

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



James 5:13-20
“Where We Learn To Pray”

September 27, 2015
(18th Sunday After Pentecost)

Pastor Phil Thraikill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646
Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumc1.org

“Following Christ From City Center!”

JAMES 5:13-20 "TWO PLACES WHERE WE LEARN TO PRAY"

Actions		1) vv.13-14 Command To Prayer: Petition And Praise In All Life's Circumstances.		
				Extremes Of Life (3 Moments), Disease/Disability Rampant In Ancient World
13	a	Is any one among you suffering?	Question	Strong Feelings! Pain From Hardships, 5:10, 2 Tim. 2:3, 9, 4:5
Pray		Let him pray (continually)	Answer	Talk To The Sovereign God! Start With Individual Prayer, 5:4
				Speak + Sing, Extremes Of Life = Occasions To Connect With God
	b	Is any one among you cheerful?	Question	Connect To God, Westminster Catechism, "enjoy God forever."
Sing		Let him sing praise (continually)	Answer	Eph. 5:19, Mortals Should Pray At All Times, And When Ill
				Assumes A Serious Illness, Initiative With Sick Person
14	a'	Is any among you sick (weak, <i>astheneo</i>)?	Question	1) Bedridden? 2) Elders Called, 3) Elder's Faith, 4) Pray <i>Over</i>
Call,		Let him call for the elders of the Church,	Answer	Acts 20:17, 1 Pt. 5:1, Elders Pray, Gifts 1 Cor. 12:9, 28-30
Anoint,		and let them pray over him,		Jerusalem Practice, Actions + Word, Not Last Rights But Hope For Life
Pray		anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.		Oil = Symbol Of God's Presence, Mk. 6:13, Lk. 10:34, Interdependent Life
				Oil Both Medicinal/Ceremonial, Prayerful Expectation Is Not Demand Or Presumption

No Formal Letter Closing, Multiple Echoes With 1:2-18 (Inclusion)

		2) vv.15-16a Promises And Practices Regarding The Sick: Save/Sin Forgiven.		Double Meanings
				Relation Of Sin & Sickness Is Multi-Dimensional, Complex
15	a1	And the prayer of faith (faithful prayer) will SAVE THE SICK MAN .		1:5-8, 4:2-3, 15, Pray Boldly, Bold Claim Based On James' Experience
				(Gk. <i>kamne</i>), Sozo = save/heal (Mk. 5:34, 6:56), Complete At Resurrection
	a2	And the Lord will raise him up.		Main Actor = Lord Jesus, Some Of These Had Seen/Known Jesus' Earthly Ministry!
				Mk. 2:1-12 = Get Out Of Bed, Acts 3:6, All Healing = Foretaste Of Resurrection!
				Physical/Spiritual Related, Ps. 38, Sir. 1:21, Intervention By Community
Forgive	b	And <i>if</i> he has committed SINS ,		Mt. 18:15-18, Highly Relational Community
16	b'	Therefore, confess your sin to one another		Ps. 32:5, Lev. 16:21, Hard For Us: Obsessive Privacy/ Image
Confess				Illness: Punishment, Demonic, Personal Sin, Most From Fallen World/Death
Pray	a'1	and pray for one another,		Dt. 28:58-62, Jn. 5:14, Assume We Live In Accountable Community
	a'2	that you (pl.) may be healed.		(Gk. <i>iaomai</i>) Not Preoccupied With Uncovering Forgotten Transgressions
				7 References To Prayer

Models		1') vv.16b-18 Old Testament Example Of Prayer: Elijah Who Is Like Us.		Things Happened!
				Not Choose Miracles of Carmel (1 Kgs. 18:16-4), Widow Of Zarephath (17:17-24)
17	a	The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects.		Righteous = Rightly Related To God, Forgiven
		Elijah was a man of like nature (suffering) with ourselves,		Not Some Super-Hero; We Have Same Access
		and he prayed fervently that it might not rain,		Lit. <i>prayed with a prayer</i>, 1 Kgs. 17:1, 18:41-46, Lk. 4:25-26
		and for "three years and six months" it did not rain upon the earth.		Persistence And Patience
18	a'	Then he prayed again,		2 Examples Of God's Responsiveness
	b'	and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit.		Rev. 11:6, Sir. 48:3, 1 Kgs. 17:1-2 Kgs. 212

2') vv.19-20 Practices And Promises Concerning The Erring: Save/Sin Covered.

