

Written Copy: James 5:13-16 “James’ Primer on Prayer”

18th Sunday @ Pentecost-Proper 21

Sunday, September 26th, 2021

Text: James 5:13-16

¹³ 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.

The text’s intent

James charges the Church to use the gift of prayer for all who suffer from any kind of affliction, especially sickness of the body. The prayers of those who are made right with God by faith are promised to be answered by the Lord according to His gracious will and plan. Confession and Absolution provides the peace of body and soul that, in conjunction with medicine can be the source of healing. James promises that whether or not bodily healing comes prayer can result in the salvation of those whose faith is wavering. We should be on the lookout for those who are in danger of falling from faith and prayerfully work to move them to Confession so that the words of Absolution can restore them and save them from death.

Focus Statement:

Prayer is a gracious gift from our loving Father. It is assured communication directly into His ear for all who are in right standing with Him through faith in Christ. He always answers our prayer and does so in ways that are beyond our comprehension doing more than we could ever ask for. He sent His Son to grant us eternal healing and life through His work on the cross to save us from eternal death.

Function Statement:

Why it’s important to know:

We can view prayer as being like asking a genie for three wishes, who must comply with what we ask. When prayer is not answered in the way we think it should be we doubt God’s promises to us. When prayers for healing go unanswered, we might see God as punishing us. We can fail to see the wonderful gift that is Confession and Absolution, as well as the Lord’s Supper in the healing of body and soul.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Utilize the gift of prayer when we are sick and when we are enduring hardships. Utilize the gifts of Confession and Absolution and the Lord’s Supper to promote physical and spiritual healing. Use these for ourselves and for the good of our fellow Christian, especially those who may be slipping away from faith.

Subject Sentence: Christ works powerfully through prayer by His will

Introduction: Prayer is Not Like a Genie Granting Wishes

In our Epistle Lesson James is providing the Church with what amounts to a “Primer on Prayer”. He doesn’t provide all that God has to say on the gift of prayer, but it’s enough to get us started. And of course, with any Scripture passage, we look to other passages in Scripture to fill in the blanks. This is something the Church of any age needs, because there is always the temptation to see prayer in the wrong light.

First of all, prayer is not like rubbing a magic lamp and having a genie appear who will grant three wishes, although sometimes people do see prayer that way; I pray and God gives me what I want. You and I can and should appeal to God in prayer far more than just three times. Just know that you won’t always get what you ask for. This is not because God doesn’t love you. He does. Far more than any Genie or even any other human being could.

What would it be like if we did get exactly what we asked for? There is a great illustration of this to be found in an episode of the X-Files. X-Files is a made-up show, not based on reality, where two FBI agents investigate things that the FBI has filed away as unsolvable and unexplainable, henceforth dealing with the paranormal. These two agents come across a man who, in cleaning out an abandoned storage facility, comes across a carpet. When he unrolls it, a genie appears. He uses his first wish very rashly. He wishes that his boss, who is always yelling at him to get to work would shut his mouth. The result is that skin grows over his boss’s mouth so that he can no longer speak. For his next wish, he wishes for the big, beautiful yacht that he always dreamed of owning. And he gets it. It appears right next to his single wide mobile home in the trailer park where he lives, with no water anywhere for him to sail it on. So, he tries to make up for it with his third wish, which is that he could become invisible. While he has all kinds of plans about how invisibility can make him rich and famous, he neglects to realize the consequence of this wish, that nobody can see him. While he is trying to cross a highway he is run over because the drivers coming at him couldn’t see him.

Even the FBI Agent Fox Mulder struggles to come up with the perfect wish. He wishes for peace on earth, and the result is that he is the only one left alive on the planet. Each of these wishes had one fault in common, they come from a selfish heart that is only interested in what is good for me, even if it’s at the expense of others. Even our most altruistic wishes would always exclude the possibility that anything bad happen to us, even if that bad thing would be for the good of another, for the good of the Church. So, we should thank God that He doesn’t answer our prayers that way. It also means that many times what we ask for in prayer will not be answered in the manner that we desire it to be.

What Moves God to Answer Prayer? How Does He Answer?

