

Sermon Series: P.E.A.C.E. the goal of godly care

#5 Skills for caring James 5:13-16

The date 9 November 1989 is etched in history as the day the Berlin Wall came down. But it's curious to discover that one month earlier, a prayer meeting took place that many believe contributed to the fall of the Wall.



Ignoring death threats and huge numbers of armed police, thousands of Christians gathered at St Nicholas Church in the East German city of Leipzig to pray for peace. Years of similar weekly prayer meetings led to this moment when an estimated crowd of 70,000 marched the streets - the largest impromptu demonstration ever in East Germany. The rest, as they say, is history.



Prayer as Pastoral Care

The Bible tells us prayers of intercession are not meant just for extraordinary moments in history. The P of our P.E.A.C.E. acrostic about pastoral care points to prayer for ordinary battles and challenges of everyday life. While we've focussed a lot on the importance of practical and sacrificial love, we must not forget the privilege of commending each other to God in prayer, as Jesus called us to do, and exemplified in his own actions.

Our Bible reading from James chapter 5¹ mentions prayer seven times,² and gives us three important lessons.

The ancient historian, Eusebius, claimed that the writer of this Epistle had knees that "grew hard like a camel's knees because of his constant worship of God, kneeling and asking forgiveness for the people." James, then, is a good teacher to consult about prayer as an ordinary act of everyday care for each other.

1. Prayer is for all seasons (James 5:13-16)

Firstly, he tells us, prayer is for all seasons. As we zoom out on verse 13 – 16 James calls for prayer in great variety of situations.

- In verse 13 it those who are suffering any form of trial or trouble,

¹ After encouraging Christians facing trials and troubles to endure their sufferings patiently as they wait on Christ's return (Jam 5:7-12), now James turns to practical prayer instructions.

² Nouns and verbs, all in imperative sentences in the Greek.

- In verses 14-15, it's those who are **sick** who should call mature Christians in to help their lives and their faith,
- In verse 16, prayer helps anyone who needs **forgiveness** and **restoration**.

When should Christians pray? Just as the apostle Paul taught,³ so James said, Christians should pray to God for each other in **any** and **all circumstances**; in **all seasons of life**, with enduring, **persistent, fervent faith in God**.

2. When You're Troubled, Pray Continually (James 5:13)

Secondly, as we zoom in on vs. 13, James says, **when troubles come, pray continually**. "Is anyone among you **troubled**? Keep on praying" (James 5:13a). The Greek word translated as "trouble" or "suffering" here means **any** or **all** types of trials and difficulties. Prayer helps us connect with God in our trials.

James **didn't** need to teach his first readers **how** to pray, or even **what** to pray (his mostly Jewish readers infused their own prayer traditions with the words and example Jesus gave them). Instead, they **needed encouragement** to **persevere** in prayer, not to think God had gone missing.

- Note that James **expected** Christians to experience joys **and** sorrows; ups **and** downs.⁴ Suffering may be experienced by even the most faithful, prayerful Christian.⁵
- James also did **not expect immediate results** from prayers. The Greek in vs. 13 means, "keep on praying".⁶ We should pray for strength and grace to **persevere**, believing God is **for us**.⁷ As Mariam Kamell puts it, "We

³ 1 Thess 5:17

⁴ Some teach falsely that spirit filled Christians should never be depressed troubled – if only they had more faith. James expects, and experienced trials and troubles, even as man of faith.

⁵ Paul sought for God to remove his "thorn in the flesh," (2 Cor 12:7-10, cf. Gal 4:13-15) but God told Paul no, because the "thorn" had a greater purpose—to make him weak so he could experience God's empowering grace. Paul could not heal Timothy or Trophimus, who both suffered long. Hebrews 9:27 says every person is appointed to die and then experience the judgment. If it was always God's will for people to be healed, some would never die. It is only when God's kingdom fully comes at the resurrection when Christ returns, that we will have perfect health, including new bodies, no sickness, and no death (Rev 21:4).

⁶ The Greek is present tense – "...keep on praying." Continual prayer or regular, on-going prayer is needed when facing trials. The Lord's Prayer assumes a daily dependence on God in all situations (Matt. 6:11). The Apostle Paul prayed continually in all manner of situations and 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, saying, "pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

⁷ James 1:5

should pray in **presumption of Gods character** (Jas 1:5-7) but not in **presumption of Gods answer.**⁸

- Lastly, James did not suggest that prayer is a **substitute** for medicine, therapy, rest, or help from others. Rather, it is a natural partner to other acts of care. James' first readers were **giving up on** praying in their trials. He called them to bring **all God's resources to any troubles we face.**

When you're seeking to help someone under stress, is prayer part of your first response? Someone once said, "We should care as though it all depends on us [and] **pray as though it all depends on God.**"

3. **When you're laid low, seek prayer** (James 5:14-16)

The **third lesson** on prayer in James chapter 5 is **when you're laid low, you should seek prayer from people with strong faith.** He writes in verses 14-15, "Is anyone among you ill? ...summon the elders of the church, and ...receive prayer and anointing with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick and the Lord will raise them up—and if they have committed sins, they will be forgiven" (5:14-15).