				If Not Confess, If Separated, Go See Them, Close The Church's Back Door!
19	a	<i>My brethren,</i>		D. A., To Physical Sickness, Spiritual Sickness Is Added, Discouragement?
		if any one of you wanders from the truth(way)		//1:8, Problem Of Drifting Believers, General Situation <i>any one</i>
Seek Out	b	and some one <i>brings him back</i> ,		Not Rabid, Modern Individualism, None Of My Business!
20	b'	let him know that whoever <i>brings back</i> a sinner		Mt. 18:10-14 On Stray Sheep/Estrangement
	a'	from the wandering (error) of his ways,		Hymn, "prone to wander, Lord I feel it..."
Rescue &		will SAVE HIS SOUL his soul from death		Exek. 3:21, Sozo Again, But Who? No Once Saved, Always Saved
Restore		and cover a multitude of SINS		2:13, Prov. 10:12, "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses." 1 Pt. 4:8
				To Practice This Faith Is Healthy, Life-Giving For Body/Soul, Present/Future

Five Cross-Cultural Principles: 1) Church must be concerned for sick; 2) Healing ministry is part of normal church life; 3) Healing prayer is most appropriate within the community, presumes a relationship; 4) Healing ministry encompasses multiple methods-including wise use of medical/practical means; 5) Spiritual health is finally more important than physical well-being in this life.

Sirach 38: 1, 4, "Honor the physician with the honor due him, according to your need of him.... The Lord created medicines from the hearth, and a sensible man will not despise them." We may assume James' audience knew such Jewish wisdom.

"Main Idea: Christians should deal with suffering, sickness, and sin by intercession with God and intervention in the lives of fellow believers. Sometimes sin will be one of the direct causes of suffering or sickness and sometimes it will not. When it is, confession becomes crucial. In all situations, prayer proves powerful" (Blomberg, Kamell, *James* [Grand Rapids, MI: 2008], 239, 252).

**What Is The Relationship Between Sin (Rebellion v. God) And Sickness (Physical, Mental Consequences)?
(Discernment And Wisdom Are Always Required In Diagnosis. Combinations are the norm.)**

Cause	Description	Scope, Examples	Possible Responses	Cure	Key References
<p>Personal setting: the world at odds with God at every level.</p>	<p>All humans share in a good but fallen world with original and actual sin plus exposure to evil and death. We are all limited, vulnerable, and mortal. We are in this together and all are affected. The earth and all its systems are not yet the kingdom of God which remains future.</p>	<p>Explains most sickness and troubles, e.g. cancers, genetic issues, infections, trauma, war, effects of aging, and finally death.</p>	<p>Use medical care where available and wise self-care always. Be frank about your world, your mortality and limits. Engage in regular confession of sin and receiving forgiveness. Follow Jesus Christ in his church and receive prayer for healing. Live in faith and hope.</p>	<p>Return of Christ, arrival of the kingdom of God and the resurrection of the dead with new bodies full of divine life forever beyond the power of sin, death, and evil at the end of the age. The ultimate healing is future. All present healings are temporary signs.</p>	<p>Genesis 3, 1 Cor. 15, Rev. 21</p>
<p>Personal God: God's holy love resists sin and evil</p>	<p>Sickness as chastisement from God</p>	<p>Some sickness, troubles, even death</p>	<p>Acknowledge your specific sins, repent and receive absolution, turn to Christ and to his people for prayer and healing.</p>	<p>A restored relationship with God is possible now with many good effects.</p>	<p>Acts 5:1-16, 1 Cor. 11:27-34, Dt. 28:58-62</p>
<p>Personal Foe: Satan, his fallen angels</p>	<p>Sickness as a result of an evil power, demonic activity, occult involvement, habitual sin and idolatry, family involvement.</p>	<p>Some sickness, troubles, particularly for those outside the faith, but not them only. Those who worship false gods come into bondage.</p>	<p>Conversion to Christ. Specific confession if necessary, prayers for deliverance and freedom, resisting evil, breaking hereditary involvement, renouncing idolatries, using the means of grace to strengthen us in the struggle.</p>	<p>Resist the enemy now. Learn his strategies and resist his temptations. Satan and the demons will be destroyed at the kingdom's coming and the advent of the new heavens and earth.</p>	<p>Luke 4:31-37, 8:1-3, 13:11-13, Rev. 21</p>
<p>Personal actions and attitudes: Me! You!</p>	<p>Sickness caused by the sins of another or of yourself. Includes war, addictions, pollution, violations of God's law and wisdom at every level of human interaction.</p>	<p>Quite a lot of sickness and troubles. Medical outcomes of addictions (e.g. cirrhosis, brain damage) and misbehaviors (e.g. promiscuity and STDs, abortion), unforgiveness.</p>	<p><u>Sins by another:</u> honest confrontation, forgiveness, restitution, justice, peacemaking. <u>Sin by the self:</u> confess, repent, receive prayer for healing, restitution, Christian growth</p>	<p>Take responsibility for your actions and the guilt they bring and enable others to do the same by speaking the truth in love. Practice healthy boundaries, fellowship, mercy</p>	<p>Psalms 32, 51, Luke 5:17-26</p>

WHERE WE LEARN TO PRAY

“Is any one among you suffering? Let him pray....”

