

**International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
January 25, 2015**

**Lesson Text: James 5:13-18
Lesson Title: We Pray for One Another**

Introduction

Jesus had a very wonderful half-brother. His name was James. He describes himself as *“a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”* (James 1:1). James took a long time to recognize the true identity of his older brother. But when he did, James became a great communicator and witness of how following Jesus applies to everyday life. One of the ways James communicated what he knew about Jesus was in writing The Epistle of James.

The Epistle of James is filled with profound doctrinal truth such as justification by faith. It is also a powerful book on practical Christian living. It addresses several of the most common faults faced by Christians such as prejudice, abuse of the tongue, hypocrisy, and strife among the family of God. In James 5:13-18, James addresses the subject of prayer.

While you would think that all believers agree on the subject of prayer, James 5:13-18 is actually one of the most difficult and controversial passages in the book of James. Some denominations base their belief on confession of sins to other humans for forgiveness on a misinterpretation of James 5:16, “confess your faults one to another...” This portion of scripture is also appealed to by faith healers and those who believe it is God’s will for everyone to be healthy and wealthy. Obviously a close and correct study of the passage reveals that those interpretations do not align with truth scriptures.

The subject of James 5:13-18 is prayer. The words “pray, prayer and prayed” occur seven times in these six verses. James has made it clear in his teaching that Christians are a people who live in a God-created and God-centered world, and that every event that takes place in our lives should be related to God. And nowhere is that truth more evident than in the believer’s prayer life.

An Exhortation to Pray (James 5:13-16)

James wrote *“to the twelve tribes scattered abroad”* (James 1:1). These were most likely Christian Jews who were *“scattered”* or dispersed from Palestine because of persecution. It is obvious from James’ writing that he knew the people well to whom he wrote. He wrote with a keen awareness of their problems and was burdened for their welfare.

James begins this closing section of his epistle by asking three questions and offering the same answer. In each of these questions prayer is the answer. In each of these answers the power of prayer is evident.

Verse 13

“Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms.”

1st Question

James asks if “any among” his readers were “afflicted.” The word “afflicted” is a word often used in public prayer but in all honesty it is used more from repetitious praying than understanding. The word “afflicted” refers to circumstances or situations that cause suffering or distress. Obviously, James’ readers were in such situations. Are you?

Those to whom James wrote were experiencing what we might call today, stress, trouble, or pressure. Physical, emotional, or spiritual problems can lead to distress and a pressure that is oftentimes unbearable. The “affliction” may be self-imposed in some cases, but in this situation it was most likely the result of living in a world that opposed Christianity and the message of the gospel. The remedy for such “affliction” is prayer. James said, “Let him pray.”

The word “pray” means “to supplicate, to worship before God.” If you are feeling to blows and the crushes of living in a persecuting world, then turn to the Lord for comfort and strength. That is James’ message. The Psalmist also said, “*And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me*” (Psalm 50:15). The prophet Jonah said, “*When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple*” (Jonah 2:7). God’s children have a refuge and a remedy for the pressures of life. It is prayer!

2nd Question

“Is any merry?” James’ second question is one of happiness or joy. “Merry” means “doing well in your spirit or soul.” James intentionally uses the word “merry” because it describes the exact opposite of “afflicted.” James is contrasting the *suffering soul* with the *happy soul*. It is hard to imagine that anyone reading James’ epistle would be “merry,” but if they were, they should “sing psalms.”

To “sing psalms” means “to play a stringed instrument” such as a harp. The early church was a *praying* and *praising* church. They *prayed* when they hurt and they *praised* when they were happy. It is ironic that much if not all the

emphasis today in corporate worship is on *praise* with very little *praying*. There must be a blessed balance in worship.

The main thought out of verse 13 is that James wants those who are suffering the effects of their trials, temptations, and persecutions to “pray.” It should be just as natural for them to “pray” as it is for someone happy to “sing psalms.”

3rd Question

Verse 14

“Is any sick among you? 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:”

“Sick” is the Greek word *astheneo* {as-then-eh-o} and literally means “without strength, to be weak.” It can mean weakness in body, weakness in soul, and weakness in spirit.” The same Greek word for “sick” is used in Acts 20:35 as the word “*weak*.” “*I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive*” (Acts 20:35).

James uses a different Greek word for “sick” in verse 15. It is the Greek word *kamno* {kam-no} and means “to be weary,” suggesting a weariness of the mind. These two different uses of the word “sick” indicate that James still has in mind those who had grown weary from the struggles of life. James is thinking about persecution, troubles, and trials, not physical sickness or disease. While Jesus does care about our physical sicknesses such as cancer, heart attacks, and all our diseases, James was writing primarily about the pressures and problems of life resulting from being Christians in a world hostile and intolerant to Christianity.

Those who were “sick” were to “call for the elders of the church...” “Call” means “to summons.” Please don’t miss this point. The people who were under pressure were to summons the church leaders. The “elders” are men (males) called and equipped by the Holy Spirit and appointed as church leaders (1 Timothy 2-3). Today, the “elder” would be the pastor of the local church or pastors of the local church (Acts 11:30; 15:2; 20:17). Why “call for the elders?” Because the people who are “sick” are weak from the pressures of life and need the strength of those in spiritual leadership.

