

As we all know, this is Super Bowl Sunday, and of course, it's especially fun for us here in San Francisco because our 49ers are in it. My 28-year-old son reminded me he was three years old when the 49ers last won a Super Bowl, and so I'd say they're due to win another! But we won't really know who the winner is until about 7:30 pm tonight. However, I can tell you right now who'll win. The winner will be the team that best executes the fundamentals of the game of football.

The greatest football coach to ever live was Vince Lombardi. In David Maraniss' book entitled *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi*, Maraniss talks about Lombardi's coaching style. Every year when Lombardi gathered his team for the beginning of training camp, he started from scratch, assuming his players were blank slates with no knowledge of the game. Maraniss wrote that he began with the most elemental statement of all. "Gentlemen," he said, holding a pigskin in his right hand, "this is a football."

He was coaching professional athletes at the pinnacle of their profession, yet he started with the basics. Each player reviewed how to block and tackle. They opened up the playbook and started from page one. According to Maraniss, Max McGee, his All-Pro wide receiver, joked, "Uh, Coach, could you slow down a little. You're going too fast for us." Lombardi chuckled but continued his obsession with the fundamentals. His team became the best at the tasks everyone else took for granted.

But football is not the only place this strategy works, it's also true in the Christian life. In living the Christian life, a focus on the fundamentals will determine our growth and our effectiveness. And just like blocking and tackling is to football, the most fundamental thing in the Christian life is prayer. Phillip Yancey wrote, "If prayer stands as the place where God and human beings meet, then I must learn about prayer." Henri Nouwen added this, "Prayer is not a pious decoration of life but the breath of human existence."

We are continuing our study of the New Testament letter written by James. Throughout this letter, we've seen how James focuses on the practical, boots-on-the-ground side of the Christian life. And in James 5:13-18, as he inches towards the end of his letter, he addresses the fundamentals of prayer. Specifically, he teaches us when to pray, why to pray, and how to pray.

**Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray.
Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is**

anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being, even as we are. 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. James 5:13-18

When to pray?

First, James tells us when to pray. He says to pray in any and all circumstances of life. He starts out, "*Is anyone among you in trouble?*" We know many of the people James was writing to were in trouble. That's why in the previous passage, he told them seven times to have patience and perseverance in the midst of suffering. But here he says to pray. In fact, you can't be patient and persevere in troubles apart from prayer. And the assumption, of course, is that we'll all face troubles in our lives. Jesus said, "*In this world you will have tribulations...*" Earlier in the letter, James said, "*Consider it pure joy whenever you encounter trials...*" Not if you encounter trials, but when. And when you encounter them, pray.

Perhaps we should ask what might keep us from praying in times of trouble. In times of trouble, we might feel angry at God, and so we don't want to pray. Or perhaps we feel as if he's punishing us for something we've done, so we don't feel worthy to come into his presence. James says, forget all of that. Let go of your anger, let go of your shame, and just come to him and pray.

But life isn't only about troubles. There are also times in life when things are going well, and we're happy and joyful. Life is like that, right? Our moods change as often as the weather. Our circumstances change, as well. As the old spiritual says, "Sometimes I'm up; sometimes I'm down." Well, what do you do when you're up? James says when you're happy, "sing songs of praise." This is just another form of prayer. Praising God and singing to him is the way to pray when you're happy and joyful. Do you do that? Do you have a few praise songs memorized you can pull out of your front pocket any time? I do.

Give thanks with a grateful heart,

give thanks to the Holy One

Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son.

If I can do it, you can do it. Here's another old one:

Something beautiful, something good

All my confusion He understood

All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strife

But he made something beautiful of my life

The problem is so often we don't pray when we're happy. My tendency in good times is to become complacent, lazy, and even self-satisfied. It's like, "I don't need to pray. All is well!" Or sometimes I feel a little bit guilty, like "How can I be happy when there's so much wrong in this world?"

We all need to realize every circumstance of life can and should invoke a response to God. There's no situation in life where God does not invite us to himself. When we're in need, we pray in recognition that only God can get us through this. When we're happy, we praise in recognition that every good and perfect gift is from Him. We hallow every pleasure and sanctify every pain. Our whole life, whether sorrow or joy, can be brought into his presence. Amidst all the fluctuations of fortune, he's the One fixed point around which the ebb and flow of life can be ordered.

But that's still not all. He adds one more time to pray. *"Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord."* James assumes there'll be people in the church who get sick. This was especially true then, but it's also true today. And when we get sick, we should pray, but sometimes when we get sick, it's hard to pray. I think that's why James says you may need to bring in some reinforcements. He says to call for the elders of the church to pray over you. This isn't because the elders are somehow more holy than everyone else, but because they represent the church body as they pray. This is the church family at prayer for one another.

So, when you're sick, you may need to ask for others to pray for you. The actual words James uses for sick in verses 14 and 15 indicate this person is suffering from a serious illness that's kind of taken the life out of them. They're weary. James isn't saying anytime you get a common cold you should call the elders and have them pray. He's talking about a debilitating illness.

