

This morning let's conclude our study of the Book of James with the final chapter and its emphasis on the power of prayer. Listen to James' advice on prayer and healing in the fifth chapter verses 13 through 16.

Read James 5:13-16

Verse 13 is a picture of the Early Church at its best. In times of suffering, they prayed. In times of joy, they sang. In times of sickness, they healed. In a pagan world that offered very little hope, these Christians lived a life of enthusiasm and power. They loved to sing: a clear sign of joy is evident in someone's singing, whistling or humming. However, when the occasion was less joyous, they prayed for help.

In these few verses, James outlines certain characteristics of the Early Church. First, it was a singing church; the early Christians were always ready to burst into a song, as many of you are this morning. In Apostle Paul's letters to the Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians, we find several references to singing in church. Singing has always been an essential part of worship, as we lift our voices in praise to God. Now you can relax, I'm not going to burst into song, but hopefully we will be back to normal singing and having the choir in worship soon.

However, this reminds me of one church where the choir had a man who couldn't carry a tune and threw everybody off in the choir. Several people hinted that he could better serve the church in other places, but he continued to come to choir practices. The choir director became desperate and went to the pastor. "You've got to get that man out of the choir," he said. "If you don't, I'm going to resign. And the other choir members are going to quit too. Please do something." So the pastor went to the man and suggested that perhaps he should leave the choir. "Why should I do that?" he asked. "Well," replied the pastor, "Five or six people have told me that you can't sing." To which the man responded: "That's nothing, fifty people have told me that you can't preach."

Another great characteristic of the Early Church was that it was a healing church. This was a tradition that was inherited from the Jewish faith. When a Jew was ill, it was to the rabbi that he went rather than to the doctor, and the rabbi would anoint him with oil and pray over him. Galen, an ancient Greek doctor, called the oil the "best of all medicines." For many centuries, the Church has used anointing as a means of healing the sick, with the oil often seen as representing the Holy Spirit.

In these verses we see the influence of the Jewish religion. There was, and still is in some circles, the ancient belief of cause and effect; that is, if you sinned, bad things would happen to you; God would punish you. They believed that prosperity was a sign of God's blessing and

favor; while suffering and misfortune were signs of God's punishment. It was a deeply rooted Jewish belief that where there was sickness and suffering, there must have been sin. The rabbis, therefore, believed that before a person could be healed of their illness, their sins must first be forgiven by God. It was also believed that we got what we deserve because of our sins; that illness and misfortunes in your life clearly indicated God's displeasure with you. And, unfortunately, some people and some churches still believe this even to this day.

Of course, we as Christians do not believe that our sickness and suffering are directly linked to our sins. For example, in the Old Testament Job became sick despite the fact that he was considered to be a very righteous man. Remember God is the source of every good and perfect gift; God always wants the best for His children. However, modern medicine has shown that some illnesses are directly linked to our unhealthy habits such as drug abuse, smoking and eating the wrong foods. And of course, there are consequences to some of our actions such as drinking and driving or jumping off a barn thinking that you can fly like a bird and breaking your leg. And then let's face it, sometimes bad things just happen. Fairness and merit have nothing to do with hardships, pain, and loss. What it comes down to is that there are no easy answers to the baffling problems of life.

It's like the story of a dying man who was reflecting on his life as lay in a hospital bed. He turned to his wife and said: "Honey, you've always been there for me. You were there when I lost my job. When I was involved in that terrible car accident, you were right by my side. That time I fell off the roof and broke my leg, you were there to call the ambulance. During those years of dark depression, you stood by me. And now as I lay here at death's door, you're right beside me as always." However, after a few moments of reflection, the old man looked at his wife and said: "Gladys, I just realized something; you're bad luck!"

Now when most of us think about healing, our initial thoughts are on our physical pains and problems such as backaches, knee problems, cancer or heart condition. And when you mention spiritual healing, the image of a TV evangelist hitting someone in the head with their hand and knocking them to the floor as they say "in the name of Jesus Christ be healed" immediately comes to mind. But that's not what we are talking about here.

The root word for "healing" in the New Testament is the same as that of "salvation" and "wholeness." Thus, James is looking into the whole sphere of healing: the mind, body, soul, and relationships – the whole person. There is a balance that must be maintained if we are to live the life that God intended for us to live, and unfortunately, we all know from experience how easy it is to get out of balance these days with all the temptations and demands that are being placed on us. Sometimes it feels like we are juggling bowling balls or hand grenades.

Here is James 5 we are called to pray for and anoint the sick that they may be healed. Now while all healing is of God, we must remember that the Church's healing ministry should in no way detract from the gifts that God has given us through medicine. It is no substitute for medicine, your doctor's advice and the proper care of one's health. Rather, it adds to our total resources for wholeness. Healing is not magic; and while no one can predict what will happen in any given case, many marvelous healings have taken place. We can all cite examples where through the power of prayer and medicine loved ones and friends have been healed of life-threatening diseases.

However, we must remember that God does not promise that we will be cured of all illnesses, and of course, we all must face the certainty of death. Why some are healed and others are not, I don't know. There are some mysteries that are beyond our understanding. We cannot always understand God's plan for our life, but because we know that He is the giver of every good and perfect gift, we must walk in faith and trust in Him.

