do that. He must be a great man of God.

Elijah is a great man of God. He does courageous and powerful exploits for God. But at other times he is weak and paranoid and fearful and self-important. After he has slain the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), he flees Jezebel's wrath. He runs for his life into the desert and lies down under a broom tree, physically, emotionally, and spiritually spent. "I have had enough, Lord," he says, "Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors" (1 Kings 19).

Does that sound familiar? It gets worse.

He runs some more until he comes to Mount Sinai (Horeb). When he gets there, God asks him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah answers with whining and excuses, the kind you wouldn't accept from your own children:

"I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life." (1 Kings 19:10)

I've caught myself whining to God like that. "Lord, I've sacrificed and done this and that, and who appreciates it? No one! Blah, blah, blah." You know the drill. You've probably said it yourself!

God just listens, and then speaks to Elijah in a still small voice, gives him three tasks to do, and says, "By the way, Elijah. There are still 7,000 who haven't worshipped Baal. You're not the only one, after all."

Elijah the great man of God isn't such a great man after all. So why does James mention him? Because we can identify with Elijah's weaknesses...

As James puts it in verse 17, "Elijah was a man just like us" (NIV) or "Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are" (KJV). The Greek word is *homoioopathēs*, from two words *homoios*, "like, similar, resembling" and *paschō*, "to feel, undergo, be affected." This compound word means "pertaining to experiencing similarity in feelings or circumstances, with the same nature."

James' point is this: if God heard Elijah's prayers, as much a failure as he sometimes was, he will hear your prayers, too.

Verse 16c has a wonderful rhythm in the KJV: "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." Other translations are a bit more down to earth: "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (NIV, NRSV).

Our problem is that we don't believe this. We think that God is a respecter of persons. God hears the prayer of Other People, more Perfect People than I. The truth is that God looks for faith, and where he finds it he can do powerful things. He can forgive your sins. He can forget about your weaknesses. He seeks your faith, your bold faith, for when you offer that to Him, he can use you far beyond your own capacity. Don't forget this truth: "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."

Bring Back Wandering Brothers and Sisters

"Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins."
(vv19-20)

James closes his letter with an encouragement for Christians to bring back their brothers and sisters who have wandered from the faith. Having introduced the topics of sin and confession, James reminds us of the need to confront those who have wandered from the truth. Wanders from the truth is a good picture. Most people don't wander deliberately — it just sort of happens. Nonetheless, it still gets them off track and possibly in danger.

He is also talking about prayer. He wants us to pray earnestly, not only for Christian believers who are sick and confess their sins, but also for those who have wandered from the truth and are still out there wandering.

And someone turns him back

This shows us that God uses human instruments in turning sinners back from the errors of their ways. God does not need to use such human instruments, and sometimes He does not. The Apostle Paul — or rather, Saul of Tarsus — was not converted through any human instrument, save perhaps the prayers of the dying martyr Stephen for him. Yet no one preached to him, but Jesus decided to meet him directly.

One reason God uses human instruments is because it brings Him more glory than if He were to do His work by Himself. In this way God is like a skilled workman who makes incredible things using the worst of tools. After the same pattern, God uses earthen vessels to be containers of His glory. Along this line, can we not say that when we refuse to make ourselves available to God's service — weak and failing as we are — we in fact rob Him of some of His glory? He can glorify Himself through a weak vessel like you; you should let Him do it.

There is a blessing for the one who loves his brother enough to confront him, and who turns him from the error of his way. He has saved that soul from death and covered a multitude of sins. James concludes with this because this is exactly what he has endeavoured to do through this challenging letter — to

confront those who have wandered from a living faith, endeavouring to save their souls from death, by demanding that they not only hear the word, but do it, because a living faith will have its proof.

Conclusion

As James mentions wandering believers, my thoughts go to what Jesus says about wandering sheep. He tells a parable:

"What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." (Matthew 18:12-14)

I can picture in my mind's eye Jesus the Good Shepherd out after dark, scouring the hills for that one sheep that is missing. He searches on one hill, and then in the valley behind the hill. Always looking, gently calling the sheep by name -- yes, shepherds knew each of their sheep by name. He searches relentlessly, and he calls again and again, and he doesn't give up until late into the night he finds that wandering sheep. And when he does, he is happy. He lifts that sheep over his shoulders and brings him back to the campfire and the sheepfold with joy and rejoicing and invites the other shepherds to join him in a little celebration.

If you have a Christian friend who is wandering, then Jesus is your example of unremitting love. If you are the wandering sheep yourself, then remember that Jesus is still seeking you out. He is gently calling your name. He so much wants to bring you home. He wants so much to save your soul from death. He has died to cover your multitude of sins.

Won't you come home?

Won't you come home? He's still searching -- for you!