

“Prayer: the Fruit of Faith” – James 5:13-18
August 16, 2020 –Morning Services
Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA
8:45am Indoor, 11:00am Outdoor
Pastor Nathaniel H. Gutiérrez

James 5:13-18

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 14 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. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. 17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

This is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Let's pray.**Driving on smooth roads**

When my wife and I were younger, we used to take the drive from San Diego, CA to Tacoma, WA over Christmas break in just one shot. Stopping only for bathroom breaks, food and gas, it would take us approximately 20 hours from beginning to end. And on those long drives on these beautifully paved highways we would get tired.

When we moved to South America, we realized the roads there didn't receive the same level of care as they do here. The roads there had potholes, sharp curves on the roads, treacherous ravines off of the sides of the roads going up and down the Andes mountains and a lot of questionable driving. While you might get tired of the roads there, one thing you would never do is get sleepy on them.

Those South American roads had you on the edge of your seat, gripping your steering wheel and fearing for your very life. You never knew when you might face an animal in the middle of the road, a dangerous curve or a massive pothole. It was exciting, but also very nerve-racking. In my experience most people prefer the smooth, well paved highways.

No one really likes potholes, bumps, curves, or treacherous falls.

If there are potholes in your neighborhood or highways, you can be sure that the local governing authorities will hear about it relatively soon. If you hit a large pothole and destroy your car or are harmed, you can guarantee someone will hear about it. This frustrates us and we want it corrected immediately.

In many ways, we like our lives like we like our roads. We want them to be smooth, with no problems along the way, no bumps or lurches. If our lives have pot-hole sized problems, we want

them resolved quickly and we certainly don't want them to impact our lives. We want our lives to be as smooth as a newly paved road.

Isn't that true? Think of all the curveballs we have received as of late. The cancelled trips, the ruined festivities, the loss of so, so much.

Just watching our CHS graduation on Friday via livestream under a tent, with the graduating students having to physically distance themselves from their best friends and with only limited family and friends in attendance, shows us this. We have lost so much this year.

2020 has put all sorts of potholes in our plans.

And while we might be willing to overlook one or two potholes, when we start seeing them all over the place, everywhere we turn, we begin to lose patience. We can't drive or live like that. We want order. We *need* order. We need things to be smooth. It is exhausting to have to readjust constantly for the next big thing that we didn't expect. And it is *also* really, really annoying to hit those tiny, insignificant changes as well.

I mention all this, because the more we face change and difficulties, the more pressure tends to build up and with it comes more anger, complaining and grumbling. You have probably all heard it. People are frustrated about all sorts of things and they are reacting in unexpected ways. We have heard many hastily giving their opinions in anger and frustration, rather than, as the Bible teaches, being "slow to speak and slow to become angry."

But pressure does that to people. Even at the beginning of our current crisis, the pressure of potential danger sent people spiraling into all sorts of irrational reactions and panic, making rash decisions to stock up on toilet paper. Toilet paper!

And that *pressure* has caused many other rash decisions. We've said things we regret, we've made quick financial decisions, living choices, college and schooling decisions. We've hurt those around us with our words, our decisions or our actions. We've offended and been offended.

That was what was happening with the Christians James was writing to. People were in a pressure cooker of a situation. They were getting pressure from all sides, pressures about where to live, how to provide and how to thrive.

But because they weren't finding solutions, the Christians were turning on one another, and grumbling about their situations; others were taking advantage of the opportunity and taking advantage of their fellow Christians. It was chaos. The pressures of their lives were causing them to lose perspective on life and forget about their priorities.

And that is exactly what happens in crisis situations. There were many news stories of people fighting in grocery stores. People fighting over toilet paper, Lysol wipes or water bottles. Crisis can bring out the worst in people.

And it isn't just the crisis of the pandemic. When we are sick and feel real pain and suffering, this can happen as well. We are frustrated and, in our frustration, we turn on those closest to us.

The same thing happens in our families. There are families here that are suffering. Marriages that are struggling. When things aren't going the way you had hoped, or wished or dreamed, who do you turn against? Who do you blame?

