

“THE POWER OF PRAYER.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Text: James 5:13-18

Introduction.

One of the great blessings of worshiping a living God is He can hear and because He can hear, He can answer the prayers of His people. Brothers and sister, imagine the despair and hopelessness of praying to a dead god, to a god who is no god at all.

Imagine the futility of spinning a Tibetan Buddhist prayer wheel building up merit and good karma, believing its spinning emits positive energy. Imagine asking for help from Brahman, the supreme god of Hinduism, an impersonal force, the unknowable divine ground of all being.

Imagine the terrible silence of gods who are deaf, dumb, and blind because they are dead.

One of the distinguishing marks of Christianity is prayer offered to the personal, living God. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of David and Elijah, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the prayer-hearing and prayer-answering God. There is no other God like Him.

Prayer is the first and last and best thing we can do. As God brings us to the end of our lives He prunes away all the lesser things and leaves us with one remaining thing we can always do, the best thing we can do, the most powerful and fruitful thing we can do, prayer.

God has created this world of ours to run under the influence of prayer. The wheels of the machinery of this world of ours are turned by prayer. He has tied His activity to our prayers. He wants us to see again and again the connection between our asking and His answering. He wants us to see the glory of His power and goodness.

Prayer is the first and last and best thing we can do. It applies equally well in all situations and circumstances.

Prayer in All Circumstances, vs. 13.

James 5:13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

In the good and sovereign providence of God our life on earth is a mix of times of sadness and joy; of trial and triumphs; of pain and pleasure. James sums up the experiences of life as suffering or cheerfulness.

God lifts us up and God takes us down (Ps. 102:10). God gives seasons on earth and in our lives. James says that both should motivate us in a heavenward, spiritual direction. In seasons of misery we should be motivated to pray for mercy. In seasons of prosperity we should be motivated to pray prayers of thanksgiving and gratitude.

Both are the providence of God and both call for an obedient response to God.

First, prayer is the best remedy for all our sorrows, trials, troubles and afflictions.

Psalm 34:4 I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.

Psalm 50:15 Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.

In prayer we seek wisdom and discernment to rightly understand what God is doing.

In prayer we seek patience for endurance. If God sets a heavy burden on us, pray for a strong back to bear it patiently.

In prayer we seek faithfulness that we not turn our back on God.

In prayer we seek hope and trust to wait on the Lord.

In prayer we seek the improvement of our soul that affliction brings.

In prayer we seek deliverance and relief according to God's will.

Second, prayer is the best response to all God's mercies and comforts and goodness.

Prosperity can work in one of two directions, either to pride and lust for more; or to praise and humble gratitude for what we have been given. Blessings can become a hindrance or a help to our souls. The prayer of praise and thanksgiving helps guard against the danger.

James 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

The devil seeks to take advantage of us in our blessings by distracting us and diverting us away from God and His goodness.

The pinnacle of Christian maturity is to learn to be content in every condition. Neither condition is permanent and both are equally useful to God and equally beneficial to us.

Philippians 4:11-13 ... I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 12 I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

It is a powerful work of true grace when we can keep the same attitude and temper in both conditions; when we can say, "If it pleases the Lord, it pleases me." "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

The first kind of prayer James mentions is prayer for ourselves. We ought in all times and places and circumstances to pray. It doesn't always have to include elders or others.

Prayer by the Elders, vs. 14

James 5:14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and *let them pray* over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

James turns from general suffering to particular sicknesses, one who is without strength. The implication here is a person who is very sick, perhaps too sick to go out, perhaps bedridden. The text speaks of being prayed over and of the Lord raising them up.

There are two duties prescribed here, one for the sick and one for elders. Those who are sick should call for the elders, and those who are elders should pray and anoint with oil.

The elders of the church are those looked to for spiritual help, those who are charged by God to keep watch over our souls. Elders are shepherds given by God's grace for the sake of the flock. They are to help the sheep; tending to physical and spiritual needs is a key aspect of their calling.