Take the Apostle Paul for example. In the twelfth chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul pleaded with God three times to remove the thorn in his flesh. We don't know exactly what this thorn or illness was, but it must have been painful. God tells Paul that His grace is sufficient for Paul and that His power is made perfect in Paul's weakness. While He didn't take the thorn away, God gave Paul the grace and power to overcome it. In the same way, God promises that while we may not be spared suffering, He will be with us. Trusting in this promise enables us to recognize and feel God's sustaining presence and power in our pain, suffering, and loneliness. Prayer can either move God to take away our affliction or give us the grace to bear it. The point is that God's grace is sufficient for the unchangeable situations in our lives; the circumstances beyond our control - the handicaps we suffer, our sickness, and all other types of adversities.

While most people see troubles and illnesses to be an intruder into their lives, as Christians, our perspective of trouble should be different. Paul experienced a thorn in the flesh; yet this weakness made him stronger. He learned how to be strong in broken places; his weakness did not destroy him. With God's help he gained strength out of his weakness. Thus, there seems to be two options in life: problems can either keep us down or make us strong. We can either give in to our present situation or stand on the promises of God.

Well, how does this work? Do you remember what James asked in verse 13: "Are any of you suffering?" "Is any of you in trouble?" "Are you hurting?" In other words, is your life out of balance, out of tune; is there no peace in your life? Who of us this morning is not experiencing some type of trouble, problem, or suffering right now? Or who has not experienced this over the past few days or weeks? James is talking about any kind of trouble: physical, mental, spiritual, personal or family relationships – whatever.

Well, what does James say that we should we do about it? What is the proper attitude of Christians under such circumstances? James tells us that we should take our concerns to God in prayer; this includes our sickness and desire to be healed. When we do, we are acknowledging that God is the One in ultimate control of our lives. There is no limit to the power of prayer. You really don't know how powerful prayer can be until you experience it. It is one of the greatest resources that God has given us to deal with the challenges and opportunities of each day, to make us whole and to restore balance in our daily lives.

The Jews had a saying that he who prays surrounds his house with a wall stronger than iron. To them, prayer was nothing short of tapping into the power of God; it was the channel through which the strength and grace of God were brought to bear on the problems of life. For the Christian, praying should be like breathing. Taking our praises and concerns to God should be second nature to us. Prayer should be our first choice, not our last resort.

As I have noted before, I believe that prayers are answered in one of four ways: yes, no, wait, or the one that I don't like – I have a better idea. In this latter case, this may mean that things will not work out the way we planned. It may also mean that we have to make some major changes in our life. We also know from experience that some prayers are not answered right away, but in God's time, not ours.

We often forget that the unanswered prayer is still heard by God, and so His silence is for a purpose. God moves according to His own purposes. Remember what the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:28 – “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.” Perhaps He wishes to do more than just answer our requests. Perhaps He wishes to draw us closer to Him, test the maturity of our faith, or force us to re-evaluate our request. Prayer is not trying to convert God to our way of thinking, but surrendering to His will. Prayer may not get us what we want, but it will teach us to want what we need.

Prayer changes things. Verse 16 tells us that “the prayer of the righteous person is powerful and effective.” By righteous, James does not mean someone who is perfect and without sin, but someone who is in a right relationship with God. Now prayer for the sick is not a substitute for prescribed medicine; prayer for daily bread is not a substitute for work; and prayer for the lost is not a substitute for the gospel, but those things are also not a substitute for prayer. Because Christians pray, some people recover from their illnesses and others are alive today who would have been dead. An effective prayer energized by the Holy Spirit can accomplish a great deal.

But we are not just talking about physical ailments. There are many other things that are negatively impacting our lives that we need to be healed of. We need Jesus' help in getting rid

of those obstructions that are preventing us from living the life that He offers us; a life filled with happiness, joy, and peace of mind that only He can give us. So, what's separating you from truly experiencing Christ's presence in your life today?

One of the most famous musicians of the 19th century was a self-taught Norwegian violinist named Ole (Olie) Bull. He was a composer and artist of amazing skill who toured Europe and America with enormous success. During his lifetime, he was the world's most renowned violinist. But he wasn't known by everyone. One day while he was traveling through the forests of Europe, he became lost and in the dark of night stumbled upon a log hut where an old hermit lived. The old man invited him in from the cold night and gave him food. After supper they sat in front of a blazing fireplace, and the old hermit picked some crude tunes on his screechy, battered violin.

"Do you think I could play your violin?" asked Ole, "I don't think so," replied the hermit, "it took me years to learn." But Ole asked him again to let him try. The hermit reluctantly agreed and Ole took the old beat-up violin, tuned the strings and drew the bow. Suddenly the hermit's hut was filled with music so beautiful that the old hermit wept like a child.

My friends, in reality we are all battered instruments; beat down at times by life with our strings snapping and our bow bent under the stress and loads of everyday life, in many ways we are out of tune with God. Yet, as James tells us, if we only let God take us and touch us, lay His hands of mercy and grace on us as a broken, shattered and marred instrument, He will bring forth music in our lives fit for the angels. Jesus has given us the power to turn every sorrow into a song, and every hurt into a hallelujah. This is the miracle of grace. Let God retune your life and make you whole again. Amen