



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

"Let Us Pray"

James 5:13

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Introduction

1. In an article on James's theology of prayer, Richard Wells noted what he called "one of the strangest and saddest omissions in modern theology": the fact that so many major modern works on systematic theology give so little attention to the subject of prayer, often devoting only a page or two and talking about it under another heading (e.g., providence).¹
2. He goes on to make a similar point about James: introductions routinely devote sections to the letter's major theological themes, but prayer is often not emphasized or mentioned.
3. Wells is generalizing; various writers do note James's emphasis on prayer.² But, he is right to observe that prayer is a major theological theme in James.
 - a. He is not unique in focusing on prayer, especially at the end of his writing. Other epistles do the same (cf. Rom. 15:30-32; Eph. 6:18; 1 Thess. 5:17-18; Heb. 13:18-19).
 - b. But, "James's exhortation is notable for its length"³ and is not all he says about it.
4. To appreciate the particular things James says about prayer in 5:13-18, we must note what he says throughout the letter, get an overview of vv. 13-18, and consider the principle in v. 13.

Body

- I. Trials, Faith, and Prayer: Interconnected Themes.⁴
 - A. James is well known for his emphasis on trials and faith.
 1. He begins with a call to unwavering faith as evidence of obeying the command to face trials with joy (1:2-8).
 2. Trials, especially the mistreatment of some by others, is a recurring theme (cf. 1:9-11; 2:1-7; 3:15-16; 4:1-3; 5:1-11).
 3. The closing section (5:13-18) again bring the ideas together.

¹ C. Richard Wells, "The Theology of Prayer in James," *Criswell Theological Review* 1.1 (1986): 85. As it appears at http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/NTeSources/NTArticles/CTR-NT/Wells-PrayerInJames-CTR1.htm. Accessed January 9, 2012.

² For those written since 1986, that may be due in part to Well's article.

³ Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 251.

⁴ Wells would add wisdom to the list, and spends considerable time explaining why. I commend his study.

- B. We should also notice how consistently James connects prayer with trials and faith.
1. In 1:2-8, the ultimate strength for coping with trials and living without wavering is found in wisdom, ours for the asking from God who gives without hesitating.
 2. In 4:1-10, the conflicts which both demonstrate trials and faithless living result from “the self-seeking [who] may not pray at all; and if they do pray, they pray only to gratify the lusts which orient their lives” (Wells, 98).
 - a) Verses 1-6 imply a call for right asking, right motives, and the right aim.
 - b) Verses 7-10 use language (“draw near”) often associated with formal religious activities, essentially a synonym for praying (Wells, 100).
 3. In 5:13-18, the trials mentioned are suffering (13), sickness (14-15) and sin (16), to which one is to respond with “the prayer of faith” (15), part of a lifestyle that demonstrates unwavering allegiance to God.
- C. 5:13-18 recapitulates the major themes even as it calls for a specific faith behavior: prayer, “another revolutionary tactic, *not* a passive resignation to a situation.”⁵

II. “Let Him Pray” – An Overview and Questions (5:13-18).

- A. That prayer is the theme of vv. 13-18 is clear: the word is used in every verse.
1. “Is anyone ... suffering? Let him pray (προσεύχομαι, *proseuchomai*)” (13).
 2. “Is anyone ... sick?... pray (προσεύχομαι, *proseuchomai*) over him” (14).
 3. “And the prayer (εὐχή, *euchē*) of faith will save the one who is sick” (15).
 4. “Therefore, . . . pray (εὐχομαι, *euchomai*) for one another. . . The prayer (δέησις, *deēsis*) of a righteous person has great power in its working” (16).
 5. “Elijah . . . prayed (προσευχή, *proseuchē*) fervently . . .” (17).
 6. “Then he prayed (προσεύχομαι, *proseuchomai*) again . . .” (18).
- B. As we prepare to consider these verses, we should keep two things in mind.
1. They do not deal with every aspect of prayer or provide an answer to every question we might ask about prayer.
 2. They present us with several puzzles; “this brief passage is remarkably full of difficult problems” (McCartney, 251).
 - a) What kinds of suffering are in view in v. 13?
 - b) What is involved in what the elders are to do when called for by the sick (14)?
 - c) What is meant by “anointing” in v. 14?
 - d) What is meant by the promise that “the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up” (15)?
 - (1) Is the sickness physical, spiritual, or both?
 - (2) Is the promise that the sick person will get well? Is that a guarantee?
 - (3) If he doesn’t, was the prayer bad? Or the faith?
 - (4) Or, is the promise that he will emerge spiritually strong through and in spite of his sickness?
 - e) What is the connection between sickness and sin (16)?
 - f) What is involved in confessing to one another (16)? Some sins? All sins? How often? When?
 - g) What is meant by the promise that confession leads to healing (16)?

⁵ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 241.

- h) How is Elijah a model for prayer? Is the emphasis on his prayer or his character? What is the significance of each?
- i) If we should pray for a specific thing like rain, or for it to cease, and what we prayed for does not happen, has prayer failed? Or have we? Or is the explanation to be found elsewhere?

III. “Let Us Pray” (5:13).

- A. James’s readers likely grasped some of these details more quickly than we can; given the chance, he might well answer them for us without the digging we will do.
- B. But, given his emphasis here and throughout the writing, I’m confident that he might tell us to take a step back and simply reflect on v. 13.
 - 1. As you deal with life, pray.
 - 2. If life deals you a bad hand, pray.
 - 3. If, like the prophets, you are suffering (κακοπαθέω, *kakopatheō*; note κακοπάθεια, *kakopatheia* in v. 10), pray.
 - 4. If you’re pleased with how things are going, don’t forget God; sing praise.

Conclusion

- 1. A story from church history shows why James might give such emphasis to prayer. It comes to us via Eusebius who attributes it to Hegesippus, a second century Christian writer. As part of his description of James’s character, Hegesippus said that: “He used to enter the temple alone and was often found kneeling and imploring forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became hard like a camel’s from his continual kneeling in worship of God and in prayer for the people.”⁶
- 2. Reflecting on things to learn from James’s emphasis on prayer, Wells observed that, “Skeptics are not the only people who wonder about the necessity, the efficacy, or the rationality of beseeching a Being who presumably knows and wills the best for his creatures, comprehensively and ceaselessly. . . . James will have none of this. His theology of prayer, like every element of his Epistle, is pragmatic-practical . . .” (Wells, 107).

January 15, 2012; updated March 2, 2017
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⁶ Paul L. Maier, trans. *Eusebius: The Church History*, 2:23 (p. 71).