I guess I thought I was Joe Spiritual or something. I guess I thought God had appointed me the corrector of my friend. I was a student at the university and a little too impressed with my own righteousness. And while I don’t even remember what it was about, I went to my best friend in college and tried to straighten him out about something. And his humble response put me in the place I should have been all the time: “Don’t criticize me, Mac,” he said, “pray for me.”

“Pray for me.” We say it. We hear it. We do it. It’s a critical part of being Christian and being church. It’s one of the ways we love one another.

I invite you to open your Bible to James 5:13-18. Today we pull our Volkswagon Van into the carport and finish our journey we’ve called The Summer of Love. We’ve had a great summer exploring God’s love for us, God’s love for the world, and how God wants us to love one another. And we finish things up with one more “one another” text—a text we find in James. During July, we’ve heard the Bible’s call to “bear with one another in love,” to “encourage one another,” “serve one another,” and “forgive one another.” In his very practical handbook for Christian living, James concludes with the encouragement for the church to “pray for one another.” Hear the word of the Lord through James … (read the text).

I

Wring out this text, and you end up with a bucketful of prayer. Alec Motyer points out that in these few verses we read about the praying individual (v. 13), praying elders (vv. 14-15), praying friends (v. 16a), and a praying prophet (v. 16b-18).¹ Prayer, prayer, and more prayer.

James reminds us that God is a God for all of life’s seasons so prayer is always appropriate. If you’re “suffering”—and that’s a word that means all kinds of suffering—pray. If you’re “cheerful,” praise. If you’re sick, call on the elders of the church so they can pray over you. Prayers of faith can lead to

healing for the sick, and if the sickness was caused by sin, prayer can lead to forgiveness too. Pray about anything and everything. Prayer helps us get right with God. Prayer helps us get right with each other. No wonder James calls us to “pray for one another.” Do that, writes James, and you just may be healed—healed from the wide array of troubles that put you in the need of prayer in the first place. Prayer really matters. “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” And Elijah, “a man with a nature like ours,” is an excellent example of that.

These are rich verses of Scripture. If you put on your miner’s hat, grab your pick, and dig into this text, once you hit the main shaft, you’ll discover that off that shaft are three or four tunnels you could explore to your heart’s content. But since prayer is the main shaft, we’re going to focus our attention on James’ call that we “pray for one another.”

We certainly believe in doing that at First Baptist Church. We maintain a lengthy prayer list. Many Sundays during the month we have people in our prayer room praying for you during this worship service. We pray for one another on Wednesday nights. We take requests and pray for one another in Sunday School classes and group meetings. Some classes even have prayer chains that spring into action with a simple phone call. And we’ll pray about most anything. On our prayer lists you’ll find the names of people in all kinds of trouble—sickness, spiritual lostness, marriage troubles, kid troubles, financial troubles, parent troubles, grief, uncertainty in the face of major decisions, families with new babies, people in life’s transitions, missionaries on foreign fields, people grieving the death of loved ones, soldiers on the battlefield, people looking for jobs, couples hoping for children, and on and on we could go. James shows us that God is a God for all seasons of life, so we’re not bashful to pray to Him about most anything.

II

And there is plenty of motivation to pray for others.

I suppose we pray for others, in part, because we’ve seen that it makes a difference. We’ve prayed and we’ve seen some answers: sick people get well, lost people get saved, married couples stick together, broken lives are made whole, suffering people find hope and peace and endurance in the midst of trials that never seem to go away. We’d be less than honest to say that every
prayer we pray for others gets answered just the way we pray it. But we see some answers—at least we see enough to keep us praying and hoping and waiting on God. We see enough answers to pray with at least some small measure of faith that God hears and God cares and God sees the big picture and God acts in ways that are wise and best. And when God doesn’t act—at least in the way we think He should—we trust Him in faith that He has reasons we can’t see and maybe wouldn’t understand. As James says it’s “the prayer of faith.” We pray for others because it makes a difference.

And we pray for others because we love them. As Richard Foster put it, “If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer. Intercession is a way of loving others.” Like every other “one another” text in the New Testament, praying for one another is rooted in loving one another. When you love others you want to serve them, you want to encourage them, to honor them, to accept them. When you love others you want to pray for them. It’s easy, isn’t it, when people are sharing prayer requests to be unmoved by a request for someone you don’t know from Adam or Eve—“Would you please pray for my cousin’s neighbor in California who has breast cancer?” You certainly want God to heal the woman, but chances are, you’ll forget about that woman an hour later. You don’t know her name. You don’t know her. You don’t know the cousin of the person who made the request. You see no face. You feel no connection. But if someone requests prayer for someone you know, you won’t so quickly forget. You’ll feel compelled to pray because you know this person, you love this person. Augustine wrote that “prayer is to intercede for the well-being of others before God.” When you love someone you long for their well-being, you pray for their well-being. So we pray for others because we love them.

