

The Prayer of Faith

Walk the Walk: James Pt. 9

You may have seen the graphics just now and assumed somebody made a mistake. After all, we've finished up our James series weeks ago and were on to the business about seeking and finding. And you are correct, that is in fact what I told you. But I changed my mind! If you recall I had said that I was cheating you out of the last little bit of James because of scheduling issues with Easter coming up and God at the Movies. And I was all set to work on a message on the finding series – *Eureka!* – on my flight home Friday – and I had already started working on it.

And then something happened in the life of my family the day before I came home – which I'll talk about in a moment – but it sort of threw a wrench into everything and I honestly I no longer felt like doing what I had planned. And so suddenly I'm flying home from my wonderful time overseas with my father and my daughter, not rested and relaxed, but rather anxious.

And so given the context of the final verses of James that I cheated you out of, I just decided that this was what I wanted to speak to you about today. So consider this the final message in the *Walk the Walk* series on the book of James...for real.

So let me read to you the last bit of the text that we missed. **James 5:13–18**, *“Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. 14 Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.*

16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

So let me tell you what happened that made me want to spend my flight over the Atlantic writing about prayer – and specifically the prayer for healing. Wednesday night, I had gotten into my hotel room in Glasgow at about 11pm. I was talking to Deanna at what for her was 6pm. She was out walking the dog – our Husky dog, Topo. When suddenly I heard her yell at the dog and everything went off the rails.

Apparently Topo decided to run off after another dog, dragging Deanna violently to the concrete in the process and breaking her jaw in two places. Her phone goes flying, but I'm listening to all this. Absolute trauma. Helpless feeling. Thankfully, our neighbor who is a nurse was standing outside, saw the whole thing and came to her assistance. She found the phone, talked me through what was happening, I merged Ari in on the call, had him go out and drive his mother to the hospital where she had surgery on Friday.

Here's a picture of her face in the emergency room...you really thought I was going to *show* you that?! What kind of a monster of a husband do you think I am? Besides, I asked and she said no.

Quick update, the surgery went well. Her jaw will be wired shut for two weeks. And she'll be on a liquid diet for six weeks. But the prognosis looks promising for a full healing. she was communicating with us by writing on a tablet like it was 1872 and she was Helen Keller or something. So I got her a a text-to-speak app, and now I have a posh British wife.

But thank you, so many of you, for your prayers, your support. People have signed up to bring food. It's going to be a long recovery, but I'm so thankful for the support of a healthy church family. But perhaps you can see why I wanted to spend that flight meditating on, "Is anyone of you in trouble...let them pray. Is anyone of you sick...let

them call on the church to pray for healing." So let's talk about that and finish out James properly.

First of all, it's very clear James is trying to impress upon us that prayer makes a difference in the world. It says, "*The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*" That means it has effects. It has an effect on things. It has an effect on the world. It really changes things.

Back in the fourth century AD there was a leader of the early church named Chrysostom, which in Greek means "the golden-mouthed," because he was a tremendous preacher. He had a sermon on prayer in which he said, "The potency of prayer has subdued the strength of fire. It has bridled the rage of lions. It has expelled demons. It has broken the chains of death. It has assuaged diseases. It has rescued cities from destruction. It has stopped the sun in its course. It has arrested the progress of the thunderbolt."

These are all things he found in the Bible that prayer accomplished. Then he says, "There is in prayer an all-sufficient armory, a treasure undiminished, a mine never exhausted, a sky unobscured by clouds, a heaven unruffled by any storm. It's the root, the fountain, the mother of thousands of blessings." What he's saying so eloquently is that prayer is powerful and effective.

And Jesus says the same types of things. To me the most amazing is in **John 14:12–14**, where he says, “*I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.*”

Now I can’t even begin to tell you what that means. All I know is it’s very exciting. He’s saying, “When I go to the Father and you pray to me, everything I came into the world to do will be released into the world through your prayer.” He says we can change the status quo. We can change the oppression. We can change the power of sin and death. We can change all of these things. We can make a difference. Because, Jesus says, “I’ll be standing at the Father’s right hand. And you pray to me, and through your prayers these things will be unleashed in the world.” That’s what Jesus is saying. Prayer is powerful and effective.

But the particular thing James is talking about, though, is prayer for sickness, prayer for physical ailments. And I really want to look at that for a little bit. In **v. 14–15** he says, “*Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person*

well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.” What do we do with that? Well, let’s spend a little bit of time on it.

