Session 12: James 5:13–20

OPEN

Have you ever had a prayer answered? I mean, where you prayed that something would happen and it happened? Tell us about it.

Looking back, was there anything special about the way you prayed that prayer?

How did you feel when it was answered?

Leader: *This is less casual than our usual opener, and you can take a little more time with it. Someone will probably say that sometimes God's answer is no, and that's true, but we're talking about times when you get what you pray for. This doesn't have to be a major mountain-moving. It could be a quieter, personal thing.*

READ

Read James 5:13–20.

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 2: *James 5:13–20* (10 minutes).

DISCUSS

How would you define prayer? What is it?

Are there certain ways we need to do it?

As children, many of us learned to bow our heads, close our eyes, and fold our hands—not a bad posture for prayer, but is it required? Some of us pray at certain times of day; many say grace before meals. Some recite the Lord's Prayer or follow it as an outline. Some seek places of quiet and solitude. Others pray while driving.

If prayer is, essentially, talking with God, then there must be many ways to do it. Certainly we want to speak respectfully to the Creator of the Universe, but that didn't stop Abraham, Moses, David, Jeremiah, or other biblical heroes from speaking their minds. It's a conversation with a great God who loves us. With that in mind, choose whatever format makes sense.

James 5:13–14 seems to give us a menu: For different situations, here's what to do. Let's parse that out. **What situations are mentioned?**

And what course of action is recommended for each one?

Let's say that all three courses of action are some form of prayer. **How would these types of prayer differ from one another?**

Why is it important to get the church leaders involved in prayer for a sick person?

In the video Francis paraphrased James this way,

> He says get the elders. Get them to pray, because hopefully these are the righteous people in the church. And he says, there's a power in the prayers of the righteous. So gather them together and you could see a miracle right there—like actual healing!

Is there more value in praying with other believers than in praying by yourself?

Scripture indicates great value in both personal prayer and group prayer, and both appear here in verses 13–14. If you're in trouble, pray. Call out to God privately when

you need His help. But there is also healing power as the community of faith gathers, with its appropriate leadership, to call upon the Lord.

Is verse 15 telling us that every physical illness has a spiritual cause? What's the connection between sickness and sin?

Francis pointed out that there may sometimes be a connection, so we must be quick to confess. He said,

> I know that when we've prayed for people as elders, we'll even give them time and say, "is there anything you need to confess before we anoint you with oil and pray for you?" Because we want to be pure before God...there are times in Scripture when people were sick because of their sin. That's not a law. That's not the way it always is—Jesus made that clear. But there have been other times where you know what, It's an opportunity to evaluate your life and confess if you've been living in rebellion.

GO DEEPER

Learn more about sickness, sin, and prayer in the following Bible passages.
John 9:1–3; 1 Corinthians 11:29–30; Mark 2:1–12; Luke 7:21–22; Isaiah 38:1–5

What do these passages suggest about a connection between physical ailments and spiritual need?

Do you think sin really causes sickness, or was that just something people thought back in that pre-scientific age?

How did Jesus correct that notion in His disciples (John 9)? But then why would he forgive the paralytic first, before healing him (Mark 2)?

Why did Jesus heal people? Wouldn't it have been better to spend that time telling them about God?

How did King Hezekiah (Isaiah 38) model the teachings of James 5:13–14?

The connection between sin and sickness is not an easy one to figure out. Yes, many in the ancient world believed illness was the result of evil spirits. They didn't know about germs yet. And so Jesus' ministry was two-fold: healing people's diseases and casting out demons.

It's interesting, thought that modern health experts are finding that physical ailments often do have spiritual causes, or at least psychological causes. Guilt and stress and broken relationships can make us more susceptible to disease. So maybe there's a connection here after all.

Does this mean that a sick person must have sinned in

some way, to bring on the sickness?

No! Sometimes that *could* be the case, but not always. Scripture tells us of Hezekiah, who became ill and prayed successfully for healing, but there was no particular sin mentioned. In Philippians 2, Paul speaks highly of an associate who was seriously ill. Perhaps most famously, Job suffered boils on his skin, and his friends assumed that was punishment for some sin, but he was innocent. So don't blame a sick person for the sickness. It doesn't always have a spiritual cause.

But then why would James talk about forgiving a sick person's sins?

Note that James says *if* a sick person has sinned, they will be forgiven. It could be the problem, it isn't always.

Let me ask you, What do you say to God when you're sick? Is this a time when you ignore God, or pay more attention to Him?

Sickness often brings about a spiritual crisis. We beg God for healing. We promise to live better lives. Yes, we even confess our sins. Somehow, we bring together the physical and spiritual in our own reactions. For many people, this can be a time of spiritual growth.

Do you think verse 15 guarantees healing if the people praying are faithful enough? Have you found this to be the case? Is every sick person healed when they're properly prayed for?

Of course our experience says otherwise. Some people assume then that they weren't good enough at praying. If they were truly faithful, they think, the healing would have happened. But that puts a lot of responsibility on us to sort of "earn" the healing, and it sort of ignores God's sovereignty.