Thus, prayer is for all, since all suffer.

J A M E S 5 : 1 3

Just recently a member of this church was very nearly arrested for domestic terrorism involving a possible dirty bomb. And be it known to all that I have permission from the innocent man to tell his harrowing tale.

Dr. Steve Skinner recently had a nuclear heart scan. His cardiologist injected a radioactive isotope into his bloodstream and put him in a scanner to map possible blockages in the coronary arteries, and apparently all was well. Test over. Job done. Back to life and genetics, which included a quick trip to New York and a walk near Ground Zero to check the progress. The NSA has yet to reveal how one of their low flying satellites spotted *the nuclear man*. I hear that’s what Cindy’s calling him these days! When one of her friends asked just the other day, “How’s Steve?” she grinned, “Oh, he’s *the bomb!*”

One of New York’s finest came up to Steve and asked directly, “Sir, do you have a heart problem?” As a scientist Steve thought to himself, “Isn’t this an odd phenomena?” and answered the officer in his typical mild-mannered way, “No, sir.” After a bit more intensive interrogation, the officer informed the good doctor he’d been picked up on a Geiger scanner emitting radiation. Steve tells me no equipment was visible, and he was not aware he’d been scanned and was being monitored. Spooky, isn’t it? I’d say we have some pretty sensitive equipment don’t you? Steve then told the officer about his recent heart scan, and that satisfied the officer. “Welcome to New York City, Dr. Skinner. Enjoy your stay, and remember: we are watching you!” So if you ride by the Skinner home at night and notice a faint blue glow in one of the upper windows, you now know why. It’s *the nuclear man*. What a good sport to let me retell his uncomfortable moment through the lens of humor.

So how could this great local story have any connection with a sermon on the

fundamental spiritual disciplines of Prayer and Scripture meditation?¹ Here's how, because these practices— once entered into— make a change in us; they have residual effects others will pick up on. When Moses came down off Mt. Sinai from forty days fasting in the holy presence, he face glowed so it had to be covered.² There were effects from being in God's glorious presence. In II Corinthians Paul speaks of this same process. What happened to Moses through prolonged exposure is happening to us a bit at a time as the Holy Spirit lets us see more and more of who Jesus is:

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. *And we all* (meaning all Jesus' followers, including us!) with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”³

In the conversation that is prayer we are exposed by the Holy Spirit to the Lord's presence in small doses, but— as Steve will tell you— even small doses make a big difference, even if you're not aware of it yourself. Something is imparted to us; call it *grace* or *glory*, call it *life* or *love*, call it *divine friendship*, call it *light* or *wisdom*, call it *being under the influence*, but voluntary exposure to God— which is what prayer is— has an effect on us and then through us. To call God's name is to be in God's presence since ours is a God who hears. Perhaps the highest privilege given us as divine image bearers and as the friends of Jesus is the invitation to log into God's presence at any time. Even an act so simple as just calling God to mind is prayer. Even a glance at God, has an effect, and the more we respond to the drawings of grace, the more we are changed. Expose yourself to the sun, you get a tan. Expose yourself to God, the presence rubs off and lingers. Just ask *the nuclear man*.

Not long ago I was sitting in an airport restaurant for a three hour layover and needed to get some sermon work done, so I fired up the laptop. I was in civilian clothes— jeans, blue blazer, checked shirt— with no insignia, just me and my laptop. I was under cover. The phone rang; I answered it, dealt with the issue, then said *Thanks* and hung up. As I went back to writing, a lady sitting nearby looked at me

¹ James A. Harnish, *A Disciples's Path: Companion Reader* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2012), Chapter 2, “The Path of Biblical Prayer,” 27-36.

² Exodus 34:29-35.

³ 2 Cor. 4:17-18.

with a big grin and asked, “Are you a pastor?” I was a bit embarrassed and said *Yes I am*. I then asked, *How did you know?* Without hesitation she said, “I couldn’t help but overhear. You were so kind to the person.”

