

The Law that Sets You Free

by
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Chapter 8 "Praying and Caring"

James 5:13-20

Our three sons, whom I regard as accidents going somewhere to happen, have taught me that life is made up of weal and woe. I have lost track of the number of runs to the hospital for x-rays and stitches, assorted pills and repairs. One never knows what a day will bring. At least life never gets dull for parents. Also, as a pastor, I've become accustomed to the vicissitudes of life. Life is an alternation of good and bad, health and sickness, prosperity and adversity. Change is constant; the status is never quo. As we used to say in Texas, "If you don't like the weather, just wait a minute."

In addition to our changing circumstances there are our changing moods. Often they have nothing to do with the outward events of our lives. For no apparent reason we may awaken with the blahs. Everything, for some unexplainable reason, looks bleak and gray. Other times, even in periods of severe pressure, we are chipper and optimistic. As the old spiritual has it, "Sometimes I'm up; sometimes I'm down." You never know what a day will bring or how you will feel about it. Our circumstances and our attitudes are in a constant state of flux. As James has noted before, "You do not know what your life will be like tomorrow" (James 4:14). Change and fluctuations of fortune are one of the hard facts of life. Therefore, we need one fixed point around which the ebb and flow of life can be ordered, something to keep us steady through the vicissitudes of life. And that James gives: "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises" (James 5:13).

Is anyone suffering? Are you beat? (The Greek word for *suffering* in verse 13 actually means suffering cruel blows from without.) Then pray. Are you cheerful? Full of vim, vigor and vitality? Then pray, sing praises. Praises, after all, are merely another form of prayer. In any and all circumstances, writes James, pray. In other words, relate everything to God. He is in everything, behind every circumstance, present in every event.

THE MYSTERY OF PRAYER

I recall a plaque over my mother's desk that said, "Prayer changes things." That's true; prayer does produce change. As James points out in this chapter (v. 16), the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much (literally, "wins out" or "prevails"). When we pray, things happen! God promises it, and our experience confirms it. Yet we must know that God (simply because he is God) is not swayed by our entreaties. He can't be influenced to act in a way contrary to what he has already purposed. Prayer, or so I believe, has no persuasive effect on God.

What then is prayer? Prayer is a great mystery. (I'm not thinking here of a biblical "mystery," i.e., a truth revealed by God that we would not otherwise know.) We are simply not told how prayer works. There is, however, at least a partial explanation in Scripture. There is even a suggestion in

the passage before us. Note the illustration of Elijah in verses 17 and 18. We are told that Elijah prayed and it did not rain for three and a half years. Again, we are told that he prayed and it rained. Surely this is an example of vigorous intercessory prayer. Yet when you read the account in 1 Kings 17 and 18, you will find only one rather obscure reference to Elijah at prayer. As a matter of plain fact, Elijah's declaration to Ahab that it would "neither dew nor rain these years" is based on the Lord's word which had come to him (1 Kings 17:1). Additionally we are told that before Elijah prayed for the drought to be broken (18:42), he was *told* that it would be broken (18:1). In other words, he merely asked God to do what God had already said he would do! That, it seems, is always the characteristic of effective prayer. It is asking in line with God's purposes and promises. Paul, I believe, is stating the same principle another way in Romans 8:26, 27:

And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Paul states what we all feel. We simply do not know how to pray. Certainly if we don't feel that way, we should. Who of us knows enough to pray in such a way that God's purposes are accomplished? What audacity, for instance, to pray for a three-year drought as Elijah did? How could I know what effect that would have on the economy of the land of Canaan, the entire Near East or, for that matter, the whole world? Who could assess the environmental impact of that prayer? Any information that I might have would be short-range and mostly related to my personal needs. Therefore, if I'm honest, I must admit I do not know how to pray. However, writes Paul, the Spirit himself who knows the mind of God intercedes for us according to the will of God. Paul's point, I believe, is that it is futile to fill the air with cries and pleas when we are suffering (for that is the context here as well) because we do not know what to ask for. The Spirit helps us in our weakness, however, by praying for us, and *we thus are led to pray as he prays*. Prayer, then, is mostly listening. Prayer is finding God's will and asking for it. That will is revealed through the internal witness of the spirit of God to the written Word of God.

PRAYER CHANGES US

It works out in practice in this way, or so I believe. Suffering ought to cause us to wait on God. In time, as we submit to his will and accept our condition as his plan for us, he will reveal a promise or principle in his word. It may come from our own reading of scripture or the counsel of another or the recollection of some forgotten truth. But it will be relevant to our situation and will become the basis of renewed prayer. Often there is a great sense of boldness that accompanies such prayer. That is what the apostles describe as praying "in the spirit" (Eph. 6:18). That is authentic prayer! I do fully expect to see all such prayers answered, because they are firmly based on the faithfulness of God. He is the God who cannot lie (Titus 1:2). Therefore, what he promises, he performs. In time or in eternity all will be realized; of that I am sure.