First of all, we see James is assuming the church has a habit of prayer for healing. He doesn’t say, “Oh, I just heard some of you are sick. I have an idea. Why don’t the elders...” No, he doesn’t do that. He says, “Call on the elders. Have them pray.” In other words, he expected this. This is assumed. It’s assumed that Christians are dealing with sick members of the church through prayer.

And by the way, when he says “elders”...this doesn’t mean only pastors or people like that can pray for the sick. No, this is just referring to people that represent the congregation. In fact, the very next verse says “*pray for each other so that you may be healed.*” So yes, there is a power – a symbolic power - given to priests in the church on behalf of God. But in the New Testament we are a “priesthood of believers”. That means you can be a spiritual elder to one another. So don’t think you can’t pray for healing. That should be a ministry of the church in whatever form it takes.

And then the instructions that he gives assumes three things that would surround a ministry of healing prayer. There's not an order here – I don't want anyone to think this is some sort of magic ritual - but here are the three things. First, there is anointing with oil. Secondly, there is to be prayer over the person, and it's called a "prayer of faith". Thirdly, there needs to be confession of sins and forgiveness on the part of the person who's sick. What does all that mean? There's lots of mystery here and I think it's very important that anytime we talk about the supernatural we lean into humility. Because there's a lot we don't know when we peer into God's realm of Spirit. But here's what we *can* say.

Let's start with the prayer of faith. What does that mean? Now, I grew up in the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement where prayer for the sick and physical healing was very much the expectation. And so I've seen and heard a number of views on the nature of faith healing, some good, some – quite honestly – manipulative. I will say that there are a lot of different Greek words that are translated "prayer", and this is a very unusual one. So we need to be humble again.

But I will tell you one view that I *don't* think is as helpful. Some people teach that a prayer of faith means a prayer of incredible certainty, just screwing up all of your certainty, working yourself into a kind of spiritual lather. They say, "A prayer of faith means no doubts." So the sick person comes to you and you say, "Alright we have to ask and not doubt. Be certain!"

And I just think that's a terrible way to do it because if the prayer is not answered - and we're going to see these prayers are not always answered - then the only possible explanation would be, "One of us is doubting. Who is it? Well, it's not me, so I guess you just didn't have enough faith for God to come through for you." Talk about adding insult to injury – *literally*. I think that's just cruel.

But I can give you another angle on a prayer of faith. In Mark chapter 9, a father with a demon-possessed little boy comes to Jesus and says, "I pray that you'd heal my son." And Jesus says, "Do you have faith?" And basically the father says, "I don't know." What he actually says is, (**Mark 9:24**) "*I believe; help me overcome my unbelief,*" which is another way of saying, "I do, and I don't. I have faith, I guess, but I don't know that I have faith. I wish I had more faith. Please help me."

And Jesus says, “That’s faith.” When somebody comes and says, “Now we’re going to pray over your healing, but we can’t doubt; nobody can doubt or it won’t work.” What about that father? That was a prayer of faith. “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.”

Another thing some people believe about a prayer of faith that I think is excessive is that it means to command - to go into a command mode. I’ve heard many, many people over the years say, “Yes, I have a ministry of prayer and healing. And Jesus has given me power over sickness and death.” So they don’t talk to God, they talk to the person or they talk to the sickness. They will say, “I rebuke this sickness, in Jesus’ name! Get out! Cancer be gone! Rise up and walk.”

That’s not prayer. I know Jesus often did it that way; “Take up your mat and walk.” I even know some of the apostles did it that way, but you’ll never, ever, ever find anywhere in the New Testament that instructs Christians to approach the ministry of healing like that.

This says you have to *pray*. Prayer is a request to God. Always. Now, I just spent a week in a very Catholic country and I know my Sicilian peeps pray to a lot of people. But you won’t find praying to saints in the Bible either. The Biblical formula of prayer is always *to* the Father, in the *name* of the Son and by the *power* of the Holy Spirit. So none of this command mode thing. You’re never told to do that.

Ok, so then what *is* the prayer of faith? I believe that the prayer of faith is simply a very specific request. I have an old book on prayer that I like that differentiates this with what it calls a “prayer of rest”. That’s where you go into a situation and you say, “Lord, I don’t even know what I should be asking for. But I just ask that you would take care of this situation, you would do what’s best. Your will be done.” You just sort of lift the thing in prayer.