By the way, this is where the Catholic church gets what they call the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, more commonly referred to as "last rites." When a person is on his deathbed, a priest comes to perform last rites, so the person is prepared for death. But, as we see here, it's not a priest but the elders who are to come and pray. And the point of this prayer isn't to prepare a person for death, but rather to restore him to life! And, by the way, we do this here at CPC. I did it yesterday for a woman at Stanford

Hospital. We pray for sick people. Over the years, we've had many calls for the elders to gather around a person and pray.

And like James says, we "anoint them with oil." This practice can mean one of two things. At some point back then, oil was used for medicinal purposes. That's why in the story of the Good Samaritan, it says he *"bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine"* (Luke 10:34). If that's what James means, then he's simply acknowledging sometimes God chooses to heal through medicine, and that's true. But if that's the case here, it seems strange the elders and not a physician would administer this oil. Others point out that oil was also symbolic of the presence of the Holy Spirit, so the anointing may be just a symbolic acknowledgment that God is the One who heals. I think this is a better way to understand what James is saying.

There's one more thing to notice here — James indicates in some cases this illness might be related to sin. That's why he says, *"If they've sinned, they will be forgiven."* Then he follows that by saying, *"Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed."* What does this mean? We know, in one sense, all sickness is related to sin. Sin, in general, causes sickness in general. The entrance of sin into the world through Adam brought about sickness and death on our fallen planet. That's why we all eventually get sick and die.

But not all sickness is the direct result of a person's sinful acts. Jesus made that clear when the disciples asked,

"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him." John 9:2-3

But it's also true that sometimes sickness is a direct result of sin. For example, Jesus warned a man after healing him, *"Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you"* (John 5:14). And in 2 Corinthians 11:30, Paul confronts the church about sin and says, *"That is why many among you are weak and sick, and many of you have fallen asleep (died)."* So there are times when our sickness is related to our own sin. That's what James is saying, "If they have sinned..." It's not certain that they have, but it's very possible. And he's not just talking about an isolated case of sin, but persistent sin.

So when we get sick, we should examine our hearts and, if necessary, confess our sins to not just the elders but to one another. This is the body of Christ at its best. This is being authentic with one another. This is taking off our masks and being real. This is what the church is supposed to be, not a country club for beautiful people who have it all together, but a hospital for the sick, a place where broken and sinful people can find grace and healing. It's essential, then, to have the kind of relationships in the body of Christ where we can share our struggles and confess our sins.

Also, we need to be people who others feel they can confess their sins to. Ask yourself: Am I approachable? Am I sensitive, trustworthy, and discreet? Would a friend at church be wise to share a painful or shameful sin with me? Would I know how to respond, how to pray for them? Or would I excuse the sin, belittle it, or condemn the confessor? If this is going to happen in our church, we must do all we can to create a culture that makes that kind of risky authenticity possible.

Why to pray?

So that's the answer to my first question: When to pray. I better get going because I still have two questions to answer. The second question is why to pray. James makes it very clear the reason to pray is because it makes a difference. This comes out in a number of ways in this passage. In verse 15, he says, *"The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; and the Lord will raise them up."* In verse 16, he says, *"Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."* And all this is summed up with one grand statement: *"The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."* And so that old saying your grandma used to say is true. Prayer changes things.

But this also brings up a great mystery. If God is sovereign and knows everything, how can our prayers make a difference? And why is it he sometimes doesn't answer our prayers, or perhaps he does but not how we wanted or when we wanted? The apostle Paul had an unanswered prayer for healing. In 2 Corinthians 12, he says he had a "thorn in the flesh," and three times he pleaded to God to remove it. Each time God said the same thing, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"* (v. 9).

So, we must find a balance between never expecting God to heal and requiring him to heal on demand. Even Jesus had an unanswered prayer. At Gethsemane, he agonized in prayer and asked his Father to take this cup away from him. Yet, he added, "not my will but yours." What he wanted and asked for, to somehow avoid the cross, wasn't granted. Even James, earlier in this letter, acknowledged this. He said, *"When you ask you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives..."* (4:3). So prayer isn't a blank check where we get to ask for whatever we want. And yet, at the same time, we're invited and even challenged to take our requests to God, and we're given assurance our prayers do make a difference. This is a mystery. By the way, let me recommend a book to you on this subject: *When God Doesn't Answer Your Prayer*, by Jerry Sitter, professor at Whitworth College.

I actually think the example James offers of Elijah the prophet can help us understand more about how prayer works. He says Elijah *"was a human being, just as we are."* In other words, he wasn't superhuman. He was just a typical person. We're told he prayed and it didn't rain for three and a half years. God answered that prayer. But guess what? In praying that prayer, he was simply

asking for something that God had already promised he'd do. God had said to his people back in Deuteronomy if they turned away from him and worshipped other gods, *"Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and he'll shut up the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce..."* (Deut. 11:16-17). Elijah's prayer was based on something God had already revealed to his people who were at that very moment worshipping other gods!

