



FISHHAWK

FELLOWSHIP CHURCH

HOW TO PRAY BETTER

James 5:13-18

GETTING STARTED

As your group time begins, use this section to help get the conversation going.

When do you first remember praying? How did you learn what it meant to pray?

How would you define prayer?

Why do you think that prayer is such a ubiquitous human experiences? Do you know people who would not confess faith in Jesus (or maybe anything at all), yet they pray? What drives them to pray?

Prayer is one of the most misunderstood practices of the Christian faith, which may seem odd because it is such a universal experience. How many times have you seen a friend on social media share their “thoughts and prayers” in the wake of a tragedy? Most people pray. Prayer, in its most basic definition, is a conversation with God. Yet, as followers of Jesus, we recognize that the object of our prayers matters. Thankfully, the Bible is not silent on this area where so many would like to see growth. James 5 offers some of the most practical advice on prayer found in all of the Scriptures.

DISCUSSION

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 5:13-14.

When do you find you are most often compelled to go to God in prayer?

When does James suggest that we need to go to God in prayer? How does James’s advice on prayer compare to your practice of prayer?

Should certain situations in our lives lead us to pray with greater frequency and intensity? Why or why not?

If we are honest, we treat prayer as a crisis defense—as a last means of defense when something goes wrong. Yet, James sees prayer as something that should be happening in our lives all the time. He sees it as the lifeblood of an ongoing connection with God the Father. If the goal of life is to know and connect to God, prayer is one of the best ways to foster that connection. Just as relational intimacy is developed with your friends through conversation, intimacy is fostered with God through prayer. As Paul wrote, we should “pray continually” (1 Thess. 5:17). This is not to say there aren’t times in our lives that require a greater degree of dependency on God. When we are sick or in a desperate situation, we should appeal to the One who is above it all. However, the prayers in those times should be in addition to our regular prayer life.

James tells the person who is sick to call on the elders of the church for prayer. Who did James put the responsibility on? Why is this important?

If we do not make our sickness known to brothers and sisters in Christ, of what blessings are we depriving ourselves and the church?

Praying for health (or a job, or a passing grade, etc.) and having others do the same alleviates the responsibility to act from the person requesting prayer. What are we missing when we don’t partner our prayers with action?

James puts ownership of expressing prayer on the person needing prayer. Our struggles (in this instance, sickness) should not be hidden from those in the church, but placed in plain view so that the church provides a vital ministry to those in need. The ability to pray for one another is one of the greatest graces that God gives His church. We get to partner with God in His work in the world through the church. However, God has also given us common sense which tells us that we need to couple our prayer with action. God does not want us to pray and do nothing. “Let go and let God” is not a truly biblical approach. We must go to God in prayer and take action.

> READ JAMES 3:15-18.

What three groups of people are mentioned in these verses? What is James promising about the sick in verse 15?

How would you respond to someone who believed that ongoing sickness was the result of a lack of faith, or that with enough faith, God would heal them?

The history of faith is filled with people who believed but who were also sick and who suffered. Coming to Christ is not an invitation to leave earthly suffering, but often is an invitation into suffering. Jesus is the only perfect person who ever lived, yet He suffered more than anyone. Job was righteous and he suffered much. A false teaching exists that says with enough faith, you will be healed. That’s not what James is saying. Rather, God uses our prayers and petitions to bring about healing.

How are sin and sickness related? How does confessing sin function in a community? Why is this something we should pray for together as well as individually?

What joy or relief have you experienced when you confess sin to another brother or sister in Christ?

What does the word “righteous” mean in the context of verse 16? Why would the prayer of a righteous person be more effective? James uses the example of Elijah. Who comes to your mind when you think of a righteous “prayer warrior”? What could you learn about prayer by observing their life?

Read Hebrews 10:19-22. What do we gain when we pray in Jesus’ name? How do we make this more than a compulsory phrase tacked on to the end of our prayers?

All sickness is caused by sin generally, yet some sickness is caused by sin specifically. This is why confessing sin is so important. It frees us from the guilt before God, but it also brings us into the accountability, love, and support of community. This is why we should always diligently confess our sins even when it is uncomfortable and awkward. Our lives are at stake. On the other hand, James said the prayers of the righteous are effective. What he means is, the person who is walking in the light prays effectively. Their sin is not disrupting their fellowship with God, so their prayers are more fervent. Lastly, the most effective prayers are the ones prayed in Jesus’ name. This does not mean that we need to tack “in Jesus’ name” on all our prayers. Although that isn’t a bad idea, it means that our prayers are accepted by virtue of our relationship with Jesus. He is perfectly righteous and all His prayers are perfectly heard. Go to God through Jesus.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Who, having a method for prayer, helps you pray more regularly and effectively? How could you incorporate the ACTS prayer strategy in your life and with your family this week?

