

SERIES: Walk the Talk
 SERMON: **Handle With Prayer**
 SCRIPTURE: James 5:13-20
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Today we will conclude our study of the Book of James as we turn our attention to chapter 5:13-20. Good, decent, and godly scholars differ greatly in their interpretation of these verses, and that always makes it a bit disconcerting when you try to deliver a clear and unambiguous message from God. But let's study it together and see what we can learn.

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. 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. 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.

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. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

I think it might be helpful for me to point out a few of the controversies that I have uncovered on this text. First, the "sickness" referred to in verse 14 is believed to be physical by some, while others adamantly insist it refers only to emotional and spiritual weakness, i.e. discouragement. One branch of Christianity sees in the call for the Elders the basis for an entire sacrament, called "extreme unction," delivered by clergy to those on their deathbeds, while others object that the elders here are not priests or clergy but rather the spiritual lay leaders of the church, and they are not preparing people for death but rather for healing.

The oil used for anointing is strongly viewed as medicinal by some, as liturgical by others, and as symbolic by still others. The promise for healing is assumed by some to be conditional and by others unconditional. The sin mentioned in verse 15 is taken by some as evidence that the sickness for which the Elders pray is sin-induced, while others suggest that James is only allowing for that possibility. The confession of verse 16 is seen as public by some and as private by others.

And that's just a sampling of the wide variety of interpretations. It's no wonder that this instruction on prayer for the sick is practiced by so few churches today. The wide disagreement has caused many to back off and avoid the subject altogether. But I don't think we need to do that. I'm of the opinion that while all these issues cannot be settled with absolute certainty, there is a core of instruction here that we can sink our teeth into and profit from.

I believe it's important for us to recognize that the principal subject of James 5:13-20 is not healing but prayer, with healing being just one of the results of effective prayer.

The importance of prayer in the Christian community at all times (13).

When troubled. “Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray.” Two weeks ago in verses 7-11 we saw that the believer must have patience, steadfastness and endurance in time of trial. He must not give up because the Lord is coming. He must not take things into his own hands, because the Lord will judge. And he must not doubt the Lord, for He is full of compassion and mercy. Now we see there is one more over-arching requirement for the troubled Christian—to pray. I call it over-arching because I don't think it's possible to have patience or to avoid giving up, taking things into our own hands, or doubting the Lord unless we are bathing our situation in prayer. The number one resource for the troubled Christian is talking to God.

But prayer is not just for times of crisis and discouragement. It is also for times of success and joy. James goes on to ask, “Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise”

When happy. I believe he's still calling for prayer. Singing praises is just another way of talking to God and it is an important part of every healthy Christian's spiritual diet. We can sing hymns or Scripture songs; old or new; in the shower, in the car, or in church; in tune or out; it doesn't matter. What matters is that we express our thoughts and emotions of praise to God for His goodness and His grace. So, let me ask you, “Do you ever think of our musical worship time as really a time of prayer?” It can't be, of course, unless our hearts are in it and we are thinking about the words we are singing.

When sick. Starting in verse 14 the individual Christian is still the beneficiary, but this time he himself is not called upon to pray; rather he is to request that representatives of the church pray for him. “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.”

Prayer for the sick is accompanied by a promise of healing that is definite, instructive, and conditional.

1. Definite. “The prayer offered in faith *will* make the sick person well; the Lord *will* raise him up.” There is no ambiguity here. It doesn't say the sick person *may* get well or that the Lord *may* raise him up. It's definite—he *will* get well.

But it's important for us to examine the term “sick.” It means “to be without strength” and has in mind the idea of being bedridden, unable to work, unable to continue. So James isn't suggesting that the Elders are to be called upon to pray for ingrown toenails or sore muscles or creeping baldness “lest,” in the words of J. Sidlow Baxter, “they turn the praying Elders themselves into sagging invalids through overmuch traipsing around!”

But when an illness has depleted one's hope, sapped one's strength, and produced inner discouragement, that person has the privilege of seeking God's healing through the prayer of the church's spiritual leaders.

