

May 17, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

The Prayer of Faith

James 5:13 – 18

13 Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; 15 and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. 17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. 18 Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.

*Our gracious God and heavenly Father,
How we love Your word! It gives light, illuminating all the dark places of our souls, and bringing clarity to our minds, and it inspires faith to believe in our hearts. Your word is life to our bodies and healing to our bones. Let Your word engage and captivate our hearts and minds like never before – let faith in Your mighty power and love rise up in our souls to grab hold of the heavenly truths Your word proclaims. And let it spur us on to trust You more, to love You supremely, to follow You unswervingly and to rest in Your unfailing love and grace, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

This passage tells us mainly two things: it tells us about the power of prayer, specifically the power of prayer for healing; and it tells us the prerequisites for prayer. The power of prayer and the prerequisites for prayer. What prayer does in regard to healing and who is qualified to pray the prayer of faith. First let's look at the power of prayer. James says, *The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much*. That is, prayer accomplishes things – it has power – it has effect – it really makes an impact in our world – it has the capacity to change things. Back in the fourth century there was a powerful preacher named John of Antioch who was nicknamed Chrysostom, which means 'Golden Mouth'.

And he had this to say about prayer: ***'The power of prayer has subdued the strength of fire, bridled the rage of lions, silenced anarchy, extinguished wars, appeased the elements, expelled demons, burst the chains of death, enlarged the gates of heaven, relieved diseases, averted frauds, rescued cities from destruction, stayed the sun in its course and arrested the progress of the thunderbolt.*** All of these things John saw in the Bible as being effected by prayer. In short he says prayer is powerful and effective. He goes on to say: ***'Prayer is an all-efficient panoply, a treasure undiminished, a mine never exhausted, a sky unobstructed by clouds, a haven unruffled by storm. It is the root, the fountain, and the mother of a thousand blessings'***.

Jesus tells us in John 14:12 – 14: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also ; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father. "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.* He is saying that when He goes to the Father, and we pray to Him, everything He came into the world to accomplish, all His victory and power over sin and death is released into the world through prayer. He is saying that the power over all that is not in line with the will of God, He has given to His people through prayer. All the mighty power of God to change whatever does not glorify the Father resides in prayer. I can't imagine the full impact of this promise – greater works than these? **But what that says to me is that prayer is powerful and effective.**

But in this passage, James zeros in on prayer for healing. Look at what he says in verses 14 and 15: *s anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.* **First of all James is assuming that the church has a ministry of prayer for healing.** He expected this – he assumed that the church was dealing with sick members through prayer. In other words, this was the normal course of things – there will be sickness – even in the church, and it should be handled with prayer. James assumed this ministry of healing prayer and he assumed that it would be powerful and effective.

And then he says three things need to characterize this prayer. First there is anointing with oil; and then there must be prayer over the sick person, and this is called the prayer of faith; and then there is confession and forgiveness of sins on the part of the person who is sick. Let's look closer at these three things. **First of all, the person who comes for prayer is to be anointed with oil.** What does this mean? Why anoint the person? Why use oil? What is the significance here? I think the first thing we see about this is that this is medicine. And I know you are saying to yourselves, 'Where is he going with this?' But just hang on a bit and I think you'll see something here.

What is the oil here? Of course we know that oil in the Bible often represents the Holy Spirit and that is throughout the pages of Scripture, and no doubt there is some sense of that picture here. We are healed by the power of the Holy Spirit. But oil also represents the healing effect of medicine. Remember the story of the man that got beaten up and robbed on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho? What was it that the Samaritan man who found him poured on his wounds? Oil and wine. Oil to soothe his wounds and wine to clean them. Oil was considered to be medicine in those days. And so I believe James is saying that prayer does not replace medical attention, prayer in fact supplements medical attention.

Prayer is a way of saying, 'Lord if You want to heal apart from any medical intervention, if You want to grant a miracle – we welcome that'. Part of praying the prayer of faith is to say 'We know You don't need any physical means to do what You want – You can heal directly'. Oil and prayer together are a way of saying that we understand that medicine, physicians, medical know how, all are gifts of God to us for our good. And God can and does, use all these means to heal. And so we pray, 'Lord we are bringing this one to You, the Great Physician, to heal in any manner You see fit. Whether you heal through medicine and physicians, or you do it directly, any healing that comes, comes from You. We are simply obeying Your word to pray this prayer of faith knowing that You know best how it ought to be done'. In the Biblical understanding of things, grace does not have to replace nature – it can very often transform it, complete it, finish it.

