

*series:* Pure Religion: Wisdom that Works from the Book of James

The topic for this message is prayer, as we near the end of our study on James. Prayer is a fascinating topic because prayer is more mystery than science. It's not something of which you can write out the mathematical formula, or draw out a mechanical blueprint. There is a mystery to prayer. Prayer doesn't always make sense. You can see that in your own life. You have seen God provide for something you've asked for God to do. You've also asked for things that God hasn't given to you. And there are times when God gives things that you never asked for in the first place.

Yet, even though prayer is a mystery, we're drawn to prayer. As church people, you seek out people to pray for you. Even non-church people pursue prayer. I read a study several years ago that said 60 percent of non-church people claim to pray. I wonder if part of the reason that we're drawn to prayer is not so we can figure it out, but precisely because we can't. I wonder if our draw to prayer is like our draw to a beautiful piece of art. You stand in front of a painting, admiring the creation. Your admiration is not because you figured out exactly how the artist did the work, but your admiration is the mystery of how someone could create something so beautiful.

In our passage, James is nearer the end of his letter and quickly moves through several quick-hitting statements about prayer. The word prayer appears in every verse in our passage. So, the main idea is not lost this morning. But what I want to do is breakdown his teaching into three sections. Three brush strokes, as it were, that are going to add on to the art of prayer. I'm not going to explain it entirely, nor give you all the mechanics to it. I don't think that's there. But here's what I want you to do at the end of this message. I want you to choose one of the three statements about prayer that we're going to see and pray with that view in mind this week. I want you to add a new brush stroke to your practice of prayer this week.

**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**

**Prayer brings the soul into focus**

In verse 13, the first aspect of prayer that James paints for us is that prayer brings the soul into focus. James describes the extremes of life. This word for trouble is fascinating in the original language. It doesn't mean that you did something wrong and got in trouble, but rather it means that your circumstances have worked out in such a way that brings distress. If that's the case, James says to pray - continue doing what you should do - and move toward God.

On the other end of the spectrum, if life is going well for you, celebrate. Recently, I was driving on 19th avenue, and I noticed in the rearview mirror that the car behind me was moving back and forth. The car was moving because the guy driving was singing and dancing to whatever music he was playing. He was having a fantastic time. I watched that and thought, I want that. I don't necessarily want to get the car moving, but I want the freedom to be joyful.

So often I mute joy, and perhaps you do too. Joy is one of the most vulnerable emotions you could experience. Part of the reason for that is because we live in a world that doesn't often work as it should. We live in a world of scarcity, uncertainty, and longing. In that type of world, as author Brene Brown puts it, joy can feel like a setup. And I think she's right about that. We're afraid to celebrate because of what might happen next. But James has a different approach. Move toward God and bring your soul fully present in whatever the circumstance.

In Jewish theology, there's a fascinating word called Kavanah, which means intention or inner participation. It means that you're not just going through the motions, but you're fully present with God. Abraham Heschel, who was a 20th-century Jewish rabbi and philosopher, describes Kavanah as disclosing yourself to the Sustainer. It is not merely to know God, but to be known by him. It means that you bring the world to God - not because God doesn't know it, but so that you are present with him in it. Heschel says this about prayer. "Prayer is...primarily Kavanah, the yielding of the entire being to one goal, the gathering of the soul into focus." Not just moving through life nor ignoring life. Instead, you are fully present, desiring to be seen by God.

**Prayer releases what is bound**

In verses 14-15, James speaks to the idea of someone who is so overwhelmed with a sickness that they cannot join the regular gathering of the church. So he says to call the elders to come to their place to pray. They are to anoint the person with oil, which is a symbolic act that declares God has given special care to the person.

As I read this, two questions stood out to me. First, what does James mean about healing? To put it another way, if I'm not healed, does that mean I don't have enough faith? Maybe you've heard that. How do we make sense of James' statement? I don't have a perfect answer, but a

couple of thoughts that could help. It's not the person who is sick who should pray, but rather the Elders. The focus is not on the faith of the sick person, but on the symbolic act of the Elders. Also, faith is a far-reaching concept. But one way that I would describe faith (looking, for example, at the journey of faith of Old Testament people like Abraham) is this: Faith is the belief that whatever happens next will not undo the good that God has planned. What if the "prayer of faith" was a prayer with this posture: "God, I want \_\_\_\_\_, but no matter what you decide to do, I want to see your goodness."