I wish I could tell you my first response was gratitude, but it was not. I felt exposed and stupid and perhaps a bit corny. We talked a bit more. She had a son who just finished his Army A school as a forward scout and was headed off to a combat infantry unit. She’s come for his graduation. I prayed with her for him before she went to catch her flight back to Dallas, and as she walked away I thought, “Maybe he is changing me; maybe it’s beginning to show in unguarded moments; maybe I can trust him to change me some more.” Prayer changes us because it’s primary exposure to God. My guess is that if I spent more time in the presence, not just saying stuff but just being there, the pace of change might quicken and go deeper.

In our United Methodist service of baptism and church membership which enacts and repeats our vision of the Christian life,⁴ there are four basic baptismal vows: first is saying No to all that opposes God at three levels: cosmic evil, the evil within our world, and the rebellion in your own heart. That firm No prepares the way for saying Yes to taking up God’s cause in a world of evil, injustice, and oppression. Third is a comprehensive vow to Jesus as Savior, Lord, and Messiah, and to his people as our new forever family. And finally a promise to be his ambassador or representative at all times, “According to the grace given you, will you remain faithful members of Christ’s holy church and serve as Christ’s representatives in the world?” If a child is to be baptized, there’s a fifth vow taken by the parents to raise the child in the faith and in the church as their primary teachers. And note that none of this is a bit denominational; nothing particularly Methodist about it– at least not yet; it’s simply Christian. No one is ever baptized Methodist, only Christian.

A bit later in the service are two vows of denominational membership because none of us follow Jesus except in one of the great clans of the larger– and now sadly divided– worldwide Christian family: Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant, to which some now add a fourth clan because of their explosive growth in the last hundred years: the Pentecostals. But even within the clans we find ourselves in one of the component tribes into which our particular clan– the Protestants– continue to divide ourselves. We Methodists are the country cousins of the Episcopalians and through them back into the Church of England and before that the Roman Catholics

⁴ *U.M. Hymnal*: 34, 38.

and before that the undivided church of the first thousand years before the Eastern and Western churches split officially in 1054 in the Great Schism.

If you look at the Mississippi River delta and all its branches, you have a picture of today's world church, but if you trace them all back you eventually come back to one river, but none of us live there. We do not live near the headwaters but far downstream amidst all the tributaries, and so there are two vows that make you part of the Methodist tribe, one to the denomination of basic loyalty and the next to a particular local church. It all boils down to this place and what our great God want to do in us and through us. And that vow— as you have heard many times— is this:

“As members of Main Street UMC, will you faithfully participate in our ministries (in five faithful ways): *by your prayers* (thus today's message), your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?” to which the brave soul answers, **“I will.”**

Your most significant contribution to the health of this church is not your money, not time or talents, not service or witness, none of these, though they all follow. It is your prayers that— along with your Bible reading and meditation— are the two most vital indicators you indeed have a living relationship with God. If you never— or only rarely— speak with your heavenly Father in an open, vulnerable manner— whether using the Lord's Prayer as an outline or just in a spontaneous conversation— then your fellowship with God is weakening each day prayer is neglected; you are out of touch with your greatest resource. Our church is the weaker because your communication and communion with God is neglected. It's not something I do for you. What you don't do in private affects the rest of us in public because you're not well connected; the body as a whole is weakened because your prayers are missing: prayers for me and the staff and our leaders, prayers for the sick, prayers for the addicted, prayers for the coming mission to Honduras, prayers for the Holy Spirit to inspire our worship, prayers for new people to come to faith in Jesus Christ and for drop outs to return home. A bit of blood flow is lacking because your prayers are absent, and lack of blood flow leads eventually to numbness and finally necrosis. And if you don't take regular time to read and meditate on the Scripture in order to learn the ways of God and have your thinking reprogrammed, you really have little to share or contribute other than your human opinions, and true as some of them may be, they are not grounded in something deeper, which is God's Word.

In prayer God hears from us, and in Scripture we hear from God who sent us

the love letter of the Bible, and if there's rhythm between the two so that they inform one another, then life takes on a conversational dimension in which God is the constant reference point for our lives and our affections.

If you carve out Sunday mornings as sacred time to be here in the school of prayer we call worship and in the school of Scripture we call Sunday School, and if you began to explore the primary spiritual research of prayer and meditating on Scripture, something will happen in your heart and mind. You will be spoken to; you will be addressed; you will learn the voice of the Good Shepherd and how it differs in tone and content from other voices that enter your consciousness. You will be able to spot it because you've read the same content in the Bible. The Christian life will no longer be a series of duties so much as an open door of opportunities, a living relationship with your life an open book to God and God's Book increasingly open before you beside a morning cup of coffee and perhaps *The Upper Room* or other devotional book. When you pray you discover a Helper who understands, and when you study the Bible you learn God's ways.