Do you feel comfortable expressing your prayer needs to this group? Why is prayer such an indispensable part of our life together as believers?

Why do we undervalue prayer as a strategy to see people reached with the gospel? What would it look like to devote regular time in our gatherings and in our personal lives to see people come to a saving knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

PRAYER

Close in prayer by using the ACTS prayer strategy outlines in the Next Steps section from this weekend. Help them use this approach by modeling it before them.

MY NEXT STEPS

The ACTS Prayer Strategy:

- A—Adoration (Praise God for who He is; His nature, character and promises)
- C—Confession (Confess any sin or wrongdoing and ask for God's forgiveness)
- T—Thanksgiving (Thank God for His blessings in your life)
- S—Supplication (Bring requests for yourself and others to God)

1. This week, I will identify the distractions that keep me from praying so that I can pray each day.
2. This week, I will create a system that works for me to pray daily and use the ACTS prayer strategy as a guide to pray for at least 10 minutes.
3. This week when I pray, I will thank God for sending Jesus so that I can pray to and have a relationship with my Heavenly Father.
4. This week, I will memorize Hebrews 10:19: "And so, dear brothers and sisters, now we may walk right into the very Holy of Holies, where God is, because of the blood of Jesus."

COMMENTARY

JAMES 5:13-18

5:13. Christians pray both in times of trouble and in times of joy. In times of trouble Christians often fall victims to self-pity, anger, or morbid introspection. James directed Christians to pray rather than surrender to these wrong responses. Trouble includes physical and emotional stress arising from both ordinary trials and special spiritual difficulties. During such trouble we are to "keep on praying." Sufferers must not stop their prayers after a quick prayer for help. They must live in an attitude of prayer.

Happy describes a cheerful, elated mood. This is not a giddy, flippant outlook but a mood of cheer and optimism. Prosperity and pleasant experiences in life can cause a person to forsake God due to complacency or worldly contentment. Instead, life's good times should lead us to sing songs of praise to God as the author of the blessings. The same verb can be translated "make music" to the Lord (Eph. 5:19). This command does not demand the use of music but calls for the expression of words or thoughts to praise or thank God.

Christians who face trouble often lose their awareness of the presence of God due to gloom. Christians who have elation tend to forget God in the joy of their good success. Both darkness and sunshine should lead believers to a consciousness of God.

5:14. Sickness includes all types of bodily weaknesses—physical, mental, or spiritual. Here the reference is primarily to physical illness. The sick person should take the initiative to call the elders of the church to pray for him. The elders were church leaders who had the task of pastoring and providing spiritual leadership for a congregation (Titus 1:5). We would normally expect them to be able to pray with effectiveness. These elders are called on to perform two tasks.

First, they pray over him, suggesting that they stand over the bed of the sick person. This is a special participation in prayer beyond the normal experiences of intercession. The fact the ill person was confined to a bed implied a serious or painful sickness. Second, they anoint him with oil. The act of anointing with personal touch and contact served to strengthen the faith of the sick person. This refers to olive oil, which served as a symbol of God's healing power. The oil had no healing power in itself. The experience of anointing with oil appears elsewhere in the New Testament in reference to physical healing (see Mark

6:13).

This practice had two benefits which encouraged more fervent prayer for the sick. The elders of the church would pray with more fervor because they had been at the scene of sickness. The sick person could become more aware of the encouragement which could come from their fervent prayer.

Roman Catholics have used this passage to justify the sacrament of extreme unction, a ceremony intended to prepare a sick person for death. The fact that in the next verse James spoke of restoring a person to health suggests that we must not understand the prayer of verse 14 as a preparation for death.

The word for “sickness” can refer to spiritual weakness (1 Cor. 8:11). Usually, however, the presence of spiritual sickness is noted by the appearance of a qualifying phrase such as “in faith” (Rom. 4:19). The absence of the phrase here lends support to the suggestion that physical sickness is the concern. The word for “sickness” was used to describe the physical sickness of Lazarus (John 11:2-3), the nobleman’s son (John 4:46), and Dorcas (Acts 9:37).

5:15. The prayer offered in faith is a prayer based on confidence that God can and wants to heal. This does not imply that if a person has a sufficient degree of faith, God will automatically answer the prayer. Rather, it suggests that believers have a right to faith in all of life’s situations.

Those who pray in faith receive two promises. First, these prayers will make the sick person well. Second, the statement about the forgiveness of sins suggests that in some instances illness may be due to the sins of the sick person. In such instances the healing provided a sign that God had forgiven the sins.

With these promises God still retains his freedom to do his will and work things out in the ways best for the kingdom. Prayer can bring healing, but lack of healing does not show that the one praying lacks faith. Neither does it show that the prayer is somehow invalid or God is somehow incapable of healing.

