

JAMES - SOUNDNESS OF SOUL FROM THE INSIDE OUT - Part nineteen

Teaching #1842 - Sunday, November 22nd, 2015, 10:00 a.m.

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IT TAKES A CHURCH TO MAKE A CHRISTIAN

James 5:13-20 - "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. [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. [15] 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. [17] 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. [18] Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. [19] My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, [20] let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins"

It's significant that all of James' closing remarks deal with different aspects of the *corporate* responsibility of each believer. He winds up by talking about church - what it's all about - how to maximize its potential. There are lots of Christians who don't appreciate their need of the body of Christ and regular fellowship with other Christians.

Paul writes about the members of the church being like the members of a physical body. I think we all have used that passage to point out that each one of us has gifts that bless and help others in the church. But there's another point to those words in **1 Corinthians 12:18-26**. Not only does the hand need the foot and the foot need the hand. That's obviously true, and I think we all understand our responsibility to bless and help one another with our gifts and ministries.

But there's something else more challenging in those verses. I am coming to realize that Paul's deeper point in that passage is a little different. His point is that an eye can't hear and an ear can't see. That is, without regular involvement with my church I'm either deaf or blind on my own. Individual members can't *help* but live life deformed because they were meant - *created* - to function only as members *joined to others*.

Christian, you're vulnerable on your own. You may be ordained. You may be in full-time ministry. You may have your masters degree or your doctorate. But Paul (and the Holy Spirit) wants you to know you need that carpenter and that plumber and that teacher sitting beside you if you want to be strong in the Lord. You can't keep your marriage strong by yourself. Your prayer life won't be powerful without the ministry of the church. You won't be as holy and pure without regular participation in the Church of Christ.

And this is true no matter how *strong* in the Lord you become in your own personal prayer life and Bible study. You will still, in Paul's imagery, only be a stronger eye or ear. And an ear, even a very healthy ear - will still never be able to *see*, and an eye - even a very healthy eye - will still never be able to *hear*.

What's the big deal about coming to church frequently and consistently? The New Testament says the big deal is you were *created for dependency*, not only on the *Lord*, but also, and perhaps especially, on the *other members of the Church*. You and I never rise above *dependency* on the other members of the body of Christ. Without the church you're just a big hand trying to walk, or a big foot trying to play the violin, or a big blind ear bumping into the walls of life.

So James closes his letter talking about two areas of *corporate* church life: *prayer (13-18)*, and *correction and restoration (19-20)*.

1) **JAMES TEACHES THE MENTAL DISCIPLINE OF WHAT PAUL CALLED "PRAYING WITHOUT CEASING"**

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

The secret is to learn to *relate all of your life directly to God*. And James says we do that primarily by different forms of *prayer*. He hi-lights two particular times when prayer is especially needed: times of *trouble* and times of *blessing*.

- a) **Times of trouble** - You can't live long without experiencing seasons when everything seems to go wrong, not just for a few days, but a prolonged season that leads into discouragement and weariness. There are times you just don't seem to have the energy or the inclination to seriously delight your heart in the Lord. Your faith doesn't easily rise to believe things will ever change for the better.

Face the fact now that there will be times when you feel like giving up on prayer. Jesus **knew** these times would come. He expected them and told us what to do when they did - **Luke 18:1** - **“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”**

Prayer doesn't always remove suffering. That's not the promise of James or Jesus. But prayer can **keep you from losing heart while you go through your trial**. Suffering, pain, fatigue, trial - these are all a part of life for saint and atheist alike. But **losing heart** is something different. It comes from losing touch with God. The greater the suffering, the greater the need for linking the heart to God's throne in prayer.

- b) **Times of blessing** - Troubles tend to make us **discouraged**. **Blessings** tend to make us **forgetful** of God and **independent**. Is life going quite well for you right now? There is a proper response to that before the Lord. In fact, there is a **commanded** response - **“Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise” (13b)**.

There is a sound theological reason for passionate praise and worship. It has nothing to do with the mistaken notion that emotional charismatic types need something to do in church. The most dangerous thing about your normal daily routine - especially when there is no crisis - is the way it makes you forget about God. Praise and worship and expressed thankfulness is the Scriptural resource to trace the hand of God into your daily habits.

Maybe you have never seen that as a scriptural command before. Maybe there are blessed people here today who need to hear God say, **“Get your hands out of your pocket. Lift your head and your voice. Pray the words of the song. Ponder them carefully. Stretch your soul before Me in grateful worship and praise!”**

Why? Why is it so important to God that I publicly acknowledge His grace and goodness in my life? Is God like that relative who tells you she's coming over to the house, so you have to go through the basement to find that things she's given you and put them on the mantel? Does God crave appreciation?