Yes, I can write prayers that take the themes of Scripture and offer them back to the Triune God; it's a skill I've developed by writing public prayers every week for thirty-eight years, and it's a good skill to have for someone in my role. It's a spiritual art form I can teach you,⁵ but this is not what we're talking about. It's not about written or spoken ease and eloquence. We're talking about something much simpler and more direct. In fact, as I wrote this last sentence— sitting on a bar stool in the Atlanta airport— I looked up at 4:51pm on Friday and there was Pope Francis on a large screen leading the Lord's Prayer in a Harlem School, at the end of which he made the sign of the cross and said, "Please pray for me, and if you don't pray, send good wishes," which is at least a step in the right direction for secular types who can't quite yet believe in the God of Jews and Jesus and Christians. That's it. To pray the model prayer and lead others in it, to live under the cross of Jesus, and to be aware of just how much we who pray need what we offer others. Francis is a good teacher, and our national and media fascination is a latent signal how much we hunger for leaders— spiritual and otherwise— who are good and true and faithful.

You could spend a lifetime moving into the layers of the Lord's Prayer under the tutoring of the Holy Spirit, because whenever we take it on our lips the Spirit is

⁵ For a manual, see Laurence Hull Stookey, *Let the Whole Church Say Amen! A Guide For Those Who Pray In Public* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2001).

nearby to offer us light and help. To learn to pray, all you have to do is pray the model prayer not as something to be ripped off in ten seconds but as a series of topics that have a clear internal ordering, from addressing God as a trusted, strong, and loving Father all the way to praying for protection from evil in all its deceptive forms since we now live behind enemy lines where the fire is live and the casualties many. We pray that God’s holy name be honored and for his healing and purging rule to come down to earth, “Thy kingdom come.” We then in confidence pray for what we most need: daily bread and all that makes human life possible, thus we care about local and world hunger; we pray for healing relationships through mutual forgiveness since we inevitably bruise and wound one another, so we care about peacemaking and reconciliation at all levels; we pray for protection from our foe the Evil One, and so we find places to push back against all that degrades and cheapens human beings, including all occult practices which try to do business with evil and deceptive spirits for personal power and special knowledge.

Just last week as I was about to exit the hospital, a woman who knew me but whom I did not know came up and said, “Pastor Phil.” She then gave her name, and because of the look on her face I asked my standard question, “Do you have someone in the hospital?” “Yes,” she said, “my husband. His daughter is a member of the Wiccan religion which worships nature, and so she refuses to have anyone come into the room and pray for him.” “Have you alerted your pastor?” I asked. Our Protestant version of the prayer ends with an uplifting song of praise, “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.” The Roman Catholic version—however— ends with *but deliver us from evil*, which is quite sobering.⁶ This stuff is not far away; it’s all around us, and we must be alert to it.

Sometimes I never get further than the first words, “Our Father, who art in heaven.” I miss my earthly father, and I take my grief to my Heavenly Father to be sorted out. So pray it slowly. Allow the Spirit to take the raw materials of your life and history and weave them in and out of the prayer. You will find your own heart and mind being excavated and refurbished as attitudes are revealed and alternatives offered. Every time you enter this prayer you have an appointment with One who desires to change you at the heart level. An effect is that you will start seeing evidence of God in unlikely places; simple food will taste better; creation will shine;

⁶ On the textual variants which underlie this liturgical practice, see Charles Talbert, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI; 2012), 89; Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 2002), 120-121. It was Jewish custom to add a doxology to prayers.

you will become sensitive to issues of forgiveness and peace between people; you will develop spiritual radar for the presence of evil and its strategies; your mind and heart will hunger for the truths of Scripture. There will be times when your heart and mind are touched with the fire and light of God, when divine love makes a surprise visit and you melt. Insights will come. You may lose track of space and time. You will weep and laugh. You are though this prayer– the Jesus who gave it and the Father it addresses– being drawn into the operations of the alternative kingdom that is already working in our midst. If you want to be changed in the direction of being a person of love and wisdom, begin praying this prayer with care and attention; and if you are content as you are, then don't because to pray is to change, to risk becoming *a nuclear person* like Dr. Steve Skinner! You might glow in the dark!

