

**James 5:13-18, No. 15****“The Prayer of Faith”****April 10, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Our text this evening, short as it is, has been the source of some important contention in Christian history, so my comments on the text, as we read it, will be somewhat lengthy.

**Text Comment**

- v.13 The word translated “suffering” here is a form of the same word used in 5:10 to describe the afflictions of the prophets who suffered persecution on account of the message they preached. The first antidote to affliction in the Christian life is prayer. When the Lord was weighed down by his burdens, as in Gethsemane, we read that he prayed “more earnestly.” [Luke 22:44] Prayer may not remove the suffering, but it can certainly transform it. On the other hand, if a Christian is enjoying happy circumstances – James here isn’t thinking about cheerfulness *in* adversity, but the absence of adversity – let him or her remember where his gifts come from and acknowledge the goodness of the Lord. In this way neither the happy things nor the sad things of life will take us away from God. Calvin puts the point beautifully: “there is no time in which God does not invite us to himself.” Or as another put it, by prayer, or conversation with God, we are to “hallow every pleasure and sanctify every pain.” [Motyer, 188]
- v.15 Now you may be aware that Roman Catholics regard this verse as teaching their sacrament of *extreme unction* (or, more commonly “last rites”), one of the seven sacraments according to that church. In that ceremony the priest anoints (that is the meaning of “unction”) the eyes, ears, nostrils, hands, and feet of a sick person considered to be *in extremis*, that is, on the point of death, in the belief that such oil, previously consecrated, is an effective medium of forgiveness in the case of those who are no longer able to make conscious confession of their sins and receive priestly absolution. In the Douay Version of the Bible, for long years the official Roman Catholic English translation of the Bible, is found this footnote to James 5:14:

“See here a plain warrant of scripture for the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, that any controversy against its institution would be against the express words of the sacred text in the plainest terms.”

The Council of Trent [1545] pronounced an anathema or curse on anyone who denies that extreme unction is “properly a sacrament, instituted by Christ...promulgated by the blessed apostle James...” or who maintains that the elders to whom James refers “are not priests who have been ordained by a bishop.” [Motyer, 191] Interestingly, in that Douay translation it is the priests who are to be called for, not the elders, as the Greek text has it, even though the Latin Vulgate, from which that English translation was made, also had “elders” not “priests” in the translation of James. [Tasker, 128-129] To be fair, the English word “priest,” derives from the Greek word *presbyter*, usually translated “elder.”

Now we don't need to spend much time on this, but let me say this much. This verse can hardly bear the weight the Catholic Church has placed on it. *First*, the prayer being offered is explicitly prayer for the person's healing in hope that the sick might be restored to health. That is clearly the sense of the words "the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up." As you know from the Gospel accounts of the Lord's healing miracles, the word "save" and the word "heal," are the same Greek word. Nothing is said here at all about the person being about to die or that the prayer is for a person who is dying. Nor is anything said to imply that the ritual itself has something explicitly to do with the forgiveness of sins.

*Second*, James does not invest this ministry in one man but in a group of men, the elders of the church. He is not talking about the sort of ministry that belongs only to those who officiate the sacraments. James says nothing at all about what Roman Catholics would think to be the special powers and responsibilities of priests. Quite the contrary. The elders are in view and for James, a Jew writing to Jews, the term *elders*, especially in the plural, would certainly include men whose calling was not to officiate worship. The Jewish elder was not a liturgical officer *per se*. To speak of the elders was to speak of the leadership of any and every local church or congregation; men, it would be supposed who were men of prayer. *Third*, in the next verse James will tell us to confess our sins *to one another*, so far is he from placing the forgiveness of sins in the hands of a priest.

