

JAMES 5:13-18
“THE PRAYER OF A RIGHTEOUS MAN”

Author and pastor Glenn McDonald tells the story of the day he had a layover at the airport in Raleigh, North Carolina. He walked toward his gate and saw a sign that said, “Ask about our upgrades to first class.” He thought, “Wow. That would sure be nice.” Then he went on his way, and later returned and sat down next to a friend who was on the same flight.

“Hey, guess what?” his friend said. “I’m flying first class the rest of the way - for free. Do you see that sign over there - the one that says, ‘Ask about our upgrades to first class’? I asked. I just got the last seat available.”

McDonald writes that he was happy for his friend, who is well over six feet tall. But as he squeezed into his coach-class seat, he wondered, “Why didn’t I ask? To tell you the truth, I think I assumed that the sign just had to be for somebody else...That grace couldn’t be for me.”

As James prepares to finish his letter about real faith in real life, he calls his people to a real life of real prayer. Maybe he knows about people like Glenn McDonald, and people like you and me - people who don’t ask God for grace, because they don’t believe such grace could be for them. We do wonder, don’t we? We wonder how the world works, and how prayer fits into God’s plans. Does prayer change things? Or is it just an empty exercise? Is grace for us?

James knows the answers, James’ words show the answers, and James calls God’s people to lives of prayer. He does not focus on technique and technicalities. He tells us when we should pray, and why we can pray. Through this he frees us to a real life of real prayer. Let’s follow his thinking by asking and answering two questions.

First, **WHEN SHOULD WE PRAY?** As usual, James launches into a series of commands. “Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him...”

When should we pray? To start with, *IN TROUBLE*. The word translated “trouble” can be used to describe all sorts of suffering, but it especially refers to suffering in the name of Jesus. James began his letter with this theme: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds...” James’ readers are facing all sorts of trouble because they name Jesus as Savior and strive to follow him as Lord.

Think of the rest of James’ words there. “Consider it pure joy...because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. And perseverance must finish its work, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”

In trouble, pray. For what? For wisdom. You will want to pray for relief. You may want to pray for revenge. But the prayer of the disciple of Jesus is a prayer for wisdom. How should I respond? What should I do? Lord Jesus, how can I honor you, even as I suffer for you?

We should pray, in trouble. We should pray, *IN HAPPINESS*. James jumps from the worst of times to the best of times. You are cheerful. You are joyful. Maybe everything is going well. Maybe nothing is going well, but God has given you happiness in Jesus Christ - so while your burdens are heavy, your heart is strong. The “songs of praise” here are Psalms - the words of the Bible that reveal both the sorrows and the joys of the human heart and human life.

In happiness, pray. With what? Thanksgiving. Give thanks to the Lord for his compassion and mercy. Not long ago, I discovered the words of a man named Alexander MacLaren. He said, “Seek to cultivate a buoyant, joyous sense of the crowded kindnesses of God in your daily life.” What an image! When you are in a crowd, people are everywhere - jostling against each other. See how all of God’s kindnesses are everywhere, and thank him for them.

We should pray, in trouble. We should pray, in happiness. We should pray, *IN SICKNESS*. Now we

are back to the worst of times.

What is this *sickness*? This is when you are weak. Generally, this is a physical struggle. But we know our spirits can fly high or sink low, based on how we feel physically. So James' words help us with both physical illness, and with the emotional, mental and spiritual struggles that come with such illness.

What is the role of the *elders*? They are sinful but saved men with a holy calling. They are leaders of the church who can come and pray for you, as they carry out their part of the ministry of the church. It is central to their call to watch over you, as a shepherd watches over sheep.

What is this *oil*? Some believed and some do believe it is part of the healing process. Some believed and some do believe it has a sacramental use - almost like the water and bread and cup we use in baptism and communion. But most likely, it is a symbol - possibly of the Holy Spirit. It is a visible reminder that we want God to set you apart for his special care and concern.

But what is this about *confession*? Is James saying that we are sick because we sin? He does not say that, and we cannot say that. But whether you are sick or healthy, unconfessed sin hinders your fellowship with God. As well, confessing your sin reminds you that your greatest need is not physical - it is spiritual. So even if we do NOT say that you are sick because you sinned, we can say that confession of sin is a healthy and helpful part of this process.

