

Prayer and Christian Living

So far in our time through James, we've covered a lot of ground. Testing. Wealth. Faith and works. The tongue. And if there's one thread running underneath all of it, it's the question of what it actually looks like to be fully committed to God. Not partly. Not in some areas. Fully.

In James chapter 5, we get what I think is the clearest window into that question. Because James talks about prayer.

Now, I want to say something upfront, and I want you to hear it charitably. Most of us think we already know what prayer is. We were taught it early. We've done it for years. It's part of the rhythm of life for a lot of people who follow Jesus.

So when someone says, "Let's talk about prayer," there's a temptation to think: I've got this one.

But James has something to say about prayer that goes deeper than the mechanics of it. He's not talking about posture or frequency or what words you use. He's talking about what prayer reveals about the condition of your heart. And that's a different conversation altogether.

So let's go there.

James has been talking about prayer throughout the whole letter, but he pulls it all together at the end of chapter 5. He writes in verse 13:

"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 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."

James 5:13-14, ESV.

Notice what he's doing here. He's covering every emotional and physical condition a person might find themselves in. Suffering. Cheerful. Sick. And in all three cases, his answer circles back to the same thing. Pray. Praise. Pray.

That's not coincidence. James is making a point. Whatever your situation, the appropriate response is to turn toward God. Not as a last resort. Not after you've exhausted your own resources. As a first instinct.

And I think for a lot of us, that's where the honest reflection has to start. Because if we're paying attention to our own lives, we might

notice that prayer is often what we do when other things haven't worked. We try to figure it out first. We talk to people we trust. We lose some sleep. And then, somewhere in there, we pray.

James seems to be describing something different. A community of people for whom prayer is so woven into the fabric of daily life that it's the natural response to anything. Good or hard. Public or private.

Now here's where it gets interesting. Back in chapter 1, James said something about prayer that most of us probably skimmed past on our way to the more quotable parts of the letter.

He writes in verse 5:

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.”

James 1:5-6, ESV.

And then later in chapter 4, verse 3:

“You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”

So James gives us two pictures of prayer that doesn't work. The person who asks but doubts. And the person who asks but asks for the wrong reasons. And in both cases, the problem isn't technique. The problem is the heart.

The doubter, James says, is double-minded. That word he uses, in the Greek, is *dipsychos*. Two-souled. It's a vivid description. A person who is genuinely pulled in two directions at once. They want God, but they also want the world. They want to trust, but they want to keep their options open. And so they pray, but they don't really expect an answer. Or they pray, but they're already hedging.

One scholar puts it memorably, drawing on John Bunyan, describing this person as “Mr Facing-both-ways.” That image has stuck with me. Because it captures something true about how we can show up to prayer. Present in body. Divided in soul.

And the person who asks wrongly in chapter 4 isn't someone who never prays. They're praying. But James says they're using prayer as a vehicle for desire. They want what they want, and they've wrapped it in the language of petition. The teachers in James's community were praying, but they weren't asking for

wisdom. They didn't go to God for wisdom, because they wanted what they wanted and not what God wanted. That's not communion with God. That's using God as a means to an end.

Both of these pictures should give us pause. Because they're not describing people who never pray. They're describing people who pray but have a heart problem underneath the prayer.

So what does real prayer look like, according to James?

He gives us an answer in chapter 5, verse 16:

“The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

James 5:16 ESV.

There's a lot packed into that single line. The scholars have spent considerable time on the Greek word translated “as it is working” or “effective” there, and the honest answer is that it doesn't resolve neatly. But what does emerge from the discussion is this: the power isn't in the prayer itself. It's in the one who hears it. Peter Davids puts it plainly when he writes that in this passage, “James makes the difference between prayer and magic clear. God hears prayer.” The emphasis falls on God as the active agent, not on the fervency or technique of the one praying.

That's an important distinction. Because there's a version of prayer that subtly tips over into something like magic. Where we start to think the right words, the right posture, the right amount of sincerity, will produce the right result. James is not describing that. He's describing a relationship. Prayer is the expression of trust in a God who listens and acts.

And then James gives us an example. Elijah.

“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. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.”

James 5:17-18, ESV.