*Fourth*, nothing is said about consecrating the oil. As you may know, there has been an ages-old argument about what the use of oil signifies here. 1) Some have argued that since oil was widely used as a medicine in the ancient world, it means only that proper medical care should be given even as prayer is offered. But since oil was hardly thought useful for any and all kinds of illnesses, it is doubtful that oil is regarded here as a medicine. No doubt, as the Bible bears its own witness, believers availed themselves of what medical care was available. But then as today, whether or not medicine cures, prayer should always be offered. 2) Some have argued that since the Lord Jesus sometimes anointed the sick with oil when he miraculously healed them (Matt. 6:13; of course, he also used his saliva in some cases and not oil), this text, coming as early as it did in the first century, suggests that what is in view is miraculous healing. I think this also an unlikely interpretation. We have no evidence that miraculous healing was widespread in the Christian church even in those early years and, more to the point, we have no evidence of it at all apart from some connection with the ministry of an apostle. It is often assumed that miracles were occurring frequently in many places, but we have no evidence that such was the case. 3) I think it much more likely that oil features here as an image and enhancement of prayer itself, as a symbolic embodiment of prayer and of the setting apart of the sick one for the blessing of God. Anointing with oil was a way of visualizing the invisible anointing of the Holy Spirit and of the blessing of God. After all, James says very clearly that it is the *prayer* of faith, not the *oil* that will heal the sick brother or sister. That is, *the oil is part of the prayer*. [cf. Moo, 238-242]

*Fifth*, the forgiveness of sin, in the case of this prayer James is talking about, may or may not be a part of the prayer or the blessing. As James says, "And *if* he has committed

sins...” In some cases forgiveness of sins may also be involved, but not in all. Now a few more details in the passage itself.

1. It appears that the case that James is envisaging is not some minor ailment, a sprained ankle or a cold, for example, as if the elders were to be called whenever we are not in tip-top physical condition. The elders are called to come to the man, not for the man to go to them, which implies that he is bed-ridden or, at least, house-bound. Second, the phrase “pray *over him*” also suggests that the man is confined by his illness and perhaps prostrate. The word translated “one who is sick” in v. 15 suggests that the person is “weary” or “fatigued.” In its only other use in the NT (Hebrews 12:3) it is translated “grow weary.” [cf. *BAG, ad loc*] And it is the elders’ faith, not the sick man’s faith to which James draws attention, suggesting that the person himself or herself may be too weak to exercise much faith of his or her own. The person, in other words, is seriously ill.

2. As for the sins that might be involved, several possibilities present themselves. It may be that the person comes to believe that his illness is a judgment for sins he or she committed. The Bible certainly doesn’t lead us to believe that sickness is always or even usually a punishment for sin, but it certainly teaches that it may be. Both Jesus and Paul said as much. In such a case the Christian may become more concerned for his or her forgiveness than for physical healing. This is a connection modern evangelicals have far too easily dismissed from their understanding of life, that connection between sin and illness. Or it may be, or may also be that, lying abed ill has given the person opportunity for reflection and self-examination and, as a result, he or she has become conscious of sins inadequately confessed and repented of.

Let me finish our consideration of these two verses by saying two things. *First*, the elders here at Faith Presbyterian Church have often been asked to pray for those who are ill and we have very gladly done so. We also have very often seen those prayers answered. I remember years ago thinking every single such prayer we had prayed was wonderfully answered! We have likewise anointed with oil as a part of that prayer. We are always ready to respond to such requests and have often suggested it to those we feel may be hesitant to ask. *Second*, while, of course, we don’t require this, I have often had people confess their sins to me and seek prayer for their forgiveness and your pastors here – and your elders in general – are always willing to hear your confessions and to pray for you and for your forgiveness. As Protestants, of course, we do not believe that you *must* confess your sins to a priest or a minister to secure their forgiveness. In the Word of God you are invited and commanded to confess your sins directly to God and promised his forgiveness in return. We see that being done repeatedly throughout the Bible. In fact, nowhere in the Bible is it taught that God’s people must confess their sins to a priest in order for them to be forgiven, nor do we see such a thing being done. But we certainly learn here that there may be times when a believer feels the need for the prayer of others. As Richard Hooker, the great 16<sup>th</sup> century Anglican theologian, described the difference between the approach of the Protestants and that of the Catholics:

“We labour to instruct men in such [a way], that every soul which is wounded with sin may learn the way how to cure itself; they, [entirely to the] contrary,

would make all sores seem incurable unless the priest have a hand in them.”  
 [Laws of Eccl. Polity, VI, vi, 2; cited in Motyer, 196]