There's a better way to think about this. Healing is both physical and spiritual. This passage mentions the forgiveness of sins along with the physical healing. The Lord may "raise up" someone physically or spiritually, perhaps ultimately in heaven. This isn't just an excuse

we make when God doesn't do what we want. It's our way of understanding and submitting to what *He* wants.

The end of verse 16 has a sentence that many people know and often quote. "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." **What do you think that means?**

Do you think the original readers of this epistle would agree with this, or would it be a new idea for them?

If we're right about these readers being Pharisee-like—proud, judgmental, but religious—then they would completely agree with that, wouldn't they? Wouldn't see themselves as the "righteous" people who remain unpolluted by the world, and therefore their prayers are effective.

So let's ask the natural question: Who is righteous? Are we righteous? How do we become righteous? What distinguishes the righteous from the unrighteous?

We often read this verse something like this: *We must live good lives, so we'll be righteous enough to make God answer our prayers.*

But where does righteousness come from? From a relationship with God. We can't earn righteousness. We become righteous as God forgives our sins. So this verse is not about being good enough to get our prayers answered. It's about connecting with God. We recognize our unrighteousness, confess our sins, and are welcomed into a relationship with God, in which we pray for the things He wants.

Why do you think "confessing your sins to each other" is so important for healing and answered prayers?

The following verses use the example of the Old Testament prophet Elijah. **How does James describe him?**

It's interesting that he does not call Elijah "righteous." Maybe that was assumed, but the point James makes is

that Elijah was a *human being*. He was just like us.

PEEK AT THE GREEK

In verse 17 James uses the word *homoiopathes* to describe Elijah (the ESV translates as “with a nature like”). The first part of that word means similar and the last part (*pathos*) has to do with feelings or passion. So Elijah was a person who experienced similar feelings and circumstances to all of us. Barnabas and Paul used this same word in Lystra when the locals thought they were Greek Gods (Acts 14:15). “We also are men, of like nature with you…”

So, while Elijah was a highly respected prophet, it’s important that we not make him superhuman. He shared our human nature. In fact, his story shows some pretty major mood swings. (Just compare 1 Kings 18 to 19.)

GO DEEPER

Learn more about prayer in the following Bible passages.
Philippians 4:6-7; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Matthew 6:5-16; Colossians 4:2-4

What do these verses teach about the content of prayer?

What do they teach about the manner of prayer?

What do they teach about the effect of prayer?

As you look at the last two verses of James, how do they connect to the rest of this chapter? Can you make any sense of it?

At first glance, the last two verses of James seem disconnected. He has been talking about prayer, and now suddenly it's about restoring an errant soul. Is this an afterthought, a sort of P.S. he appends to the letter? Maybe, but notice the kind of people he's talking about in this chapter.

In verse 1, he's scolding the rich people. But a few verses later he's talking about workers, and then sufferers, and then people "in trouble" and sick. Now he's talking about spiritual wanderers.

If we're right about the readers being like Pharisees—and take a glance at 4:11 to support that notion—how would they normally treat someone who "wanders from the truth"?

How does James's approach differ?

LAST WORD

Earlier James challenged his readers to humble themselves before the Lord. In this last part of his letter, he shows what that looks like. The church community is praying together, confessing their sins to one another. They accept the fact that they're "only human," but they still expect great things from God when they pray. And when someone strays from the faith, they don't alienate that person with harsh words of judgment. They pray. They forgive. They restore.

James has long had a reputation as a book of works. But there's a lot of grace coming through these pages. James will not stand for boasting. He opposes the judgmental spirit of his readers, with their harsh words. The Christian faith is not about setting up some ideal of perfect behavior, but of connecting with God humbly, listening to Him, letting Him reorder our priorities, and living out His passion for the needy.

Our faith in Christ changes us. We haven't experienced the life-changing power of the gospel if we confess that Jesus is Lord with our mouth, but live like we are our own Lord through our actions. A true faith, a living faith has the natural outworking of good works. And good works, no matter how good, can't produce authentic faith—faith is always a gift and never earned.

So as you face trials, as you experience temptation, as you minister to the needy, as you suffer, have faith in God. Trust Him for wisdom. Trust Him for compassion. Trust Him for patience. Trust Him for endurance. Trust Him for healing. Trust Him for the faith that produces a harvest of righteousness.

LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Prayer Journal: Begin keeping a prayer journal, in which you record the things you pray for. Plan to check back periodically to see how God is changing the situation, and how He's changing you.

Group Prayer: If you don't already do this, connect with other believers for group prayer. Talk with a few friends about getting together on a regular basis to pray for the needs of your church and community.

Care for the Sick: Do you know anyone who's sick? How can you help them? Are there practical matters—errands to run—you could attend to? How could you encourage them? And don't neglect prayer—for and with the sick person.
Study Elijah: The character of Elijah is fascinating. Pick the story up in 1 Kings 17, and follow him until he gets swept up to heaven in 2 Kings 2. Do a name search to find other Bible passages that mention Elijah. Consider how his "passions" made him such an effective pray-er.

Connect with Wanderer: Do you know anyone who is wandering from the faith? What can you do to reach out to this person? Pray a lot before you do anything. Listen for God's direction. And remember all of James's cautions about the tongue. Don't spew harsh judgment, but express your love and concern.