Secondly, you have the prayer of faith – what does that mean? I don't think that it means what many people often think of when they think of the prayer of faith. What people generally think of is this prayer of incredible certainty – a prayer where you dial up this fierce assurance – you sort of work yourself into a lather of believing – never entertaining a negative thought. And so people will say things like, 'Now we are going to pray and you can't have any doubt here – you've got to have faith – you can't doubt even a little bit – or it won't work.' And if the person being prayed for is not healed then the only possible explanation would be – one of us was doubting. Who is it? But that is not what is meant by the prayer of faith. Look at Mark chapter 9. In Mark 9, there is this father of a demonized boy who comes to Jesus to ask Him to heal his son. And Jesus tells the man: *All things are possible to him who believes.* *Immediately the boy's father cried out and said, "I do believe ; help my unbelief."* Mark 9:23-24 Jesus says, 'Do you have faith' and the guy says, 'I believe – help me believe' which is another way of saying, 'I do, but I don't'. I have faith but I need more faith – there's some doubt here – help me. And Jesus says, 'That's faith' and heals his son.

There are others who say the prayer of faith is a command – you simply command the sickness to leave. You take authority over it and conquer it. You don't talk to God you talk to the sickness and you rebuke it and command it to leave. Now I know that Jesus spoke to sickness that way, and we even see some of the apostles doing that, but nowhere in the New Testament are we told to minister to sick people by commanding sickness to leave – demons, yes, sickness no. What we are told is that we must pray. Prayer is a request – not a command. James tells us that in the church we must pray – we must ask God for healing – we must pray the prayer of faith.

The prayer of faith very simply is a very specific prayer. Sometimes we pray not knowing how to pray – and Romans tells us that in those cases the Spirit Himself intercedes for us – because He knows the specific what to pray. But here, James says the prayer of faith is a very specific and very direct prayer – the sick person comes to the elders for a specific need and says 'I need prayer for this'. Is it a place where no uncertainty lives? Of course not – it is coming to God believing He is not only greater than our doubt, but bigger than our disease. It is saying with that father: 'I believe – help my unbelief!' ***It is not the dimension of your faith but the direction of your faith. It is not the strength of your belief but the object of your belief.*** In other words we are not working ourselves into a lather of faith – because one thing is sure – if we are healed in that case we are convinced that we had a hand in the thing. The prayer of faith is a specific request that rests on the power and providence of Jehovah Rapha – the Lord our Healer.

Thirdly you have confession of sins. Firstly you make sure the person is getting medical care, secondly you pray the prayer of faith over them, and thirdly you make sure there is spiritual therapy going on as well as the physical. That is, when a Christian falls ill, it is time for that person to examine his or her heart. Do I regard iniquity in my heart? If I do, the Bible says that God will not listen. Now I need to say this clearly so you all don't go home thinking that I believe that all sickness is due to sin. The Bible makes it clear that this is not so. But some sickness is, and therefore we have the 'if': '*...and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him*'. All sickness is due in some part to sin. If there were not sin in the world there would not be sickness. But that is not to say that your particular sickness is due to something you have done or not done.

However that may be the case. And so James tells us that sickness is the motivation to examine our hearts and confess our sins so that we may be right with God. And that confession leads to forgiveness and physical healing. Karl Menninger, the famed psychiatrist, once said that if he could convince the patients in psychiatric hospitals that their sins were forgiven, 75 percent of them could walk out the next day! People in the medical profession know how much anxiety, fear, anger, unforgiveness – the Bible calls those things sin – works to tear down a person's physical health. So James says: *Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed.*

And James says that this prayer, the prayer of faith *will restore the one who is sick*. Literally it says that this prayer will save, will keep safe and sound, will rescue from danger or destruction, will restore to health the one who is suffering. What are we to make of this? It seems unconditional – *will* restore to health. And people look at that and say, 'If I pray in faith, then whoever I pray for will be healed – unconditionally'. But that prayer in the Bible is never unconditional. The very nature of prayer is that there is one overriding condition to all prayer. What is that? Well if you look at the prayer Jesus prayed in the Garden – Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me – you see the condition. He was praying as the Son of Man that if there was another way for God to accomplish His purpose through Him, by all means do it. He knew He was facing the most horrific death imaginable, not only the physical torture, but the mental anguish brought on by having the sin of the world laid on Him. We cannot imagine that for a moment. And so He prayed, Father, if You are willing, let this cup pass. If there is any other way to do it – I'm praying for that.

But He didn't leave it there because He knew, as we must know, that in all things, especially in prayer, the will of God is paramount. And so He finished by saying, 'I would like to see another outcome here, but *nevertheless*, I don't want what I want but what You want because You know what is best'. We must understand that Jesus was not lacking faith – if anyone could pray the prayer of faith He could – He had perfect faith. And so the Father did not deny Him on the basis of faith, but rather on the basis of His sovereign will. It was the will of God to put Him to death – that's what the Bible says, and Jesus bowed to the will of His Father, in this as in everything else. Sometimes the best answer we can have from the Father is NO.