The second question that stands out to me, in this set of verses, is why does James bring up forgiveness? What does forgiveness have to do with healing? Part of the reason is the context of James' world. In the ancient world, there was a belief that sickness was tied to sin. You were sick because you (or your family) did something wrong. Jesus and others came along and taught differently. But maybe that idea of sickness and sin existed in James' audience. We could paraphrase it like this, "Even if you think sin caused the sickness, the prayer of faith will cover it."

There's another idea that I find fascinating as well. Part of the definition of the word forgive means to send away. So, when you're forgiven, the sin is sent away. When you forgive someone else, you are sending away what was done. I love that idea. When you forgive someone else for the harm that they did to you, you are setting them free from the burden upon them. And you're sending away the hurt that has bound you. Prayer releases what is bound. So he says that prayer brings the soul into focus. And prayer releases what is bound.

### **Prayer unites what is divided**

There's an interesting movement in verse 16. James has talked about the individual praying (verse 13), and he's talked about the elders praying (verse 14). Now he's moving to the broader church community. As they meet together, confess, and pray for each other. I wonder if James knew of situations in his audience where the community had been divided. James' answer is to confess and pray.

Why is that important? Both confession and prayer are vulnerable acts. Think about a relationship in which you have been able to confess something deep in you. What happened at that moment? You put yourself on display. You put your well-being in the hands of another person. It a vulnerable act to confess. But prayer is also a vulnerable act. When you commit to pray for another person, what you are communicating is that you care for that person. You reciprocate the vulnerability.

What happens when both people are vulnerable? Belonging. You are more united than you were a moment earlier. I wonder if part of what James is doing here is leading his audience to a practice that will united relationships that have been divided. With this in mind, how is prayer

"powerful and effective?" Prayer heals, forgiveness, and unites. That's an astounding power.

James then gives an example of what this type of prayer looks like. Elijah was one of the great prophets in Israel's history. But here's the interesting thing, in verse 17-18, James doesn't highlight Elijah's great acts. Instead, James highlights the common humanity that we share with Elijah. What Elijah did in his humanity is that he prayed earnestly. In the original Greek language, that phrase is literally, "prayed with prayer." What Elijah did - and what we can do - is "pray with prayer." The secret to Elijah's great acts? He prayed with prayer. I imagine, when he didn't know what to pray, he prayed with prayer. Perhaps when he got lost in prayer, he prayed with more prayer. His prayers were filled with prayer.

Here is what a human being just like you did amid his world: He prayed with prayer. Elijah's soul was brought into focus; he presented the world to God. Drought bound up the rain; his prayer released what was bound. And the earth produced its crops; his prayer brought to life what was absent. All this happened because Elijah prayed with prayer.

I think that James is trying to take prayer down from the shelf, where we think that we could never do in that way. James wants to say that all of us could do prayer that way. All of us can pray with prayer. Maybe for you, it's about your soul being brought into focus. Perhaps for you, circumstances have turned you all sorts of ways and somewhere along the journey you've checked out. Maybe you've live surrounded by division, and you long for God to bring things together again. What if this week you held on to one of those brushstrokes of prayer. What if you pray with the posture, "God, whatever happens next, I believe it will not undo the good that you have planned."

Perhaps you don't remember what Jesus did before he got to the cross. Before the Cross, before the trial, Jesus knelt in a grove of olive trees and prayed. He prayed for what was coming next. He prayed for His eleven remaining followers. But here's the thing that people often forget, Jesus also prayed for you (John 17:20).

I don't know when the last time was when you thought about that. Perhaps you've never thought about that. All of us would long for someone to pray for us and express that they are for us and care for us. Here is a picture of the love of God for you. In His greatest distress, He spent energy praying for you. Jesus prayed for you before you even existed. On the path to the Cross, where Jesus died for you, He was on his knees in prayer for you.

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

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