

*Confession and Prayer: James 5:16-18*  
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church  
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I asked you last Sunday, and I ask you again today, what is the role of prayer in your life? Jonathan Edwards said that “Prayer is as natural an expression of faith as breathing is of life.” One way that you can know you’re alive is to see if you’re breathing. If you’re not breathing, you’re not alive. And the same is true of prayer. You can know you’re alive spiritually if you are continually going to the Lord in prayer. If you don’t pray, you have no reason to believe that you’re spiritually alive. Charles Spurgeon, similarly, said, “If any of you should ask me for an epitome of the Christian religion, I should say that it is in one word - prayer.” Prayer is an integral part of the Christian life. It is bound up with faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who are true believers will be people of prayer, because faith and prayer go together. So I ask you, Do you pray? Or I could ask the same thing by saying, Do you trust in Jesus Christ? Prayer is not something that you tack on to your Christian life. It’s not an extra. It is part and parcel of saving faith.

When a person trusts in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin, that person is brought into a relationship with the Almighty God. We are reconciled to God, we become a friend of God, we have peace with God. And once we have a relationship with God, we talk to Him. We communicate with Him. We express to Him our desires, our needs. We cry out to Him for help. We confess our sins to Him and ask for grace to overcome those sins.

I also want to make the point here at the outset of this sermon that prayer is possible only because Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2:5). Prayer is not something we can take for granted, because we don’t deserve the privilege of speaking to God. It’s impossible for us to even enter His presence unless our sins are covered and our guilt is erased. And that happens through Jesus Christ, and through Him alone. Every time we pray we ought to marvel that we hell-deserving sinners can step into the presence of God and bring our requests before Him. And it’s only because we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ that this is possible. He is our mediator. He is the One who reconciled us to God.

Prayer is not an extra in the Christian life. It is a natural expression of genuine faith, just as breathing is a natural expression of life. And prayer is only possible because Christ is our mediator. In the midst of a culture that commonly talks about prayer, I want to be clear that what we’re talking about this morning is Christian prayer. We’re not talking about generic

prayer, as the world may think of it—prayer to a higher power of some kind. No, prayer in the Bible—true prayer—is prayer to God that is possible only through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. So if you're here this morning and the idea of prayer sounds good to you, but you're not sure about Jesus Christ, I want to be frank with you and say that your so-called prayers will mean nothing until you repent of your sin and trust in Jesus. You have no access to the Father except through Christ. In John 14:6 Jesus said it very clearly, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." So, please, come to Jesus Christ, and through Him be reconciled to God, and then enjoy the privilege of real prayer.

For those of us who *are* reconciled to God, may we see afresh today the privilege and the power of prayer, and may we be encouraged by this text to be men and women of fervent prayer.

As James draws this letter to a close, he exhorts us and encourages us in the area of prayer. Prayer is mentioned in every verse from verse 13-18. James wants us to realize how massively important prayer is in our lives. We are to pray when we're suffering. We are to sing praises when we're cheerful. When someone is gravely ill, the person is to call for the elders to come and pray for physical healing. Those are the things we saw last week in verses 13-15. And this morning we're going to see that we also need to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another. And then James encourages us with the promise that prayer is powerful, and then he puts before us the inspiring example of Elijah.

### **I. Confession and Prayer (verse 16a)**

First let's look at confession and prayer in the first part of verse 16. "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." The conjunction "therefore" connects this verse with the previous verses, specifically verses 14-15 which talked about the prayer of faith. As I acknowledged last week, those are difficult verses. But what I think James is saying is that there will be times when God grants a special measure of grace for the elders to pray a "prayer of faith," and at those times the sick person will be healed. Notice in verse 15 that it says, "the Lord will raise him up." That's where the power is. The Lord is the One who heals. And sometimes He chooses to work through the prayers of the elders. And then the end of verse 15 says, "And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." So the assumption is that at least some sicknesses are the result of sin in the person's life. This is not always the case. It may even be that this is seldom the case. But in at least some situations, sickness comes upon a person as a chastisement for sin. And so James says *if* this is

true—if he has committed sins, then he will be forgiven, as God works powerfully through the prayer of faith to bring not only physical healing, but also spiritual healing.

Now in verse 16 he says “therefore” and draws out a broader application of this. He says, “confess your sins *to one another* and pray *for one another*, that you may be healed.” In verses 14-15 it was the elders of the church who came and prayed, but now it’s applied to the congregation as a whole. There may be times when a person is gravely ill and they call for the elders, but prayer for healing isn’t limited to the elders. All believers should participate in mutual confession of sin and prayer for healing. I think the straight-forward reading of verses 14-15 is that James is writing about physical healing, and I think it’s physical healing that is still in view in verse 16. However, we should certainly still see here the general importance of confession and prayer. Whether you’re physically sick or not, there are plenty of things we need to confess to one another so that we can lift each other up in prayer.