Have you ever prayed for something that you really wanted and seemed to have great faith for that when you got it you realized that wasn't the best thing for which you could have asked? Joni Erikson Tada, a great woman of faith who has been a quadriplegic for years because of an accident in her youth said: *Sometimes God's best answers to prayer are "no" because, if indeed we received everything that we prayed for, all our wants and wishes and heart's desires, I just don't think it would be God's best for our life*'. She shared how she had prayed for healing, imagining herself by the Pool of Bethesda, and asking Jesus as He walked by to heal her, but He never did. And then she says: *But you know what? I'm so glad God didn't because the "no" answer to a prayer for healing has meant a more urgent leaning upon Him every day, a more vibrant hope of heaven, a deeper sense of prayer, a more energetic love for His Word. It's fostered my friendships, and deepened my concern and compassion for others who hurt.*

But you might say, 'Didn't Jesus tell us in those verses we read in John 14 that whatever we ask in His name He will do? Well what does He mean by that? I think the best explanation of that is found in Luke 11 where the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. And He teaches them a prayer, and gives them the illustration of the persistent friend, and encourages them to keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking; and at the end of the lesson He says this: *"Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish ; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? "Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?"* Luke 11:11-13

In other words, our heavenly Father invites us to ask, encourages us to keep on asking, but because He is our Father and loves us as a good father loves his child, He will not give us what is not good for us. It would be divine child abuse for Him to give us everything we asked for without condition. ***When we pray, God will answer, and He will either give us what we ask for, or He will give us what we would have asked for if we had His knowledge of what was good for us.***

Finally, knowing that the prayer of faith is powerful, **what is the prerequisite for praying the prayer of faith?** And there is just one – just one condition: *The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.* **You've got to be righteous.** And you are probably saying 'Great, you've built my faith up to a point where I think I can pray, and now you say it only works if I'm righteous? Thanks a lot!' But I think that is why James explains what he means in the next two verses: *Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.* Elijah was a man just like us. What is the point of him saying this **unless** it is to point out that this is not something only a few people possess – but rather a common characteristic of believers?

Read about Elijah in the Old Testament and you discover that Elijah was indeed just like you and me. he got depressed, he got scared, he was an imperfect person – and yet, he prayed and the rain stopped and he prayed again and it rained. So what should we understand about this righteousness? One thing we need to understand is that all of us, blood-washed, born again, believers in Jesus Christ, are imperfect people clothed in the righteousness of Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:30 says, *'But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.*

In other words, the righteousness of faith has altogether to do with the righteousness of Christ, not us. He is the perfect one whom the Bible says is seated at the Father's right hand in heaven interceding for us according to the will of the Father. And as our prayers ascend to the throne, He takes what we pray and turns that into the prayer we would have prayed had we known what He knows and gives us back what is best for us. He alone is qualified to pray the perfect will of God for us because He alone is righteous and that righteousness is what covers us when we pray. In the ultimate sense, His is the effective prayer of the righteous man. Our prayers can be imperfect, our prayers can be unformed, but our prayers are consumed in His prayers for us that unleash the power of God in our lives to grant us the good that God intends.

So what should we take away from this tonight as we go to prayer for the sick among us? We need to be clear that prayer is powerful – prayer is effective – prayer lines our will up with the perfect will of God in every matter. Our prayers work to do the impossible because they have all the power of heaven behind them. We need to understand that praying for the sick is the normal course of action in the church. We need to understand that even though God may choose to work through medicine and physicians, that does not mean He is not behind the healing, or that He is not answering our prayers for healing. We need also to believe that our heavenly Father hears our prayers for healing, and He will either give us what we ask for or He will give us what we would have asked for had we known His perfect will for us. And finally, we should be confident that Christ is praying in our prayer, praying the perfect will of God for us, even when we may not know what that is.

*God of all mercy and grace,
Grant that we would be a people of prayer – never fainting, always praying. Forgive us, oh Lord, for weak, insipid prayers that do not presume on Your great power and might. Forgive us too for those hasty and even casual moments we indulge in and call it prayer. Anoint our hearts and minds for prayer tonight, and stir within us the prayer of God that moves our hearts and Your hand. Lord we come this evening, just as we are – with no pretense or covering up. We are weak, and fragile and doubting, but You died for people like us and Your work on the cross purchased for us both salvation for our souls and healing for our bodies. We say have mercy on us O God in our weakness, in our sickness, in our doubt and show Yourself strong on our behalf. We pray Father, for Your healing power to go out over us tonight and bring healing and restoration, bring conviction and confession and forgiveness. May we come this evening with boldness to the throne of grace, there to receive Your mercy and find Your grace to help us in our hour of sickness and trouble. Cause our hearts to rejoice in the God of our salvation and exult in Your mighty healing strength, we pray in the precious and powerful healing name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*