

## “Well-Oiled Prayers”

*Series: This is where the healing begins, part 1*

*James 5:13-20*

Good morning! It is a good day to be together in God’s house. There are many other places you could be right now, but you’ve chosen to be here, in person or online. I want to thank you; it was a good choice. And I want to do my best to honor the decision you made, so that together, we can all honor and glorify God. You are in the right place today, and you are surrounded by people who care deeply about you.

Would you please pray with me?

“Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that, as the Scriptures are read and your Word proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.” (Book of Worship, p.34)

I want to start by thanking those of you who have been hosting and attending the listen sessions for me. It is exciting to hear all of your stories, how you came to this church, and to hear your hopes and dreams, especially in the ways you want to reach out to others. It’s easy to forget in a historic church like this, but the truth is, we were all new once. Someone had to introduce us to Christ and to this congregation. Many of you said, the number one thing that brought you here is a relationship, and it’s the reason you’ve stayed. You have found friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, who care about you and your family.

In all of the words you have spoken to me lately, there is on common thread that connects them. Sometimes it’s obvious, sometimes it’s assumed and more subtle. Here is it: everything that connects us in this church is bound together by prayer.

This morning I would like us to consider how healing is linked to prayer. Have you ever prayed for someone? What for? (*Solicit responses.*) I find it is quite an honor when someone asks me to pray for them. Maybe you agree, or maybe you are intimidated? Sometimes, I even feel guilty, because I promised to pray for someone, and I forgot until much later. The truth is, even for Christians, prayer can be intimidating and even discouraging. My hope today is that God’s Word will renew our commitment to prayer and healing.

We often pray in response to a painful or traumatic event. The fact of the matter is, we have trouble in this life. Have you ever wondered why God allows us to have trouble? I once had a conversation with a man on this very topic. He was convinced that God should not allow the trouble we see in this world. I have a different view. I believe God allows pain and suffering because God has given us the freedom of choice. Pain and sin would not exist if we could not choose. Then again, neither would real love exist without freedom.

The important truth we teach in the church is this: despite their prevalence, pain and suffering are not the end. Yes, God allows pain, however, God wants us to experience restoration. What we do and how we pray when we are in trouble matters greatly. Others are watching our reactions very closely.

Suffering, healing, and prayer are intertwined, and God’s Word tells us. Specifically, I want us to consider James chapter five this morning.

The recipients of this letter in the early church were experiencing trouble. They were facing trials. They were dealing with favoritism and prejudice. They were struggling with immature Christians who claimed to believe in Jesus Christ but did not have the actions to back it up. If any of this sounds familiar, it is

because these issues still trouble the church today. They had lost focus on their purpose. And maybe they had forgotten to pray.

The good news is, the book of James reads somewhat like a prescription. You might take antibiotics to stave off a possible infection, even if you think you are well. We wear masks because it helps keep us safe. A similar rule applies to this scripture. Following these commands will keep us spiritually healthy.

Starting in verse 13, James gives us great, straightforward advice: “If anyone is in trouble, they should pray.” A friend of mine used to say, “When the going gets tough, the tough start praying.” And surely the next line makes sense: “If anyone is happy, they should sing.” That pretty much describes me in a nutshell. At any given moment, I might break into “Because I’m happy....”

So far, we’re tracking James. Then we hit verse 14. “If someone is sick, the church should pray for them.” This is huge. Prayer should be our first response to pain and suffering in the world, our immediate reaction. Again, I think most of you will agree, in spirit. Yet we run up against resistance. First of all, God is not a vending machine. We don’t pray, and our answers pop out of a slot. Listen, I believe prayer works. I believe God heals and restores. What I don’t believe is that God can be manipulated by our prayers. I have prayed for miraculous healing. I also pray that God will work good from any situation, no matter how terrible. That to me defines my faith.

If God can’t be manipulated, then what’s the point of praying? Are our prayers even working? Yes. A few years ago, I had emergency surgery on my hand. While I was lying on the surgery table, I knew the church was praying for me. That was an unbelievable comfort to me. I felt a connection to the church through the Holy Spirit. I knew the healing was beginning. I have had countless

conversations with people who received very disappointing news; every time, we prayed. I'm telling you, prayer does work. Among many things, it reminds us that we are not alone.