But a prayer of faith is simply a very specific, very direct request. The elders are supposed to get together and say, “Lord, this is what we ask for. We want this disease gone. We want this operation to be successful. We ask for this very specifically. We ask for this very directly. Of course we have uncertainties, but we’re coming to You with them, because we know that You are able to make a difference.” That is the prayer of faith.

When the man said, “I believe; help my unbelief,” Jesus said, “That is belief. It’s to come even with your doubts. That actually takes *more* faith than working yourself into a lather. You can get emotionally worked up down at the club! But faith is simply to come to me, to be dependent on me, to ask very directly, very specifically. Assuming that I am actually willing and able to do something about it.” So that’s the first thing this is. This is the prayer of faith.

Secondly, anointing with oil. Now, there's a lot I don't know about this, but here's one thing that's very, very important...the oil is *symbolic*. We are symbolic animals and the Bible is always giving us symbols to remind us physically of what's true spiritually. A big for instance is communion – the bread *symbolizes* Jesus' body and the cup *symbolizes* his blood. But we're not practicing cannibalism! Water baptism is a symbol of the spiritual washing you received at salvation, but the water in the tank does not save you.

The water is just water and the oil is just oil. Which, by the way, means it doesn't matter if you buy a flask of oil from the Holy Land for \$50 an ounce or get a bottle Wesson out of the pantry, it's going to do the same thing. Don't fall for Christian snake-oil salesmen. The power is in the symbol.

These are not magic talismans. That is paganism. Paganism worships the power of nature. Christians worship the One whose power *created* nature. What does the oil symbolize? The Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit plays a key role in healing – starting with raising Jesus from the dead. So the oil is a lot like the baptismal water, a visible physical symbol of what the Holy Spirit does in the invisible realm.

Now, here's something else you need to understand about oil in Bible times. In the ancient world, oil was medicine. Did you know that? Have you ever read the parable of the Good Samaritan? We're told a Samaritan comes along and finds a man who had been beaten up by robbers and left by the side of the road. Do you remember what he did with him? He poured two things on him - oil and wine. No, he wasn't making him a salad. Oil was for the soothing of the joints and muscles – you ever have a massage? - and wine was for antiseptic purposes. Wine was something that sterilized wounds and cuts and such.

But oil was considered medicine. Too many people create an artificial distinction between the prayer for healing and the medical arts. They are *not* at odds! It is *not* a lack of faith to go to the doctor. Just the opposite. God is the healer...yes...and He very often uses doctors to deliver His healing. Just like God is the great communicator...and He often uses preachers to deliver His messages.

Now, I believe in miracles. You have to believe in miracles if you're a Christian because our faith is founded on a man coming back from the dead and that is a miracle. I've seen miracles. I will pray for a miracle. But I will also pray that God will add skill to the skill He has already given the surgeon, the nurse, the medical tech.

So the oil as a symbol of the Holy Spirit *and* as a form of medicine is a way of praying, “Lord, however you want to do this. If You want to heal my friend in a supernatural way..fantastic. If You want to heal them through a process of medicine and science – which we believe You created – fantastic. We’re not here to tell You *how* to do it, we’re just here in faith pleading with You to heal our friend, because we love them, and we know that You love them more, and we have the faith to believe that You have the ability to actually do something about it. So please intervene in this natural world with Your supernatural power and bring about the healing of our friend.”

That is a prayer of faith. And you don’t have to shout. But I suppose you can if you want to. But do understand, in a biblical view of things, grace doesn’t have to replace nature. It can very often transform it and even complete it. Ok, so that’s the prayer of faith and the anointing with oil.

Thirdly, the confession of sins. And this is very, very interesting. We’re told here that when you are doing the church’s ministry of healing prayer for a sick person you make sure there’s a spiritual therapy going on as well as the physical – or I should add *mental* – therapy. Let’s not forget that mental health should be handled the same way as physical health – prayer *and* medical arts.

So we’re told here that when a sick Christian is seeking physical healing, that sick Christian must examine his or her heart and look for sins and confess them and renew their relationship with God. Now why? This is a very important insight. And I’m going to have to restate this a couple times so nobody goes out of here saying, “Anthony said that when you’re sick it’s because you’re sinning and you need to confess your sins.” No...but sometimes *yes*.