The first duty of Christians is to pray and the first duty of elders is to pray for the saints, the flock. Prayer is the primary and necessary thing in all cases.

Anointing with Oil.

In the NT there are two outward actions that accompany healings, frequently the laying on of hands, and in two places in the NT anointing with oil.

Mark 6:12-13 So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. 13 And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.

We do many outward things that have an inward meaning or significance, that speak of an inward reality. The waters of baptism, a hand shake, a wedding ring, the laying on of hands.

The oil is simply an outward sign or symbol of the inward power of the Holy Spirit and the inward power of prayer. It draws our attention to unseen realities.

It's not magic, there is no power in the oil. Nor is it medicinal, having healing power. The oil is a *symbol* of the cure that rests in the power of the Holy Spirit by prayer, in the name of the Lord. Healing depends solely on the grace of God.

Since there are only two texts in the NT that mention anointing the sick with oil it isn't wise to build a doctrine on this. Rather than being required, it is at least descriptive of a practice that would not be wrong to follow.

The erosion and loss of authority in the offices of the church today might be one consideration for keeping this practice for sake of wisdom and honor rather than biblical conviction.

This passage is clear about elder's praying, this is a priority for us. Prayer is the main verb and first and most important action.

Second, along with praying for yourself, there are times and reasons for calling the elders to pray for you and we ought not to hesitate to ask.

Prayers for Confession, vs. 15-16

James 5:15-16 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and *pray for one another*, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

This is a third kind of prayer, praying for one another.

Prayer of faith, vs. 15.

Notice it says the prayer of faith and not the anointing of oil will heal the sick. Notice that this applies to those doing the praying, in this case the elders or others.

Prayer of faith is prayer that rises out of trust in God and flows from a sincere commitment to God, prayer that trusts in God and looks only to Him.

Remember the words of James in chapter one:

James 1:5-8 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. 6 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Pray with total trust in God and conviction from the Holy Spirit, without doubt or hesitancy. Don't pray in vain. Don't call the elders with the attitude, "Sure, I will try anything."

Doubters and skeptics can expect little from God. But on the other hand, even weak faith is answered, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief."

We are all well familiar with the prayer, "Thy will be done." His sovereign purposes and His glory and His mercy rule and overrule any request. God doesn't owe us healing and He doesn't always heal. It doesn't necessarily mean our faith was too weak. Paul was a man of great faith, yet his thorn was not removed.

Not every sickness is a result of sin.

Vs. 16 confess your sins to one another and *pray for one another*, that you may be healed.

Sickness is not always a sign of God's displeasure as Job's false friends assumed. God put the book of Job in the Bible to teach us this. And Jesus confirms the same truth:

John 9:1-3 As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.

But this doesn't mean that there is never a connection.

There are some diseases that are a result of our sins, a messenger from God to wake us up out of complacency. When we confess and seek forgiveness the cause of the sickness is removed.

Every sickness/illness should at the very least be cause for serious and diligent self-examination. When we are laid up in bed it is a good time for deep spiritual reflection.

We have the example of David,

Psalm 32:3-5 For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. 4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah 5 I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.

We are often more concerned about our bodies and less concerned about our souls. James is saying be as concerned about your spiritual health as you are about your physical health. Go to the doctor for physical examination, but go to God for spiritual examination.

Conclusion.

I had the privilege of seeing this kind of healing pray a few years ago. A woman was having some serious health problems and she called me and asked if I would bring an elder person with me and some oil and come to her home. So I did and when we got there she confessed some of her sin toward that elder. There was repentance and forgiveness and then we anointed her forehead and prayed. She reported to me the next day that the chronic pain she had been having was completely gone.

It was a powerful thing to witness and be a part of. God was glorified and He answered with both physical and spiritual healing. Pray for yourself, ask for prayer for elders, pray for one another. There is more we need to say about that, so we will pick up here next week.