James also says of Elijah, *"Again, he prayed, and the heavens gave rain..."* Another answered prayer. But why did he pray that? He prayed that because God had just told him that after three-and-a-half years he was now ready to send rain again (1 Kings 18:1).

So prayer is powerful and effective but not as a blank check. It's powerful and effective in accomplishing God's revealed purposes and promises. It's like God enlists us in the process of fulfilling his will. Through prayer, we participate with God in what he's purposed to do in this world.

Prayer isn't a way of aligning God to our purposes and plans, but rather a way of aligning our hearts with his. Prayer works on us as well as for us. It orients us to what God is doing. It makes us partners with God in his plan to bring his Kingdom to this earth. Jesus said, *"You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it"* (John 14:14). He doesn't say you can ask for anything and I'll give it to you. He says you can ask for anything "in my name." Praying in Jesus' name means we pray for things that things consistent with his character, desire, and will. I think the mystery of prayer can be summed up with a quote from Pastor Timothy Keller,

When you pray for something, God will either give you what you ask, or he will give you what you would have asked for if you knew everything he knows.

How to pray?

And this leads me to the third question: How to pray? There are several things we can learn about this. First, we should pray continuously. When James says in verse 15, *"Let them pray...let them sing songs of praise,"* he uses the present tense which means, "Let them keep praying...let them keep singing songs of praise."

And with that, we're called to pray earnestly. It's like we're to work at prayer. When it says in verse 17, *"Elijah prayed earnestly,"* it literally should read, "Elijah prayed with a prayer," and that kind of repetition was used to express intensity. He prayed continuously and intensely.

And then a third thing I've already mentioned is we should pray with others. James envisions a church at prayer together: confessing sins, sharing, and singing praises, asking God to heal a brother or sister of physical, emotional, or spiritual illness.

The thing that stands out for me in this passage about how to pray is what James says in verse 15, *“the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.”* Let me say first what that does not mean. It doesn't mean you have to work up perfect certainty for your prayer, somehow to be answered. We see many people falling into that trap today — if God doesn't answer my prayer, say for healing, the problem is I just don't have enough faith. That is wrong. On one occasion, recorded in Mark 9, Jesus ran into a man with a son who was possessed by a spirit and unable to speak. Jesus said to him, *“Everything is possible for one who believes.”* And then the father said, *“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”* (vv. 23-24). He had doubts. He had imperfect faith. But guess what? Jesus healed the boy anyway. Another time Jesus said, *“If you have faith as small as a mustard seed,” you can move mountains* (Matt 17:20).

You see, James isn't talking about us mustering up certainty of faith or even more faith. I believe the prayer of faith is a Spirit-given conviction that the Lord does want us to ask for something and will indeed grant it. And quite often, as James says here, it pertains to healing. It's not something we can manufacture by saying, “I believe, I truly believe, I really believe.” It's a gift of God. It's not even something we always have in our prayer life. There are many times we pray without this conviction. But, at the very least, this encourages us to be open and alert in our prayer life to what God is leading us to ask of him. Perhaps this is what Paul meant when he frequently mentioned “praying in the Spirit.” Certainly, this is what he meant when he said,

“We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God” (Romans 8:26-27).

Several years ago, Lynn and I were praying with and for a dear friend who suffered from a brain tumor and was told she likely only had a few months to live. She was a mother of three small boys, and her desire was to be able to live long enough to raise them and see them grow up. All I can say is we were given a gift on that day to pray this prayer of faith for her healing, and indeed she lived long enough to see her youngest son turn 18, at which time the tumor returned, and she died. Honestly, I don't understand everything about how that works. More often than not, the people I've prayed for don't get healed. But I believe that's an example of the “prayer of faith” James is talking about here.

So those are the fundamentals of prayer. James answers three questions:

When to pray?

Pray in any all circumstances of life. Pray when you're in trouble and when you're happy. Pray also when you're sick. And when you're sick, you'll need to ask others to pray for you, and you may need to confess your sins to one another.

How to pray?

Pray continuously. Pray earnestly. And learn in your prayers to listen to the Spirit, and when he prompts, pray the prayer that's offered in faith.

Why to pray?

Because prayer makes a difference. Prayer is powerful and effective. Go back with me to that verse: “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” You may think as I do, “Well, I guess that excludes me.” I mean, I'm not righteous, and neither are you. None of us are righteous apart from Jesus Christ, making us righteous. But consider this, Jesus, the righteous one, is in heaven right now interceding for you. Listen to Romans 8,

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Rom 8:33-34

Jesus is praying for us, and Jesus is perfectly righteous. He's praying for your holiness. He's praying your joy would be made full. He's praying your life would have purpose and meaning. He's praying the very best prayers for you. And those prayers will be answered because he is the righteous One. I love how John Wesley put it in an old hymn:

**Poor though I am, despised, forgot,
Yet God, my God, forgets me not;
And he is safe, and must succeed,
For whom the Lord promises to plead.**

The Lord himself, Jesus Christ, the righteous One, promises to plead for you and me. And not only that, he makes you righteous. He took your sin upon himself so you could have his righteousness upon yourself. With that, you can pray powerful and effective prayers!

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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