“Pray for one another,” writes James.

III

You can do this. And here are some things that might help you pray for others.

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3Ibid, 201.
The first thing to remember is that **there's really no right way to do it**. Jack and Lucy went to a revival and listened to the preacher. After a while the preacher asked anyone with needs to be prayed over to come meet him at the altar. Jack got in line, and when it was his turn, the preacher asked: "Jack, what do you want me to pray about for you."

Jack replied, "Preacher, I need you to pray for my hearing." So the preacher put one finger in Jack's ear, and he placed his other hand on top of Jack's head and prayed fervently for his hearing. After a few minutes, the preacher removed his hands, stood back and asked, "Jack, how is your hearing now?"

Jack said, "I don't know, Preacher, it ain't till next Wednesday!"

It is good to know the need for which you're praying—though not absolutely necessary because God knows. So begin by just talking to God about your friend however your heart moves you. Leith Anderson offers a helpful comparison. Ask any parent about the “right way” for a child to phone home and you’ll receive a blank stare. Parents who love their children know there is no “right” way. Day or night, long or short—they're just glad to get a call. And their calls are welcome whether they have nothing much to say or are facing a major crisis. It’s okay to call home to share news, cry about a problem, seek some advice, talk about a needy friend—anything.

The same thing goes for intercession. God wants to hear from you about the concerns of the people you love. There’s no right way to do it—no particular formula you have to recite, no magic words you have to say. Just talk to God however your heart moves you—if you're in anguish, cry out; if you feel joy, sing; if confused, ask a lot of questions; or in an effort to reason with God, hash it out. And then let God shape your heart about how to pray for your friend. Don’t look for some silver bullet in intercession that guarantees better or faster results. There really is no right way to intercede. After all, prayer doesn’t work; God works. So just get the conversation going with God however your heart moves you. That’s the first thing to remember.

Now here’s a second thing. We pray more wisely for others **when we try to see our needy friend from God’s perspective**—when we try to let God shape our heart concerning our friend or loved one. We’re so quick to pray for

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relief for those we love. But maybe, just maybe, God is using a hard circumstance in our loved one’s life to draw him closer to God and to answer deeper prayers than we would dare to pray. Quick relief from the need may move our loved one away from God rather than toward God. And no matter what need our loved one may have, he needs God more than anything else.

In her book *Just Give Me Jesus*, Anne Graham Lotz (daughter of Ruth and Billy Graham) wrote about her recent troubles. Her husband’s dental office burned to the ground. All three of her children got married within eight months of each other. Her son was diagnosed with cancer and underwent surgery and radiation. Lotz published two books and kept a busy schedule of speaking engagements. And she also offered care to her aging parents and all their health problems. Her mom was in the hospital five times in ten months. And this is what she wrote in response to all of that:

> My duties and responsibilities at times seem overwhelming and my schedule is overfilled. But I don’t want a vacation, I don’t want to quit, I don’t want sympathy, I don’t want money, I don’t want recognition, I don’t want to escape, I don’t even want a miracle! Just give me Jesus.\(^5\)

That’s the main thing to pray for when we pray for our needy friends and loved ones. Our inclination is to pray for relief or quick and easy answers, but our heart’s cry must be even deeper than that. The Bible tells us that Jesus “is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us” (Rom. 8:34). And we know something of how Jesus prays: “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.” And, “I wish you would relieve me of this burden, but not my will, Father, your will be done.” We intercede most wisely when we seek God’s perspective on our friend’s situation and pray as best we understand it—trusting that however God answers, our needy friend will meet God and discover God’s will in her situation. And that will be enough because the will of God is good, pleasing, and perfect (Rom. 12:2). That’s a second thing.

Now here’s a third. Some people find it helpful to make a list. That certainly helps us remember to pray for the people we say we’ll pray for. How many times have you told someone you’d pray for her, and then walk away and never think about her until you see her again? That happens. Making a list can help keep the needs of our friends before us and help us keep the needs of

our friends before God. A prayer list is also helpful in another way. If you list the needs of your friends you can also mark when God answers that prayer. And you'll be surprised that God often answers the prayers of our hearts for our friends in ways we'd have never imagined. Some of you will find it very helpful to keep a list. That's the third thing.

Now here's a fourth thing you can do to “pray for one another.” You can pray for people as God brings them to your mind. Intercession need not be confined to a quiet time at some particular point in the day. I do a lot of my intercession on the go. Sometimes God just puts a person on my heart. I always take that as a cue to pray for that person whether God does this at 2 in the morning or 2 in the afternoon. Sometimes God puts persons on my mind in other ways. As I pass by the house or business of persons I know, I often offer a prayer in their behalf. When I see people who have needs, I offer a prayer right there on the spot in the quietness of my heart—whether I know the person or not. It might be somebody in the fifth pew, center section on a Sunday morning. It might be a homeless person walking down the street pushing a shopping cart. It might be a person eating alone a couple of tables over at the restaurant. It might be at the sound of a siren that breath a prayer for whoever is on the end of that trip and for those who'll be dealing with it. I pray for people I know and for people I don't know. I may pray briefly or take more time.