TURNING TO THE TEXT

I've chosen the last paragraph of the Book of James⁷ to guide our thinking on prayer in the church for several reasons, the first being that James– according to reliable church tradition– is Jesus' younger brother who did not follow him during the ministry⁸ but who was given a singular resurrection appearance.⁹ Think of the mental and emotional revolution it was for James to come to the conviction his older brother *Jeshua*, the one he slept beside all those years, was– dare he even think it– the long awaited Messiah and the only one to whom the language of *Son* can be applied in an absolute sense.¹⁰ "He was there all the time, and I knew it not." Secondly, that the word *prayer* is mention seven times in the first six verses, so it's a unifying theme. Thirdly, that this treatment of prayer ends with an outreach ministry where those who know the love of God take initiative to reach out to those who have– for whatever reason– drifted way, either in disappointment or rebellion. James expects prayer and

⁷ Articles I have found helpful are Robert Karris, "Some New Angels on James 5:13-20," *Review & Expositor*, 97 (2000), 207-219; Dale C. Allison, Jr., "A Liturgical Ending behind the Ending of James," *JSNT*, 34 (1), 2011, 3-18; Keith Warrington, "James 5:13-18: Healing Then And Now," *International Review of Missions*, Vol. 93, July-October 2004, 346-367; Ezekiel A. Ajibade, "Anointing the Sick with Oil: An Exegetical Study of James 5:14-15," *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology*, Vol. XIII (2), 2008, 166-176.

⁸ John 7:1-9.

⁹ 1 Cor. 15:7.

¹⁰ Matthew 11:27.

the changes it brings to lead to loving action towards drifting Christians.¹¹

Prayer Is For All Seasons (vv.13-14)

In the first two verses we hear the voice of James asking and answering three rhetorical questions, just as he did in the sermons he gave in the temple courts and in the homes of believers in Jerusalem. Here he teaches that prayer to God is for individuals and groups and for all the circumstances of life, from the best to the worst; nothing that is human is excluded from the conversation with God. The first and last are about pain, about suffering and sickness, but the one at the center is about happiness and joy, “Is any one among you cheerful? Let him sing praise,” and what is praise but prayer set to music? In any church at any time some are suffering and some are joyous, some are sick and others well, and the response in all the circumstances of life is to turn to God in a variety of kinds of prayer. By giving us two examples of the lows of life at the frames and one at the center about the natural highs, James is claiming the whole of life as the raw material of prayer. The suffering may use one of the psalms of complaint or lament, which are a Jewish reminder it’s OK to be really honest with God about question like Why? and How long? and Why don’t you do something?¹² Here is a sample from the raw honesty of Psalm 38:

“Lord, all my longing is known to thee,
my sighing is not hidden from thee.
My heart throbs, my strength fails me;
and the light of my eyes— it also has gone from me.
My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague,
and my kinsmen stand afar off.”¹³

Everyone has suffering visit them. So take your pain and hurt and confusion and longing for relief to God in prayers of lament and complaint. Be honest with God.

¹¹ The best training plan for this ministry is the Stephen Ministry resource *Caring for Inactive Members: How to Make God’s House a Home*. The book for the course is Ken Haugk, *Reopening the Back Door* (St. Louis, MO: Stephen Ministry, 1992).

¹² Stookey, *Let the Whole Church*, Exercise 14, “The Lost Art of Lament,” 93-98.

¹³ vv. 9-11. Other songs of individual lament are Psalms 3, 6, 7; Jeremiah 11-20.

But real as it is, suffering is not the whole of life; there are times of happiness and a glad heart. And what do you do with these emotions? You sing praises to God, “This is my Father’s world, the birds their carols raise, the morning light, the lily white, declare their makers praise.” Or maybe one of my favorites from Disney’s 1946 movie *Song of the South*:

“Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay.
My, oh my, what a wonderful day.
Plenty of sunshine headin' my way.
Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay...
Wonderful feeling, wonderful day...”¹⁴

And if you are weak and ill, depressed and discouraged, call in the calvary as James encourages in verse 14. Ask a team to come to where you are— in the hospital or at home— to pray for you and as a reminder you are not alone, to anoint you with oil, which has multiple association in Scripture with the Holy Spirit and healing. Our practice as found in our *Book of Worship* is to make the sign of the cross on the forehead with olive oil- which is a reminder of the sign of the cross made at baptism— and then to pray for healing and wholeness *in the name of the Lord Jesus*, which is not a magic slogan but a call to pray— as best we can discern— for what Jesus would pray for.¹⁵ We are thankful for all the Lord provides through his friends the doctors, but we do not want any to miss anything the Lord might want to do more directly, and often we are surprised by the benefits that come, either in whole or in part. To be loved in prayer is a new experience for many.

