

A Study in James

The Tests of a Living Faith

James 5:13–20

April 10, 2013

Introduction

As we come to the end of this book, it is good to take stock of what James has already taught us. He has laid out several practical tests whereby we may test ourselves to see if we have a living faith. These tests include proper responses with regard to: trials, Scripture, partiality, good works, wise speech and conduct, godly affections, humility, and perseverance. As he concludes his letter, James offers one final test of a living faith: prayer.

Test #9: A Living Faith and Prayer (5:13–18)

As we look at this final test, James will argue that a living faith is a praying faith. Those who have been born again by the Spirit of God should be seeking the Lord regularly, offering prayers in every circumstance.

Prayer and Affliction (v. 13a)

Those who are undergoing affliction are exhorted to pray. Affliction tends to highlight our own weaknesses as human beings. By praying, we are demonstrating reliance on God.

Prayer and Thanksgiving (v. 13b)

Those who are cheerful are also exhorted to pray by singing praises! This verse is not putting a sharp dichotomy between prayer and singing praises. Both activities are types of prayer since both are offered unto the Lord. Joyful times can sometimes mask our own depravity and need for the Lord's help. When we are experiencing blessing from the Lord, the proper response is thanksgiving and praise. This also demonstrates a reliance on God.

Prayer and Sickness (vv. 14–18)

Those who are sick are exhorted to pray. As with the previous two conditions, prayer in the midst of sickness demonstrates a reliance on God for physical healing. This doesn't mean we can't turn to doctors to

seek relief from physical sickness. But what displeases the Lord is those who *only* turn to physicians and neglect to trust in the Lord for physical deliverance (e.g. 2 Chron 16:12, 13).

The Exhortation to Pray (vv. 14–16)

The person who is sick is told to call for the elders to come and pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

Visitation for the Sick (v. 14)

The term “elders” is a synonym for the pastor(s) of the person’s local church (elder = bishop = pastor, 1 Pet 5:1–2). This does not prohibit others from participating in this kind of pastoral visit, but it should include the pastor(s).

The anointing oil used in these circumstances does not have any medicinal value. It merely symbolizes setting apart the sick for the purpose of God’s intervening to heal (cf. Mark 6:13). Does this mean that pastors should not use oil? No. Prayer under these circumstances without oil would be like water baptism without water. But it is not the act of anointing or the oil that makes a person well. It is the prayer of faith.

The Prayer of Faith (vv. 15–16)

The “prayer of faith” means a prayer offered in faith or confidence in God’s ability to hear and answer prayer (Jas 1:6; Heb 11:6). This doesn’t mean we need to know in advance how God will answer before we pray this prayer.

The qualifier “if he has committed sins” indicates that sin can be, but is not necessarily the cause of the illness. Some illnesses are the direct result of sin (e.g. 1 Cor 11:30), while others occur so that God’s work might be revealed in us (John 9:3). Still others occur as a natural byproduct of our corrupted sinful state that will ultimately lead to physical death. But if the illness is a direct result of sin, confession is called for by the sick individual so that the prayer is not hindered (cf. 1 Pet 3:7). We should avoid the extremes when interpreting the phrase “confess your sins to one another.” This is not calling for confession before a priest. But neither is it instructing us to continuously and indiscriminately bare our sins to one another as if we are trying to “one up” our fellow believers with the number and magnitude of things confessed. What it does tell us is that the sinner

should confess specific wrongs to those who have been wronged, and any public sins that have affected the whole church should be confessed to the church.

“Effective prayer” means persistent prayer that produces results, i.e. praying until God answers (v. 17). Jesus taught about a persistent attitude in prayer (Luke 11:5–13; 18:1–8). Persistent prayer does not give up after the first try. But persistent prayer alone is not enough. The one offering the prayers must also be a “righteous man.” This is any person who is saved and living in obedience to God’s word. That means both the one praying *and* the sick person must each have righteous lives. But there is one more element to effective prayer: it must be done in accordance with God’s decreed will (see notes on James 4:15). On the one hand, this can be frustrating because God’s decreed will is rarely revealed in advance, especially for day to day events. But on the other hand, it can be extremely rewarding to see God answer our prayers, knowing that He used those prayers to accomplish His decreed will! The results of effective prayer are tremendous — the sick will be restored and raised up (v. 15), sins will be forgiven (v. 16), and the person will be healed (v. 16).