That was what was happening in the church in this passage. That is why James tells the believers that we must be different than the world. We need to *redirect* our focus. No matter the circumstances, he calls them to turn to God.

When you suffer, and when you go through impossible situations, when you are sick, or your life is a wreck, James calls you to stop trying to fix it, stop trying to make quick decisions, stop trying to relieve the pain and be still. Turn to God in prayer.

In one of my counseling meetings in South America, I met with a man who wanted to leave his spouse so desperately. He had grown so tired of the fighting and the disagreements and the constant pressure. In his attempt to show that he was the victim, he argued that his wife was certifiably crazy. He accused her of having all sorts of disorders.

The more we talked the more I realized that he was saying all of these things because he believed that somehow that would free him of his vows and responsibility to her.

The fact is, that he was not the first person to make this argument. Many people argue that their spouses are crazy. But the truth is, if their spouse is truly crazy, mentally unstable, then all of the onus is on them. The burden falls squarely on the sane spouse. Now they bear all the responsibility to love their spouse according to their vows before God, in sickness and in health.

And I think we like to make these accusations all the time. We look at our spouses or friends or other people in the church – people we disagree with – and we think they are crazy. They literally have lost it. We think, *there is no helping that person!* They are a lost cause! Have you ever thought that about someone?!

If there are people who drive you up the wall, who drive you crazy, and you think they are crazy and unstable, be careful. You aren't off the hook. If they are crazy and irrational and foolish, you have all the more responsibility to love and fight for that person. You now have the responsibility to do double the work of loving that person. Because by your own admission of them, they are incapable of seeing things clearly and yet you believe that you do.

And if that is the case and you feel that way, you must love them. That is what God commands us to do: to die to self and help your neighbor. We will learn more about how that plays out in the last two verses of this chapter in our next sermon on James, but for now, suffice it to say, we have a responsibility.

And that responsibility takes place first and foremost through prayer. If you are suffering with those around you, if you are struggling with your brothers and sisters, with your co-workers, your spouse or your children, God has called you to pray today.

See, this passage is a call to prayer. Even in crisis. James reminds us that even if you are running for your life like the persecuted Christians were, or if your health is failing, or your relationships are suffering, the response is not to turn to this world for help or to turn on each other. Your first and most crucial response must be kneeling before the throne of God in prayer.

Praying when you are suffering and in despair and praying when you are cheerful and rejoicing. Prayer when you see more potholes than you see paved road, and prayer when the roads are smooth and beautiful.

No matter what your circumstances, your outlook on life, in joy and in sorrow, you must respond in prayer. This is the response of faith. Prayer is a fruit of faith.

James says that faith without works is dead. Well, so is faith without prayer. Because prayer is a fruit of faith.

Work out your faith. Tend your prayer life like a garden and produce the fruit of prayer in your life. Work at it day and night, water it and share it.

Part of the evidence of our faith is that we turn fervently to God in prayer. Not only at mealtimes, but all day and in all circumstances.

This is the difference between someone with faith and someone without.

As one commentator writes,

“Rather than grumbling, or swearing oaths, in the midst of the trials in this earthly life, Christians are called to turn constantly to God in prayer whatever the circumstances may be. **The habit of prayer should be one of the most obvious features that differentiates a Christian from other people.**” (Tasker, 126).

Are **you** any different from other people? Do people know you as a person who prays? If they do, they will ask you to pray for them. Even non-Christians will ask you to pray for them.

This must be such a well developed habit that it is instinctual, like second nature to you.

I took a few months of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu while we were in Peru – yes, I know that is a Japanese/Brazilian art that I was learning from a Peruvian black belt, but that is not the point. The point is that the things they make you practice over and over again (especially as a new student) are the same basic moves. While you want to move on to bigger and better things, and while you want to wrestle against other competitors, they won't let you. You have to practice the same movements over and over again until they are second nature. They want you to know the different techniques so well that every technique you learn becomes part of who you are.

That way, in the midst of any physical alteration, you have a response that is second nature to you. You don't even need to think about it. You know exactly what to do.