So if the suffering is yours, it’s your job to pray, at least in the beginning. And if the joy is yours, it’s your privilege to praise. And if your physical or emotional sickness has you bed-bound, it’s your responsibility to call for help. If we find out, we will come, but if no one let’s us know, what can we do? We don’t have a crystal ball in the church office, only phone lines. Life is fragile, vulnerable, and to be handled with care and prayer by the church as a whole. We learn to pray by praying for ourselves and with others. We learn to receive gifts of the Holy Spirit not by reading a book about it but at the risky intersection of listening to people in pain and listening to the Holy Spirit in prayer. Prayer to our great God leaves nothing out; it

¹⁴ This song won the Academy Award in 1947 for best song. See YouTube.

¹⁵ On the sign of the cross (61), on the anointing with unscented oil (614).

is as big and broad, as high and low as life itself. Life is meant to be processed in conversation with God, and the name for that living dialog is prayer. Get in on it!

Confidence In God, Realism About Sin (vv.15-16a)

The next two verses are remarkable for both their optimism and their sophistication about the multiple causes of disease and dis-ease. The proven faith of James is evident in verse 15, “And the prayer of faith will save the sick man; and the Lord (my older brother!) will raise him up,” which can be read either as a future statement of salvation and resurrection beyond death or of healing and getting of bed in short order, and perhaps James meant both now and later. We moderns love one clear reduced meaning; the early Christians loved multiple meanings and layers, especially regarding the relationship of the present and the future. And since our ultimate healing is heaven after death followed by the future resurrection at the end of the age, and since any healing received now is a preview and foretaste of the ultimate restoration, I like the double meaning. Some now, the full dose later. We all die; something will kill us all, but along the way the Lord visits us with help from on high as an encouragement. Emotional and physical healing is one of those gifts.

Remember that James knew all about his brother’s remarkable ministry through reports while it was unfolding outside Nazareth and later on from Peter and the rest. James could speak with many Jesus healed. The evidence was everywhere. There was also a keen sense after Pentecost that the ministry of Jesus now continued in the church because the Spirit had been bestowed. What I means is that James and other apostles had a high batting average when it came to having their prayers for healing and restoration answered; the twelve had an intimacy and confidence in Jesus because of their three years of apprenticeship and their fresh and overwhelming immersion in the Holy Spirit. Our batting average is much lower since we are just beginning in the church to recover our proper role in healing after a long period of skepticism and neglect and leaving everything to science and technology.¹⁶ But there’s no reason to think we can’t improve, and so we keep at it. In my ministry of pastoral care, two of the most common questions I ask are, “Have you seen your doctor about this?” and,

¹⁶ For an accessible history of the rise and fall of the church’s healing ministry, see Francis McNutt, *The Nearly Perfect Crime: How The Church Almost Killed The Ministry Of Healing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen, 2005); the classic remains Morton Kelsey, *Healing and Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005).

“Can I get a team to pray for you?” and the one is never a substitute for the other.¹⁷ God heals through both hands.

But James then adds a layer of sophistication we always have to remember. Most sickness is not sin related, except in the most general sense that all are sinners in a fallen world.¹⁸ But James has something more specific in mind because the willful violations of God’s will we call *sins* do have both physical and emotional effects on people, and none of them are good. It’s not that the illness is God’s direct punishment, it’s just that walking out of sync with God has real consequences because of the way the world is designed. Sexual immorality risks STD’s, abortion, broken hearts, and children without dads; addictions of all varieties steal our health and wealth; bitterness and unforgiveness weaken the immune system; violence and murder and lying turn you into a different kind of person; unbelief cuts you off from life now and later; occult involvement– which I define as seeking spiritual power apart from God– opens you to the direct infestations of evil, to genuine spiritual darkness. And, perhaps worst of all, your beliefs and habits have an effect on your children and their children for several generations.¹⁹ So let’s not minimize the sin problem; it is pervasive and devastating, and we cannot save or fix ourselves.

So James does not say that there is a one-to-one linkage between this specific sin and that specific disease, but he does know that sometimes they’re related, and so healing in these cases must involve forgiveness, thus he adds with a big *if*, “And *if* he has committed sins– which the Lord will bring to mind or that emerge in the pre-prayer interview²⁰– he will be forgiven” by the same Lord who offers the relief of healing, and so this has implications for how the whole church handles our common sin problem. Don’t hide it in pride. You listen to me confess, and I will listen to you confess, and together we will assure each other with a simple formula, “In Jesus’

¹⁷ For our official U.M. statement, see *The U.M. Book of Worship*: 613-615.