James is not saying that the “elders” or church leaders were to call for the “sick” to come to them. As previously pointed out, the “sick” in James 5:14-15 are not primarily those with physical disease. Many of the faith healers of today interpret this passage to refer to those physically sick and then they call for the physically sick to come to their meetings or their altars to be healed. In many

cases they ask for the sick to touch a television screen or laptop screen. Even if the “sick” of James 5:14-15 did primarily refer to the physically ill, which it doesn’t, the procedure the professing faith healers use contradicts James’ teaching. “Let him call for the elders...”

The elders are instructed by James to “pray over him.” The early church leaders including deacons were to give themselves “*continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word*” (Acts 6:4). Church leaders are to come alongside of those who are under pressure from persecution and troubles related to the Christian faith. That’s the ministry.

“Anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” means “rubbing the one calling for prayer with oil.” “Oil,” throughout the centuries, has been medically used for healing and symbolically used for comfort. The word “anoint” means “to rub.” In the story of the certain Samaritan in Luke 10:34, “oil” was “*poured in*” for the purpose of soothing the hurts and bruises. The Shepherd in Psalm 23: 5, “*anointest my head with oil.*” What James is commanding here is not some ceremony in a church service where people line up to be anointed. He is teaching that a Christian who has been bruised and wounded by the pressures of life should call for the church leaders to “pray over him” and “rub” his hurts and pains with encouraging words and spiritual comfort.

Just as the certain Samaritan literally poured oil in the cuts and bruises on the beaten man’s body in Luke 10, and just as a shepherd pours oil over the body of the sheep to help in the healing and restoration process, so should church leaders, when called for, apply the tender loving care to those bruised and wounded in the Christian life. That is the symbolism here used by James.

How does James’ teaching apply to believers today? How do we fulfill James 5:14 today? The answer is clear. You can’t “anoint” or “rub oil” on someone if you’re not “in touch” with them! Don’t just say, “I’ll pray for you.” Get in touch with people in their suffering and sorrows. When our brothers and sisters in Christ call for spiritual aid and help in their times of weakness and hurt, church leaders are to “pray over them,” and literally sooth their spiritual wounds and hurts “in the name of the Lord.”

“The name of the Lord” is not some magical phrase we attach at the end of a healing prayer. James means that as we pray over the hurting and suffering believer, and while our hands of love and comfort embrace our brothers and sisters in Christ, we do so with totally faith and trust in a sovereign Lord who knows the depths of the hurts and sufferings of those for whom we pray.

Verse 15

“And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.”

“And the prayer of faith shall save the sick” is referring to the prayers being prayed over the sick by the elders of the church. The “sick” in this verse is referring to “those weary in mind” who probably were unable at this point to even pray for themselves. How do we pray in faith? “Faith” is found in the Word of God (Romans 10:17). We pray in faith when we believe what God has said in His word which allows us to pray according to His will (1 John 5:14-15). It sounds great when preachers and professing faith healers tell you, “You can be healed today by just asking,” but that’s not biblical. Remember, it was James who also said, “*If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that*” (James 4:15).

“Prayer offered in faith is prayer prayed according to God’s will, and when we agree with Him, His will will be done” (Doctor O.S. Hawkins).

“Shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up...” does not mean that every person who is suffering and under pressure from persecution will be saved from that by the prayers of the elders. How do we know that? First of all, it is not God’s will that everyone be delivered from suffering or even from physical disease. If it is, why did Paul leave Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20)? Why was Paul’s thorn in the flesh never removed (2 Corinthians 12:9)? Again, if you interpret James 5:13-18 to teach that people are promised physical healing by prayers of miraculous faith, you are missing the true interpretation.

“Save” is the Greek word *sozo* {sode-zo}. It means “to save, to deliver, and to rescue.” The prayers of faith based on God’s Word and God’s will for suffering saints will result in “deliverance and restoration.” The “prayer of faith” will “restore the weary.” God still “saves” those who are “weary in mind” when spiritual leaders pray over them!

“And the Lord shall raise him up...” is speaking about something more than being raised up off the sick bed. James is speaking in a spiritual dimension here. That is why the “sick” person in this passage calls for the “elders” instead of the “doctor.” This is a spiritual matter resulting in spiritual complications. That’s why James adds, “...and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.” Remember, the word “sick” in verse 15 refers to “those weary in mind.” When the pressures and sufferings of life come upon us it usually results in things weighing heavily on our mind. And it is easy to sin when we are spiritually weary and under pressure. If your weariness and spiritual battles has caused you to sin, in the environment of prayer your “sins shall be forgiven.”

Not everyone in the church who is in sin got there because they are immoral and wicked. Sometimes the pressures of life can result in choices and decisions

that offend our Lord. When that happens the believer needs to call for his or her spiritual leaders to “pray over them” and through their faith and obedience to the call of ministry, the hurting believer can be “raised up.” The word “raised” means “to waken, to collect one’s faculties.” What a glorious truth!