Prayer must be that way for us. It must be second nature. It must be part of who we are. Is that who we are? I fear that while that should be the case, our instinct is to turn frustration,

complaining, reasoning, grumbling and anger rather than prayer – lashing out, calling others crazy.

This is not a godly response, brothers and sisters.

We all are missing a great opportunity to grow in this area. God has allowed for our entire routine to be interrupted, our schedules to change and slow. Traveling has been largely shut down; many of the things that we used to do in are closed.

Some of you now have limited hours; some are working from home, or studying from home. We might be furloughed or sick or in transition, and this is the time. This is the time to develop the habit of prayer, to make it second nature in our hearts and lives, so that in every moment of joy and sorrow we immediately fall into a posture of praise or prayer.

I have felt strongly convicted that we as Christians are not doing enough to bring an end to this virus. We are waiting around for a solution, for a vaccine, or for it to just magically go away. We are waiting for medical professionals to save us from our woes.

But brothers and sisters, we have access to the Almighty God! We have access to the throne room of God by the blood of Jesus. What are we doing here waiting around for a solution in our homes when we should be praying fervently for God to intervene?

Do we believe in prayer, that God can put an end to this pandemic?

James reminds us of the power of God, and he links it to the prayer of faith. He shows how Elijah, who was not a god, but a man like us – sinful, weak and frail. But he knew how to pray, and he prayed fervently.

First Kings 18:42 tells us that “Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and *put his face between his knees.*” We see that Elijah prayed intensely and it did not rain for three years and six months!

God heard his prayer and shut down the floodgates of heaven. And then Elijah, again a mere man, prayed and God gave rain and the earth bore its fruit.

James demonstrates that God acts through the prayers of his people, and he acts powerfully. And part of what we learn here is that God could act without our prayers, but he chooses not to. He chooses to use us, to work through us for his glory.

That means that he has so created this world that he wants it to *work through prayer*. That is why he says the prayer of faith *heals the one who is sick*. Because God has chosen to use our prayers to change people’s lives. What James is writing about here is not a spell. When he tells us to call the elders to pray and anoint you with oil, the oil that the elders use to anoint the sick is not a miraculous oil (in the same way those essential oils my wife likes aren’t helping anyone – but that is a different topic that I’m sure I’ll hear about at home).

The oil is a symbol of a much greater reality. It is reminding us that something mysterious is happening. That God is working.

God is working through the prayers of the elders because he has chosen to care for his people in this way. He gives us his shepherds, your elders, to pray for you and intercede for you. To shepherd and guide you. He gives them the sacred responsibility to care for your very soul.

So, it is no wonder why in this passage James would say, "If any of you are sick, let him call the elders of the church and let them prayer over him anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord." Because if you are a believer and you believe in the power of prayer and you know that God has placed elders over the care of your soul, why wouldn't you call the elders to come and pray for you? Why wouldn't you ask them to anoint you with oil in the name of the Lord?

We, as your pastors and elders, have been given the unique calling to pray for and intercede for your lives, and love and care for you in Jesus' name as shepherds of your souls. As we go to your home and or hospital bed, we come in Jesus' name.

Just like Elijah, we are mere men. But we come in Jesus' name. We join together united in Jesus' name to pray according to his will that his will be done in your life. That he heal you. And if that is God's will, he will certainly heal you through those prayers.

I'm not sure if you caught that or not, but I want to make sure that you do. I did say, ***if it is God's will***, he will use our prayers to heal you. You see, we cannot take passages in isolation from the rest of their context in Scripture.

As we learned earlier in James, there are evil and selfish ways to pray. And there are prayers that are prayed correctly. One commentator explains:

"All prayer, is subject to the reservation 'they will be done'; but, provided that this limiting condition is always in the mind of him who prays, Jesus has promised 'all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive' (Mt. xxi. 22). Much current teaching in the contemporary church on the subject of 'spiritual healing' rests on the false assumption that it is God's will that everybody should enjoy at all times perfect physical health. There is nothing in the New Testament to justify this assumption, and some evidence which points in the opposite direction. For example, Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' was not removed by God though he prayed three times that it might be taken from him" (Tasker, 132).

