

THE PRAYING CHURCH (PART II)
JAMES 5:13-18

INTRODUCTION:

Probably the most influential sermon ever preached on American soil was preached Jonathan Edwards. The sermon ignited the fires of the first great awakening in this country. It was entitled, “Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God.” Jonathan Edwards was not an accomplished pulpiteer. He spoke from a manuscript and held it so close to his eyes that the congregation could not see his face. He went on and on until the people in that crowded church were moved almost beyond control. It was reported that one man sprang up, rushed down the aisle, and cried, “Mr. Edwards, have mercy!” Others caught hold of the back of the pew unless they should slip into the pit. Some thought that the Day of Judgment had dawned on them. The power of that sermon is still felt across the United States.

However, there is something about that sermon that most people do not know. There was a group of believers in the vicinity of Enfield, Massachusetts, who had become alarmed about the spiritual condition of their communities. They were afraid that God in His anger pass them by. Because of this deep concern about the needs of their community, they met to spend the whole evening in prayer before the sermon. They actually spent the whole night in agonizing prayer. The rest is history. Is it any wonder that there was such a display of the power of God on the Lord’s Day as Jonathan Edwards preached? A praying church is a powerful force in any age. We began our study of the Praying Church in this epistle of James last Lord’s Day. We noted that in

the praying church the members pray about everything. We also noted the prayer ministry of the leaders of the church. The congregation has such confidence in the prayer life of the leadership that they request from the leadership special prayer when illness falls upon them. But there are more things to be learned in this passage about a praying church. We will consider those things this morning. Our objective in all of this is to see First Baptist Church be a praying church.

I. IN THE PRAYING CHURCH THE MEMBERS PRACTICE MUTUAL CONFESSION.

After his instructions concerning the prayer for the sick, James gives appointed admonition.

“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

The first part of admonition calls for the church to practice mutual confession. What does this involve?

1. The confession of personal wrongs to each other.

The old version called for the confession of “faults” to each other, but the newer version appropriately translates the word “sins.” The better manuscripts have the common word for sin in this context. It seems rather obvious here that the confession is at a personal level. I do not understand James to be instructing us to have each member of the church come and hang their dirty laundry out in front of the whole congregation. Rather, we should follow the principle that the confession ought to go as far as the impact of the sin. In other words, if I have sinned in a way that hurt you, then I need to make an acknowledgement to you and to request your forgiveness. If I have sinned in such a way that it hurt a group of people in this church, then I should confess it to that group. If I have sinned in such a way that it hurt the church, then I should make confession to the church. This is an admonition for us to keep our relationships with each other and with the

Lord right. And the way we keep them right is that we seek forgiveness when we have sinned against each other. There is a wonderful thing that happens in the life of a church when this practice is followed appropriately.

I remember as a young preacher being in the mountains of Kentucky in a revival. The little mountain church in which I was preaching wasn't having much revival. Every service was a struggle. I did not know what was wrong, but I knew something was wrong.

One night before a evening service, two brothers met out behind that little church and made a confession to each other. These brothers had become estranged from each other over a decision to be made with reference to the new church building the church was constructing. Their differences had become angry and bitter. When these two brothers met each other before the service and were reconciled to each other, every thing began to change. I can still remember that night. At the invitation time those two brothers came to make public acknowledgement before the congregation of their sin and reconciliation. This was appropriate since everyone in the church knew about their differences; they had no sooner stepped out to make their public acknowledgement than I saw out of the corner of my eye an attractive older teenage girl making her way toward the front weeping. She was coming to give her life to the Lord and to be saved. She was the teenage daughter of one of these men who was in the process of being reconciled. The confession of the dad released something in the church that made it possible for the Spirit of God to move in mighty convicting power in the life of the unsaved. This kind of confession when done appropriately is always in order.

2. The confession in preparation for prayer.

In the context it is rather obvious that prayer is to follow the confession. James knows that if there is a broken relationship with a brother and unconfessed sin, then prayer will be hindered. Peter goes so far as to admonish husbands to be careful in their relationship with their wives lest their prayers be hindered. If there is unreconciled conflict in your family, at your place of work, in your Sunday School department, with anyone, then before you will be able to enter in to prayer effectively, you need to make confession. This is an important principle and practice in the life of a praying church.