John MacArthur makes a strong case for the notion that James is not here speaking of physical

illness, like cancer victims or people with diabetes, but rather of fallen spiritual warriors—those who are defeated, exhausted, and depressed because they have been suffering from persecution and exploitation at the hands of the wicked. He appeals to the context to show that these are the ones he urged to be patient in the previous passage. MacArthur also bemoans the fact that in today's church weak, struggling, depressed believers are often handed over to so-called expert professional counselors, who often make little use of prayer. He says, "Those who have been defeated in the spiritual battle do not need to hear opinions of human wisdom; they need to be strengthened by the power of God through their leaders' prayers."¹

Now I agree with MacArthur that this is the kind of person whom James probably has principally in mind, but the term translated "sick" or "weak" in this verse cannot be limited to spiritual weakness. It seems to me that when any debilitating illness has brought a believer to his knees he should feel that he has the option of calling for the ministry of healing through the prayers of the spiritual leaders of the church.

By the way, this procedure clearly does not preclude other treatment. Medicine and surgery and therapy are also gifts from God that a believer should take advantage of. When Timothy had stomach trouble Paul didn't tell him to call the Elders; he told him to drink a little wine. But there are times when medicine may not do the job; in such a case the believer is not left without hope. He can call on the elders to pray.

2. Instructive. By that I mean it includes clear instructions for both the sick person and the Elders. First, the one who is ill has the responsibility to take the initiative to call the Elders. The Elders are not to seek him out. Chuck Swindoll asks,

"Isn't that interesting? We look at it the other way around in our day. We have the feeling that the church ought to know automatically when we are sick (or how sick we are). And so when we fall ill and no one comes or calls, our tendency is to blame the church because 'no one cares.' But the fact might be that no one knows. There isn't some great, massive crystal ball that a pastoral staff looks into each morning to determine who is ill... those who are sick and wish to have attention and help need to declare it. They need to say, 'I'm bedridden and I need your help and support.'"

The directive for the Elders is to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. The anointing is most likely a symbolic action, picturing the consecration of the person for God's special attention and care. This was its typical use in the first century. It is true that oil was sometimes used medicinally, and so some see the notion that the Elders should come to the bedside armed with both spiritual and natural resources—i.e. with both prayer and medicine. But oil was not a treatment for every debilitating illness, and one wonders why Elders would be expected to do a physician's duty. I believe it makes more sense to see the oil as a spiritual symbol of consecration and the healing ministry of the Holy Spirit. The third factor in this promise of healing in response to prayer is that it is

3. Conditional. We saw earlier that the promise is definite: "The prayer offered in faith *will* make the sick person well; the Lord *will* raise him up." But we need to note that it is only

definite if the conditions are met. It also says, “the prayer offered *in faith* will make the sick person well.” Now for some this is a disappointing condition. They feel it provides a face-saving “out” for the Elders and for the church in general. If someone gets well, great—God performed a miracle of healing in response to prayer. If they get worse and die it's because they didn't have enough faith or the Elders' faith was deficient.

I understand those sentiments and I have expressed them myself in regard to much of the faith healing that goes on in the name-it-and-claim-it churches today. I've seen people devastated when they were promised healing of a loved one and then, when it didn't happen, were blamed for deficient faith.

Yet I cannot avoid the fact that a condition is attached here to the promise of healing. God does not intend to heal everyone, and frankly, I don't think he gives the same level of faith or confidence to the Elders every time they are called to pray. I can speak for myself, having participated with groups of Elders in scores of such prayer meetings for the sick over the past 35 years. There have been times when we were called to pray that I was convinced God was going to heal the individual, and I could pray with strong faith. There are times when I did not have that same confidence. (It's difficult to know always whether the lack of confidence is a spiritual problem of mine or whether God just didn't give peace, but I know there are times when I can pray in faith and times when I cannot). When I do not have that confidence I still pray, only I pray for God's will to be done. When I do have the confidence, I pray specifically for healing.

But then I have to realize that I'm not the only one involved, and I have to recognize that God works through the whole group of spiritual leaders. Perhaps there are times when it takes only one person praying in absolute faith for healing to take place. Then again, perhaps at times just one person's lack of faith prevents healing.

But let it be remembered that if God does not heal, all is not lost. I myself have known sick Christians to be healed, not *of* their sickness, but *by* it. Through their physical illness has come a healing of the soul, for it has brought them into a communion with the Lord such as they had never known before.

Now up to this point—the middle of verse 15—nothing has been said about the cause of the illness for which healing is sought. But now James adds, “If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.”

When sinful. Some conclude from this that the sickness for which the elders should be called is only the kind caused by sin. But it doesn't say, “since he has sinned” it says “if.” James is not implying that all illness is caused by sin. But if it is a sin-caused illness, then prayer has an important place in dealing with that too.