The Example of Elijah (vv. 17–18)

Notice a couple things about Elijah: (1) He was a human being like us. He had the same struggle with sin and was weak like us. And yet he was also righteous when he prayed. His prayer in 1 Kings 18 was earnest and persistent. The whole event in 1 Kings 17–18 occurred over a period of 3½ years! In our culture of instant gratification, this kind of patience can be a difficult lesson to learn. But we must! Those who seek the Lord will not be ashamed.

Problem: Unanswered Prayer

What about Paul — why wasn’t he healed? He was a righteous man who prayed persistently and prayed in faith. Answer: Paul’s prayer was not according to God’s will (2 Cor 12:7–9).

How do believers know what God’s will is if someone is sick and they pray? Answer: God’s will is revealed when He chooses to heal or not to heal. But regardless of the result, believers are commanded to pray! God has appointed both the means and the end in His will. Prayer is the divinely appointed means to God’s divinely appointed end — His providential healing in accordance with His will.

Prayer and Action: Restoring a Sinning Brother (vv. 19–20)

James concludes his epistle with an exhortation to help restore those who wander from the truth. This has a specific application to those in the last test who have sinned. However, these verses have application to anyone who fails one or more of the tests in this epistle.

There has been some debate over how to interpret these last two verses. One position takes those wandering as unbelievers. The wandering refers to apostasy or something close to it, and the salvation in view is from eternal death (cf. 1:15). The other interpretation understands those wandering to be believers. The wandering then refers to disobedience (Gal 6:1), and salvation is from physical death (cf. 5:15; 1 Cor 11:30; 1 John 5:16–17). I understand the second interpretation to be correct. Believers are able to fail these tests. Those who do should be corrected and restored.

The Responsibility to Correct the Erring Brother (v. 19)

“Brethren” is a reference to those who are brothers (and sisters) in Christ. There are millions of ways that a brother or sister could be doing something wrong. Wandering could involve some departure on the doctrinal level — not believing correct doctrine. It could also involve some a departure from correct behavior — not acting as a Christian ought. Whatever the case, this wandering believer is engaged in a situation that is potentially damaging to his health. James is exhorting other believers to come alongside this wayward saint and restore him to a place of righteous obedience to the word. In other words, we have a moral obligation to fellow Christians. We *are* our brother’s keeper!

However, there are times when it is appropriate to leave someone to the hardness of his heart. For example:

- Matt 18:17 — Have no fellowship with an unrepentant sinner who will not hear the church’s admonition.
- Rom 16:17 — Avoid those who cause divisions contrary to sound teaching.
- Titus 3:10–11 — Reject someone who stirs up division after two warnings.
- 2 Tim 3:5 — Avoid those who live a consistent life of evil opposed to the truth.

The Promise of Deliverance and Reconciliation (v. 20)

For the wanderer who is turned from his ways, there are two promises. The first is deliverance from physical death. Following the context of verse 15, it is assumed that those who have committed sins resulting in sickness will not be healed, but will die if those sins remain unconfessed. Thus, a brother who comes along to restore the sickly saint can save him from death. The second promise is that the wanderer's sins will be covered over (cf. Prov 10:12; 1 Pet 4:8). Not only will his sins be forgiven, but he may avoid some sins entirely by repenting of his erring ways.

Prayer is not only meant to drive us to our knees. Prayer should motivate us to action, trusting in faith that God can accomplish mighty things through His righteous servants.

Conclusion

James has given us much to consider as we live out our faith day to day. But this epistle is not just an academic textbook. We need to use it to make changes in our lives. God does not want His children to live out lives of sin and doubt. If we would heed James's words, we would gain great assurance of our salvation and eternal reward from Christ our Savior!

~AWB