James says that the prophet Elijah was a man who prayed. His prayers were answered, dramatically. In Mark 9:29, Jesus told the disciples that healing could not be accomplished without prayer. James says in verse 16, “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” We must believe that. We need to pray.

Are you all still with me? Good! Because there's more.

Look again at verses 15-16. “And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” (NIV)

Prayer is the cure to worry and anxiety. James knows what any psychiatrist will tell you: many of our illnesses are related to anxiety. And nothing creates more anxiety in a person than a broken relationship. For a broken relationship to be made whole, one person must have the audacity stand up and say, “I'm sorry. Please forgive me.” This is where the true healing begins. James commands us to not just pray for each other, but also to confess our sins to each other. And the church's job is to create a safe place where that can happen. When we do that, and pray together, we will know true healing.

My bible commentary says, “Mutual correction and exhortation are expressions of love for your neighbor.” (Harper Collins, p1167). Part of the reason that the Church is in decline is because we have become really good at hiding the problems we have with each other rather than confessing them and

talking to one another openly and with love and respect. Think about it: What is gossip? Simply the misdirected desire to heal a relationship. Instead of going to the person directly, we gossip about them. Instead of praying for them, we harbor a grudge. This eats away at us and makes us physically ill.

I don't want any of us to be ill, do you? This church is full of people who like each other. I daresay we love each other. But our lives are not simply bound by mutual affection, they are bound by our shared relationship with God. Any brokenness, whether physical or spiritual, that comes between us has the potential to break our relationship with each other and with God, making us sick. That's why we need confession with prayer. We can't just pray for each other and say, "That's good! Let's go eat our potluck now." No. We need to confess so that our whole community can be healed and restored. That is the main reason our communion liturgy has both the prayer of confession and an opportunity to pass the peace.

Finally, our prayers need to be "Well-Oiled." It's a double meaning. My family toured Quincy Mine last weekend: to keep the engines on the shaft elevator running, guys had to keep hundreds of oil containers constantly filled. Parts become squeaky from disuse. I don't want our prayers to be squeaky. My fervent hope is that our church would be known as a church that prays. Jesus said, "My house will be called a house of prayer." (Matthew 21:13) The disciples knew that prayer was so important they asked Jesus how to pray. (Luke 11:1) We need to be praying so often that it is as natural as eating or walking. Take a breath. Inhale. Exhale. As you inhale, say "Dear Jesus," and as you breathe out, "have mercy on us and heal us." We need to spend time on our knees beside our beds, at the prayer rail, in our cars. Whenever and wherever. Use every moment

to thank God for all we have been given, and intercede for the people everywhere. Make it your goal to ask someone every day, “How can I pray for you?”

There is another meaning to “well-oiled prayers.” Have you heard the phrase, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease”? When you pray, don’t give up. Our prayers need to be persistent. They need to be specific: Name and Need. Offer them up to God constantly. “Dear God, please give our pastor a brain, because apparently his is defective.” OK, I’m kidding. How about, “Dear God, please give me a new heart.” “Dear God, help me forgive my enemy.” “Dear God, help me forgive my parents. My brother. My sister. My ex-spouse.”

Prayer is critical for a healthy church. That’s why I am serious when I promise to give you a dollar if you have to remind me to pray at any meeting or event. If you read your bulletin online or got one at the door, you will also notice that I am starting a weekly prayer group, September 1<sup>st</sup>, here at Grace, Tuesday mornings at 10am. I have also created a separate email group for prayer requests here at our church. If you would like to be on it, please send me an email. You might want to check your spam folders – about half of the messages we send from the church office are never opened.

Prayer must be our first priority. We need to pray for one another. We all know how good it feels to have someone pray for us. So I’m going to take a risk today with the “Prayers of the People.” Look around you: take note of who is sitting near you. This is your opportunity to pray for them, literally right now, out loud, preferably. This might seem a little chaotic and awkward at first; that’s OK. I fear some of us are out of practice. That’s fine. Let’s do this, together. Let’s make our prayers as natural as breathing.

(Time for corporate prayers.)

Memory verse:

James 5:16 “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”

Reflection Questions:

1. How do you react when someone asks you to pray for them? Are you honored, self-conscious, or something else?
2. How is illness of the soul connected to illness of the body?
3. Why is it important that members of the church be able to confess to each other? What practices encourage people to do that?
4. How does God use the church to restore people back to the wholeness?
5. Who needs your prayers this week?