

Let's take up the challenge to "Pray at all times"...

Under the following headings, try writing your prayers for the day letting James' teaching guide you.

CATEGORIES FOR DAILY PRAYER:

Prayers of honest repentance (power to change my ways)

Prayers for mercy and healing (relationships and physical issues)

Prayers of praise for the blessings you have received in life

Prayers for the challenges and "troubles" of the week ahead



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bible study notes

study #6

the letter of james

James 5:7-20 Prayer in all circumstances

Phil 4:6

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

1 Tim 2:1

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone--

Matt 6:11

Give us today our daily bread.

Acts 16:25

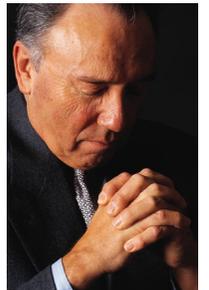
About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

Eph 6:18

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

1Thes 5:17-18

pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.



JAMES 5

⁷ Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸ You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. ⁹ Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

¹⁰ Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

¹² Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple "Yes" or "No." Otherwise you will be condemned.

¹³ Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make them well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

¹⁷ Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

¹⁹ My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring them back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the way of error will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Misconceptions of prayer

In the movie *National Lampoons Christmas Vacation* Aunt Bethany is asked to pray. She actually recites the American pledge of allegiance! I wonder if asked to pray, what most Australians would come up with?



could say that James, the brother of Jesus, had a *Top Five* for the situations in which we should pray:

NUMBER 5 situation in which we need prayer is found in vss 19-20
James says we need prayer when we are found to be living in
ERROR AND NEED TO CHANGE OUR WAYS.

NUMBER 4 is found in vss 16,19 & 20
He says we should pray when we need FORGIVENESS in order
to be healed.

NUMBER 3 situation in which we should put prayer as a priority is in
vss 14 & 15
He says we should seek prayer when we are PHYSICALLY SICK.

NUMBER 2 situation where praying is called for is in v 13
James says we should direct our praise to God in prayer when
we have JOYFUL HEARTS

And finally, **NUMBER 1** in James' Top Five situations in chapter 5
where we should turn to prayer is found in v 13 also,
He says we should pray whenever we are facing ANY TIMES
OF TROUBLE

Put another way, if we were to ask James if there is any situation in life in which prayer is not a priority- he would say a definite "NO".

- Jesus' own teaching in the Lord's Prayer assumed a daily dependence on God in all situations (Matt. 6:11)
- The Apostle Paul not only prayed continually in all manner of situations, he urged Christians to do the same (Acts 16:25; 1 Tim. 2:1; Phil. 4:6; Eph. 6:18; 1 Thess. 5:17, 18) In 1Thes 5:17-18, Paul says: "pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

Tony Compolo tells a story about being in a church in Oregon USA where he was asked to pray for a man who had cancer. Compolo prayed boldly for the man's healing. That next week he got a telephone call from the man's wife. She said, "You prayed for my husband. He had cancer." Compolo thought when he heard her use the past tense verb that his cancer had been eradicated! But before he could think much about it she said, "He died." Compolo felt terrible.

But she continued, "Don't feel bad. When he came into that church that Sunday he was filled with anger. He knew he was going to be dead in a short period of time, and he hated God. He was 58 years old, and he wanted to see his children and grandchildren grow up. He was angry that this all-powerful God didn't take away his sickness and heal him. He would lie in bed and curse God. The more his anger grew towards God, the more miserable he was to everybody around him. It was an awful thing to be in his presence.

The lady told Compolo, "After you prayed for him, a peace had come over him and a joy had come into him. Tony, the last three days have been the best days of our lives. We've sung. We've laughed. We've read Scripture. We prayed. Oh, they've been wonderful days. And I called to thank you for laying your hands on him and praying for healing."

And then she said something incredibly profound. She said, "He wasn't cured, but he was healed." (Tony Campolo, "Year of Jubilee," *Preaching Today*)

When we look at James chapter 5 overall, healing has a community dynamic. God wants a prayerful, patient people who will persevere in Christian character under pressure. The cult movie called "High Fidelity" is about a record shop owner who rates everything in life in a series of *Top Five* lists like the singles charts of the music industry. With this in mind we

How do you view prayer, and what place does prayer have in your daily life?

- Is prayer something you consider as an agent of change and effect in life?
- Is it something you turn to only on occasions where things get difficult: a last resort?
- Is prayer something of a powerless ritual?
- Is prayer a means of communicating with God?
- Do you pray for others when they are in need? Do you pray for your own needs too?