Elijah. That name might feel like it belongs in a category that doesn't include us. A prophet. A miracle worker. Someone who called down fire on a mountaintop. And James seems

to anticipate exactly that reaction. Because the first thing he says about Elijah is this: he was a man with a nature like ours.

That phrase is doing a lot of work. And it's worth sitting with, because it's deliberate. Elijah was normally depicted in heroic terms in the Jewish tradition. Scot McKnight notes that Elijah was typically "listed with such folks as Abraham, Moses, and Samuel," but James's focus is at the other end: James says of the great prophet that he was a "mere mortal like all of us." The point is not to make Elijah a hero, but to encourage the community that they too can pray and that God hears their voice, just as he did in the days of Elijah.

So James chooses Elijah not because Elijah was exceptional, but because Elijah's reputation for prayer was powerful in the minds of his readers, and James wants to redirect that power. The reason Elijah's prayers were answered was not because of who Elijah was. It was because of who God is.

Now let me come back to the passage in chapter 5 that I think deserves the most careful attention. Verses 14 and 15.

James says that when someone is sick, they should call for the elders of the church, that the elders should pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord, and that "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."

This is one of the most discussed passages in the whole letter. It's shaped how different Christian traditions think about healing, anointing, and pastoral care across centuries. And there are genuine disagreements about what James is describing, and whether it is meant as a universal prescription.

But I want you to notice two things.

First, the primary act is prayer. The anointing accompanies the prayer. McKnight is helpful here: "Intercessory prayer is the first thing he commands and is the main verb. The anointing accompanies the prayer." The oil isn't the point. The elders aren't the point. Prayer is the point. James is describing a community that believes God is present, that God is able to act, and that prayer is the appropriate way to invite that action.

Second, look at what James connects healing to. He says if the sick person has committed sins, they will be forgiven. He's not saying all sickness is caused by sin. That's not his argument. But he is saying that wholeness, in James's view, is not only physical. A person who is restored is restored in every way. Body and soul.

That's a deeply integrated picture of what God is doing in human life. And it changes what prayer is for. Prayer isn't a means of

accessing divine power for our physical benefit. It's an act of placing the whole person before a God who cares about the whole person.

Verse 16 keeps pulling me back. "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed."

There's a word in there that's easy to miss. "Therefore." James uses it as a hinge. Because of everything he's just said about healing and forgiveness, this is what follows naturally. Confess. Pray for each other.

He's describing a community practice. Not just individual prayer. Corporate confession. Mutual intercession.

And I think that's significant, because we tend to think of prayer as a private transaction. Something between me and God. And it is that, in part. But James is describing something bigger. He's describing a community where people are honest with each other about where they are, where they're struggling, where they've failed. And where that honesty is met with prayer rather than judgment.

That's not easy. It requires real trust. And it requires people who actually believe that prayer does something.

So let me bring this back to the anchoring question we started with: What does James think prayer actually is? And am I doing it?

Here's my best attempt at what James is saying.

Prayer, for James, is not a spiritual discipline you perform. It is not a technique you master. It is not something you do when you've run out of other options. It is the natural expression of a heart that is genuinely oriented toward God. A heart that isn't divided. A heart that isn't using God as a means to something else.

And the test of whether you're doing that kind of prayer isn't whether you pray regularly, though that matters. It's whether your prayers are honest. Whether you're bringing the real thing before God. Whether you're willing to confess as well as ask. Whether you're praying for other people and not only for yourself. Whether you actually expect God to be present in the answer.

James isn't trying to make prayer more complicated. He's trying to make it more real.

There's something in verse 13 that I keep returning to, and I want to close with it.

"Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise."

It's easy to pray when things are hard. Suffering has a way of stripping away the things we might otherwise lean on. We know we need God when we're in the middle of something difficult. But James says cheerfulness also calls for a response. Praise.

In other words, prayer and praise aren't reserved for the hard seasons. They're the posture of a person who is connected to God in every season. Who acknowledges God when things are good and when things are difficult. Who brings the whole of their life into the conversation.

That's what James is after. Not more religious activity. Not a longer prayer list. A life that is genuinely and consistently turned toward God.

I hope that sits with you for a while. And I hope, as we continue through this series, that these aren't just ideas we understand but rhythms we actually begin to live.