¹⁸ See page 3 for an analysis of the possible relationships of sin and sickness.

¹⁹ Exodus 20:5 // Deuteronomy 5:9.

²⁰ In our “A Service of Healing II” in *The Book of Worship* (622) the sick person is addressed by the leader, “As your *sister/brother* in Christ, I ask you now, are you at peace with God, or is there anything in your life that causes you to feel separated from God and less than the full person God calls you to be? Are there anxieties that cause you to feel separated from the peace that God promises”? This is an invitation to confession.

name, you are forgiven. Glory to God. Amen.”²¹

So what happens at the bedside of a person who had not only a sickness problem but a specific sin problem is generalized by James for the whole church as a means of regular spiritual hygiene for all God’s people, verse 16: “Therefore— and this signals an inference or conclusion— confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you (plural!) may be healed.” Not only to the pastor as if he or she was the only one capable, but to *one another*. Husbands and wives to each other (how much healing that would bring!), parents and children to each other (how much love would that bring!), friends to each other, enemies to each other.

All have the need to confess from time to time— to own up before God and another person the exact nature of our wrongs, and all have the authority to announce forgiveness once the confession has been honestly made with a desire to be separated from the sin and its effects. This makes me wonder how much of the physical and mental torment people face is a direct result of our neglect of this mutual means of grace. But in our privatized modern world where image management and looking better than we are is a national pastime, is it any wonder we avoid both the honesty and trust this practice involves? What the early Christians did together because of their love and mutual support, we have relegated to the offices of the therapist and the psychiatrist. AA meetings have their special opening liturgy; everyone gives first name only, then a blunt confession, “My name is John, and I am an alcoholic,” to which the community responds, “Hello, John,” because without that statement healing never begins. What if the church was Sinner Anonymous and our liturgies began, “My name is Phil, and I am a sinner.”

A Great Biblical Example (vv.16b-18)

Because James was now a Messianic Jew immersed in the Book of his people and its stories, he next calls to mind the example of the prophet Elijah as an encouragement to engage in bold, risky prayer. In a time of great national idolatry, Elijah announced a drought, and it happened. He then announced its end, and it happened, a sign that God heard his prayers and gave him instructions as to the sanctions he was to announce. Now weather prayers that God backs is major league stuff, and of this Elijah is an example, but James qualifies this amazing example with two introductory

²¹ This formula of absolution is found in the *U.M. Hymnal* (1989): 8 and is spoken by the laity to their pastors who first absolve them in our liturgy, so the effect is mutual.

phrases, “The prayer of a righteous man or woman have great power in its effects,” meaning that all who are rightly related to God through trust in Jesus are qualified to pray for small and big stuff as the Lord directs; prayer is just too important to be left to the professionals, so pray. We are lifted up into the same relationship Elijah had with God, which is trust and obedience. But in the second phrase he– in effect– brings Elijah down to our level by saying “Elijah was a man *of like nature* with ourselves.” Elijah was just like us, so pray. God uses prayer to shape the lives of people and the destiny of nations, so pray. Prayer is simply our greatest unused resource, so come pray before worship and visit us for prayer meeting on a Thursday evening.

Prayer And The Practices Of Love (vv.19-20).

I asked myself this week, “What is the purpose of all this communication with God?” In suffering and in joy and in illness and in sin and to stop and start the rains if necessary. The answer is simple, “To increase in us the love of God and neighbor.” Love God with all we are, and one another out of the overflow. That’s what we were made for, to love in order to understand and to understand in order to love.

James’ final paragraph begins *My brothers and sisters*; it s addressed to those present but it concerns those who are absent, and it is an encouragement to me that this is not a new problem but an old one, as old as the church itself. People lose their moorings and drift. People lose their way and stumble. People get offended and discouraged and involved in all sorts of destructive things, and if we don’t pay attention to those who used to be here and are now not, guess what? They soon become invisible and forgotten; some of them revert to the vast pool of the lost and unconverted, what we used to call *the backslidden*, which is a vivid image of going the wrong direction on a slippery slope. Someone has to go get them in 1's and 2's, and the person to do that is you! Prayer leads to actions of costly love because in prayer we discover God’s heart. Who do you miss? Who should you pray for, then go to their home, hear their story and offer the encouragement that as long as they are absent, we are the weaker for it? You can only see such truths through prayer.

CONCLUSION

“As a members of Main Street UMC, will you faithfully participate in our ministries *by your prayers....*” Maybe now you understand why in the five disciplines of faithful church membership, prayer is first. And if you need help making a good beginning, I will be glad to help you.
