

James 5:13-20

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 April 2016

Preacher: Stuart Cashman

[0 : 00] Well, as you know the old saying, when the going gets tough, what does the tough do? Get going. That's right. The only problem is, what if you're not tough? When the going gets tough, the rest of us, what do we do? We get grumbling, we get running for cover, we get burying our heads in the sand like ostriches, we get working, planning solutions, we do lots of things anyway, I don't know which of those is your general response.

Well, when the going got tough for the people James was writing to, they got grumbling, they got moaning. Chapter 1 verse 13, they got grumbling against God. Chapter 5, they were grumbling against one another. That's what we do, isn't it? Those kind of things.

Of course, the problem with the people James was writing to is that they were double-minded people. We read that earlier, chapter 1 verse 8. Their double-mindedness was seen in they would pray but not really expect an answer.

Or chapter 4 verse 8. Their double-mindedness was seen in actually they were arguing with each other because they were really full of worldly ambition. They wanted what the world had to offer rather than wanting what God had to offer.

And then from the rest of chapter 4 through chapter 5, we see that their double-mindedness was seen in the way they viewed the world just like their unbelieving secular neighbours would.

[1 : 23] So for the wealthy, that meant they were planning to make money, planning their travels as if God was irrelevant to the equation. To those who were poor and oppressed, it meant they were grumbling about their oppressors rather than waiting patiently for that great day when the Lord Jesus will come back and right every wrong.

As we read through this letter of James, we find constantly that his readers were wavering between two opinions. They were limping on in their Christian lives. Wavering between two opinions.

On Sunday, they professed faith wholeheartedly. Many of them felt they were good enough to be teachers. And yet for the rest of the week, well, they'd live like the rest of the population.

But if we're honest with ourselves, how many of us are like James' readers? How many of us can behave in double-minded ways?

We love the Lord on a Sunday. We can sing greatest by faithfulness. But on Tuesday morning when work is tough, we can so easily live like God isn't faithful, can't we?

[2 : 29] It's so easy. Double-mindedness is a temptation, if not a default setting for many of us. And so we need the medicine that James prescribes.

And that medicine, in a sense, is summed up back in chapter 1, verse 17. We need to remember God's character. Chapter 1, verse 17. See, James is saying, this is the medicine you need to remember.

Our unchanging God who gives good gifts. He's given us the ultimate good gift. Of bringing us to life through the word of truth, through the gospel. So we can be his.

He's done this single-mindedly for us, so we should single-mindedly confess our faith in him and pursue him. And as he closes this letter, he wants us to show how that single-minded response to God is seen both in our response to the circumstances in our lives, and in our response to other people.

We'll sum it up with two little phrases. Pray in any weather, and pursue any wanderer. So first of all, pray in any weather. Verses 13 to 18. Here's what he says in verse 13.

[3 : 53] Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call the elders of the church to pray. Pray in any weather, James says.

Pray in any weather. When you're suffering. We often pray when we're suffering, don't we? When we know we need help. We pray for people to get jobs. We pray for people to get well. And it's clearly not wrong to pray for those things. Most of what James says in these verses is about praying for the sick. But is that all we're to pray for? Well, James has given us a clue back in chapter 1, hasn't he, of what else we can pray for.

He says, count it pure joy when you make trials of various kinds. Now that is impossible naturally, isn't it? Yet James gives us the reason.

He tells us these trials produce steadfastness. Test our faith for reducing steadfastness. That steadfastness has its full effect. That it may be perfect, lacking nothing.

[4 : 53] So in trials we can pray that God will help us to be steadfast. That he will keep us. We can pray in chapter 1, verse 5 for wisdom. That doesn't mean wisdom so we understand our trial.

But wisdom so we can see life from God's perspective. So we can fear him and honour him in our lives. These are things we can pray for in the midst of suffering.

Pray for wisdom. Pray for steadfastness. Pray that by God's grace we'll count them trials as joy.

Pray for endurance. Pray the Lord will make us complete.

Are these things we're praying for ourselves when life is hard? James encourages us to be careful.

