

Right Praying James 5:13-20

We return this morning to the Letter written by the half-brother of Jesus, James, to the dispersed Jews around the Roman Empire. The theme of the book is demonstrating our salvation through our works. Not obtaining salvation by works but simply demonstrating that we have been saved by the blood of Jesus.

We find ourselves in the last section of the book, in the last half of chapter 5. This pericope is one of the most controversial passages in the New Testament. It has been used by various groups to support their doctrinal position, often misapplying the text into something that is contrary to the rest of Scripture. Of course, the best way to interpret scripture is with scripture, and if your interpretation conflicts with some other part of scripture, you have something wrong.

So let's dig into the text this morning to see what God has for us in this difficult passage.

If you were to count the number of times James uses the word Pray, you would see that he uses "Pray" 7 times in these 8 verses. Actually verses 13-18 form one paragraph and all 7 times are in those 6 verses. What you think the subject or topic of the paragraph is? That's right prayer. Let's see what James says about prayer:

James 5:13 (ESV)

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

Very often this verse is misinterpreted to speak of suffering in sickness, but that is not what James is talking about here. He addresses that in verse 14. If we go back to verse 10 we will get a hint.

James 5:10 (ESV)

10As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

The prophets were badly treated by the people of Israel. They did not listen to them, they physically abused them, and they often tortured them because they brought a message that was not pleasing to the leadership or the people. James is speaking of the same situation for the dispersed Christian Jews in the Roman Empire. Think about their situation. They were rejected by their families for turning to Christ. They were rejected by the citizens of Rome because they followed another king, not Ceasar.

Imagine now if you add to that that they were busy about trying to spread the illegal gospel message. They would have been confronted and even attacked by all around them. I think that is what James is talking about here. He is talking about the physical abuse that these early Christians were experiencing.

So, what is the proper response to suffering as James is talking about here? PRAYER! As we will see in this pericope that is the solution or proper response to all of the issues we face.

Now go back to verse 13.

James 5:13 (ESV)

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

Is anyone Cheerful? Let him sing praises. James is talking in the 2nd half of the verse about those who manage to keep the good attitude of a follower of Jesus which is joyful. Cheerful here describes those who keep a joyful attitude in serving the Lord.

At first, I thought that James was just talking about two different groups of people. But as I looked at the passage more I saw that what James did in the first verse of this passage was set the boundaries of the conversation. From one extreme to the other. From those suffering to those who were joyful. In other words, it does not matter where you are along the spectrum, from suffering to joyful, you are to pray. Prayer is the proper response for all of us, no matter what our situation is.

I think in many ways Prayer is one of the most missed parts of life in the church. We pray when we have trouble but James here indicates that prayer should be a regular part of our life and not just a response to struggle. We should pray when we are cheerful as well.

James 5:14–15 (ESV)

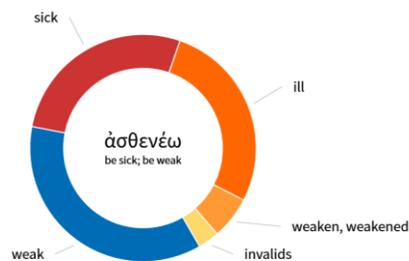
14Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

15And 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.

These verses have been the source of much false teaching over the years. They are the basis for the false teaching of the Catholic church for the giving of last rights or extreme unction, which came about recently, in the 18th century. They have also been the source of the charismatic healing ministries.

Even in our own fellowship we have I think gotten this passage wrong. The first thing we need to do as good students of God’s Word is to figure out what James is referring to when he uses the word ἀσθενεῖ (asthenei) in this verse. The word which is translated as “sick” in this verse.

Look at this graphic from Logos Bible Software.



It reflects in a graphical way how this word is interpreted or translated in the ESV. It is almost split evenly between sick or ill and weak or weakened. So we have to figure out which way James intends for us to understand it. Remember one of the primary principles of hermeneutics is the writer sets the meaning, not the reader. The reader has to figure out what meaning the writer intended.

