

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. 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 5:16–18)

Introduction

Our recent study of the command to “greet one another” (Romans 16:16) in one sense summarises the heart of all of the “one another” commands in the New Testament. Yet there is value in continuing to expound the rest of them, for in doing so we will flesh out the important principles of showing affection to one another. So it is with James’ exhortation to “pray for one another” (James 5:16).

The theme of prayer has arisen in this epistle already (1:5; 4:1–5). As James addressed beleaguered Jewish believers, he reminded them of their responsibilities to God and to one another in several practical areas.

James has been called the Wisdom Literature of the New Testament. It is filled with the practicalities of the Christian life. That is one reason that Martin Luther was so confused by its insistence on “good works” (see chapter 2). One of these “good works” is the work of prayer. In chapter 5, James makes it clear that those who believe the gospel will be people who pray. They pray about many things, including praying for one another.

We are to say our prayers one for another. We will consider this truth under several headings.

The Exhortation to Prayers

James begins: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another” (v. 16a). As you can see, the exhortation is actually a dual one: to confess our sins to each other and to pray for one another. At least in this context, the two go hand in hand.

The Wider Context

James writes to scattered Jewish believers living life in a broken world. Trials are a major theme in this letter. Temptations are a major theme in this letter. James highlights the realities of church life in a broken world and concern within the church for the well-being of every member – regardless of social standing. As you read James, you get the sense that

all is not well, and that there is a desire for things to change. The letter highlights the need for meaningful relationships in the body and with the elders. It speaks to elders who care and are committed, and of a church that is committed to holiness and sanctification as a consistent pursuit.

The Immediate Context

The immediate context is that of someone who is sick and calls for the elders to pray for them. But in this verse it is clear that the theme widens. Now the congregation is being called upon. This implies that we are to speak with one another. It implies that we are to share with one another. It implies a sense of transparency. It implies taking our walk with Jesus Christ seriously.

Though the context is confession of sin, the principle widely applies that we are to *pray* for one another. When we confess our sins to another, it is an indication that we are taking our spiritual life seriously. But, if done in a right spirit, we take seriously the person to whom we are confessing. Likewise, when we pray for others, we take *them* seriously.

We can conclude that one of the things which James emphasises is the relational closeness that is expected in the church. Perhaps there is truth to the saying, “The church that prays together, stays together.”

To obey the spirit of this command requires that we acknowledge one another, that we take initiative with one another, and that we have affection for one another. To pray for one another implies that we care for one another, value one another, take one another seriously, take God and his word seriously (with the conviction that God hears and answers prayer), and take the local church seriously.

But it also has much to say about the one who asks for the prayers of one another. This person understands their sense of need. To ask for prayer is a recognition of dependence. It expresses confidence in the concern of others. It displays a willingness to be transparent and a sense of relationship with others. It displays faith in God and in his word of promise – the conviction that God hears and answers prayer.

The Expectation of Our Prayers

Verse 16b highlights the expectation of our prayers: “that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

James expected answers to the prayers of God’s people. Before we explain away this text, let’s be careful to give it its due. James expected God to answer the prayers of his people. The problem – our problem – is usually that we don’t share that expectation.

The story is told of a student who was talking to Spurgeon, discouraged by the lack of conversions he saw. Spurgeon asked, “You don’t expect conversions every time you pray do you?” “Well, no sir”, the man replied. Spurgeon responded, “Well, there’s your problem!” Touché, as they say!

We have noted that this passage indicates that the person asking for prayer is taking their sin and their situation seriously. We have noted that the one who listens and prays is taking their sister or brother seriously. But this next part of the verse confronts us with whether we are taking God seriously.

If we take God seriously, we will not hesitate to ask for prayer – about anything: health, overloaded schedules, work-related issues, etc. Commenting on Jesus feeding the five thousand, and the disciples doubt in that story, Ted Kluck notes, “It wasn’t that Peter didn’t believe in Jesus. He did. It is that Jesus doubted what Jesus said because he forgot who Jesus was.” This is often where we find ourselves. We need to take God seriously by taking his word seriously (see Hebrews 11). We need more and more of the weightiness of God. For too many, God is weightless.