What does move God to answer your prayer or my prayer? **James 5:15 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.** What is the “prayer of faith”? Maybe we should start with what James is referring to by “faith”. That faith is faith in Jesus Christ! Faith in Him as the Son of God who became the incarnate Son of Man, who gave His life on the cross to earn for us forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life. The Christian faith. This faith realizes and confesses that all I receive from God is a gift of grace, including the way He chooses to answer prayer. All who believe in Jesus Christ have an open line to God in prayer. Even more so, whenever you engage in prayer it’s as if you are transported into the very throne room of God. You have His undivided attention, no matter how many other prayers are being lifted up to Him at that time. That is the gift you have received from faith in Christ, that is the gift you have because you have been made righteous, declared to be in right standing with Him. You have access to Him anytime and anywhere. Your prayer is heard just the same as if I, your Pastor, were praying for you. He answers your prayer because of the steadfast and unending love He has for you.

How will he answer? James says He “**will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.**” Notice James says He will “save”, but not necessarily that He will heal, at least not in this life anyway. This is not because Jesus doesn’t love you, He does. And that “saving” can mean healing of the physical and emotional afflictions that plague us. But even when we are healed from whatever condition we are praying about, be it a stroke, heart attack, cancer, or even severe depression, that bodily healing is only temporary. Our body will one day die. That is the temporal result of sin. But Jesus is interested in more than just our time here on earth. Jesus is concerned with our eternity. He wants to save us from eternal separation from God on the Last Day. He wants to raise us up body and soul to live in a world where sickness, death, and all its causes are banished forever. After Adam and Eve sinned God bared them from the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life so that they would not eat of it and live forever in this sinful, fallen, and broken world. When Jesus doesn’t answer the prayer of healing in your life or the life of our loved one, as believers in Christ, we should see it as a blessing, not a curse. He is preventing us from living forever in a fallen and dying world.

How can we know that our eventual death will be a blessing and not a curse? James says, **“And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven”**. When we, or our loved one is sick and we ask God in prayer to come and help them, to come and heal them, He comes to renew their faith in Him. He comes with His Holy Spirit to remind them of their baptism, that miracle of continued washing away of sin that lasts your whole life. Very often those who are sick or who are facing hardship worry that what they are going through is the result of God being angry with them. They see what they are going through as God punishing them, especially when the healing and restoration they seek is slow in coming, or not coming at all. Here is the Gospel Promise for all who are suffering: in Christ all the sins they have committed will be forgiven.

When you confess your sins here in worship, or even at home, you are praying to God. And how does He answer that prayer? By the Words of Absolution, and that answer is always “YES”. When you confess your sins, those you remember as well as those you cannot, He wants you to know that because of your faith in Christ, and by His powerful work for you in His death and resurrection, you stand forgiven. Whatever you are suffering is not the Father punishing you. He already punished His Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross for every wrong you have done or will do. You may receive healing now, or you may not. But you will most definitely receive His wonderful gift of eternal healing and restoration on the Last Day.

How/When Should We Utilize Prayer?

So how and when should we utilize such a wonderful gift as prayer? Early and often? Even more than that: continually! **James 5:13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.** Is there anyone here who is not experiencing some kind of suffering in their life? Some kind of hardship? Some kind of illness or nagging condition? If so, James says, **“Let him pray.”** Now here is where the Greek language is more expressive than the English. The sense here is “Let him **continue** to pray”. Now this is not to say that if you pray once God won’t hear and respond. He hears even that one hastily made prayer. In fact, Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit interprets our groanings and sends them up as prayers to our Heavenly Father. James is telling us to continue praying as long as we are suffering, as long as there remains a weight on our hearts. And even when it goes away only to come back. Pray! Pray again. Keep praying.

How about when our prayer has been answered and our affliction lifted? How about those times when the sun shines down on us, and we feel freed from all our burdens? Pray! Pray and give thanks to God. And one of the best means for doing this that He has given us is music. Sing praises to God! Sing Christian hymns and worship songs with thankfulness and joy in your heart. That is what we did to open this Worship Service, and is a part of all our worship services. Music is a gift from God that engages not just our intellect but moves us to pray from the heart. And singing hymns can move us to praise and give thanks even when we don't feel like doing so. Even when we are struggling with illness and hardship the gift of prayer and His gifts of forgiveness are cause to give heartfelt thanks and praise to Him.