We could spend more time on these details, but we don't want to miss the larger point. God through James is commanding his people to pray! We may face trouble. We may be happy. We may be sick. No matter what is happening in our lives, our hearts and minds should be directed to God. Every part of our lives should be filled with prayer.

In a little book called "Once Upon a Town," author Bob Greene told the story of the town of North Platte, Nebraska. Trains filled with troops on the way to World War Two would stop there, and the people of the town and area would welcome these troops for just a little while.

A woman known to the author as Mrs. Johnson was a teenager in those days. After too short a time, the train horn would blow, and the troops would scramble back onto the train. She said that as they did this, "I would pray. For all of them. I would watch them get onto the train, and I would ask the Lord to bless and keep them. I wanted to keep smiling, in case they turned around to look at us as they left. But I was praying for them, with my eyes open."

We talk about morning devotions and prayer, but this is about prayer with your eyes open, as you walk through the joys and sorrows of your day. Nothing is too small for God's heart, and nothing is too great for God's hand. So whatever is happening, God calls his people to pray.

What does this look like in a real life, lived with real faith? Let me offer a few examples.

* Maybe you have heard the old saying, "As long as there are tests in public schools, there will be prayer in public schools." It reminds us of all the situations our young people face, in all kinds of schools and all kinds of places. Young people, I want to urge you, in your youth, to be in the habit of praying before tests, and praying before tough classes, and praying before tempting situations, and praying in traffic, and praying with your eyes open, all through the day.

* Most days, you know what to expect from your day. Sometimes you are surprised, but more often than not, you can look at your day and see what and whom will challenge you. If you are in the habit of real prayer for real life, you will not just pray at the start of the day - you will pray through the day. You pray before the tough meeting. You pray through the huge task. You pray during those moments when worry rises and threatens to flood heart and soul. You pray with your eyes open.

* Yet sometimes life is not predictable. Sometimes disaster strikes. I remember a Sunday in Minnesota when we received word that a fire had occurred in the home of a family in the church. My first instinct was to do something. One of my elders' first instinct was to pray - not for an hour, but for a moment - to ask God to give them help and give us wisdom. Do you first pray with your eyes open, even as you prepare to take steps to do what you must do?

* The opposite of disaster is success. By God's mercy, sometimes things go right! You ace the test. You persuade someone to see things your way. You get a raise or a promotion. You do the right thing. You actually fix the broken widget. In those moments, whose name is in your heart and on your lips? It is not pious silliness to say, "Praise the Lord!" It is a form of prayer, in which we give thanks to God for all of the blessings we enjoy, with our eyes open.

* Then there is the example of illness, which takes up most of James' words here. We are glad to have good health care workers. But where is your trust? While you may seek healing from medical professions, you must always remember that your Great Physician is the Lord. You may research. You may talk to people. You may sit in waiting rooms. But do you have a heart and life of prayer, that displays the heart of your trust for your life? Do you pray with your eyes open, in times of sickness?

We could add examples all day - and that is the point! When do we pray? Always! Again - there is nothing too small for God's heart, and there is nothing too great for God's hand. Even as we walk through this world with our eyes open, we pray.

That's nice. But that's not enough. We still need James to help us with the question of how our prayers work, and whether our prayers work. We find the answer in the answer to a second question: **WHY CAN WE PRAY?** As James writes, he reminds us of who we are, and who God is. As he does this, his words free us to pray.

Why can we pray? In part, *BECAUSE OF WHO WE ARE*. Who are we? As we have seen, James is far more concerned with our actions than our identity. But in verse 16, his words remind us that he knows exactly who we are in Christ. He writes, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

"A righteous man." Who is this? Is this everybody? The Bible says that no one is righteous - not even one. The only perfect person who ever lived is Jesus Christ. The word "righteous" describes someone who is in a real relationship with God. This is the man, woman or child who has been restored to that relationship through faith in Jesus. We are not righteous. But Jesus gives his righteousness to us - through his sinless life, forgiving death, and victorious resurrection. So we live before God as his forgiven, adopted children, and we are free to pray to him.

I know I have told this story before, but I tell it again because it captures this truth so well. It is a story from the funeral of Stonewall Jackson - the great southern general of the Civil War. Thousands filed by his casket, but as the day ended, the guards closed the doors. A tattered veteran pushed forward, held up the stump of an arm that had been lost in the war, and said, "By this right arm which I gave for my country, I demand the privilege of one more time seeing the general under whom I served." The governor of Virginia was standing nearby, and he ordered the man to be let in to see the body. The governor said, "He has won entrance by his wounds."