So how do we determine the proper meaning of a word in Scripture? We look at how the word is used elsewhere, and we look at the immediate context of the word. Let me read the context along with 14 and 15 twice, once with sick and once with weakness and see which makes the most sense.

James 5:13–16 (ESV)

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

14Is 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.

15And 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.

16Therefore, 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.

James 5:13–16 (ESV)

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

14Is anyone among you weak? 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.

15And 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.

16Therefore, 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.

In verse 13 we have Christian Jews being oppressed by other and suffering because of it, we also have some of those same people who still have a joyous attitude.

Then in 14 we have people that are physically sick, or we have people that are weak in completing the things God wants them to do, so they ask for prayer from the leadership and because they pray and are anointed with oil they gain the strength they need to serve God properly.

In verse 15 they confess their sin of not depending on God, they are forgiven and become stronger. Then in verse 16 we see those who did confess and pray are healed or restored.

I think the context directs us to view the proper interpretation of ἀσθενεῖ (asthenei) seen in the ESV as sick. I think it is more easily understood as weak rather than sick.

What happens to someone who does not use their leg because it hurts when they move it? They lose muscle tone and the muscles atrophy. It becomes weak. So the person in verse 13 who is suffering from the persecution of the unsaved around them gets weak because they have used less and less of their spiritual muscles and eventually become too weak to do anything. That is who James is talking about should call the elders of the church to come and anoint with oil and prayer over him. He should confess his sin of not doing what God has said for him to do and again be focused on doing what God wants, back to proving his salvation by the works that he does, by his obedience to the Word of God. That is in keeping with the entire theme in the book of James.

Now before all of the Grace Brethren from years, past gang up on me let me say that the weakness from atrophy of our spiritual muscles does manifest itself as physical sickness as well. So our historical position of anointing the sick with oil and praying for them is not without merit. But I think the source of the problem

here is spiritual weakness caused by suffering or by the lack of obedience to God's direction.

James 5:16 (ESV)

16Therefore, 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.

Not only do the weak call the elders to anoint and pray they also confess their sins to one another, and then we pray for one another. So that we can be restored. Restored is a legitimate interpretation of the word translated as healed here in this verse. In the spiritual sense, we are healed from our weakness when we are restored to service of God.

The final phrase of this verse is another one we often view improperly. *The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.* Who is a righteous person? I would submit that a righteous person is one who is obedient to call and direction of God. Those who are obedient to God have great power in prayer, and those who are weak and not obedient to God do not have great power. When the weak call on the elders to anoint them, which symbolizes being set apart or dedicated to following God, which results in them being righteous followers of God which results in powerful prayers. I think "righteous person" here is not a reference to the Elders but to the restored previously weak person who finds new strength in serving God obediently.

In fact, James gives an illustration of such a man.

James 5:17–18 (ESV)

17Elijah 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.

18Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

Elijah came on the scene when Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel ruled the northern tribes of Israel. They worked to remove any last vestiges of the worship of YHWH from the nation. He prayed trusting God to hold the rain and the rain did not come for 3.5 years. He again prayed trusting God for it to rain, and it rained. But late in his ministry Elijah also got depressed and discouraged. He took his eyes off God when it looked like no one else followed God. It took another man of God, Elisha, to bring Elijah out of the depression.

I think Elijah is the perfect illustration for James to use here. He demonstrated great power when he trusted God and prayed. He needed another man of God to come alongside of him when he was depressed and not completely trusting God. Just like the man James is talking about in this passage.

James 5:19–20 (ESV)

19My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back,

*20let him know that whoever brings back a sinner
from his wandering will save his soul from death
and will cover a multitude of sins.*

James concludes the letter abruptly with a very short paragraph that is one sentence long, verse 19-20. It, like the previous paragraph, is misunderstood and miss interpreted. Let me see I I can make sense of these verse for you.