James 5:14 *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.* When you are sick or suffering, don't keep it to yourself. Notify me, notify your Elders. While the hospitals are restricting entrance to one family member only, Ascension Genesys will let me visit, even when your one designated family member is there. I will come as soon as I can to visit and pray with you. I don't bring along any oil. In James' day oil was used for medicinal purposes. I let the doctors administer that kind of healing as they see fit. But the reason Genesys lets clergy in is that they recognize there is more to healing than what they can provide. The healing that I bring with the Lord's Supper can heal body and soul now, and unto life everlasting by the power and grace of Christ Himself. It's not a magic potion, it is the supernatural presence of Christ Himself who will do what He knows is best for you right now and looking forward to eternal life.

And your Elder, if he knows you are suffering, can call and pray with you over the phone. If you are home, he can visit you when I might not be able to. And it's not just your Elder and your Pastor that need to know, the Church needs to be in prayer for you. Jesus says in **Matthew 18:19-20** ***19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.***" You can be confident that when the Church is praying for you, Christ is there, and He will respond. But we can't do any of this if you don't tell us. Hospitals used to notify the Church when a member was admitted, but due to laws against revealing medical information that no longer happens. You may tell a friend that you are ill or in the hospital, but that doesn't guarantee that I or your Elder will find out. I don't have an alarm that goes off or a board that lights up. I need a call from you or from a family member. James is telling you how important that is.

James 5:16 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. Confession is good for the soul, whether you are ill or experiencing hardship or not. And as I pointed out earlier, who among you is not going through some kind of hardship or unpleasantness; you or someone you know. And as we are told in **1 John 1:8-9** **⁸If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.** When you sick or struggling, the devil and your own sinful conscience can drag up all kinds of things to make you feel guilty about, all kind of things that God could be punishing your for. That kind of guilt, heavy on your heart, works against your body trying to heal. When I come and visit, I will make Confession and Absolution a part of my visit. There is power in this rite. When you have to take what seems like a black cloud of guilt that encompasses the whole horizon of your life and condense it down into words, it no longer hangs over your head like it did before. It is just “this”, and I, in the stead and by the command of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ proclaim to you that He died to forgive “this”, whatever “this” may be. God no longer remembers it, so neither should you.

I have been called to be the Corporate Confession and Absolution guy. And if you confess any sins to me in Private Confession I am shielded from and commanded to never reveal them to another person without your consent. But I’m not the only one who can fulfill this role. Trusted friends and loved ones can hear your confession and pronounce God’s grace and forgiveness to you. And that forgiveness is just as valid as if I said it because the power to forgive comes not from me, or from them, but from the Lord Jesus Christ whose death and resurrection makes it a fact and reality in your life. Your prayer to God, and His Words of Gospel grace and forgiveness to you have mighty power in their working.

Conclusion

What a wonderful gift is the gift of prayer. As the hymn says ***“What a privilege to carry, everything to God in prayer.”*** There is great power at work when we pray. It’s not your power or my power, but the power of our Lord and Savior at work. Prayer doesn’t work like a genie granting us three wishes. And thank God it does not. We would all wish ourselves into eternal separation from Him. The Lord works out of love and mercy in answering our prayer. He answers as a Father would answer the requests of his beloved son, with only what is best for him. Prayer works miraculously. But it needn’t be seen as a mystery. It’s just holy conversation with our Creator and Redeemer God. (LSB #772 “In Holy Conversation” verse 1) ***“In holy conversation, we speak to God in prayer. And at His invitation, our deepest thoughts we share. We come His will obeying, as children bringing needs. And to support our praying, His Spirit intercedes.”*** (Verse 3) ***“As holy conversation, in silence or by word. In every situation, through Jesus we are heard. So let us pray securely, expressing hopes and fears. With confidence that surely, our Father ever hears.”*** Amen