II. IN THE PRAYING CHURCH THE MEMBERS PREVAIL IN INTERCESSORY PRAYER.

The second part of the admonition concerning the life of the church says simply, “Pray for each other so that you may be healed.” In this passage James gives us some careful instruction about this responsibility.

1. The admonition to prevail in prayer.

“And pray for each other so that you may be healed.” The verb translated “pray” is the ordinary verb for prayer. It means to express your desire in the form of a petition. In this context it is obvious that the prayer is offered for “one another.” This is not a prayer that you offer for yourself, but one that you offer on behalf of someone else. The tense of the verb indicates that this is to be the habitual practice of your life. It is a verb that has continuous action in it. So the admonition is that we are to be in the habit of praying for one another. Prayer is to be a natural

part of the life of the body. The whole church is to continually be involved in the process of praying for one another.

2. The promise to those prevailing in prayer.

James attaches to this admonition a promise—“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” What an encouragement for prayer! Williams translates this: “An upright man’s prayer when it keeps at work is very powerful.” There is tremendous power in the prayer of a righteous man.

Do not allow the adjective “righteous” to discourage you. The righteous man is the man whose been practicing mutual confession. He is not a sinless man but is rather a man who consistently works at keeping his relationship with God and His fellowman up to date. He seeks to do the right thing with reference to his neighbor and to his Lord. So this enables him to approach God with an undefiled conscience. If you have not been behaving righteously, you’ll not prevail in prayer. Your conscience will condemn you over shortcoming when you stand in the presence of the Lord. So, the promise is specifically for the prayers of a righteous man.

But there is more involved than the righteousness for the one praying. There is the connection in the statement that indicates that prayer is one of earnestness and intensity. The promise is that the intense prayer, the earnest prayer, of a righteous man will accomplish much. Too many times our prayers lack heart. We say words but they do not come our heart. The passion is missing. This prayer promise is to the man or woman who is passionate at presenting their petitions before God.

3. The example of prevailing prayer.

After the promise James presents an example. He reaches back into the book of Kings in the Old Testament and calls forth Elijah as his example. “Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed and the heavens gave rain and the earth produced its crops.” You will remember that this incident to which James refers led to a mighty revival time in the life of Northern Israel. It was while wicked King Ahab and wicked Queen Jezebel were on the throne. Elijah made the announcement that it would not rain for three years. There is no reference specifically in the book of Kings to Elijah praying that it might not rain. However, there is an indication of this when he told the king that he was the one who “stood in the presence of the Lord.” This is probably a reference to the intercessory prayer ministry of Elijah.

Encouragement is given to us about the praying of Elijah in the reminder “Elijah was a man just like us.” James knew our tendency to put people like Elijah in a special category. We wrongly feel that we would never be capable of influencing God like Elijah, but he was a man who shared our human nature and human frailties. The thing that set him apart was, “he prayed earnestly.” He prayed with all of his heart. His earnest prayers prompted God to close up the heavens and allow no rain then after confrontation with the false prophets at Mount Carmel, his earnest prayers led to the sending of rain and the renewal of the land.

The praying church is a church that prevails in that kind of praying. It is a church where the members pray earnestly, intensely, purposefully, expectantly. It is a church where they do believe the promises of God and claim those promises in prayers to the living God.

III. IN THE PRAYING CHURCH GOD WILL BE GLORIFIED THROUGH ANSWERED PRAYER.

This great passage of scripture encourages us to expect answers to our prayers. It encourages us to expect miracles to happen because we pray. By a miracle we understand it to be simply a display of the power of God in a mighty way.

1. As the church experiences spiritual miracles.

There is an emphasis in the passage upon the spiritual miracles. Earlier we heard James make reference to sins being forgiven. As we are seeking to pray the prayer of faith, practicing mutual confession to each other, God will respond to our confession with a miracle of forgiveness. He will respond with the miracle of reconciled relationships. Things happen when the church prays in the spiritual realm that will require God as an explanation.