Why would anyone need to call "elders" to pray for them? Some were too sick to exercise their own faith. They needed others with strong faith to step up. Some of the details in verses 14 and 16 brings this out with more clarity:

- **Without strength**⁹ means literally, "weak" and "lying in their sick beds"¹⁰
- **"Elders of the church"**¹¹ in verse 14 referred to people with mature and tested faith, not professional ministers, or official bishops.
- The **"anointing with oil"** reference would not have surprised his original readers. Olive oil was commonly used as a **"medicinal"** aid and sometimes as a spiritual and ceremonial symbol. It helped connect God

⁸ We should hold here to the principle learned in chapter 4 of praying, "if the Lord wills".

⁹ It is used to refer to physical sickness and, at times, to refer to "spiritual, ethical, emotional, or moral weakness." In verse 14, most commentators believe "ill" refers to physical sickness.

¹⁰ In Elijah's case, the story includes the "raising up" of a young boy from being by all accounts "dead"

¹¹ No professional or "ordained" pastors existed with common official roles and authority at the time. The emphasis here is on strength of faith in God for those who have none.

and healing, but the emphasis was on God, not on the anointing itself, or the one doing it.¹²

- In verse 15 James assumes some may need **“forgiveness from sins”**. Note he says **“if”** sins are committed. There’s **no necessary connection** between sin and sickness. But **if** a person **is** suffering from guilt or shame that’s part of their illness, forgiveness through Christ leads to wellness.¹³
- Lastly, note in verse 16 **that any Christian** can pray **for any other** to be forgiven by God. No professionals or officials were a necessity. Instead, Christians with tried and tested **mature faith** can be helpful.¹⁴

Here then are **three lessons** from James 5 on **prayer as Christian care** that we can take into our pastoral care for one another. James says:

1. Pray for each other in **all situations**,
2. Pray with **enduring faith** when you face all sorts of trials, and
3. When you’re really laid low, seek the **prayers of faithful** friends.¹⁵

Conclusion

The title for this sermon – Skills for Caring – is quite misleading. Praying for others is an essential element of Christian caregiving, but Jesus taught prayer as a simple act of trusting in God and was brief on detail.¹⁶ Those faithful intercessors in the big events of history, like the fall of the wall, would not dare claim any merit or skill of their own brought it down. Instead they praised and thanked God. In our ordinary everyday prayers for one another, we recognise that we may be **the caregivers**, but **God is the ultimate cure-giver**.¹⁷

Now it’s over to you and me, **to pray**, to love, and to care.

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¹² The Roman Catholic doctrine of “extreme unction” for the dying may have diverted attention from benefits of anointing with oil in other circumstances. In the Greek text, prayer with mature faith is the primary concern, oil is a secondary matter, and perhaps not essential to the instruction, but cultural. Opinions abound!

¹³ Luke 5:22-24

¹⁴ See 1 John 9 – 2:2 for confidence in the forgiveness of God through Christ

¹⁵ Galatians 6:2, Paul said, “Carry one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

¹⁶ E.g., Luke 11:1-4

¹⁷ Heb. 4:16

EXTRA TEACHING from James chapter 5

4. Have faith in God

James also gives brief lesson from the Old Testament about what faithful, enduring prayer looks like. He writes in verses 16-18:

“The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. 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.

If you have time, read **1 Kings** chapters 17-19 and you’ll see that Elijah the prophet was **just like you and me**. He too **struggled with feelings of doubt and fear and had times of suffering and insecurity**.

The Greek word used “like us” is *homoioopathes*, which means “similarly affected” – subject to like passions. Elijah was not some super saint that never had any problems. Yes, Elijah saw God do some amazing miracles through him. However, it is important to remember that Elijah possessed our limitations. He was prone to all the frailties of human nature that we are. Elijah was far from perfect. For example:

- i. He was **Scared** – he ran for his life

I find it amazing that the man who had just called fire down from heaven and defeated 850 false prophets then ran away in fear because of Queen Jezebel came after him.

- ii. He was **Selfish** – he left his servant

Elijah left his servant in Beersheba. You do not get the sense from this passage that this was planned, or that this was something the Elijah felt was in the best interest of his servant. He abandoned him there to fend for himself as he ran away.

- iii. He was **Secluded** – he was alone and exhausted

Elijah ran into the desert when in trouble. There seems to be no real direction in his retreat, he for his life. He found himself in a place desolate, dry and desperate.

iv. He was **Spent** – he wanted his life to end

Elijah had given up. He had reached the end of his rope and wanted to die.

v. He was filled with **Self-pity** – he felt he was the only one left. Elijah's focus was on himself. He felt alienated and alone.

Elijah resembled the same human frailty we see in ourselves. One of the reasons we often do not pray boldly and persistently is that we do not really feel like powerful people. We fail to ask God to do the impossible because we figure that we are unworthy to make such a request.

James' points to Elijah because he was also unlike **you and me**. Despite all his frailty, he **persevered in praying** over a **long period** through many **lean years**, always believing in God's power to **restore** Israel.

He served to bring the wandering people of God back to trust and devotion to Yahweh. He prayed boldly for change and for healing. He did so with great faith in the God he served - not in faith itself, nor in his own prophet status.

Witness the faith Elijah had in his heart for God's power and grace:

'When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, and when they pray towards this place and give praise to your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel. Teach them the right way to live and send rain on the land you gave your people for an inheritance (1 Kings 8:35-36).

We too, then, are encouraged to approach God **persistently** in prayer during lean times, showing that we trust the God who provides, and draw on God's strength for patient endurance till a new season comes.

Four important lessons about prayer

1. Prayer is for all seasons of life
2. When in trouble, pray continually
3. When you're laid low, call others to pray, and
4. When you pray, keep trusting, drawing on God's strength for patience.