- v.16 The specific instructions of vv. 14-15 are now generalized. Confession and prayer are the everyday duties of Christians. They are not the prerogative of the elders and they are not confined to the sick room. [Motyer, 201] Now we gather from the Bible taken together that James does not mean that we are always to be confessing all our sins to one another. Rather James seems to be speaking either of our confessing to another the sins we committed against him or her or the general acknowledgement to one another that we are sinners and need forgiveness. There have been those in church history who have encouraged constant, explicit, and comprehensive confession of sins to many others, but the results have almost always proved the wisdom of those who have recommended against the practice. Such confessions produce either an *unhealthy exhibitionism* or a *hypocritical sanitizing* of one's faults. Here, the confession that James is recommending produces peace and harmony among fellow believers and a readiness to pray for one another with prayers that will prove effective.
- v.18 Throughout his letter James has made reference to exemplars of the faith and wisdom that he is recommending to his readers. He has mentioned Abraham (2:21), Rahab (2:25), Job (5:11), the prophets as a group (5:10) and now he mentions Elijah. It is, as you know, typical of the Bible to set before us examples to emulate, to show us what the Christian life looks like in flesh and blood and to inspire us to live it. In this case, Elijah serves as an exemplar of a believer whose prayers proved powerful to produce impressive results.

First, notice that the ESV has departed from the famous rendering of the KJV: “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” Without boring you with the details, the ESV's rendering is more accurate. The point is not to stress *how* the righteous pray but that *their prayers are powerful*.

There were plenty of examples of righteous men and women in the OT whose prayers were powerful and effective. Think of Moses. Think of Hannah. So why Elijah? Several things about Elijah commended him to James. The first is that the biblical narrative of his life and work draws attention not only to his magnificent achievements but to his disappointments, fears, and spiritual failures. He could show amazing courage at one point, and skedaddle at the first hint of danger at another. He could be selfless in his concern for others on one occasion and be overcome with self-pity on another. [Motyer, 205] This is everywhere the picture of the righteous man or woman in the Bible, a mixture of success and failure, of faith and doubt. Righteousness in a person's life never means moral perfection, so such perfection will not be the prerequisite of such powerful prayers. This seems to be important to James as he draws attention to the fact that “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours...” Powerful prayer does not require an almost super-human spiritual life. Even those who are often afraid and sometimes near despair can pray powerful prayers.

Secondly, Elijah prayed *powerful prayers*. The OT narrative in 1 Kings doesn't actually say that the rain stopped in Israel *because Elijah prayed that it would*. That is, however, a

fair inference from 1 Kings 17:1. But in other cases too he is presented as a man of prayer. The widow's son was raised to life again because "the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah" (1 Kings 17:22). But especially on Mt. Carmel, the issue is joined with the prophets of Baal precisely as to the power of their respective prayers. They were to pray to Baal and Elijah would pray to Yahweh and *it was Elijah's prayer that was heard* and ended three years of drought. Even in a severely depressed state, after Jezebel ordered his death, Elijah still remained a man of prayer. He didn't commit suicide, *he asked the Lord* to end his life. The Lord answered that prayer very powerfully as well, however differently than Elijah imagined. Elijah is a perfect exemplar for the life of prayer and all the more for people as weak in faith as we often are. Thus far the Word of God.

It should come as no surprise to us that James has important things to teach us about the Christian life of prayer. Eusebius in his 4<sup>th</sup> century church history quotes this from the *Memoirs* of Hegesippus, a Jewish Christian of the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century. He is speaking of James.

"He used to enter the temple alone and was often found kneeling and imploring forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became hard like a camel's from his continual kneeling in worship of God and prayer for the people." [Meier's translation, 81]

James, in other words, has not given us teaching that he did not practice himself, indeed, to hear that these famous verses were written by "Camel Knees" himself gives them a special power and authority! Now, as it happens, we are going to be treated to the retelling of the history of Elijah on the Lord's Day evening, April 24<sup>th</sup>, as Felix Mendelssohn's never-enough-praised oratorio *Elijah* is presented. In many ways it is the story of prayer and of the difference that prayer makes not only in the individual believer's life but in the world. But, I will be surprised if any one of you who were paying close attention to the text as I read it and commented upon it did not wonder in the back of your mind whether you can take this teaching seriously *in your own case*. You have prayed for something, something precious to you, something you think that God should want to give to you, something you believe should be in accordance with his will – whatever that may be – and you have not received it. You prayed for the salvation of a loved one or a friend, perhaps for years, and the person remains as uninterested in the gospel as ever. You prayed for a spouse, for marriage, for children, for a family, and the Lord has not given them to you even though he has said in his Word that it is not good for a man or woman to be alone. You prayed for a better job or a different job or a certain job and though any person's work is such a large part of his life the Lord has not answered your prayer. You prayed for deliverance from a sin that has bedeviled you, a sin over which you have wept many times, a sin that has darkened your relationship with God, a sin that has covered you with shame, but the Lord has not given you the victory you have plead for times without number. Or, as James urges you to do here in these verses, you have prayed for health but remained sick.

