

## A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF JAMES

### LESSON # 12

#### “THE POWER OF EFFECTIVE PRAYER”

##### JAMES 5:13-20

Prayer is one of the necessities of the Christian life. The word of God challenges the believer with the promise found in Jeremiah 33:3, “Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know.’ Yet we do not pray as we should. Why is that?

Perhaps Bill Hybels identifies our problem when he says in his book. *“Too Busy Not To Pray”* *“To people in the fast lane, determined to make it on their own, prayer is an embarrassing interruption. Prayer is alien to our proud human nature.”* [Bill Hybels. *Too Busy Not To Pray*. P. ]

One of the strongest passages on prayer in all of the New Testament is found in our text today James 5:13-18. In our previous lesson (5:7-12) the word patience was used seven times. In this passage, the word prayer appears seven times. The connection seems obvious when situations arise where patience is required, prayer is the key.

“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. (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 sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. (16) Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (17) 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. (18) And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit. (19) Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, (20) 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.” (NKJV)

James gives three prime examples of times that would call for prayer; prayer in times of suffering, prayer in times of sickness and prayer in response to sin.

First, Prayer As A Response to Suffering. (5:13) *“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.”*

James identifies the problem by asking the question, *“Is any among you suffering?”*

Suffering as used here means hardships and distresses. These distresses could be mental or emotional or a combination of both. The word used here (*kakopatheo*) usually does not refer to physical suffering.

James prescription for this problem is *“let him pray.”* The old hymn says it well,

*“In seasons of distress and grief,*

*My soul has often found relief,  
And oft escaped the tempter's snare,  
by thy return, sweet hour of prayer!"*

On the opposite side of coin James says, "Is any merry (cheerful)?" I think that is important to note that praising God is viewed in the same measure of seriousness as praying. Praising God in song is a form of prayer.

*But we should see prayer not only as a response to suffering but to...*

*Secondly, Prayer As A Response to Sickness 5:14-15a*

"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 sick, and the Lord will raise him up."

The word translated sick (*asthenia*) means "to be without strength" and depicts the debilitating effect of sickness. It is an obvious reference to serious physical illness.

This familiar passage is a difficult passage. Many suffering Christians have tried in all sincerity to follow the instructions given here, yet have not been healed. This may be because the promise has a specific, rather than general, application. It is amazing the number of unbiblical practices that have claimed this verse as the sanction for practice.

It is this passage the Roman Catholic Church derives its doctrine of the sacrament of Extreme Unction. They believe that the last rites performed by a priest prepares the soul of a man to enter into death, that this is the final and greatest temptation and that his faith is sustained and supported in some way by these last rites. I have never been able to see how they derive that interpretation from this passage. James is not talking about preparation of the soul for death. He is talking, rather, about raising a man up from sickness and restoring him to health and wholeness.

It is also this passage that the faith healers used to advance what they call "the prayer of faith." They say that they are 'claiming' these words, and so they go to the Lord in the light of this kind of teaching and they demand healing for someone, and they tell the Lord that they are "really believing him for this." They see this as a promise and therefore they are 'claiming' it.

Yet the New Testament does not teach this. The apostle Paul did not heal Timothy. He urged him to take a normal medicinal remedy for a chronic stomach condition: "*Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses*" (1 Tim. 5:23). When he left Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Tim 4:20), it was not because the apostle did not have enough faith to pray for Trophimus to get better. Sickness is part of man's mortality; it is appointed unto men once to die. When James says that the prayer of faith will save the sick we are not to find the meaning in putting stress upon the word 'faith' and claiming that answered prayer comes out of special kind of faith which only a few super-Christians occasionally experience.

## JAMES SAYS THAT THREE THINGS ARE TO BE DONE

- The Elders Are To Be Summoned.

It is the sick person who must take the initiative to summons the elders.

- The Elders Are To Come And Pray Over The Sick Person.

It should be noted that this anointing seems to take place in private there is no evidence that anointing services ever took place at the front of the church. It is not always God's will to heal us physically, but it is always proper to pray for healing. Then we can leave the results with God. We have trusted him with our immortal soul, we surely can trust him with our bodies.

- The Elders Are To Anoint With Oil In The Name Of The Lord

The word anoint is a general term that means to apply or administer. A different word was used when the anointing was sacred or symbolical. Oil was applied from many common purposes, including as a medicine or perfume.

The anointing with oil was a common medicinal practice. In a day and age where there were not an abundance of medicines oil was commonly used. As is evidenced in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan where the Samaritan bathed the wounds of the injured traveler with oil (Luke 10:34). It is likely that James is suggesting that prayer be exercised along with a proper use of available medicines. It is an affirmation, that after praying for healing; that it is totally correct and are not showing a lack of faith by using available medical techniques and doctors.

Yet, the power of prayer for the sick can not be over estimated. *"In a recent survey of 269 doctors, a remarkable 99% said they were convinced that religious belief can heal. In fact, that's 20% higher than the figure for the general public.*

*Why do doctors feel this way? "Because we've seen the power of belief, said Dr. Herbert Benson, author of "Timeless Healing." "We've seen that belief is powerful in conditions including angina, asthma, ulcers, congestive heart failure, diabetes, all forms of pain. We see it all the time, and we can't deny it..."* [Parade, Spokesman-Review, December 1, 1996, p. 18.]

*Not only is prayer to be seen as a response to sickness but...*

Third, Prayer As A Response to Sin (5:15b-20) "And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven."