When I read this verse I picture our small groups. I picture men with men and women with women, sharing from the heart about the sins that we’re facing in life. Confessing sins of anger, pride, selfishness, lust, greed . . . And praying for one another that we would look to the cross and find forgiveness and grace to live holy lives. This is why we have small groups. This is why you need to be part of a small group. We each need to have relationships in which there can be mutual confession and prayer.

Let me ask you this: When you’re struggling with a sin in your life, who do you share that with? You don’t need to share it with everyone. That’s not what this text is saying. But you do need to share it with someone. You need to have someone in your life whom you trust, who is spiritually mature, who will not minimize your sin but will speak the truth in love to you and help you confront that sin and pray for you as you fight the fight of faith.

I want to encourage all of you this morning, and admonish you to confess your sins to one another. Is there any hidden sin in your life? Is there a secret sin that you’ve been justifying in your mind even though you know deep down that it’s wicked? You need to confess it to the Lord, and you need to confess it to other believers. Because as long as you keep it hidden you are putting yourself in extreme danger. That’s right where Satan wants you to be, because you are so weak on your own and so susceptible to sin’s lies. But when you bring those sins into the light, then there’s power to overcome them, by God’s grace.

I hope that your small group could be a place where you would confess your sin. Or maybe you feel like it’s something you want to share more privately with just one or two trusted friends.

Maybe you need to pull someone aside after the service this morning. Maybe you need to call someone on the phone this afternoon. Whatever you need to do, please do not keep any sins in hiding. Confess it to others so they can pray for you.

It's important that we consider how we ought to confess our sin and to whom we ought to confess it. We first confess our sin to the Lord. Jesus taught us to pray, "forgive us our debts" (Matthew 6:12). In Psalm 51 we find an example of confession. In verse 1 David says, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions." And in 1 John 1:9 we're given the promise, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." We confess, first and foremost, to God. And when we recognize how appalling our sin is in the eyes of God, and we bring it before Him and ask for His forgiveness, He is faithful and just to forgive us through the blood of Jesus. That's the vertical confession that needs to be a continual part of our lives.

But confession should also have a horizontal dimension. As James tells us, we also need to confess to one another. Notice that it doesn't say you have to confess to the elders or to a priest. The confession is to one another, meaning other believers. This is God's design for the church. We are to serve one another, bear one another's burdens, admonish one another, encourage one another and build one another up, exhort one another. And part of the *one another* fabric of the church is confessing to one another and praying for one another.

Now, while you don't have to confess to a priest or an elder or an ordained minister of some kind, it's still important to think about whom you're going to confess to. Here's the danger, which is also our natural tendency: We'll find someone who is struggling with the same sins as we are and who is going to empathize with our struggle. Do you know why we do that? Because we're proud, and we're comfortable, and we don't want to be challenged. We want to make a nice little confession, but we don't really want to change. So I'm exhorting you to give some thought to this. Don't make hollow confessions to immature believers just so you can feel good about confessing your sin. Go to someone who is going to take your sin seriously. Go to someone who is going to give you wise counsel. Go to someone who will hold you accountable. Go to someone who will pray for you.

Also give some thought to *how* you confess your sin, because how you confess your sin will reflect how you perceive your sin. We need to realize how heinous our sin is in the eyes of God. It is detestable, no matter how we might try to minimize it. I'm reading a book right now by Jerry Bridges entitled,

*Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate*, and he discusses sins like anxiety and frustration, discontentment, unthankfulness, lack of self-control, impatience and irritability, judgmentalism, envy, sins of the tongue, worldliness. Are you wrestling with any of those sins in your life? The bigger problem might be that you're *not* wrestling with them. You overlook them and ignore them. But I plead with you, brothers and sisters, and I exhort you to examine your hearts and consider the sins that are present there, and confess those sins to other believers who will say the hard things to you and love you and encourage you. Let us be a confessing people and a praying people.

One more comment on *how* we should confess our sin. On the one hand, there can be the tendency to minimize our sin, as I just mentioned. But I think there is another danger, and that is to dramatize the confession in such a way that almost relishes the sin, rather than mourns over it. And this becomes a danger not only to the one making the confession, but also to the one listening. Paul's warning in Galatians 6:1-2 is applicable here, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted." Applying this to confession, the person listening to a confession needs to be on guard. For our own sake and for the sake of those listening, we should be very careful not to relive the sin in the confession of it. For instance, confessing that you've been angry at your spouse should not be an occasion for that anger to be reawakened. Confessing anxiety should not be an occasion for feeling anxious all over again. Confessing lust should not bring to mind lustful thoughts. All of these sins need to be confessed and dealt with in a way that turns us away from them in disgust and points us to Christ.