This attitude helps keep me in a praying mode. It helps keep me conscious of God and others. It keeps me from becoming too absorbed in myself and my own little world. I just bring the person before God. If I know the need, I pray about it. If I don't I just commend him or her to the Father for His blessing and His mercy in their lives. I pray Jesus over their lives. Call them shotgun prayers, flash prayers, or prayers on the run, but God hears them, and God considers them as He suits an answer to the person's need. And such prayers have the equal effect of drawing me closer to God as well. Pray for people as God puts them on your mind. That's a fourth thing.

And now the fifth: if you want to pray effectively for others, nurture a strong relationship with God. Look again at the end of v. 16: “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” A righteous person. Not a perfect person—a righteous person. A person who as best she can seeks to live in right relationship with God and others. A person who seeks to live right and do right. And all that begins with a strong relationship with God. James uses Elijah as an example of a righteous man. He tells us that Elijah “was a man
with a nature like ours”—a man of like passions and temptations. He was not lifted above the fray of human life. He had to wrestle with the same things with which we wrestle. He had his successes. He had his failures. He had his sins. But Elijah nurtured a strong relationship with God—talking with God, listening to God, submissive to God.

All the effective intercessors in history have had a strong relationship with God—Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Jesus, Paul. And the people I know today who are effective intercessors also nurture a strong relationship with God. They may not be the brightest bulbs in the lamp. They may not be the smoothest talkers in the world. They may not even be visible leaders in the church. But they know God, and they talk with Him and reason with Him and wrestle with Him and lay out the concerns of their loved ones before Him. They state their minds in prayer, but are content to settle for God’s answer whether it is exactly what they want or not. All the prayers offered in behalf of others are helpful. God hears them all. But James is pretty clear here that the most effective prayers come from those who know God best and live God’s way. Isn’t it always easier to get help from a friend than a stranger? Be a friend with God. Relationship with God is the key to our best praying for one another.

Let me give you an example from our own congregation. Those of you who have been here a while will remember Carroll and Eulon Wood—an older couple in the church some years ago, a delightful couple, a couple that walked with God. I admired Eulon’s walk with God. We talk about being on a first-name basis with people. Eulon was on a first-name basis with God. That was her walk, her relationship with the Father. Her husband Carroll had been sick for some time. He had developed a great deal of pain. And against Eulon’s wishes, hopes, and prayers, Carroll had to move to a nursing home. But he wasn’t there for long. After an exceptionally bad day, Eulon went home and talked to the Lord about Carroll. She told me about it when I met them at the nursing home that night. This is what she prayed: “Lord, you just don’t know how it is.” And then she stopped. She said the Lord corrected her. “Oh yes you do, Lord. You had a son. You know. I’ve talked to you a lot about Carroll. How much I hate to see him suffer! He’s a good man, Lord. I’ve decided I’m not going to pray about it anymore. You know our needs and I’ve talked about it with you so much I feel like I’m bothering you. Just do what you think’s best.” And about two minutes later she got the phone call to tell her Carroll just died.

That is effective intercession. Not so much because God answered the prayer the way He answered it, but because of the spirit of the prayer. Eulon
and God—two people who walked and talked together a lot over eighty-some years, talking like the friends they are, and in God’s mercy and kindness He answered. Sure, Eulon would have preferred healing. We all would have preferred to have Carroll well. But God is God and He decided it was time for Carroll to come home to heaven. And in spite of her grief, that decision was okay with Eulon too. Carroll was relieved of his suffering and healed completely. “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

IV

So let’s pray for one another. It’s a gift we need as much as anything else. My mother was a letter writer. Because of her disability, she had to type them, and she typed a lot of them. From the time I left for college until sickness and dementia took hold of her life a few years before her death, she was pretty good about writing letters. Usually she would write one letter that she could mail to my two brothers and their families as well as to my own. And they were fairly typical letters really: a little bit about the weather, a little bit about the traffic, a little bit about her job, a little bit of scolding—“I haven’t heard from anybody in a long time, and I better hear something soon.” Pretty typical letters. But one thing about her letters always stood out to me. In every letter I received from her since my college days so long ago, she concluded by writing: “You are always in my prayers.” And when my mother wrote that, it was no idle statement, no trite cliché, no phrase written down on paper and quickly forgotten. When my mother wrote, “You are always in my prayers,” she meant it. And that can be a very encouraging thing.

And it’s something Christians do. “So pray for one another,” writes James. Your prayers make a difference. Your prayers deepen bonds of love. And God who knows us best and loves us most will hear and answer our prayers in ways that are best for everyone involved. Pray for one another, brothers and sisters. Pray for one another.

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