



THE TENDER TOUCH
James 5:13-20

For 13 Sundays we have studied our way through the epistle of James. We have learned from one of the church's early pastors who skillfully and honestly went about his work of confronting, diagnosing, and dealing with vital areas of misbelief and misbehavior that turned up in a congregation seeking to live out her faith.¹

Like the television commercial James knew that "life can come at you fast." Therefore, he has taught us:

- To seek wisdom from above
- The dangers of wealth and the deadly virus 'affluenza'
- A tongue that is out of control and not governed by God
- Temptation is no small matter – without God's help we will fail
- Everybody matters to God – both rich and poor, male and female
- The need of patience and perseverance to out-think and out-work the powers of evil and darkness
- Our faith is both a noun and a verb – it is to be put into action
- Our faith is a lifelong journey – not a sprint
- We are servants of Jesus Christ – not celebrities or stars

The church at Jerusalem where James was assigned was not a perfect church. James deals with its problems and brings them out in the open – and they are dealt with.² This is not a mythological church – it is a real one which is why we have learned so much from her. God is at work in this church – molding and shaping this community to be an instrument of hope and wholeness.

According to church traditions, James carried the nickname, "Old Camel Knees" – because of thick calluses built up on his knees from many years of determined prayer.³ As we study this closing portion from the letter of James today it is no surprise that James ends with the power of the prayer of faith. James is sharing that prayer is always foundational to wisdom.⁴

It was Warren Wiersbe whose insight on this passage I found helpful when he shared, "Prayer is certainly a high and holy privilege. To think that, as God's children, we can come freely and boldly to His throne and share with Him our needs! Seven times in this section James mentioned prayer. The mature Christian is prayerful in the

troubles of life. Instead of complaining about his situation, he talks to God about it and God hears and answers his prayer.”⁵

There is a true story that comes from the state of Kentucky. A certain tavern owner somehow got the permission from the Town Council to build his establishment closer to the church than the law allowed. The pastor and the congregation publicly prayed in a worship service that the tavern would burn to the ground. In 5 days – the tavern burned to the ground. The tavern owner sued the church and brought civil action against them. The pastor and deacons said, “Judge, it was only a prayer. It did not mean anything.” After a few days the Judge found the church and its pastor not guilty. The Judge was forced to conclude that the tavern owner believed in prayer – but the pastor and the church did not. I agree with Max Lucado who shares:

**“I find it easier to preach on prayer – than to pray.
I find it easier to write on prayer – than to pray.
I find it easier to talk about Jesus – than to pray.
I find anything I do in my Christian life easier than praying.”**

Perhaps Martin Luther had the right insight when he wrote, “I have so many things to do today – I dare not ignore my time with God.” John Wesley discovered that Luther spent an average of 3 hours in prayer each day and he accomplished more for the faith than most. It is said that the Reformation began in Luther’s prayer closet. I believe all reformation – individual or corporate – begins on your knees before God.

In that spirit – let us dig in.

FIRST OF ALL, JAMES URGES US TO PRAY IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES OF OUR FAITH JOURNEY.

Eugene Peterson translates **verses 13-14** of our lesson today: “Are you hurting? Pray. Do you feel great? Sing. Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master. Believing prayer will heal you, and Jesus will put you on your feet.”⁶

Every Sunday in this church at either service – there is someone who is in crisis and in need of comfort and care – and there is someone who has a praise to share. In **Romans 12:15** we are taught: “Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.” We are to bring all of these human emotions and circumstances before God. Tears of joy often exist alongside tears of pain and anguish.⁷ That is why the Psalms are so important to authentic worship. In prayer we simply immerse ourselves in the presence of God.

As we see from **verses 13-16** our prayer life takes on many forms and expressions.

SECONDLY, WE LEARN THAT PRAYERS OFFERED FOR ONESELF CAN BE BIBLICALLY CORRECT.

It is not wrong to share with God a desired outcome in your request. You are asking God to act. You are seeking a resolution. However, we pray with the understanding that almighty God may have a different outcome than we are expecting. As Dr. Fred B. Craddock taught us “we must always allow God to be God.”

There is a mystery locked away in the power of intercessory prayer – known only to God. There are times when God says, “No” to the form of our prayer – but “Yes” to the substance of our prayers. Let me share the story of St. Augustine – long before he was a saint. His mother, Monica, cried great tears over her son, from which you get the St. Monica’s Falls in California. Her soul was flooded with anguish because her son was not a Christian.

Monica prayed that her son would not leave North Africa and go to Italy because she wanted so desperately for him to become a Christian. Augustine, being ambitious and wanting very much to go to Italy, decided that he would defy the request of his mother and go to Italy anyway. The day before he left she went to a small chapel by the sea and prayed that God would intervene in this situation.

As typical with most sons, he did what he wanted to anyway and boarded the ship for Italy. On his way to Italy, he fell into conversation with a notable Christian and, while on the ship, he accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. He accepted Christianity as his way of life and became one of the greatest writers and thinkers of the faith.

God, you see, did not answer the form of Monica’s prayer, but God did answer the substance of Monica’s prayer.