The promise of raising up the sick person refers to physical restoration to sound health and not to participation in the final resurrection. The verb for “making the sick person well” is sometimes used in the New Testament to describe “spiritual deliverance.” The Gospels also use it for restoration to health (see Matt. 9:22). Sick person describes the experience of weariness (Heb. 12:3). Raise up describes the increased physical vigor of those who have experienced healing (Matt. 9:6; Mark 1:31). This seems to suggest that both verses 14 and 15 refer to physical healing and not to spiritual deliverance.

The Bible text here does not qualify the promise of healing in any way. It provides an absolute promise that the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. This poses a problem because it is obvious that believing prayer does not always produce bodily healing. Paul left Trophimus at Miletus sick (2 Tim. 4:20). We must always understand that this and other promises of the Bible (see Mark 11:24) contain an implied condition. God will grant the prayer whenever it accords with his will.

Thus, we cannot take this statement as a guarantee that every prayer offered with a sufficient degree of faith will be answered. The intercessor must approach God in an attitude of faith, but the request will be granted only if it accords with the will of God (1 John 5:14). Whenever God does not provide instant healing, the prayer is still useful because it provides encouragement and help for the person who is sick.

The concluding words of verse 15, If he has sinned, he will be forgiven, recognize that the sickness may be due to sin. When the sickness does come, the ill believer must examine himself before the Lord to determine if sin is the cause of the sickness. The grammatical construction shows that sin is not always the cause of sickness (see Jesus’ teaching in Luke 13:1-4; John 9:3). Some sickness, however, is due to sin (1 Cor. 11:30).

If sin is present, the Bible offers hope. It assures the sick person that forgiveness is available. Sins are sent away because God no longer holds them against the sinner. He forgives completely.

Some interpreters have suggested that this passage discusses two types of healing: physical and spiritual.

The reference to experiencing forgiveness seems to suggest this possibility. Such an interpretation would require that the action of making the sick person well in verse 15 also carries with it an additional meaning of spiritual wholeness. The meaning of the context is satisfied, however, when we see simply a reference to physical healing. We should not give the words of the text more meanings than they require.

5:16a. Because God hears the prayers of penitent people and forgives sin, Christians should confess their sins to one another and pray for one another. The mention of “healing” at the conclusion of this verse makes it likely that the sins to be confessed are those which have caused illness. The healing shows the purpose of the mutual confession and prayer.

Since the intent of the confession of sins is to experience physical healing, it seems best to refer the command to the confession of sins which may hinder healing. The confessor of sins is seeking healing by the act of admitting sins.

Two interesting observations come from this verse. First, the entire church is to be involved in this praying. It is not confined to the elders. Second, the power to heal appears in the act of praying, not in the elder or other one praying.

Confess means “to say the same thing.” It suggests that in confessing, we must identify the sin by its true name and call it what it is. We must acknowledge and repent of specific sins, not merely offer a general confession of guilt.

Placed so close to the discussion of prayer for the sick, this verse likely has its primary application in confession of sin by people who are sick. However, the application is easily extended to confession of sin in any of life’s situations.

This confession of sin seeks to secure faithful prayer support for stumbling Christians from trusted spiritual friends. It is not urging a careless confession to just anybody. Such a type of confession might cause more harm than good. It is confession to dedicated, trusted prayer warriors who will intercede for you with God. Roman Catholics have used this verse to justify confession of sins to a priest. It is important to note that this verse discusses confession and intercession among Christians and not between a believer and a priest.

5:16b. This verse concludes by showing the powerful effect of prayer. Translators have disagreed widely over the translation of the last half of this verse. Some translators emphasize that James was commenting on the effect of the prayers of righteous people. Other translators emphasize that James taught that righteousness and earnestness were requirements for uttering powerful prayers.

We learn two features of effective prayer in this verse. First, prayer must come from righteous people. A person must have a living faith shown by an obedient life. Second, effective prayer must have energy or persistence. Effective prayer comes from the heart of a believer whose passion is to see the will of God worked out in life.

5:17. Elijah is spotlighted as one who prayed earnestly with power. A man just like us teaches us that Elijah had human weaknesses and frailties just like our own. The exact length of the drought in Elijah’s time was not mentioned in the Old Testament (see 1 Kgs. 18:1). Jesus mentioned the same length of time as James (Luke 4:25).

5:18. Elijah knew the will of God so intimately that he could understand the exact time when the divine purposes were to occur. He was able to perceive when God wanted to begin and end the drought. The example of Elijah in determining God’s will challenges us to seek a closeness in our walk with God so that we know and follow his will. Those prayers which accord with the will of God will always be answered (see 1 John 5:14-15). We must so walk in God’s will that we love what God loves and reject what he rejects.