Prayer for the sinner is also accompanied by a promise of healing that is definite, instructive, and conditional.

1. Definite. It says “if he has sinned he *will* be forgiven” and then in verse 16 the implication is

that he will also be healed. Obviously all have sinned, but this is talking about someone whose sin leads to illness. Perhaps the person is sick from a sexually transmitted disease, or is wasted from abuse of alcohol or drugs, or perhaps he is in a weak and debilitated condition due to laziness and gluttony. If he is willing to confess his sins and repent, then he will be forgiven.

2. Instructive. “Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” When the Elders gather the question should be raised to the sick person, “Do you think there could be a spiritual cause for your physical weakness? If so, we need to have a time of confession right now so that healing will not be hindered by that sin.” The wording also allows for the possibility that the Elders themselves may have sin that needs to be confessed so they too will not hinder the work of God's Spirit.

3. Conditional. While the condition is not stated, it is clearly implied. If the sin remains unconfessed, there can be no expectation of healing, which indicates to me that in some cases the Elders may pray in faith and healing might still be prevented because of sin in the life of the individual or in the life of an elder.

The Apostle has so far stressed the importance of prayer in the Christian community at all times. I wonder sometimes how much suffering God's people undergo unnecessarily. How much could be relieved if we availed ourselves of God's provision for suffering, for sickness, and for sin? I think of the words of the old hymn we sang earlier in our service, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

*O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.*

And why don't we? Perhaps the principal reason is that we have lost confidence in the power of prayer. Let's face it, prayer is largely a side issue in the church today. I can't help but think about how exercised some Christians have been over the issue of prayer in the schools. We never had prayer in the public schools I attended in St. Louis, but once the Supreme Court ruled it out of order one would think that Americans were being deprived of one of their most cherished liberties.

But I have always wondered why Christians get so upset about the fact that they can't pray in school with pagans when they so rarely avail themselves of the privilege of praying with their brothers and sisters in their churches, or even in their homes?" Can we really say that prayer is the backbone of our church, or our homes, our personal lives? I don't think most of us can. James mentions one other time when prayer is important besides when troubled, happy, sick, or sinful.

When someone is found wandering from the truth (19,20). Look at the very end of the chapter: "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins." I like to call this “operation rescue.” That James is talking about straying believers and not about unbelievers seems obvious. He addresses them as

brothers and states clearly, “if *one of you* should wander from the truth.” This may refer to doctrinal deviation or moral deviation; whatever it is, it is serious because it can result in a multitude of sins.

What should we do with a wanderer? Castigate him? No. Discipline him? Not yet. The first effort should be to rescue him? But how?

1. The means of “operation rescue” is “bring him back.” Because this comes at the end of a passage devoted to prayer, I would have to say that the chief means of bringing back a straying saint is probably earnest prayer. And it works. I have shared with you about my little sister, who walked away from the Lord at age 15. My parents prayed for her for 41 years, and shortly before my dad’s death at the age of 91 she came back and her husband was gloriously converted. We were at her home last month for a family reunion, and it was a huge blessing to observe the incredible spiritual growth in her life and in her husband’s.

Of course, usually prayer should be accompanied by action, and there are many other passages which speak of the value of loving confrontation, gentle rebuke, and other means of rescue which we do not have time to get into today. But one thing is clear, if you know a straying saint the most important thing you can do is to pray. Any why bother?

2. The results of “operation rescue.” Two are specifically stated:

- (1) you can save the wanderer from death, and
- (2) you can cover over a multitude of sins.

You may actually save his life because the ultimate discipline that God brings upon a straying saint is physical death. Many a Christian, I’m convinced, dies prematurely because of unconfessed, unrepentant sin. If you can bring him back before that point you may save his life.

At the same time you can cover over a multitude of sins, a reference to the forgiveness resulting from his repentance, or possibly even to the fact that his restoration prevents him from continuing in gross sin.

Now I cannot leave this word about the straying believer without speaking to the straying saint, for there undoubtedly a few in that category here this morning. In fact, we are all susceptible to spiritual wanderlust. The hymn writer put it this way,

*"Prone to wander, Lord I fell it.
Prone to leave the God I love."*

We must be aware that sin persisted in will make you sick and can eventually kill you. Deal with it before it does you in!