Frankly, the people who have the most medical practice know how often spiritual issues, emotional issues, issues of anger, issues of guilt, issues of anxiety, issues of fear - some of you are in the medical field - you know how much that undermines a person’s *physical* health. Let me ask you, do you know what a psychosomatic illness is? Somebody says, “It’s an illness which is all just in your head, right?”

Wrong! No, a psychosomatic illness is in *your body*. You have real headaches from the worry. You have real ulcers from the fear. You have real colitis from the anger. Your body is breaking. It’s not in your head. It’s in your colon! It’s in your lungs! It’s in your brain! It’s not just in your mind. Psychosomatic illnesses are not imaginary illnesses. They’re *real* illnesses, but they’re aggravated and many times absolutely caused by spiritual and psychological issues.

There is nothing better you can do when you're sick than get right with God, get at peace with God. There is nothing better than to get your conscience clear, and to see the things that have been too important to you, and to get right with God, and to sense His love again. There is nothing you can do better for your physical healing than to do some spiritual healing. This is profound wisdom.

First of all, sometimes the spiritual ailment will cause spiritual *growth* you wouldn't get otherwise. Listen, when you get sick you feel weak. Right? You feel vulnerable. You feel fragile. You feel like you're breaking down. Even when you just have a really bad cold, it's like the universe has turned against you. That's one of the only times you see spiritual reality! Because when you're healthy you feel like you're going to live forever. When you're healthy you feel like you're really in charge of your life.

Sometimes it's not until you get sick that you realize what a fragile, vulnerable, dependent creature you really are. It's when you can hardly get out of bed sometimes that you actually have a true picture of your real spiritual condition. "Oh God, you've got to help me here!" We are utterly dependent on God. And that is *always* true...but it's when we're sick that we can really see it clearly.

I can tell you personally, very often when you get sick it humbles you into the dust. Deanna says I am a crybaby when I am sick. That's not true, I'm just very, very spiritual. "Oh Jesus! Oh Jesus! Look down on your servant in his suffering!" Sickness is very humbling. Sickness shows you how in charge you really are – or *aren't*! So often you will be able to see sins, you'll be able to admit flaws you couldn't any other time.

What I'm trying to say is sometimes the spiritual healing and confessing and getting right with God actually causes physical healing, but other times the physical sickness actually causes the spiritual healing. The Bible is saying here you must always, always do them *together*. You must always use physical sickness as a time for spiritual renewal. You must always make sure you're working on spiritual healing as well as physical healing at the very same time. Always.

If you do that, then what? Well, some people are going to say, "Ah, it says, 'The prayer of faith *will*...'" Doesn't it say that? Yes, it does. It says, 'And the prayer offered in faith *will* make the sick person well.' So the prayer of faith is an unconditional guarantee for the Christian." I know people who believe and even teach that.

But that leads again to the problem of what happens when the healing does not occur. And so often the answer is that either the pray-er or the pray-ee doesn't have enough faith. Or has secret sin in their life. Or has angered God in some way. Just a kind of spiritual blame game that's just not helpful or edifying. Again, guys, that's what pagans do. "Maybe you didn't say the words just right." This isn't magic.

Now, we could obviously have an entire sermon - in fact, we could have an entire *series* of sermons - on unanswered prayer and why some people get healed and some people don't. I think we have to own that there is just an awful lot about the spiritual world that we simply do not understand. Paul said we see as through a glass dimly.

In addition, you have to remember that Jesus Christ had an unanswered prayer. Jesus Christ in the garden of Gethsemane said, "Father, if it's possible, let this cup pass from me." He was saying, "If there's another route to the salvation of humanity that doesn't involve my torture, murder and descent into hell...maybe we could go with that?" And he was turned down.

You don't think Jesus prays in faith? Come on! Jesus had perfect faith. He had to have perfect faith. That was his job. His job was to live the life you should

have lived as well as die the death you should have died. So we can't say he was turned down because he lacked faith. Do you know why he was turned down? Because his Father knew the greater good.

Have you ever wanted something sincerely you thought would honor God, you thought would be good for you, you thought would be good for everybody around you...and as it turns out, if you had gotten it it would have destroyed a lot of people, a lot of things? Have you ever sought out and *gotten* something you were sincerely sure was good for you, sincerely sure was good for people around you, and sincerely thought honored God...and it was destructive? Have you ever made a mistake? Of course.