So pray when suffering. But also pray when happy. Is anyone cheerful?

Let him sing praise. I don't know about you, but it's so easy, isn't it? To stop praying when things go well. We pray for months for a job. The job comes.

[5 : 51] And within a few weeks we're complaining about the job not being good enough. We're just forgetting that God has given it to us. Sing when you're cheerful, James says. Because all good gifts come from God.

As one person once said to me, gratitude is the first emotion to evaporate. Gratitude is the first emotion to evaporate. It's often true, isn't it?

So James says, sing. Sing when you're winning, as it were. Sing when you're cheerful. Remember every good gift comes from God. But not many of that. Pray when you're ill.

Verses 14 to 18, really. Now in these verses, James covers a lot of ground, which leads to a lot of confusion and a lot of wrong ideas.

So let's kind of go through these verses carefully, so we understand what they are saying and understand what they're not saying. So verses 14 and 15, James describes a specific situation of the elders coming to pray.

[6 : 48] From that then, verse 16, he says, therefore. In light of that, he makes a general application. How we should pray for each other. Then in verses 17 and 18, he gives us an encouraging example.

Now we need to get all these things right, or we could get very confused. Let's look first of all at the specific situation. Verses 14 and 15. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church.

Let them pray over him. Anoint him 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 him up. And if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.

Here's a specific situation. A person is so ill, he seems to be bedridden. He has to call the elders to come to him. Why the elders? Well, because they're the leaders of the church.

They're the spiritually mature ones. They're the ones who are spiritually responsible for this individual lying in bed. Here's a few instructions. The elders should anoint him with oil.

[7 : 49] Why anoint him with oil? Is it because oil was the best medicine they had in those days? That's what some people say. I think actually the clue here, there's no magic going on. The clue here is in the word that's used in the original language.

It's the same word that's used for anointing in, amongst other places, Exodus 40, verse 15. If you remember Paul's series on Exodus recently, chapter 40, verse 15.

The priests are anointed with oil. Same word. They're set aside for God's service. They're set aside for the Lord. And so I think here, the oil is being used to set this person aside for prayer, for God's special attention.

And in a community where people were double-minded, wouldn't this reinforce to them how they used to be single-minded? They're set apart singly for the Lord who has brought them to new life.

Brought them to life through his word of truth. And what's the result of this prayer? As the elders gather around this person lying in their bed, anointing with oil, praying for them. The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick.

[8 : 55] And the Lord will raise him up. His committed sins will be forgiven. Now it's tempting to just spiritualise that promise. Say, well, yes, the Lord will raise him up on that last day.

And yes, Jesus will indeed raise us all up. And there is truth in that. There is truth in that. Those who have trusted in the Lord will be raised up from death when Christ returns. But I think here there is a more obvious promise of physical healing in this situation.

Now, that raises questions, doesn't it? Does that mean if this person is not healed, the elders didn't have enough faith? There are churches where that gets taught, that gets taught, doesn't it?

If you're suffering, it's because you don't have enough faith. If you prayed but it didn't get better, you didn't have enough faith. The problem is you. You hear that, don't you? Is that what it means by the prayer of faith?

We've got to remember, what is faith? Faith is in God, in his promises. Faith is not just a kind of magic force. It's not the force on Star Wars that gets rid of things.

[10 : 03] That does Jedi mind tricks and such like. No. Faith is in what God has promised. What's therefore important is not our subjective feeling of faith, but whom the faith is in, the object of faith.

And remember, we see clearly in the Bible prayers of faith that are not answered, in the sense of the person doesn't get what they wanted. So Paul, in 2 Corinthians 12, prays the Lord will take the thorn in his side away from him.

The Lord says, no, my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in your weakness. Well, think of the Lord Jesus himself in the Garden of Gethsemane. Gethsemane. Father, if it is possible, take this cup away from me.

But not what I will, but what you will. Did the Father take the cup away? No, of course not. Jesus still died.

But his prayer of faith, and Paul's prayer of faith, in 2 Corinthians 12, was submitting themselves to God's purpose. He wasn't saying, God, do what I want to do because I've got enough faith.