Have you not seen this kind of thing happen? Have you not seen lives transformed in answer to prayer? Not long ago a long time friend was buried at Lorenzo. His death brought back some memories. I remembered the night that Buster Smith came to make public his faith in Christ. But when I remembered that dramatic decision of that Crosby County farmer one night, I also remembered the intensity of the prayers of that church for him. I especially remembered the intensity of the prayers of his wife, Opal. She was under such distress of heart over his need

before the Lord that she could hardly live. Through the prayers of that dear wife and the membership of the First Baptist Church at Lorenzo, we saw the miracle of a good man becoming a better man. We saw the miracle of a man becoming a useful servant in the life of the church of Jesus Christ.

Over these forty-seven years I have seen miracle after miracle like that. I have been able to connect to every one of them the prayers of someone. When the church prays they will experience spiritual miracles, even the miracles of transformed lives.

2. As the church experiences material miracles.

In the day of Elijah it was rain from heaven. In the life of some of the members of the early church, it was physical healing. But in both cases there was a display of God's sovereign lordship over all of creation. He brought forth answers to prayer in the realm of the physical and the material. When they saw the rain in the day of Elijah, the whole of Northern Israel was given a fresh reminder that the Lord He is God. God was glorified through answered prayer. So it has been through the ages.

It would be interesting to take the time this morning for us to share our own experiences of answered prayer. Given the context in which we meet, let me stir up your memory about an answered prayer. Nine years ago this past winter this church was going through a very difficult time. There was division within the deacon body. There was division in the life of the church. There was division in the life of the church. There was division over the leadership of the church. There was suspicion and doubt and mistrust on every hand. In the spring of 1992 after Dr. Hayes

Wicker had resigned as pastor to go to Florida, this church became involved very intensely in Experiencing God. A number of little groups met weekly and the members of this church walked together through Henry Blackaby's book, Experiencing God. During that time mutual confession was made on a number of occasions. During that time earnest prayers were made on behalf of the church. This church, at least, the core leadership of this church, cried out to God in earnest prayer. The situation in the church looked very, very, desperate.

Then a miracle began to happen. It was a miracle that began to involve me. The deacon leadership of this church called me in my home in Brentwood, Tennessee and solicited my prayers. As I began to pray with those deacon leaders, they asked me if I would consider coming back to First Baptist Church as pastor. I cannot explain to you why I said yes. All I know is that there was a witness in my heart that it was right for me to return to First Baptist Church. It didn't make any sense. Fifty-seven year old pastors who have found a place in a denominational structure don't go back to local churches. It didn't make any sense financially. And yet there was in my heart a witness that it was right.

I said to those deacon leaders, "Why don't you take this up the deacons and see what their response would be." When they went to the deacons to have a discussion about the possibility of D. L. Lowrie returning to First Baptist Church, something miraculous began to happen. The deacon group began to find something on which they could agree. Almost unanimously they agreed that this could be the will of God for the Church.

Then I suggested to the deacons, “Why don’t you go to the church and ask the church to elect the deacon body as a pulpit search committee with the express purpose of discussing with D. L. Lowrie the possibility of returning to this church as pastor.” The deacons agreed to do this. They brought it to you as a church and this church almost unanimously agreed to elect the deacons as a search committee.

On Mother’s Day 1992, Alice and I came to Lubbock and I preached in this place. The air was filled spiritual electricity that day. I shall never forget that night and the excitement that I felt in my own heart and sensed in this church as you extended to us the call to come back as your pastor. It was an unforgettable night in my life. Across the summer of 1992 I came as often I could and preached and then nine years ago today, I began my ministry as your pastor. The rest is history. The years have not been without their struggles and their disappointments, but can deny that God has been among us.

My mission this morning is to remind you that all of that happened when this church became a praying church. There was probably more earnest, intense prayer made on behalf of this church in those early months of 1992 than has been made in many a year. Every thing good that has happened since that winter time and spring of 1992, began in the prayers of this church.

Some of you are fearful as I resign and you move into an interim period. You are fearful of something bad happening in the life of your church. I want to remind you that if this church will be a praying church, God will be glorified through answered prayer. These weeks and months ahead can be the greatest weeks and months this church has ever known if this church will be a

praying church. If the members of this church will prevail in prayer for their church and for each other, God will be glorified through answered prayer.