A bus driver and a minister were standing in line to get into heaven. The bus driver approached the gate and St. Peter said, "Welcome, I understand you were a bus driver. Since I'm in charge of housing, I believe I have found the perfect place for you. See that mansion over the hilltop? It's yours. The minister heard all this and began to stand a little taller. He said to himself, "If a bus driver got a place like that, just think what I'll get." The minister approached the gate and St. Peter said, "Welcome, I understand you were a minister. See that tent in the valley?" St. Peter had hardly gotten the words out of his mouth when the shocked minister said, "I was a minister, I preached the gospel, I helped teach people about God. Why does that bus driver get a mansion, and I get a tent?" With sadness St. Peter responded, "Well, it seems when you preached, people slept. When the bus driver drove, people prayed."...



Do you think that people most often pray in times of emergency and not at other times? Perhaps you know the film "O brother where art thou" loosely based on Homer's Odyssey. George Clooney's character Everett and his friends are about to be hung in one scene and he breaks into a fervent prayer asking for forgiveness and deliverance. But after he is delivered, he returns to his religious skepticism. Do you know any people like this?

James is someone who believes prayer is a priority, not a passenger. James covers a whole range of situations in which we should pray or seek prayer.

1. The Prayer of Distress & Delight vs. 13

13 *Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.*

James used a Greek word we translate as “trouble” to mean all kinds of afflictions and trials people can face. In particular, verses 1-6 of James 5 revealed that some wealthy Christians had caused suffering for others in the Christian community by the selfish misuse of their riches. “Trouble” for many early church Christians was often a very physical experience with little material comfort or networks of opportunity. In many cases, the suffering caused led Christians to complain that the return of Jesus Christ was taking too long, or to turn on each other in grumbling and in-fighting. James deals with these matters in verses 1-11.

READ 5:1-11

In the face of all manner of difficulties, James teaches that instead of escapism, anxiety, or power struggles, **God’s priority plan for Christians is prayer and patience to persevere with all our Christian character in tact.**

According to verses 7-12, evidence in creation and the testimony of the saints both tell us the same lesson...

The Farmer (vs. 7) - Those who want a quick escape from trouble only have to look at a farmer who has to wait patiently for good crops in a generous season to learn that equally **the Christian must not expect instantaneous outs from God**, but should expect that God will give sustaining power to stand firm, no matter what.



The example of Job (vs. 11)- Equally, he says, we should look to past heroes of suffering, like the prophets such as Jeremiah, whose stories were well known. But to hammer the point home, James cites the penultimate of innocent sufferers: the Old Testament figure, Job. Job was the model of

- What is of importance to James is that a **“righteous” person (end of vs. 16).** **What does James mean?** James means here a person who is forgiven and trusting in Christ for their right standing before God- someone who is trusting in the God to raise the sick person. The focus of James 5 is on **God’s competence** to raise the sick person, not on our technique, nor on our giftedness.
- James is less interested in the technicalities of the prayer than he is in having forgiven disciples actually praying for those who are sick and believing that God can heal. Any Christian who is in the right with God could pray this prayer for you.
- Many congregations have a pastoral care ministry that is suitably accountable to the church and suitably available to others so that anyone can call and have a “righteous” person come and pray a powerful and effective prayer.

Q. Have you ever received prayers for healing? How did things work out? How did the experience compare to what you read in this text?

Summary Comments

In our society we are more likely to ignore the opportunity to call someone to pray for God’s help. One of the greatest reasons people don’t call for prayer is that people are **disappointed by the results.**

An obstacle and disincentive for us to ask for prayer nowadays is our misunderstanding of what healing really is about. James, on the other hand, is always looking to more than physical healing- he is about the healing of the community and its relationships as we see in the remainder of chapter 5.

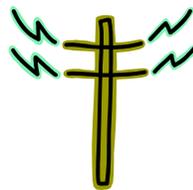
James doesn’t suggest sickness is always the result of sin, but he **does make it clear that sin can create or exacerbate sickness** and disorder in the community. We need to realize that healing is more than mere physical recovery, and that prayer is powerful to change and transform a life.

Today's "elders" could be ordained pastors, or bishops or the like, but they could also be any other Christian with some suitable accountability in the congregation.

- **The anointing with Oil (vs. 14)**- Probably refers to common olive oil used medicinally at the time. James avoids using a word for "anoint" that would point to a ritual or religious act. Instead he just says to smear or daub the oil. What's more, the structure of the Greek text suggests that the **prayer is the primary action** and the oil is a secondary matter.



Church history has been hung up on finding the right technique for prayer. Three ministers were talking about prayer in general and the appropriate and effective positions for prayer. As they were talking, a telephone repairman was working on the phone system in the background. One minister shared that he felt the key was in the hands. He always held his hands together and pointed them upward as a form of symbolic worship. The second suggested that real prayer was conducted on your knees. The third suggested that they both had it wrong--the only position worth its salt was to pray while stretched out flat on your face. By this time the cable guy couldn't stay out of the conversation any longer. He interjected, "I found that the most powerful prayer I ever made was while I was dangling upside down by my heels from a power pole, suspended forty feet above the ground." ...