As he points out, it is not God's will that everyone should always enjoy at all times perfect health. Paul certainly didn't. So, it is a false assumption to believe that what James is saying here is that every prayer for healing will absolutely come about. If we believed that to be the case, then we would also expect that no one would ever die, because then all the prayers for healing would always work and prevent people from illness and death – but we don't. We know that sometimes, even when the elders come and anoint someone with oil and pray over them in Jesus' name, sometimes God will respond by taking that person into his presence.

Sometimes God's will is that he be united with his beloved son or daughter. Psa. 116:15 reminds us that "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints."

While we try to play tug of war with our loved ones, God loves our loved ones even more than we love them. He is going to fight harder to have them with him than we are.

But sometimes, he wants them to be healed by his power. And sometimes that is his perfect will. And sometimes, when we pray according to his will, his power rains down from heaven and gives healing. God uses the power of his children “the righteous” in this world and manifests his great power through our words.

What a great privilege! What an honor, to be his ambassadors on behalf of those who are sick. And while we see that God works in a special way through his shepherds, your elders, he also promises to work through your individual prayers as well.

He says, “is *anyone* among you suffering? → Let *HIM* pray.
Is *anyone* cheerful? → Let *HIM* sing PRAISE.

Now, it is important to qualify a statement in here. It says the prayer of a “righteous person” has great power in v. 16.

You might look around and think to yourself, *there is no one righteous around here!* You might look at your elders and pastors and think...*these are the righteous people who are to pray for me?* They are nice, but righteous? I can sense you are suspicious because you probably know some of us.

This is an important piece of this passage and it is helpful to see how it is used in Scripture to understand it. You see in Scripture, the author of Hebrews, Peter and Jesus refer to people as “righteous” who we normally wouldn’t attribute that title to.

Specifically, we read of Lot, in Genesis. Peter writes that God saves “righteous Lot” from the destruction of the wicked! If you know the story of Lot, you would probably not give him that title. You would not give many people that title.

But the reality is that none of us really deserve that title. None of us in and of ourselves are truly righteous. We are all sinners who have fallen far from God’s holiness. Each one of us has our fair share of sins. Certainly, we are not righteous enough to be heard by God and not righteous enough to be messengers of his grace and healing.

There is no one good. Roman 3:10 clearly teaches, “there is no one righteous, not even one.” Not even one. Not one of us is righteous. And our unrighteousness makes us enemies of God.

And yet, we know that is not the whole story. We know that the Scripture also teaches that there is one who is righteous: Jesus Christ. And Jesus, when he gave up his life on our behalf, and carried the sins of all who would believe in him, also gave us his righteousness — righteousness not of our own, so that no one can boast, but righteousness from God.

1Pet. 3:18a: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, ***the righteous for the unrighteous***, that he might bring us to God...”

And it is for that very reason that we can enter in boldly into God's presence. As Hebrews reminds us, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Heb 4:16)

God saw us in our unrighteous condition, and he made us righteous so that we might be reconciled to him.

While many in this world might utter prayers or requests before God in vain, it is only those who have trusted in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins that will be heard. "Only the righteous."

1Pet. 3:12: "For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

With that in mind, we know that we can pray all the more confidently, knowing that he not only hears us, but calls us to speak to him. So...Jesus has made us righteous in him, that we might no longer live as orphans in this world, but that we would go to our Father in prayer in all occasions: for the sick, for our country, for our schools, churches, businesses, loved ones and more. God has given us the Christian duty of praying at all times. We are his representatives, praying and interceding in the name of the Lord. This is the time he has given us to show that in prayer.

In Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, as we face the potholes of life this year and we suffer, face illness and even death, may it be our second nature not to respond in our flesh. May it be part of who we are instinctually to turn to God in prayer. May we be people who work out our faith, with the fruit of prayer, as our first response in joy and in sorrow. May we be men and women who are known as people of prayer.

And finally, may we rest in Jesus for our own righteousness and step forward in our prayers knowing that he works mightily through us, that he acts decisively and powerfully through the prayers we lift, as we lift them in Jesus' name.

Amen.