

Study Notes: James 5:13-18
November 17, 2024: “Called to Pray”
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Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.

- James begins this section of teaching by speaking to the situations we will encounter in life, times of trouble, and times of joy. Though the situations are different, in each case, the person is to communicate with God the Father. In times of trouble, the command is to address God through prayer. In times of happiness, we are commanded to sing praises.
 - The word for “songs of praise” is the Greek word which means *psalms*. This doesn’t mean we can only sing from the book of Psalms (although those are a good model for our songs of praise). The idea is addressing God with our hearts full of praise, which come from our mouths in songs to Him.
- Trouble is a general term that refers to any kind of difficult situation; likewise happy does not refer to any specific event, but a general time of favor. The reality of the human condition is that we will all experience times of trouble (to be afflicted, or endure evil) and times of happiness (to be full of joy, in good spirits). In both of these situations, it is easy to turn from God, but James encourages us to instead turn towards Him.

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.

- Next, James addresses those who are sick. The word James uses for “sick” in his question is *asthenēs*, which means to be powerless or very weak. For this reason, some scholars believe that James was not addressing actual physical illness here, but just spiritual weakness. While James may not have only physical illness in view, we cannot say that this verse only applies to those who are dealing with weak faith. It applies to all who are weak, whether that weakness be a result of physical illness or spiritual infirmity.
- Those in this state of powerlessness were to call upon the elders of the church. Notice who took the action, it was the person in need of prayer. This was an act of faith on their part, and an important step in the process of healing (see James 1:6-7).
 - Elders was a term that is used in the New Testament to refer to the leaders in the church. There were two lists of qualifications for elders (see 1 Timothy 3:2-7, Titus 1:5-9). For James, the key about these people was that they were able to intercede with “prayers offered in faith.”
- The elders would “pray over” the person, bringing them to the throne of God, and they would “anoint them with oil.” Oil is a sign and symbol of the coming of the Holy Spirit, and is also the purpose of encouragement and uplifting.
 - The New American Commentary notes, “Olive oil, according to Old Testament and Jewish understanding, was prized for its nurturing of human well-being and for its healing properties. In Jesus’ and his disciples’ ministry, olive oil was utilized in their healings of the sick when combined with the preaching of repentance.”

- Faithful prayer is a powerful thing. James says it will make the person well and raise them up (restoring them from what has kept them weak and powerless). The term James chooses for “well,” is the Greek word *sozo*, which is used many times in Scripture as the word for “save.” If we realized the power of our prayers, we might be more likely to ask for more healing in prayer. However, sometimes earthly healing is not the result of faithful prayer. It is in these moments that we must trust in the sovereign will of God and know that He sometimes works in ways we cannot understand.
- The healing that James describes is of both body and spirit. Not only will the person be made physically well, but more importantly, they will be made whole in their spirit, forgiven of sins that they have committed. James offers us a link between sin and weakness. Though it is not a direct link (James uses the word “if”) it is clear that physical healing would mean very little if it were not connected with forgiveness of sins.
- This was the model of Jesus often in the Gospels. While He offers physical healing to many people, more importantly, He offers forgiveness from sin.

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.

- Once more, James picks up on the issue of sin. Again, we can't say that all our problems (illnesses, etc.) are a result of our own sin, as the book of Job makes this point very clear. However, sin has consequences and should not be harbored in our hearts, but confessed to one another so we might find healing from the pain sin inflicts upon us and others.
- The purpose of confession is to open ourselves up to healing and grace. The main people we should address in confession are those people who have been wronged or impacted by our sins. We should always confess our sins to God, since all sin is against Him.
- The purpose of the body of Christ is to lift each other up to God. While earlier James only addressed the leaders of the church, now he addresses the whole body. We need not have special qualifications to pray for one another. We must simply offer our prayers in faith. If we are in right standing with God, our prayers will be powerful and effective.
- James uses the adjective, “righteous,” for a specific purpose. He is not suggesting that we must be perfect before we can pray, but that we must be in a right relationship with God before we can expect our prayers to be heard and answered; hence the fact that James talks about confession of sin before he talks about the power and effective nature of prayer.

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.

- Elijah was one of the great heroes of Jewish faith. He was one of the few people who never tasted death, but went into God's Presence in a chariot of fire (see 2 Kings 2). Yet, James reminds us that Elijah was still a human being, and the power of prayer available to this great man of God is available to us.
- The story of Elijah, that James references, is found in 1 Kings 17-19. One important note about the story is that in it, Elijah followed the will of God, and prayed in accordance with God's will. The fervency of Elijah's prayer is indicated by an idiom that is not evident in the NIV translation. The Greek which is translated as “prayed earnestly” literally means, “He prayed with prayer.”