“Forgiven” means “sent away.” Through the ministry of prayer the family of God is exposed to an environment of healing and restoration of the soul. That same environment encourages confession of sin and the experience of forgiveness.

Verse 16

“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”

James has just told us that if we are under pressure and suffering we are to “call for the elders.” In other words, go get in that environment of spiritual leadership and ask them to pray over you. Now that you are restored and raised up, James says, “Confess your faults one to another.”

“Confess” means “to acknowledge.” “Faults” is a reference to your “errors, sins, and trespasses.” It doesn’t mean you are to tell everyone in the church all the dirty details of your life. What it does mean is that just as you needed spiritual leaders to help raise you up out of your sickness, you also need to tell the congregation of believers your “faults.” Why? Because the same spirit that encourages confession also promotes prayer, the kind of prayer that lays bare the heart and soul before the Lord. When believers “acknowledge” their “sins,” they are more likely to “pray one for another.” And that is James’ purpose for his teaching in this section of his epistle.

As believers, if we “confess” our “faults one to another,” it is impossible to hold grudges against one another. And, if we “confess” our “faults one to another,” it is so much easier to “pray one for another.” Another beautiful truth from James!

“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” is obviously an introductory statement to James’ example of Elijah in verses 17-18. However, it also seems to magnify the importance of the “confession” mentioned in the first part of the verse. “Confession” represents the first attitude of “righteousness.” We can’t be “righteous” men without “confession.”

“Effectual fervent” praying speaks of prayer that is energetic, active, and efficient. The word “prayer” in this verse is the Greek word *deesis* {deh-ay-sis} and means “a humble plea or petition.” It is one of the most humble words for prayer in the New Testament. It is not the type of prayer that orders God or demands something from God. The word pictures a needy man with his head bowed, asking for help he doesn’t deserve. What a beautiful picture of prayer.

James is saying, “the prayer of a man who is right with God when energized by the Holy Spirit, is greatly effective.” He wants his readers to keep praying no matter how difficult their situation in life may be. He also wants them to know that those who live righteously or in obedience to the Lord will have a persuasive energy about them when they pray. If we do what is right and pray in humility through the power of the Holy Spirit, God will answer our prayers.

An Example of Prayer (James 5:17-18)

As James presented his teaching for effective praying, his mind turned to the Old Testament prophet, Elijah (1 Kings 17-2 Kings 2). Introducing Elijah into James’ teaching on prayer is not as strange as you might think. Elijah lived in a day of apostasy and opposition to the God of Israel. King Ahab and his wife Jezebel wanted to rid the land of godly men such as Elijah. But God used Elijah and his prayer life to send a much needed revival to the land.

Verse 17

“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months.”

“Elias,” or Elijah, “was a man subject to like passions as we are.” That simply means Elijah was a person just like we are. He had his strong points and he had his weak points. James wants his readers to take a long hard look at Elijah. “He prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months.” Elijah was such a man of prayer that “he prayed earnestly” and God withheld the rain from heaven. The word “earnestly” means “he prayed with prayer.” Elijah prayed with a prayerful intensity. God controlled the rain based on Elijah’s prayer. And in response to Elijah’s praying there was no rain “on the earth” for “three years and six months.”

Verse 18

“And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.”

“And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain” means when Elijah asked the Lord to send rain, He did. While the Old Testament doesn’t record Elijah’s first or second pray concerning the withholding or giving of rain, James records it and it is a part of the word of God.

“And the earth brought forth her fruit” is one of the most significant phrases in this entire section on prayer. There is no doubt that the earth was parched and

lifeless after three and a half years without water. And this example fits perfectly with James' previous teaching concerning the "sick" calling on the elders for prayer. Those who had suffered under persecution and the pressures of life must have been lifeless and withering away. And just as Elijah's prayer had resulted in "rain" from heaven with resulting "fruit," so "effectual fervent" praying would bring freshness and life again to these suffering believers.

Surely God worked a miracle in Elijah's day in stopping rain and then in sending rain. The miracle came through prayer. When we pray today we pray to the same God to whom Elijah prayed.

Conclusion

There is no time in which God does not invite us to Himself." And that's the point James is making. Even in the extremes of life, in cheerfulness and in unbearable sorrow, we are to go to the Lord in prayer. God wants us to talk to Him at all times. In trouble He is our comforter; in joy He is the giver of all joy, and in going to Him in prayer we hallow every pleasure and we sanctify every pain.

As Christians, we also have spiritual leaders to help us and come to our aid. Thank God for the faithful church leaders who are filled with God's Holy Spirit and able to soothe us in the midst of our suffering. Don't be ashamed to ask those who know the Lord to pray over you.

It seems the church has reached a point of prayerlessness. We've emphasized everything possible in regard to worship, work, and witness, but the prayer lives of righteous people seem to be nonexistent. Prayer is the most practical and spiritual thing we can do. When was the last time you asked someone in leadership to pray for you? When was the last time someone in the body of Christ asked you to pray for them?

James' question, "Is any afflicted? Is any sick?" James' answer, "Let him pray...let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him."

James' example was Elijah. "He prayed" and "he prayed again." There is purpose in prayer. There is power in prayer. May we be a people of prayer.

Amen.