



The Truth about Prayer

James 5:13-18

As James closes his letter to the church scattered by persecution throughout the Roman Empire, he urges his brothers and sisters in Christ to respond in prayer to their life situation. There's a better alternative to escaping your trials than the power of money or the power of material possessions or the power of slandering or the power of vengeance. There's the power of prayer! James says that believers are strengthened and matured as they endure trials. He says that they can endure their trials through prayer. And then he says that their prayer life is made more powerful through righteous living! So then, pray!

There is never a bad time to pray! (v. 13)

James 5:18 says that God wants his people to pray in blissful, happy situations as well as when they are grounded by sickness. Prayer isn't to be thought of as a psychological coping mechanism to help us get through the day. Prayer is communion with our heavenly Father. Prayer is an act of love to the sovereign Creator of the universe. Where you do you see yourself on this spectrum?

Prayer as:

Using God -----Loving God

Christian Philosopher Peter Kreeft wrote:

Praying keeps your soul alive because prayer is real contact with God, and God is the life of the soul as the soul is the life of the body. If you do not pray, your soul will wither and die, just as, if you do not eat; your body will wither and die. . . . Nothing but prayer can make saints because nothing but God can make saints, and we meet God in prayer. Prayer is the hospital for the soul where we meet Doctor God.

Sometimes we're so sick that we need help in prayer. (vv. 14-15)

14Is 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.

Prayer is one of the fundamental responsibilities of local church elders. Prayer by the elders over the sick or weak enforces the community of God's people. It means that we're not going

to ignore or marginalize those who are frail and fragile. We're going to bring them in and shelter them with love and grace and prayer. James asserts that as the elders have the responsibility to pray; the congregation has the responsibility to ask! Elders can't read minds! They are not all-knowing. If you need the elders to pray *for* you and *over* you, you must ask!

The anointing with oil accompanies prayer with elders. The oil (most likely olive oil) is not some magic ingredient; it is a symbol, placed on the forehead of the sick, which signifies the presence of the Holy Spirit as this brother or sister in Christ is set apart for God's care. It is not a last rites procedure for death; it is for the living! Just as the waters of baptism signify the washing away of sin; just as the loaf and the cup of the Lord's Supper signify the body and blood of Christ; so the anointing of oil signifies the person being "set apart for God's special attention in prayers" (Moo 2000, 240).

15And 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. James seems so absolute in this verse. "At first glance James has such an unbounded confidence in the power of prayer that nothing seems impossible—and nothing is denied. The request for physical recovery and reinstatement in v. 15 looks to be granted in such an unequivocal way that the results are automatic and inevitable." (Martin) And if you simply wrenched that verse out of the context of James and the entire Bible, you'd come to that conclusion. But we can't do that. The prayer of faith in James 5:15 is in fact the prayer of faith that Jesus teaches in Matthew 7:11, *"If you then, though you are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!"* The prayer of faith is this: "Ask and if it's good, God will give it!" James has already mentioned in James 1:17 that "every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights." In James 4:15, he has already urged believers with these words, *"If it is the Lord's will"* The only reason why God doesn't answer your prayers . . . is that He loves you! But, you say, "How could praying for cancer's cure not be good?" I don't know and this perplexes me. But is it possible that our omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God has reasons that I can't possibly understand? And am I willing to trust Him anyway?

Powerful things can happen when righteous people pray! (vv. 16-18)

Some struggle with this: people closer to God have more prayers answered. I believe that, not just because it is in the Bible, but from experience with the folks in the church who are devoted and who pray and who are known for God hearing their prayers. There's no one-to-one correlation, and that's the hitch: godly people have unanswered prayers and some scoundrels have their prayers answered. But the point for James is clear: if you want God to hear your prayer for healing and forgiveness, then (1) you will have to trust God and (2) you will have to have a heart turned toward God. I don't think he's offering magical solutions or inevitable formulae. (Scot McKnight)

"To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."—Karl Barth

"The purest form of love is given with no expectation of return. Measured by this standard, earnest prayer for others is a magnificent act of love."—David Hubbard

If the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective, don't I now have an encouraging reason to live righteously? Not in order to earn my way to heaven; and not in order to merit the admiration of a watching world. Rather, for the sole purpose of having my prayers—lifted to the throne of God on behalf of others in the name of Christ for his glory and their good—render explosive effects.