To stimulate our faith in prayer James offers us an illustration of how important it is.

The importance of prayer illustrated (16,17)

Look at the end of verse 16. “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. 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. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain; and the earth produced its crops.”

Elijah was just like us. Now that's important to me. It's easy to think of people like Elijah as super-saints, miracle-workers, really spiritual aliens. They were not. They were ordinary people with the same temptations, the same susceptibility to discouragement, the same occasional failures. If there was an area in which Elijah differed from us it was not in I.Q. or natural gifts or spiritual resources; it was in regard to his prayer life.

Elijah was a man of intense prayer. Friends, it's extremely important for all of us to realize that prayer is a privilege equally open and available to every child of God. As far as I can tell in the Scriptures there is no spiritual gift of prayer. Some people are particularly gifted as teachers, others as evangelists, others as mercy givers, but we're all on a level playing field as far as prayer is concerned. The fact that some pray casually and rarely while others pray earnestly and frequently is a matter of personal choice and spiritual discipline, not giftedness. Elijah was one who prayed earnestly.

Think, for example, of the time Elijah prayed for the dead son of the widow at Zarephath? Mind you, (and this is amazing to me!) there is no record of any resurrection in the history of the human race prior to that event, yet Elijah prayed, “O Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him!” (1 Kings 17:21). And God did!

Or what about his prayer on Mount Carmel when he called upon God to bring down fire from heaven upon a sacrifice that he has drowned with barrels of water in order to make it impossible to burn without divine intervention. Listen to this prayer:

"O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench." (1 Kings 18:36-38)

But James chooses to illustrate Elijah's earnestness in prayer with the incident of the drought brought upon Israel after Ahab led Israel into idolatry. In 1 Kings 17 & 18, where this story is recorded, Elijah made a proclamation to Ahab: "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." And there wasn't. Then following a drought and famine such as Israel had never seen before we read in chapter 18, verses 41-45:

"And Elijah said to Ahab, 'Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.' So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. 'Go and look toward the sea,' he told his servant. And he went up and looked. 'There is nothing there,' he said. Seven

times Elijah said, 'Go back.' The seventh time the servant reported, 'A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea.' So Elijah said, 'Go and tell Ahab, "Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you"' Meanwhile the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel."

Elijah's prayers were powerful and effective. Why? I suggest two reasons: faith and fervency. His faith is obvious. Before there was even a cloud, Elijah could hear (evidently with the ears of faith) the sound of a heavy rain. Dr. Guthrie, a great Scottish preacher, prayed in the morning service one Sunday that it would rain. As he returned to church in the evening his little daughter said, "Papa, here's the umbrella." "What do we need that for?" he asked. "You prayed for rain this morning, didn't you," she responded. They took an umbrella, and when they came home they were glad for its shelter. O, the faith of a child!

Another element was fervency, evident in Elijah's posture and in the seven times he sent his servant to look. How many times have we gone back to God seven times about the same issue?ⁱⁱ

Conclusion: Do you know what James' nickname was in the early church? They called him "Old Camel-knees." Now most of us wouldn't consider that to be particularly flattering! But I think James didn't mind, for it was a reference to the callouses that resulted from spending so much time on his knees in prayer. In other words, James didn't just talk about prayer; he didn't just write about prayer; he prayed. He walked the talk.

It has been said that today's church has
 many organizers, it has few agonizers;
 many who pay, but few who pray;
 many resters, but few wrestlers;
 many who are enterprising, but few who are interceding.

Samuel Chadwick said, "The one concern of the Devil is to keep saints from prayer. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray." I challenge all of us this morning to increase the time we spend in earnest prayer. Whether troubled or happy, whether sick or sinful, or straying, handle life with prayer.

i. John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, James*, 277.

ii. But perhaps you are inclined to object that Elijah shouldn't get credit for his great faith because God told him it was going to rain. Back at the beginning of chapter 18 we read this: "After a long time, in the third year, the word of the Lord came to Elijah: 'Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.'" He had inside information! But when I pray about something I often don't have any idea what God's will is. Romans 8:26 describes what

my normal experience: “We do not know what we ought to pray for.” So what part does faith play? Well, the whole passage reads,

"the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts, namely God the Father, knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."

I see this as the Christian's great safety net in prayer. A sincere prayer is always answered, but sometimes it is answered as we prayed it and sometimes as the Spirit corrected it, but we should always pray, and with faith.