You read here of Elijah's powerful prayers and can't help but wonder why his prayers were so effective but yours are so ineffective. Believe me when I tell you, brothers and sisters, *I know of what I speak when I speak of the trouble believers have, especially men and women who have been Christians for long years, the trouble they have taking Elijah as an example for themselves, as proof of the power of prayer.*

Ordinarily, when facing a text like this one, my task as a preacher is to ring the changes on the power of prayer, for that is surely James' point: righteous men and women pack a powerful punch in their prayers. [Motyer, 204] But I fear that if I did that, I would leave unaddressed the actual existential confusion that passages like these produce in the hearts of Christian people. Tell me honestly, is it your experience that *your* prayers, like Elijah's, have great power in their working? Perhaps you can, as I can, remember some prayers that packed such a punch, but what about most of your prayers and what about your prayers of late?

So, without in any way pulling James' punch, for, as we will see, the prayers of righteous men and women *are* powerfully effective, let me put James' remarks here in a larger perspective.

*I. The fact of unanswered prayer and the reality of it as a challenge to faith are faced repeatedly in the Bible.*

It is not as if we hear only of how powerful and effective the prayer of the righteous is. We often witness the saints' confusion and their complaint and their near despair when prayers so sincerely offered are not answered; when it seems to them, as we read in the Elijah history, that the heavens are as brass above them. There are a great many psalms that are, in fact, the cries of faithful men to the Lord *because he has not answered heard their prayers*. And in many cases there in the psalter and elsewhere we are actually told what prayers were prayed to no effect. Think, for example, of

1. David, who prayed for the life of his illegitimate son but was refused. David had to be made to suffer for his sin with Bathsheba and the loss of his son was partial payment.
2. Or think of Jeremiah who prayed for the repentance and spiritual restoration of his contemporaries in Judah and who was told flatly by the Lord that "though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people."
3. Or consider the Apostle Paul who pleaded with the Lord that his "thorn in the flesh" might be removed and was refused; was told instead "my grace is sufficient for you."
4. Or think of the Lord Jesus in Gethsemane praying that the cup might be removed from him, a prayer by the most righteous man who ever lived, but one which was not powerful and effective in the terms in which it was offered.

Even in the cases that James mentions here, we are perfectly aware of the distinct possibility that our prayers will not be answered. The sick do not always recover. Indeed, sometimes it has happened that someone has asked us to anoint him or her with oil and offer such healing prayer as James describes here when it is perfectly obvious that the Lord has already determined that the person should die. I sometimes remind medical doctors that they lose all of their patients eventually; whereas I never lose many of mine! So any reader of the Bible knows when he reads James here that we are not being told that any and every prayer we pray will be answered in the terms in which it was offered.

*II. There are reasons given in the Bible itself why our prayers may not be answered.*

So much is unanswered prayer a reality in the life of faith that the Bible often prepares us to consider carefully *why* our prayers might not have been heard. Indeed, James himself has mentioned some possible reasons why prayer might not be heard.

1. In 1:5 he taught us that double-mindedness is fatal to effective prayer. What he meant, we said, is prayer for the blessing of God by a man or woman who is unwilling to make a whole-souled commitment to the Lord and his kingdom, who wishes to keep one foot firmly planted in the world.
2. In 4:2-3 he taught us that prayer motivated by sinful desires and passions will not prove powerful or effective. Long before, in Psalm 66:18, God's people knew to say, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." A person who sows his wild oats during the week and then comes to church on Sunday to pray for crop failure should not expect his prayers to be powerful and effective!

But there are a number of other reasons as well. We have already mentioned that God may have other plans for our lives than we expect or know anything of, or that he requires us to do without something we greatly desire to accomplish some good purpose he has for us or others. In any case, as the Lord Jesus himself reminded us, in the very Sermon on the Mount that James alludes to so often in his letter, we do not pray because God does not know what we want or what we need until we tell him! [Matt. 6:8, 32]

*III. James 5:13-18 are typical of the Bible's way of making unqualified and absolute statements in regard to prayer, the qualification and relativizing of which are found in other statements elsewhere.*

The promise that our prayers will be powerful and effective, will pack a punch, is found in both 1:5 and 5:13-18. But, as you know, it is found in many other places as well. The Lord Jesus himself made promises about prayer in just this same way.