- James is neither focused on the office, the office bearer, the tools or the technique of prayers for healing.
- There is no mention of a special gift of the Holy Spirit being required, though such a gift would no doubt be welcomed according to teaching in 1 Corinthians 12.
- There is no instruction for laying on of hands, though this may be pastorally helpful.

patience and perseverance under pressure. His lesson reminds us that no matter how bleak the horizon, God is the one who eventually turns our troubles to his glory, and in the meantime gives mercy and compassion.



James calls the church to pray for God's help as a priority in times of trouble. We should pray to be people who demonstrate restraint, love and care to others despite our own circumstances.

A young boy went to the local store with his mother. The shop owner, a kindly man, passed him a large jar of lollies and invited him to help himself to a handful. Quite out of character, the boy held back and didn't put his hand in the jar. So the shop owner pulled out a handful for him. When outside, the boy's mother asked why he had suddenly been so shy and wouldn't take a handful of lollies when offered. The boy replied, "Because his hand is much bigger than mine!" The boy's focus was on how much he could get for himself, and too many times, prayer is hijacked with a shopping list. It's all too often an opportunity for self-benefit and disguised as an opportunity to commune with God. Being bred to be consumers in this country, we are in danger of too often seeing prayer as a retail experience....

It's sadly true that many people pray little, pray poorly or don't pray at all. Some have lost faith that God listens, others don't know enough about prayer, and others thought they value prayer, find little time to pray in a busy lifestyle. As a result our lives are more obviously dependent on our own competencies than on God's help.



In contrast, the great preacher and church leader of the 19th century, J.C. Ryle once said, "My work is getting busier, so I must find more time to pray." Bill Hybels wrote: "For many years I knew more about prayer than I ever practiced. Then I did something absolutely radical. I prayed."

While James calls us to prayers in times of distress he also calls us to **prayers of delight** in verse 13. Lest we treat prayer like a retail exercise or a service industry for our needs, James says, those who are **happy should also pray**.

When was the last time you prayed prayers of joy and thanks to God? What was the occasion?

Note that James is using a word for happy here which is not about the absence of trouble. **Rather it's when we meet someone who is under pressure but has not succumbed to escapism or complaint or in-fighting that the real miracle is on show.**



The second half of verse 13 is not the opposite of trouble, but thanksgiving for the strength God gives in such a time of trouble.

James says, our prayer should be like a “psalm of praise and thanks”, such is the Greek word he chooses here. **The Christian should pray prayers of distress *and* delight.**

2. The Prayer of Healing and Help vss. 14, 15

The second of these situations of prayer is more specific. James calls us to the **prayer for healing** and help in verses 14 and 15.

14 Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make them well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.

The first priority when sickness strikes is to use any number of medical facilities available to us. In ancient times, no such luxury could be offered. Anyone with olive oil or fortified wine could qualify for a St. John's first aid certificate back then! Not much else was available for medicinal purposes. In such a world, it made sense to pray and pray fervently when faced with physical sickness.

James is not teaching us to reject medical help. Instead, James may be painting a picture of someone chronically ill, for whom medical help is not enough. The same Greek word for “sick” in verse 14 is used of those close to death in other parts of the New Testament. For example:

- The **royal official's son** in John 4:46, 47
- **Lazarus** (John 11:1-3,6), **Dorcus** (Acts 9:37) both of whom died from their conditions
- And **Epaphroditus** (Phil. 2:26, 27) who was near death.

James seems to be referring to people with a serious illness. If they are bed-ridden, the reference to the Lord “raising” the sick person up in verse 15, and the reference to the elders praying “over” the patient make perfect sense.

What is clear is that James seems convinced that prayer in the name of the Lord Jesus will bring healing to those who seek prayer in this situation.

These are the only prescriptive words about prayers for healing in the New Testament. The church down the ages has been keen to discover the exact technique required to make the prayers for healing effective. However, translating these commands lock stock and barrel to our world today can be tricky:

- **Who are the “elders” of the church today?**
- **What sort of oil should we use? What amount?**
- **What constitutes praying in the name of the Lord?**
- **Should there be laying on of hands?**

How should people pray in order to make the prayer effective?

- **The Elders (vs. 14)-** James mentions “elders”. The “elders” of the New Testament are described as those who perform differing tasks and responsibilities in different orders in different churches- there isn't a neatly packaged definition to make it clear whether today's “elder” should be an ordained person or lay person, bishop or gifted healer. The only common ground of all of the examples is the **spiritual maturity and right standing with God that is to be their mark.**