No. That's not it at all. You see, there is someone sitting one row back from you right now who, perhaps through no fault of his own, is having a hard time seeing the goodness of the Lord. In fact, he's having a hard time believing his situation can **ever** turn around.

But then he sees you or someone else. And he knows not all that long ago you too were hurting big time. And God was faithful. Perhaps it took quite a while, but your heart is now full of song. And this hurting brother **needs** to know that. Because he knows you're no more special or brilliant than he. He needs to see your heart abounding **expressively** in joyful songs of gladness and thanksgiving. Seeing that can fill his crusty heart with hope and expectation. That's how the **body of Christ** works when we gather together.

Always remember, your praise isn't **just** for the Lord. And it isn't **just** for the increase of your **own** faith (though praise **does** build up your own heart). Your **“singing of praise”** is for your brother and sister in the Lord.

We used to sing the Biblical text, “Come bless the Lord, **all** you servants of the Lord - Who stand by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the holy place, and bless the Lord.” People singing to other people - **“Come and bless the Lord!”**

2) **JAMES GIVES SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE BODY OF CHRIST IN THE FACE OF SICKNESS IN ANY OF ITS MEMBERS**

James 5:14-16 - **“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. [15] 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.”**

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” Is this to remind me that I never **qualify** for God's **healing grace** anymore than I qualify for His **forgiving grace**? There's something very freeing in these strange words.

Without taking too much time to develop the point, let me just say attempts to make these verses refer to **spiritual** healing rather than **physical** are biased and fruitless. True, James **links** spiritual healing with physical later on in **verse 16**. But the

subject he begins with is clearly **physical** healing.

This is more powerfully attested to in the instruction about anointing with oil. The **only** person to teach directly about anointing with oil is Jesus. And He only talked about it once as far as the New Testament records show. And the only time Jesus commanded anointing with oil is in clear connection with **physical** healing:

Mark 6:7-13 - "And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. [8] He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts— [9] but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. [10] And he said to them, "Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. [11] And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." [12] 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."

There is no doubt about it, James is writing to this New Testament church about **physical** healing. And while there are many **descriptions** of miracles and healing in the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, this is the **only** place the New Testament gives **instructions** about how to pray for physical healing in the church. For that reason alone, it deserves careful attention:

- a) ***The emphasis in these instructions is on the sick person receiving the prayer of others rather than praying for himself or herself.***

Both the **pastors** (that's the meaning of that word "**elder**" in the New Testament) - "...Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him...."(14) - and the **members of the church** - "...pray for one another...."(16) - are to be involved.

I'm not saying people can't believe God and pray for their own healing. I'm simply saying when the New Testament gives specific **teaching** on how **the church** should usually pray for healing the emphasis is on the **faith and body life** of the congregation, not just the prayer life of the **individual** in need.

Again, these are very grace-filled words. Many times the sheer pain of our physical condition can seem to diminish our capacity for robust faith. That's why it's the faith of **others** that stressed in this passage. Let them come and carry you along.

Think deeply about this. Our prayer lives aren't solitary things. Our prayers are **interconnected** in the body of Christ. Why are prayer meetings usually so poorly attended in our churches? Why do people enjoy concerts more than waiting on God? Because they **think** the prayer meeting only has to do with those who choose to come.

This is an enormous mistake. It's like thinking if the Air Canada 747 runs out of fuel it only affects the pilot. **You** are affected by the spiritual power and dynamic of this church whether you ever come to seek God corporately or not. James attaches **your** physical healing - the area of our lives where we become most **keenly aware** of our pain - to the spiritual health of the whole body.

- b) ***There are occasions when the Lord ties ministry to the body with ministry to the heart, and both these ministries are to be ongoing in a healthy church***

James 5:15 - 16a - "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 same kind of love and openness that would allow me to invite you to pray for my sore back should allow me to invite you to pray for my cold heart. We **know** each other and **trust** each other because we've made diligent and consistent **connections** in our local church family. We're deeply **invested**. There is a transparency between members of the same body. The hand knows when the finger hurts and the finger knows the hand had only its best interest at heart because when the finger hurts the hand is handicapped as well.