1. "If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my father in heaven." Matt. 18:19
2. "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it." John 14:13

Clearly the unqualified nature of such promises is meant to encourage us to believe in the power of prayer. But just as surely it must be obvious that God did not hand over to us the running of the universe in promising to hear and answer our prayers. Knowing as little as we know about what we need in order to get to heaven or what others need, having a view of ourselves and our lives so often utterly inaccurate, having no idea as to what purposes God is pursuing in the circumstances of our lives, we can't even imagine how much harm we would do to ourselves and others if God were obliged to answer every prayer we prayed.

*IV. We certainly are never taught in the Bible or led to believe that we have a right to expect that God will give us whatever we ask of him.*

From the very beginning of divine revelation to its end the distance that separates God's plans and purposes and our grasp of those plans and purposes remains very great. A mystery attaches

to God's ways that the Bible teaches unapologetically we will never penetrate. That he has promised to hear and answer our prayers is an emphatic teaching of God's Word. But so is the fact that his ways are far above our ways and past finding out. To imagine that God must give us whatever we ask for would not only penetrate that mystery but thoroughly dispel it. That will never happen, God being God and we being only his creatures.

It is often helpful for us to use our imagination to visualize the situation described in the Word of God. Suppose you still wanted and hoped for the thing you had prayed for but not yet received from your heavenly Father. And suppose that one night the Lord Jesus himself, with his divine glory upon him, came and sat at your bedside and said, "You have asked for this, but the Father cannot give it to you. The reason why I cannot tell you, but I can assure you that it is better for you and for your loved ones that you be refused than that you should receive what you have asked for." Would you complain? Would you doubt that the Lord was telling the truth? Would you demand a further explanation as your right? Of course not. You would say, "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you." And you would also say, "Shall we receive good from God, and shall not we receive evil?" and "Though the Lord slay me, I will hope in him." *Magnificent expressions of faith and love that would never have been uttered if the Lord always gave his children whatever they asked when they asked for it!* Our entire faith rests in the character of God as invariably, unchangeably wise and loving toward us. So our life of prayer must rest on that same confidence.

How many stories can the saints tell like Amy Carmichael's, who as a girl so envied her mother's blue eyes that she prayed that God would turn her eyes blue. Only much later, as a missionary in India, did she realize that having brown hair and brown eyes allowed her, when dressed as an Indian woman, to enter the temples where foreigners with blue eyes would never be permitted to go, in order to find and rescue the little girls who had been sold into sexual service there. And how much wiser God must be than we are in a million such ways!

*But we do not end here.* We end with what James has said so emphatically to us in these verses we read this evening: the prayer of the righteous has great power. Whether or not we always receive that for which we have prayed, whether or not our prayers are answered in the same terms in which they were offered, they have great power. Sometimes, of course, as in Elijah's case, we get precisely what we ask for. I suspect this is true most of the time, whether we are praying for the forgiveness of our sins or the sins of another, or for someone's health, or for his or her blessing in some other way – we are so forgetful of the prayers we have prayed, we so often fail to reckon with their outcome. And that being so, I think that Francis Schaeffer was right to encourage us always to be praying for something that only God could give us. Surely in every Christian life some such prayers will be heard and answered, profound demonstrations as they are of God's faithfulness, of his love and compassion, of the invisible world, of the power of prayer, and of the spiritual nature of our lives, Do not lose heart. Pray like Elijah prayed.

But our prayers no doubt have great power even when they remain unanswered. God our loving father listens to our cries and, I'm sure, if he cannot in his wisdom and love give us what we have asked for, he blesses us and helps us in other ways to compensate for our disappointment.

Always remember this: it was the Lord Jesus who went to the cross who promised to hear and answer our prayers. Is it possible that he misled us? *It is not!* And it was camel knees himself who reminded us that the prayers of the righteous have great power. Does anyone here dare to contradict *that* man? Let me finish with this piece of wisdom from Thomas Boston, a very wise man and also a faithful praying man: “There are many prayers not to be answered till we come to the other world, *and there all will be answered at once.*” [Andrew Thomson, 145]