Yes, God does answer our prayers but not always in the way we envision it or design it. Remember, Jesus is sitting now at the right hand of God the Father, making intercessions for us as our great high priest.

Just this past week – a dear member of our church received an answered prayer after 6 months of intense praying. That is why our prayer insert might be the most important part of our bulletin. There is power in our prayers – because there is power in the blood of the Lamb. I believe Max Lucado is right when he shares: “The power of prayer is not in the one who prays – but in the ONE who hears it.” That is why we take it to the Lord in prayer. That is why James shared in **chapter 4:8**, “Come near to God and he will come near to you.” It is a reminder to us that our help is in the name of the Lord who created the heavens and the earth. When Sir Winston Churchill led his nation to victory against the evils of Hitler’s Germany, he commanded the choir at Westminster Abbey to sing **Psalms 124**, which we use today. **Psalms 124:2** shares,

“If the Lord had not been on our side

when men attacked us,
When their anger flared against us,
They would have swallowed us alive.”

As our own Dr. Charles Tindley wrote, “When the storms of life are raging, stand by me.” And God does.

When my own father was dying in Maine of the dreadful Alzheimer’s Disease and I came to accept that his healing would not come in this life – but in the next – I prayed as others did when he could not pray for himself. I prayed that the Most High God would shelter him.

I prayed that he would find refuge under His wings until he reached the eternal shore of a newer and greater kingdom. This is the reason you call for the Elders or church leaders. You have the privilege to pray for others – who can’t pray for themselves. Our great God not only heals – but more importantly – he saves.

Now to **verse 16**. Mr. Peterson translates it as follows: “Make this your common practice: confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed.”⁸

Our text speaks not only of sickness – but of sin as well. Confessing our sins to one another is closely linked with praying for one another. Psychological effects of sin are well known and documented.⁹ In **Psalm 32:3** King David shares:

“When I kept silent my bones wasted away
Through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand
was heavy upon me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.”

Recently you and I were stunned and deeply disappointed by the revelation of Olympic champion Marian Jones and her use of steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs. I can only imagine the inner turmoil and emotional pain she has been carrying around for 7 years. However, in terms of her relationship to God – her path to restoration and healing began with her confession. The knowledge of being forgiven by God ushers in a source of health and wholeness.

This is why St. Augustine shared, “Confession is good for the soul.” This is why David cried out to God, “Restoreth my soul.” In **Psalm 32:5** it shares:

“Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and did not cover up my iniquity;
I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’ –
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.”

LASTLY, WE TURN TO VERSES 18-20.

We must remember that straying saints and inactive Christians are NOT the enemy. They are victims of the enemy. They need a tender touch. You cannot pray for a person without loving them as Christ loves you. Your prayers can make a difference. There is great joy in turning a person around and pointing them in the right direction.

The late Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote a book entitled, **ON BEING FIT TO LIVE WITH**. There were a collection of sermons he wrote when our nation was involved in the Second World War. In the book he shares the vital importance of a nation – a church family – the world family – your family to develop the skills and attitudes necessary for us to be fit to live with. Being fit to live with requires a spiritual maturity which flows from vital Christian discipleship.¹⁰ This is exactly what James is sharing with the church at Jerusalem and beyond. This being fit to live with brings wholeness and health and salvation to a church family – your family and beyond. Prayer is the bedrock of that maturity and discipleship.

So, we bring our study of James to a close. Perhaps you noticed there is no farewell or benediction to end this challenging epistle.

Unlike the letters of Paul – there is no closure to this letter. However, I believe that James deliberately ends this letter this way. James has constantly taught us and reminded us that faith is a verb.

It is not complete until you put it into action. Our world – our churches – our families will not be fit to live with until we do.

Every Sunday we gather as the church – but we are to leave empowered to be the church. James, like my mentor Eugene Peterson, “believed and insisted that everything that God revealed of himself and his works is capable of being lived by ordinary men and women in their homes and work places.”¹¹

Yes, this letter is incomplete – it is not finished until you act upon the truth that is clearly revealed. James is urging us after much prayer to roll up our sleeves and get to work. Will you?

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **THE MESSAGE: The New Testament in Contemporary English**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 1993, page 478.

² Ibid, Peterson, page 478.

³ Ibid, Peterson, page 478.

⁴ Ibid, Peterson, page 478.

⁵ Warren W. Wiersbe, **“Volume 2: The Bible Exposition Commentary,”** Victor Books, 1989, page 381-82.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, **THE MESSAGE**, page 485.

⁷ Fred B. Craddock, [et.al.], **“Preaching Through the Christian Year, YEAR B,”** Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, first edition, 1993, page 425.

⁸ Eugene Peterson, **THE MESSAGE**, page 485.

⁹ Ibid, Craddock, page 425.

¹⁰ Thanks to my colleague, Dr. Thomas Lane Butts for the reminder of this book written by Dr. Fosdick, which he gave to me when I met him for lunch in New York City almost 10 years ago.

¹¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **CHRIST PLAYS IN TEN THOUSAND PLACES**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005, page 5.