I think verse 19 is pretty clear. Even in the early church, they had false teachers and people that followed them, or others who just went their own way. Completely misapplying direction they were given. For the Jews, and that is who James is writing to, they had the difficulty of remaining a Jew and keeping Jewish custom while now being a follower of Jesus. Jesus the ultimate sacrificial lamb while still taking a sacrifice to the temple each year. So it is pretty simple to think of the people that wandered from the truth that James and other leaders were teaching the early church.

But in verse 20 we run into a little difficulty. We are to go after those who wander from the truth and attempt to bring them back. James then says that when we are sucessful in bringing someone back from false doctrine, from wandering away from the truth, we will save his soul from death.

The very first reaction you should have when you read or hear verse 20 is “I thought we could not lose our salvation.” You can’t, scripture is quite clear on that. So we then have to look for

a proper way to understand what James is saying here.
Remember we interpret Scripture by Scripture.

The solution to the proper understanding of who James is talking about here lies in the word “wanders.” It is the Greek word $\pi\lambda\alpha\nu\eta\theta\tilde{\eta}$ (planēthē) which is used to speak of those who have completely missed the proper path. In the current context of weak and suffering people in the church I think that James is introducing another group. Those who are weak because they do not have power from God because they are not indwelt by the Holy Spirit because they are not actually believers. They are members of the local church and they even do stuff, in their own power, but they do not have power from God. They have wandered off the proper path, they have missed the right direction to go in.

So when James says that when a brother goes after one of these people and turns them around his soul will be saved from death is a literally true statement. When we go after someone who thinks they are saved because they go to church, even do stuff in the church but in reality are weak because they do not have the power of the Holy Spirit because they do not have Him indwelling them because they are not truly saved and turn them around they become truly saved.

There are many scholars that try to make this passage about saving them from death as God will eventually take out the

Backsliding Christian. But I don't think that is what James is talking about here.

Conclusion

This passage is all about our need to trust God and to pray. Not matter if we are struggling with the pressure of rejection and hostility to our attempts to give the gospel, we are to pray. If we have kept a good attitude and are joyous as we are obedient to God we need to pray and praise God.

Even when we get weak with atrophied spiritual muscles, we need to pray. We need to dedicate our selves to serving God and building up our spiritual muscles. We need to confess our lack of faith and trust to each other and be more like Elijah, dedicated to serving God and trusting Him to do even more than we can think or dream He will do. If we do that we will be righteous before Him and we will truly demonstrate our salvation through our works.

As we conclude our study of the book of James here are some of the principles we have seen in the book:

1. God permits trials to develop stamina in his people.
2. God gives rewards to those who show their love for him by enduring trials.
3. Submission to God's demands brings a blessing in the act of obeying.

4. God demands obedience to his entire teachings, not just acceptance of a part of them. Those who hope to receive mercy from God must in turn show mercy to others.
5. Saving faith produces works of compassion and obedience
6. God holds teachers more accountable for the words they utter.
7. The tongue is a small object which can influence huge events with its words
8. God yearns for us to give him our undivided allegiance.
9. God exalts those who humble themselves before him.
10. Only God has the ability to judge and evaluate our motives.
11. Seeking the will of God must be the goal of our personal planning.
12. God hears the prayers of his people as they cry out for justice.
13. The fact of Jesus' return gives Christians the hope of eternal reward.
14. The compassion and mercy of the Lord give Christians the stamina to endure.
15. God hears the prayers of righteous people who pray with passion.

Here is the bottom line from the book of James. We have been wondrously saved by Grace alone through faith alone as a gift from God. When we became saved we were indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who gives us the power to be obedient to the Father in our

everyday life. That obedience demonstrates the reality of our salvation. There will be struggles and trouble that come from our obedience but there will also be blessings from our obedience to God.

James is a wonderful letter that has much for us to understand and do. It also a book that often miss-applied and misunderstood. My prayer is that our our detailed study of the book has made it a little eaiser for us to comprehend and therefor respond to.

In two weeks it is our plan is to begin in 1st Peter. Another great book.

Let's Pray.