My 18-year-old son graduates from High School in two months – two months! What if he said, "Dad I've done really well in school and I would like a Ferrari for graduation." Of course the answer is no – first of all I'm not a *television* preacher, I can't afford a Ferrari! "But even if I could afford it, son, I would not buy you a Ferrari." He says, "You don't love me." No, actually it's *because* I love you that I wouldn't put an 18-year-old boy behind the wheel of a Ferrari.

And because God loves you, He would *never* say, “Whatever you ask for in faith, I will give you without condition.” That would destroy you. The power of prayer would be destructive power. It would be child abuse if our Father who art in heaven gave you anything you asked for. Jesus said, “If you ask for anything *in my name*...” That “in my name” is carrying a lot of freight.

That’s the reason why I always say that when you ask something of God, God will either give you what you ask for, or God will give you what you would have asked for if you knew everything He knows. He’s your Father, and fathers are like that. Don’t you want a Father like that? Therefore, that’s the reason there’s unanswered prayer. Why unanswered prayer? Because your Heavenly Father loves you.

And that’s as far as I can take it, because if you want a more specific answer than that then you’re asking for the mind of God. And no one can know the mind of God. He works in mysterious ways. And His ways are not our ways. But He loves you. He loves you so much that He didn’t answer His own Son’s prayer. I do know that much.

Now last thing. And then I’m actually going to pray for you. I feel very strongly that we are to end this service a little differently today.

I’m going to finish the sermon and pray and we’ll receive the tithes and offerings and I’ll dismiss you. But if you would like to receive healing in your body - if you are sick, if you are in pain – I’m going to just stand down front here, I’m an elder of the church, and I’ve even got some oil, and you can line up in the center aisle and I’m going to pray a prayer of faith over anybody who wants healing today.

But there’s one last part of this text that we have to address. Because before you come and let me pray for you, you just need to know that we have a problem. Because what does the text say? What kind of prayer is powerful and effective? The prayer of what kind of man? A...*righteous* man. Uh-oh! Bad news guys...that ain’t me.

When you see that, does your heart sink and you say, “Oh my gosh, you took all of this time to tell me about how great prayer is, and then you tell me it only works if I’m righteous? Thanks a lot. Thanks for nothing.” You have to remember something. Notice right after James says, “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective,” in **v. 17** he says, “*Elijah was a man just like us.*” Now why would he end his letter that way? Doesn’t that seem like a strange ending?

Well actually, we just finished Connect Groups that were all about Elijah. And if you go back and read about Elijah in 1 and 2 Kings – as many of us did - you'll feel a lot better. He really was “just like us.” He got depressed. He got scared. He talked back to God. He was an imperfect person. And yet his prayers resulted in some pretty wild stuff.

You know, the Bible says, for example in **Psalm 66:18**, one of the most awful verses in the Bible, “*If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened;*” The more you look at that verse, the more you say, “This is ridiculous.” It’s right. We’re sinners. No matter how much higher up that righteousness line we are, why would God ever hear us? The answer is God *would* never hear us because we’re always cherishing iniquity in our hearts to some degree. We’re always sinful. Why would God ever hear us?

Here’s the interesting thing. “The prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” That’s the old King James Version. And the prayer of a more righteous man would avail more. The prayer of a perfectly righteous man would avail perfectly, and you have one. Because **Romans 8:33-34** says, “*Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also **interceding for us.***”

What is that? Jesus is praying for us. Now he’s perfectly righteous – he never cherished sin in his heart. And now he has absolute knowledge. He’s never going to be turned down again. Why? *Because* his prayer in the Garden was not answered. Because **Isaiah 53:5** prophesied about the coming Messiah, “*But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and **by his wounds we are healed.***”

Of course “healing” in that passage means a lot of things. Most importantly, it means the healing that comes *after* death. Because all of us will die one day – regardless of how many prayers of healing we review. After all, Lazarus had a second funeral! But the greatest enemy is not death, it’s hell. And by his wounds on the cross, Jesus has defeated that enemy in our lives.

But I believe that it also means that healing can happen now in this life. Again there are a lot of mysteries, a lot we don’t understand. But if prayers for healing didn’t work, the Bible sure talks about them a lot. So let’s step out in faith. Not faith in our faith. Not faith in our certainties. Not faith in our righteousness. But in faith in Jesus Christ, knowing that he loves us and he has the power to help us when we cry out to him.

If anyone of you sick? Then call on the church to pray the prayer of faith with you. And the Lord – either now or in eternity – but the Lord *will* lift you up.

Let's pray...