We have won entrance to God, by the wounds of Jesus. Because of the life he lived and gave and regained, we can pray to God as our Father. We do not pray because of our goodness before God. If we did, who could pray? How could I ever utter even a syllable to the holy God of all, on the basis of my goodness? We pray because of God's goodness to us in Jesus Christ.

James illustrates this by reminding us of the prophet Elijah. He was a great Old Testament prophet, but James writes that he was a man "just like us." He was a sinner saved by grace, through faith. God did not hear Elijah because Elijah was good. God heard Elijah because God had been good to Elijah, and just like with you and me, God had called him "righteous" because of what God had done for Elijah, not because of what Elijah had done for God.

You don't need to be superhuman to pray to God. You need to be in union with the superb Savior, Jesus Christ. If you are, you are free to pray to him - in trouble, happiness, sickness, and everything else. Take courage - he is glad to hear the prayers of his children, made righteous in his sight, by his grace. Our prayers are powerful and effective, because of who we are in Jesus.

Yet we can also pray *BECAUSE OF WHO GOD IS*. In these words, James reminds us of God's

sovereignty. He does this with:

* His words about our prayers for the sick. Who raises up the sick? The Lord. We pray, but God sovereignly cures illness, and he sovereignly raises the sick from the sickbed.

* His words about Elijah. James speaks of the prayers of Elijah, but his words remind us of who brought the drought, then the rain. It was God.

We don't heal the sick. We don't withhold or bring rain. God does. So even as James tells us that our prayers are powerful and effective, he affirms that God is sovereign over our prayers. He is utterly, completely, absolutely in charge of the world he has made.

This may lead you to ask, "If God is sovereign, why pray?" If God is in control of all things, why ask him to do anything? He is just going to do what he is going to do. But a better question would be, "If God is not sovereign, why pray?" If God does not have his heart and hand upon all things, why pray to him? What can he do?

But God does have his heart and hand upon all things. He chooses to use our prayers as his means to accomplish his purposes. As some have said, the God who ordains the ends, ordains the means. He will do what he will do. But he will do it through the powerful and effective prayers of his people.

Let's use the simplest of examples: why did I marry my wife? (In all of her spirituality, she would tell you that since about the age of ten, she prayed for a husband with a short last name!) But I think of the prayers of our parents. I think of our own prayers. I think of how God sovereignly ordered our lives to bring us together. So as I think of my own children, I know that if God should ordain that they have spouses, they will have them, and it will happen through God's sovereign plan. But still I pray. I pray for God to protect my children and those children. I pray for God to order events in his time, and in his way, to bring my children into relationship with those people. I pray for them to be people who love one person more than my child - I pray for them to love Jesus more than they love my children. I believe my prayers are powerful and effective, even as I believe that he will do whatever he wills.

What freedom this gives! I don't understand it all, but I know the sovereign God wants me to pray about this and everything else. So as I walk through this world with my eyes open, I pray and pray and pray, trusting in who he is, as the sovereign God who will hear and direct and ordain in ways that are best for his kingdom, and best for his children.

This is why I try, as well as I can, to know the Bible and pray the Bible. That is God's Word to me, and when it is my word to him, I know I am praying in a way that reflects his heart and reinforces his hand regarding the small and large issues of life. What power and what effect is mine, when I pray God's truth back to him, as I walk through every situation and season of life?

The story is told of a business that planned to open its doors across the street from a church. The business of this business was mostly immoral and maybe illegal, and the members of the church protested the business. They passed out petitions and prayed against the opening of the business. Just before the business was about to open, a bolt of lightning struck the building, and it burned to the ground.

The owners of the business sued the church. The members of the church defended themselves and denied any responsibility for what happened. This led the judge to say, "I don't know how I am going to decide this case, but it appears from the paperwork that we have an immoral and illegal business owner who believes in the power of prayer, and an entire church that doesn't."

Do you believe in the power of prayer? Do you believe, child of God, that God's sovereign grace is for you, in every moment of life? Then hear and heed this call, and pray to the God whose heart is always for you, and whose hand is upon everything in your life.