

Rev. Janet R. Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
19th Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 29, 2024
Scripture: James 5: 13-20
Sermon: When Are We To Pray?

We are looking again at James' letter this morning. It is very intentionally designed to take your faith and commitment to God and make it very practical not just theoretical or internal. Early on in James, the author, boldly proclaimed "your faith if not evidenced by outward actions is dead." (2:17) We have talked about the importance of words and how they can encourage, or they can destroy. Last week we talked about the seeds of peace that we sow in our lives by our actions and our words.

Christians should be easy to pick out of a crowd by how they live their lives. And throughout this letter he mentions several specific ways we have opportunities to demonstrate our faith in the way we live our lives. Things such as faith evidenced by:

- How we handle trials and difficulties in our lives
- How we handle success
- How we handle temptations
- In the way that we use our words and if we speak more than listen
- In the level of concern you have for widows and orphans
- In the prejudices you have and demonstrate through your words and actions
- How you help those in need.
- How you approach plans for the future. Do you ask God to rubber stamp your plans or do you seek to know His plans for your life.

In today's text James closes out this letter by writing 5:13-20.

"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.”

James is saying, all of your life, every part of your life ought to flow out of the richness of your relationship with God and back to God.

- If you're in trouble pray to God about it
- If you're happy – pray praise to God about it
- If you're sick (on any level: physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual), call the elders and have them pray over you and God will heal you. He will set you free by giving you peace in your life to deal with what is happening.

What James is talking about here is the foundation for every situation in life. Our relationship with God is not primarily about the destination, spending eternity with Him in heaven, but it's more about the process of getting there. He wants to walk with you in and through every situation in this life as preparation for all of eternity spent with Him.

What's your first response when you're in trouble or sick or happy?

Our first response and not our last resort. Is it turning to God in prayer?

James reminds us that our lives are rooted in God, held forever in God's care, sustained and blessed by God who is compassionate and merciful. When we suffer, when we feel overwhelmed, when we are stressed, what is our framework? James says - pray. When we are cheerful, when life goes great, we sing songs of praise. Life is held by God, and nothing can separate us from God's love. This is the framework that intends to give us balance and peace and perspective in all of life's moments.

James seems to be encouraging - a centered life. Are you suffering? Pray. Are you cheerful - sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? Gather the community and pray. Life is rooted in God. We keep focused on God's primary care with us and for us. God is in all things. God is always at work. God never lets us go. We seek to be shaped and sustained in prayer and praise.

James instructs us to call the elders, if you're sick, and have them come and anoint you with oil and pray over you and the prayer "offered in faith" will make the person well. I want you to know that we are going to offer this anointing here in this church today.

The oil, throughout Scripture, is symbolic of God's presence. However, healing comes in many forms. We may not be healed physically but spiritually. Many have received the healing of a profound sense of peace with God in the midst of their sickness.

Although many have been healed or their life has been extended beyond the life span the doctors gave them, the greatest healing is being united with God at their final destination, eternal life. In the context of this instruction on healing James mentions confessing our sins to one another for a prayer of healing.

The prayers of faith do not always save the sick. So, this verse is not meant to be taken literally but as encouragement for living life fully with God.

Prayers are a primary means that we live life with God and with one another. Prayers help us trust God. Prayers help us relate and commend our lives to God's care. Prayers connect us to one another when we share our prayer concerns and remember each other in our prayers. So we pray fervently, even unceasingly, as another scripture teaches us. Our prayers help us and keep us bonded together in community and with God. Prayers remind us that we are not alone, or on our own. Prayers teach us that God is near, that God is always at work. Prayers deepen our faith. We draw near to God and God draws near to us. We do not believe IN prayer we believe in God. God is the One who sustains us, and God invites us to pray. So we pray.

We pray sincerely. We pray with devotion and care. We pray for ourselves, our loved ones, our friends and neighbors. We pray for our church, our city, our world. We pray for everything in our hearts. God gives us prayer. God instructs us to pray. James teaches - are you suffering? Pray. Are you celebrating? Sing songs of praise. But our prayers are not magic.

We bind our hearts to God's heart and to one another in prayer. We believe in God, who never leaves us, who always prevails, and who holds us forever. Our lives are always rooted in the compassion and mercy, the hope and promises, the peace and purposes of God.

We keep living in challenging times and many of us with very challenging circumstances. We seek to be faithful and resilient people amidst all that comes along. But we have to practice what we focus on. When we focus on the dark stuff - our lives become darker. When we focus on things that we cannot control, we become more paralyzed, and life gets

more difficult. But, when we focus on God's abiding care, God's promises, and keep our lives related to God in prayer and service, focus on the good things, the possibilities that might be before us, gratitude emerges, depression is abated, and we become more resilient.

James may realize that his hearers' suffering sometimes drives people away from God and God's Church. The apostle, after all, invites those who are in trouble to turn and pray not away from, but toward the Lord about it. The apostle also calls those who are happy to respond with praise to God.

That suggests that suffering gives the church community the opportunity to respond to it as a caring community. It offers members chances to respond in Christ-like ways to the suffering in the world that affects both family, neighbors and themselves. James invites God's children to turn toward their brothers and sisters in Christ rather than turning away from their suffering and helping each other in the Body of Christ deal with confession, and prayer, and do it with the laying on of hands. Also as the Body of Christ we should rejoice with each other and sing songs of praise in all circumstances.

James tells us that prayer is the answer for suffering. Is there any among the congregation who is suffering? Let that person pray. The suffering that James is referring to is not merely that we are having a bad day at work. Look back to James 5:10 and we see that this suffering is a reference to the suffering the prophets endured for the Lord. The prophets suffered for their stand for righteousness and God's truth. They suffered for speaking the messages of God. They suffered for engaging the wicked world. After pointing out the suffering of the prophets, James turns his attention to his audience and tells us that when we suffer for what is right, we need to pray. When the apostles suffered at the hands of the Sanhedrin, notice that the first thing the apostles and the Christians in Jerusalem did was pray for boldness (Acts 4:29-31). When we are not suffering for righteousness, then our prayers must be songs of thanksgiving to God.

James turns to the example of Elijah. James wants to remind us that Elijah was a person with a nature like ours. Elijah was a prophet. Elijah accomplished great things through prayer. He simply prayed to Almighty God. We can also accomplish great things through prayer. Prayer is not for personal, selfish gain, but for God's kingdom and glory. Elijah prayed fervently, James says. Look at the outcome of his fervent prayer. Prayer is powerful and effective. James is begging us to see why prayer is useful and

why we must engage more frequently in prayer individually and as a congregation for the needs around us, for ourselves and for the needs of the world.

James reminds us that the Christian life is not to be lived alone. We're instructed to pray for one another (5:16). God has provided the church body as a beautiful means of grace in our lives.

God doesn't promise to take all afflictions away from us, but He does promise to give us His joy and peace (John 15:11). He also promises to cause all things to work for good to those who love Him (Romans 8:28).

Turning to God in prayer shows that we are reliant upon Him. Through prayer, we can align our actions to His will and our attitudes to His desires.

Sometimes when the going gets tough, we may give up, complain, or even doubt God. But all of these are fleshly responses. God is the ultimate comforter and knows exactly what we are going through. We should turn to him during difficult times. Nothing in the world can fully comfort you or give you peace like God can give you.

As we offer this time of Anointing this morning let us pray for each other and our needs whether they are physical, emotional, or spiritual or praying for the needs of our families and friends.