James completes this verse with the encouraging (and convicting) words, “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” However you translate this somewhat difficult phrase, the point is not difficult to grasp. James is saying that the right kind of praying is effective. He has already told us what a large part of this right kind of praying is: selfless, others-concerned, God-centred praying (4:1-4).

Effective praying, like everything else in the Christian life, is all of grace. As the songwriter put it, “Only by grace can we enter, only by grace can we stand, not by our human endeavour, but by the blood of the lamb.” This is always the case. Yet it is clear that we are required to live in accordance with God’s righteous word.

Let us pray expectantly, which means that we must pray! Let us ask for prayer, meet for prayer, send prayer requests, join in prayer as a pray-er, and testify when God answers prayer.

The Earnestness of Prayers

In vv. 17–18, we read of the earnestness of prayer: “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.”

If we have great expectations for our prayers, we will pray with much earnestness. This is James’ point, and he uses Elijah as an example.

Elijah was as weak as we are. In fact, he may have been weaker than most of us are, and for that reason he was more powerful in prayer.

If the last phrase of v. 16 is misunderstood, we might think that God only answers the prayers of the super saints. That is not what is meant by “a righteous person.” These verses make this clear.

A righteous person is one who takes seriously the gospel by which she is declared righteous. We call this justification. A righteous person is one who takes God and his word seriously, and therefore is increasingly made righteous. We call this sanctification. A righteous person is one who looks outside of himself for the righteousness of God. He knows that his only hope is in God. This was the mindset of Elijah. In his weakness, the power of God was manifested.

Let’s consider some practical application here.

Since prayer is a confession of dependence, let us realise and embrace our dependence. Stop trying to prove yourself to God and begin trusting him. In other words, start preaching the gospel to yourself.

Display your dependence upon God by believing his word, not your circumstances. This is precisely what Elijah did. He prayed according to God’s revelation in the face of evidence to the contrary!

The Expression of Our Prayers

Though we are to pray “in secret” (Matthew 6:5–6), this does not mean that others are to be unaware of your prayers for them. Rather, encourage them by letting them know you are doing so. Express to them your loving concern by praying for them and letting them know you are doing so.

We all, I am sure, are aware of the immense encouragement that comes when, out of the blue, perhaps, you receive a message that someone is praying for you. This happened this past week in my own life. I want to be sure that I also pay it forward.

Is it at least possible that James has something like this in mind as he pens the closing of his epistle: “My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” (vv. 19–20)? Perhaps.

This is a rather unusual ending for a New Testament letter. It is somewhat abrupt. I don’t know why. Perhaps the urgency of the situation (1:12–15) called for it. It seems that there

Pray for One Another

James 5:16–18

Doug Van Meter

were serious challenges that these Jewish believers were facing. Some were behaving like the world – like those who might be falling away – and James was deeply concerned (1:26; 2:1–4; 3:5–12; 4:4, 4:11–12; 5:1–6). This was not time for niceties or for sentimental charity. No, this was a time for serious, sobering confrontation – and serious, sobering and salvific supplication.

People in the church needed to be rescued! Go after them!

It would seem that, in the context, confession and prayer are vital elements, essential means towards the end of saving a soul from death and covering a multitude of sins. We need God's help. We therefore need to pray.

The local church is always in need of healing. Sin brings harm to the body. It may be slander or malice. It may be a motive-judging spirit, which produces heartache and even division. Self-centred envy has a way of “murdering” the reputations of some church members. Partiality can blind people to their responsibility to be loyal to the Lord and to his truth.

When this happens, the church needs healing. And to be healed, it must be a church that confesses sin to one another and prays for one another. Will we heed God's word?

May God the Holy Spirit descend mightily upon us, bringing healing as our prayers ascend to our Father in heaven, whose name deserves to be hallowed through the inevitable and unstoppable extension of his kingdom.

To that end, brothers and sisters, let us pray.

AMEN