This is also why I feel very strongly that men should confess their sins to men, and women to women, because Satan can so easily take a confession of sin and make it a pathway to further sin. So let's be mindful of *whom* we confess to and *how* we confess.

## II. Powerful Prayer (verse 16b)

Moving on to the latter part of verse 16, let's look at powerful prayer. "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." I see this as a ground for the instruction in the first part of the verse. We ought to confess our sin to one another and pray for one another, *because* prayer is powerful. James states it very emphatically. This prayer has "*great power* as it is *working*." Prayer is very powerful. Prayer works. But, of course, it's not just any prayer that is powerful. It's the prayer of a righteous person. This is a reference to all believers, not that we

possess a righteousness of our own, but we are righteous in God's eyes because we have been forgiven in Christ and clothed in Christ's righteousness. In this sense every believer is righteous. And therefore the prayer of every true believer has great power.

Have you ever thought about this? Maybe you feel like you're immature in the faith and you struggle with so many different things that your prayers can't be very effective. Maybe you feel like you're weak and frail, and therefore there's no way your prayers could be powerful like this verse is saying. But the fact is, your feelings of weakness and frailty are just the thing God delights to see in you. He loves to answer the prayers of weak and frail people, which is what we all are if we would only acknowledge it. Do you remember the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector and how they each prayed? Everyone would have expected the Pharisee to have powerful prayers. The Pharisees were the extra-super-holy people, as our children's Bible describes them. He stood up and applauded himself and his religious zeal. But the tax collector, "standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'" If you feel like the tax collector, that's exactly where you need to be. Because Jesus said, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:9-14).

Weakness is not a liability in prayer. It is an asset. Because it's not my power or your power that makes the prayer powerful. It's God's power! And God loves to glorify Himself by answering the prayers of people who acknowledge their own weakness. So don't underestimate the power of prayer. If you do, then you're underestimating the power of God. Wayne Grudem writes, "If we pray little, it is probably because we do not really believe that prayer accomplishes much at all" (*Systematic Theology*, 377). And if we don't think prayer can accomplish great things, then we apparently don't believe that God can accomplish great things. So in your weakness and frailty, come before the omnipotent Ruler of the universe, and experience the power of prayer.

### **III. Elijah's Prayer (verses 17-18)**

Finally, James gives us an example to inspire us. He tells us about Elijah's 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." James stresses here what I was just saying in the last point, that you don't have to be some kind of spiritually elite person in order for God to

work powerfully through your prayers. Certainly Elijah was viewed as a spiritual giant, but James reminds us that he had “a nature like ours.” In other words, as a believer (as a “righteous person”) God could choose to work through your prayers just like He worked through Elijah’s prayers.

The story that James recounts is from 1 Kings 17-18. There’s a lot that happens in those chapters. At the beginning of chapter 17 Elijah says to Ahab, “As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word” (1 Kings 17:1). After that the Lord told Elijah to hide by the brook of Cherith, where he drank from the brook and the ravens brought him bread and meat. And then the Lord sent Elijah to Zerephath, where there was the miracle of the widow’s flour and oil which never ran out, and then there was the even more spectacular miracle of the widow’s son being raised to life. Then in chapter 18 we read of the famous encounter between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, when God sent down fire from heaven to consume Elijah’s sacrifice and showed everyone who the true God is. And just after that we see a picture of Elijah praying for the rain to come. It says, “Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees” (1 Kings 18:42). And then after sending his servant seven times to check for clouds, finally he saw a little cloud in the distance. “And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain.”

What an inspiring story of prayer this is! What an inspiring example of a man of prayer. Elijah depended upon the Lord. His desire was that God would be seen for who He really is. He wanted the people of Israel to follow God wholeheartedly rather than being double-minded and worldly. Elijah said to the people just before his face off with the prophets of Baal, “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). This reminds us of James’ bold statement in chapter 4, “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?” James and Elijah were confronting similar things, which makes James’ reference to Elijah all the more appropriate.

So as we recall the broader Old Testament context of what James refers to, which is certainly what his original audience would have done, we see such an awesome model of prayer. We, too, should pray God-centered prayers, asking God to do great things to demonstrate His power, asking God to reveal Himself so that people would see Him for who He is. And God will work powerfully through our prayers. Don’t forget that phrase in verse 17, that “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.” James doesn’t

let us make excuses. We'd be tempted to say, "Well, sure, God answered Elijah's prayers. But I'm no Elijah." You may not be Elijah, but God can work powerfully through your prayers, too. Because it's not about you. It's not about Elijah. It's about the power of God working through weak and frail people like us.

Please don't underestimate the power of prayer. May prayer be just as natural as breathing in our daily lives. May it be a continual overflow of our faith in God—trusting that He hears us because we have been reconciled to Him through Jesus Christ, trusting that He is powerful to do whatever He pleases, and trusting that He is good and will always do right.