Now do you see what has happened? God enlists us in the process of fulfilling his will. In other words, we by prayer share with him in what he has purposed to do in the world. Prayer thus is not our way of aligning God with our program, but his way of aligning us with his. Prayer works *on* you as well as *for* you. Prayer changes you. It relates you to what God is doing, as well as relating God to all elements of your life. It makes you a partner with God in his program to bring salvation to this earth. In short, it "can accomplish much." It can and may change the outward affairs of

your life. It will always, if rightly used, change your attitude toward those circumstances. You will begin to see things from God's viewpoint and, having thus viewed them, will begin to agree with God that they are right and proper for you. Therefore, you can stop resisting and start resting in them. Prayer, thus, has changed you. This is, at least for me, a most satisfying explanation of the necessity for prayer. Therefore, James writes, pray about everything. If you are suffering--pray. If you are cheerful--pray. That's God's way of getting into every aspect of your experience.

James picks up the theme of prayer again in verses 14 and 15. But in this instance he has in mind a particular aspect of prayer:

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; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him (James 5:14-15).

This passage is admittedly difficult and has been interpreted in various ways. It is this passage from which the Roman Catholic church derives its Sacrament of Extreme Unction, termed *extreme* because it is administered when the patient is *in extremis* or at the point of death. According to Roman Catholic theology, the last rites performed by the priest prepare the soul of man to enter into death. Accordingly the sign of anointing and prayer symbolize the grace given to man upon faith and repentance to produce strength of soul to face death. The emphasis in Roman Catholic theology, then, is more on preparation for death than for life. It seems to me, however, that James' stress lies elsewhere. His emphasis is that this action, taken in faith, will restore a brother to *life*.

Others have assigned this passage to an early period of church history when healings authenticated the apostolic message (Heb. 1:4). It was legitimate for that hour and the particular needs of the church at that time, but has no relevance to our century. Thus they believe the passage has no meaning for us today. I believe, however, that this passage is spoken for our day as well. We must, therefore, take it literally and seriously. Because this passage is largely ignored today, this practice is absent from our churches. And I believe by so handling it we have weakened the ministry of the Word.

Let's make some observations. First note that this passage has something to do with the relationship of sickness and prayer. The prayer here specifically has to do with prayer for an *ailing* brother--primarily one who is physically sick. The term translated *sick* in verse 14 means "helpless or weak." In other words, this is an especially debilitating illness. The brother or sister is severely afflicted. The second term, translated *sick* in verse 15, actually means "weary." That is, the sufferer has grown weary because of the long duration of the illness. We can conclude, therefore, that James is not talking about minor ailments, but severe long-term disorders with accompanying physical pain and emotional discomfort; the victim is gravely ill.

SICKNESS AND SIN

Second, the sickness is related to sin. In one sense, of course, all sickness is related to sin. Sin, in general, causes sickness in general. The entrance of sin into the world through Adam brought about degeneracy and death. Our partnership with Adam means that we all get diseased and eventually die. So in that general sense, all such sickness is the result of sin.

Not all physical disorder, however, is the direct result of one's sinful acts. Jesus made that very clear when the disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:2-3). In other words, the pitiful plight of the blind man was not because the man himself sinned. There was no direct cause-and-effect relationship between this man's sin and his affliction. In his case it was permitted in order to display God's works in the man, specifically by giving him his sight and thus authenticating the work of God's Son (John 9:4). Other passages likewise indicate that not all calamity and sickness is the direct result of one's sin (cf. Luke 13:1-5). However, a substantial number of verses do indicate that sin can make one sick, even to death (Mark 2:5; 1 Cor. 30; Deut. 28:22, 27; John 5:14; 1 John 5:16, 17). And this seems to be the intent of James' words here. He is referring specifically to a sickness caused by sin.

You'll note that James says in verse 15, "And if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him." In English all conditional clauses have one force. They convey a true contingency. In Greek, however, there are a number of ways to state a condition. In this particular case James uses a phrase that actually suggests a high degree of probability. It is not certain that he has committed sin. However, it is *most* probable. At least that is the way James views the situation before him.

In addition you should know that the verb in verse 15 translated "committed sins" suggests an action in the past with continuing results. In other words, they are sins that were committed in the past and are still exercising control over the individual. He is the victim of his sin. And there is only one class of sin that can victimize a Christian--unjudged, unconfessed sins. I believe, then, that these are not isolated sinful acts--sins which one may inadvertently or even deliberately fall into and then quickly judge. They are rather sins *persisted in*. That is, they are areas of rebellion which the individual in question has allowed to go unjudged. This is sinning with a high hand--deliberate, conscious, long-term rebellion against some known command of God. And it is a well-established biblical fact that sin of that nature may produce weakness, sickness and even death (1 Cor. 11:30).