Sometimes, though certainly not **always**, our loving God **uses** physical pain to awaken us to spiritual needs. In fact, every time a connection is made between sickness and sin in the Old Testament it is **God**, not the **Devil**, who

causes the sickness. Check it out for yourself - **Leviticus 26:16, Numbers 12:9-10, 1 Kings 5:27, 2 Chronicles 21:14-15, Psalm 38.**

When this happens James assumes the one in need will **know** there is something deeper going on than just the physical illness. And the important point is he or she will be humble enough and honest enough, and will have built such a relationship with the body of Christ in prayer that such confession of sin will be natural and received in love and grace rather than condemnation.

Should any of this surprise us? How far has the church of Christ drifted from the practice of the New Testament if we find it strange that a church that makes it a habit to instantly bring all sin into the light of open prayer and confession and forgiveness would **also** be a place where the healing power of Christ flows freely into sick bodies too?

1 John 3:21-22 - "Beloved, *if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God;* [22] and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him."

Don't get confused with these words. John isn't describing a process of **earning** answered prayer by moral perfection. This is a text about **honesty** before God. It's about not abiding in a stance of **unrepentance** at any single point.

3) **ALWAYS REMEMBER THE CHURCH PRAYS TO THE GOD OF ELIJAH**

James 5:17-18 - "*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. [18] Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit."

There is something in all of us that keeps the story of Elijah tucked away with all the other stories we learned in Sunday School. Notice the first eight words of **verse 17** - "**Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.**" That word translated "**nature**" - "**with a nature just like ours**" is the same word Paul uses in **Acts 14:12-15** - "**Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. [13] And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. [14] But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, [15] "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them."**

Paul and Barnabas say, "**Listen, don't be worshiping us. We are ordinary people just like you. Save your worship for God alone!**"

That's what James is saying about Elijah. He was just like you. He prayed a great deal. He sacrificed everything for his God. And he had a burning passion for God's glory.

That, by the way, is why he prayed that it wouldn't rain (Do you notice why James picks **this** episode from the life of Elijah? It was **God** who **caused** the drought. And it was **God** who would **heal** the drought). The people were worshiping idols and false god's and **Elijah couldn't stand it**. He couldn't sleep while people blasphemed his God!

And read **1 Kings 18** to see **how** Elijah prayed. This was no casual afterthought. He went up on the top of mount Carmel, a long journey in itself. He bowed down to the ground. He put his head between his knees (have you ever tried that?) And he did this seven times. This is **seeking** prayer. It's **business** prayer. This is, in the words of the old King James, "**fervent**" prayer.

4) **IN A THRIVING CHURCH THERE MUST BE A HEART TO RESTORE THE ERRING AND A WILLINGNESS TO BE CORRECTED**

James 5:19-20 - "My brothers, if anyone among you *wanders from the truth* and *someone brings him back,* [20] let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

There is such beautiful balance in these closing words. It's the last thing James wrote. He's given a lot of bold,

down-to-earth instruction in his letter. There are more commanding verbs per chapter in James than any other book in the New Testament. But James doesn't just want **you** to do God's will. He wants **you** to want **everyone else** to do God's will as well. That's why he just cited that example from the life of Elijah.

So how does a church do this? Unless we're very careful we'll fall into one of the two **worldly** approaches to our collective pursuit of holiness. The first mistake is to buy into the **tolerant live-and-let-live attitude so common in our age**. Usually, in the church, we cite verses of Scripture like, **"Don't look at the speck in your brother's eye until you've removed the beam from yours."**

But Jesus didn't end his instructions with that sentence. After He said that, He said this - **"...first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye"**(Matthew 7:5).

That's what James is talking about. He's talking about a living, honest, loving church where **everyone** is open to **confessing** sin and **receiving** correction. The first is always easier for us than the second. But he **forbids** cold indifference to a brother who is wandering from the truth of the gospel.

The second worldly response James forbids is the exact opposite of indifference. He forbids a lingering condemnation of the restored brother or sister. This is actually made clear in James' remarks at the end of **verse 20** - **"....let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."**

The verse people usually think of when they hear about covering sin is **Proverbs 28:13** - **"Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy."**

Obviously this kind of **"covering"** is something we're **not** supposed to do. But that verse is talking about **me** covering up my **own** sin, instead of bringing it to the Lord in confession and repentance. James is writing about a person who used to be all fouled up in sin but someone in faithful love has gone and exposed this brother's heart to the truth. Then that wayward brother has come back to God. He has turned from his sin.

And that's where this reminder from James is so critical. **"Don't you treat that brother like he's a convict. Don't treat him with anything less than grace and renewed fellowship and love."**

In short, Jesus said we were to love each other in exactly the way He loved us. That's what these verses at the conclusion of James are all about. I think people are dying for a church like that.