In this particular case the cause of the sickness is sin. Yet sin is not always the cause of sickness but it can be a cause. Sinful behavior can lead to sickness as a natural consequence. Example, Venereal disease, Alcoholism, Drug addiction.

Sinful behavior can also lead to discipline through sickness (1 Corinthians 11:29-30). But by no means is sin always the cause for sickness. (John 9:2-3)

The remedy of this sin sickness is given in verse sixteen, “Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” In the later part of verse fifteen the believer is told to confess our sins to God for Forgiveness - (v. 15c) “*they shall be forgiven him.*” Now in verse sixteen we are told to confess (admit) our faults to others for prayer (v.16a). James is not recommending that we indiscriminately bare our sins before an entire group. Experience also tells us to be careful judges of the people to whom we confess our faults. Some can handle it others cannot.

Four preachers, taking a short breather from their heavy schedules, were on a park bench, chatting and enjoying an early spring day.

“You know, since all of us are such good friends,” said one, “this might be a good time to discuss the problems that are disturbing us.” They all nodded in agreement. “Well, I would like to share with you the fact that I drink to excess,” said one. There was a gasp from the other three. Then another spoke up. “Since you were so honest, I’d like to say that my big problem is gambling. It’s terrible, I know, but I can’t quit.” Another gasp was heard, and the third clergyman spoke. “I’m really troubled, brothers, because I’m growing fond of a woman in my church—a married woman.”

More gasps. But the fourth man remained silent. After a few minutes the others coaxed him to open up. “The fact is,” he said, “I just don’t know how to tell you about my problem.”

“It’s all right, brother. Your secret is safe with us.” “Well, it’s this way,” he said. “You see, I’m an incurable gossip.” [Arlene Quant, quoted by Alex Thien in Milwaukee Sentinel]

So admitting your faults should be limited to those who have demonstrated that they are mature to handle keeping confidences.

Then in verses sixteen through eighteen James tells us three things about Elijah’s prayers

- They were earnest
- They were powerful
- They were effective.

“The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (17) 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. (18) And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.”

This kind of prayer “*effective fervent*”

prayer is possible for all believers because Elijah was a just a man and look at the effect of his prayer. To become more effective in our praying, we should heed these words: “*It is not the arithmetic of our prayers, how many they are; nor the rhetoric of our prayers, how eloquent they be; nor the geometry of our prayers, how long they be; nor the music of our prayers, how sweet our voice may be; nor the method of our prayers, how orderly they may be; nor even the theology of our prayers, how good the doctrine may be—which God cares for. It is the fervency of spirit that avails much.*” [William Law, in J. S. Baxter, Explore the Book, p. 236]

*James reminds us that Elijah "prayed earnestly." And what answers he received—the very forces of nature were changed! By contrast, indefinite praying by indifferent people brings little results. Fervent prayer, if it be for God's glory and presented in the name of His Son, will accomplish great things for time and eternity.*

The goal of prayer concerning the brother or sister who has wandered into sin according to verses nineteen and twenty, is restoration. "Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, (20) 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."

The word James uses is the classic term in the Bible for estrangement from God. It is the Greek word (*planao*) from which we get our English word 'planet'. The stars have fixed points in the sky but the planets are so-called wandering stars. This professing brother has begun to drift. That is so familiar a concept that we actually sing about it: "*Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.*" It is not that we are wandering from the people of God because they are hypocrites, or wandering from the congregation because the ministry is boring, or wandering from the young people because they don't excite us, but wandering from the truth because it is too inconvenient.

"Take heed," Paul tells the Ephesian elders, "*Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!*" (Acts 20:31). The writer to the Hebrews says to them, "*See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God...so that none of you be hardened by sin's deceitfulness*" (Hebrews 3:12 & 13).

Notice in verse nineteen it says, "*Someone turns him back*" (v. 19). He doesn't say, "*Notice this phenomenon.*" He doesn't say, "*Take heed from it.*" He doesn't say, "*Weep over it.*" He says, "*Someone should bring him back.*" He doesn't say, "*The pastor should bring him back,*" or "*The deacons should bring him back.*" Why doesn't James say that the minister should bring him back, because there are times when the minister is not the best person. James puts the responsibility of restoration of a fallen brother or sister squarely on the shoulders of the church body. In Galatians 6:1 Paul says, "*Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.*"

How should he bring him back? What must be his manner? He must be motivated by love for his neighbor. If we do not love our neighbor then we will gossip about him, or kick him further down, or harshly drive him back, or give up on him entirely. The Bible commits us to the way of love. There is no guarantee that we are going to bring every wanderer back, but our judgment is not that we tried and failed, but that we did not try at all.

James tells us two things that happen when one is able to turn such a one from a lifestyle of sin. First, "he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death" (v. 20) - he saves a "soul" (life) from death. When James refers to the saving of the sick person's soul, he is not talking about his salvation. This passage has not dealt with eternal salvation but deliverance of one who has fallen into sin. Secondly, he "*covers a multitude of sins*" (v. 20). Sins that have been covered by the blood of Christ are forgiven sins that are remembered no more.

Prayer then in the sense that it brings us to God, is powerful and effective.

“Prayer is the link that connects us with God. It is the bridge that spans every gulf and bears us over every abyss of danger or of need. ... Do we know the power of our supernatural weapon? Do we dare to use it with the authority of a faith that commands as well as asks? God grant us holy audacity and divine confidence. He is not wanting great men, but He is wanting men that will dare to prove the greatness of their God.” – [A. B. Simpson - [www.bible.org/illus/prayer](http://www.bible.org/illus/prayer)]