OPEN CONFESSION

Perhaps the strongest indication of James' intent is verse 16: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed." The conjunction *therefore* marks this sentence as a conclusion to what has preceded it. The argument, I believe, goes like this: Sin persisted in will make you sick and eventually kill you. *Therefore*, confess your sins to one another so you may be healed. (The verb suggests a state of being--a healed or healthy condition.) More about this verse later. My concern in introducing it at this point is to show that James' solution to the sin that leads to death is open confession of that sin. He is directing us to deal with sin before it does us in! He is exhorting us to share our struggle with a brother and pray for one another that we may be healed as a condition of life, a state of being.

You can see, therefore, that this verse would have little significance in this context unless James is speaking about the dire effects of sin in one's life. Because sin will destroy us, James reasons, we must do something about sin. Call for help from a stronger member. There are some sins which can spring up quickly and with which we cannot cope. Some habits, likewise, are almost impossible to eradicate. That's why we need the Body. In such cases, James argues, confess your

sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed. Then, by way of reminder, he underscores the radical effects of believing prayer. If prayer can alter the forces of nature, it can most certainly change us. James' entire argument hinges on the idea that prayer will release one from sin which will in turn result in health and a state of well-being. To violate this principle may result in weakness, sin, and an untimely death.

These observations, then, have led me to believe that James is here referring to sickness and suffering that is the direct result of rebellion. This is sin that leads to death. This is the sin that John says we should not beg God to cure (1 John 5:16). That is, we should not plead with God to merely terminate the illness because the real source of the malady is deeply entrenched sin. If he healed in that situation, he would merely be treating symptoms. The man's need is fundamentally spiritual rather than physical. In this case the only cure is genuine repentance and the concerted ministry of the entire Body of Christ. The confession of the ailing member and the intercession of a believing Body will then result in wholeness of spirit and body.

THE ONE-TWO PUNCH

Notice that James suggests two stages. Confession of sin to one another keeps the body healthy spiritually and physically (James 5:16). That is what James means when he says, "Confess your sins to one another." The terminology suggests confessing to someone of the same kind, a much needed reminder that we are all subject to failure. We all need the support of the Body in our fight against sin. The term *confession* implies frankness and openness about our sins. It means essentially to agree with God about the sin--to call it what it is and not rationalize it or justify it. Name it and ask for help. Then the stronger member is to pray for us that we may be strengthened to resist the sin and thus delivered from it and its damaging effects. In such a case, James insists, we will continue in a state of good health.

If, however, we have allowed the sin to so control us that it has led to sickness, then we may, even in that advanced state, call for the elders of the church who will then, like any other member of the Body, and in fact representing that Body, pray for us that we may be healed. The result of such a prayer will be restoration and forgiveness (James 5:14, 15). Note that the ailing man takes the initiative. *He* calls for the elders (v. 14). They come in response to his call. The elders, in this case, because they are the leadership in a local assembly, represent that local group. That is, they come in place of the entire church. They represent the Body of Christ on a rescue mission! Thus, in effect, the whole Body ministers to the need of the ailing member.

This is a vivid analogy to the way in which our human body functions. If one part of our body is ailing, it cries out for help. Every other member comes to its aid. All the resources of our body are brought to bear on the infirmity of the weaker member. In this way the entire body takes on this weakness. The weak member takes on the strength of the whole organism. Thus the body ministers to itself. It is a fact that physicians cannot heal, but the body will heal itself if given the opportunity. All any physician can do is assist the body in its internal affairs. Given half a chance, our bodies will correct almost any malfunction. So it is with the Body of Christ; when one member hurts he ought to alert the other members to his need so they can move to meet it.

Since it is normally impractical for the entire church to respond in this way, the elders come in response to an ailing member's call. They, representing the church, will come and anoint him with oil and pray. The oil, in this case, is not medicinal, but symbolic. (Note that they *anoint*, not

rub with oil.) Oil almost always symbolizes the ministry of the Holy Spirit, without whose restoration powers no one would ever be healed. The prayer of those believing men, based as it is on their full confidence on the Holy Spirit's capacity to heal, will restore the man both physically and spiritually.

Do you understand now what James is advocating? Essentially he is describing two approaches to this issue: (1) Confession of sin to one another and intercession by supporting members of the Body will deliver us from sin and its damaging side effects. That is the principle enunciated in James 5:16. (2) If, however, sin has run its course and in the process ravaged our bodies, even then we can call the elders of the local Body with which we are associated. If our sickness is the direct result of sin, then the prayer of the believing elders will result in both spiritual and physical restoration. That, it seems to me, is clearly James' conclusion in 5:14, 15.

From James' treatment of this theme, then, we can draw a rather startling conclusion. An open, caring, sharing community ought to be a more healthy community! Certainly that ought to be true in a spiritual sense. I believe that it is also true in a physical sense. Christians, to be sure, have their share of sickness and inevitably all die. Certainly no one is immune to the overall effects of sin in the world and in our bodies. James himself makes that clear in his book. Christians do suffer and die. However, in general, we ought to expect a greater measure of physical well-being in those groups where men and women are realistic and candid about their inner lives and where there is a mutual sharing and bearing of one another's sins. Certainly the physical well-being of the Sons of Israel was conditioned by their obedience (Deut. 7:15; 28:59, 61). It appears from this passage in James, moreover, that the principle is an enduring one. Therefore, keep on confessing your sins to one another that you may be healed.

THE FINAL WORD

This is James' last word, and it's a good one--one worth heeding. It has always struck me that James has no real conclusion to his epistle, at least not a formal salutation or conclusion. It ends very abruptly--no benediction, doxology, or farewell word. Perhaps it is because he does not want to deflect his readers' minds from these last thoughts. They seem to hang in the air and then reverberate in our memories.

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back; let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19, 20).

Sad to say, some will stray from the truth. Perhaps it will be one of us! I certainly know the feeling. As the hymn writer puts it, "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love." We are all susceptible to spiritual wanderlust. But what do we do when one among us strays? Well, James declares, rescue him, turn him around, turn him back. Get him headed for home. That's the counterpart to the discussion in 5:14-18. There the brother recognizes his need, and we come to his rescue. But what if he does not know or admit his need. He's lost and doesn't know it or doesn't want to be found. What do we do then? We seek and find him and turn him back. As Paul writes in Galatians 6:1, 2:

Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's

burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.

That is love in action--the fulfillment of the law of love.

You have undoubtedly heard the story of the boy who was trudging through the ghetto with a small crippled child on his back. When asked how he could carry such a heavy load, he responded, "He ain't heavy. He's my brother!" When you see a straying saint, he's your brother--therefore he ain't too heavy. Pick him up and help him along. James says that in so doing we will turn a sinner from the error of his way, we will save his soul from death, and we will cover a multitude of sins. By "saving a soul from death," James may have in mind the sin unto death of which he speaks in 5:14-15. In that case he would be using *soul* interchangeably with *person*. That may well be. It seems more likely, however, that James is thinking metaphorically, and referring not to physical death, but to that deathlike state of soul that settles in when we try to evade the truth. We have all experienced this death--the boredom, frustration, and emptiness which is the consequence of disobedience. When we turn a brother away from his rebellion, we save a brother from such a condition.

Furthermore, James states, we will "cover a multitude of sins." That's a quotation from Proverbs 10:12: "Hatred stirs up strife, But love covers all transgressions." The poetic parallelism here indicates that this action is antithetical to "stirring up strife." Love takes a different tack. It covers up sins. It doesn't harp on them (cp. Prov. 11:13). The stress is on conciliation and peacemaking. Love doesn't make trouble for a sinner. It makes peace. It is restorative and redemptive. It hushes up the matter. It covers the sins with love and points the way back home. That is a high and holy calling. That is working the works of God.

And who of us is adequate for those things--any of those things we have read in the Book of James? What will keep us from "straying from the truth" as James puts it? James has stressed throughout his little epistle that the truth is *something to be done*. For him truth was not merely a matter of study, research, or discussion. It was something to which he submitted his entire humanity. God's truth is an affair of the heart and the hands. It is something by which James lived. He wholeheartedly endorsed it and lived it, and thus was liberated by it.

Freedom is not the liberty to do as we please. That so-called freedom shortly becomes tyranny of the worst sort (Gal. 5:13-15). True freedom--the only freedom worthy of the name--is the result of obedience to the will and character of God. As the Lord put it, "you shall know [in experience] the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). By faith we *can* work the works of God (James 2:23). By dependence on the indwelling life of our risen Lord, we *can* live lives free from bitter jealousy, selfish ambition, prejudice, and pride. Our tongues *can* be harnessed for redemptive and constructive purposes. We *can* be peaceable, gentle, reasonable people, stable and poised in the face of adversity and stress.

That's what makes life exciting. That makes it all worthwhile. And again, how do you do it? How do you become authentically Christian? It is by faith that you work the works of God. God alone is your adequacy and strength. Authentic faith works! All other belief is dead, demonic and downright dull.

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