[11 : 10] They were saying, Lord, I trust you, so that your will be done in my life. That's what the prayer of faith is. It has faith in God's sovereign purposes. It has faith that every good gift comes down from above.

The prayer of faith, trust that the Heavenly Father gives good gifts, and does not change. In some cases, that will mean he takes his children home to be with him, rather than giving him physical healing now.

And that is because he is good. That is because he is good. The prayer of faith trusts God to do what he knows is best. He doesn't try and bend God to do what we want.

That said, command is still here, isn't it? We pray for healing. We pray for healing. It is good to do that. But there's another question that arises here. So, if someone isn't healed, it isn't necessarily a lack of faith.

But is James saying that illness always causes diseases? Well, let's look carefully at verse 15. What does James say at the end of the verse? If he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

[12 : 19] If he has committed sins. So, James is not saying that all disease and illness is caused by particular sins we have done. No, he's not. On the other hand, he is saying that some illness may well be caused by sin.

Some illness may well be caused by sin. You see other examples of that in the New Testament. The most dramatic example, of course, Acts chapter 5. Ananias and Sapphira lie to the Holy Spirit. Don't just get ill, get struck down and dead. Or 1 Corinthians chapter 11. The Corinthians are disregarding one another as they celebrate the Lord's Supper together.

So, 1 Corinthians 11 verse 30. Paul warns them about this. He says, that is why many of you are weak and ill and some have died. Because you have not recognised the body of Christ.

Because you have taken the Lord's Supper as your own party. You can eat and drink as you like. Some of you are getting sick and dying. The Lord is disciplining you.

[13 : 26] His covenant people, Paul says. So, illness can be part of God's discipline. Can be one of the tools God uses to turn us back to himself.

But, notice what James doesn't say. He doesn't say, spend your life navel-gazing, trying to worry if every cough and cold, or every hospital visit, is due to an individual sin.

That's not the point. What he does say, though, is recognise that is a possibility. And pray. Pray when you're sick. Pray the Lord will heal you. Pray the Lord will heal you. Pray in confidence. Remember in the Lord is compassionate and merciful. He uses even our suffering for his eternal good. As a loving Father, he will discipline his children to bring us back to himself.

Well, it's a clear application, isn't it? If we're sick, we can call the elders to pray. I think of a gentleman in my last church. He was very ill. Actually, he was just about well enough to come to the church. So we stood around and prayed for him, did as James says here.

[14 : 35] A few weeks later, I went to see him in hospital. He was, do not resuscitate, on the bed next to him. But we carried on praying. And the Lord, in his mercy, did heal that man. He came back, he was in his early 80s at that stage.

Came back from kidney failure and heart problems. And was spared for about another two years, I think. And then his health started to decline again. And he wanted to call us around again. And he said, no, I think at this point, brother, you need to be ready to go to glory.

You need to be ready to pray for your family. And I believe in those last two years, he actually had good conversations with his sons who turned away from the Lord. And I think he was a helpful witness in those last years.

And by the time he did finally die, he was ready and looking forward to being with the Lord. And I remember those conversations with him clearly. As he was looking forward to finally seeing the Lord face to face.

Well, we can pray in conference. We don't just dial 111 or go to the doctor. We can call the elders as well. So that's the specific application. There's also a general application.

[15 : 40] A specific situation. A general application. Look at verse 16. We pray for the sick. We pray for one another. Therefore, because God answers prayer. Because God will raise up the sick person and forgive sins.

Therefore, confess your sins to one another. And pray for one another. That you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it's working. So because God answers prayer. Pray for one another. James says. Pray for one another. See, you've noticed the whole church should have an atmosphere of mutual care and support. There should be a culture of openness. Independence on God's grace. That's why you just confess your sins to one another. We're not just afraid for physical healing. But a whole spiritual well-being as well.

This is the only place in the New Testament. Christians are told to confess our sins to one another. Primarily, we confess our sins to the Lord. So he forgives us. So what James is commanding us to do here is not the Catholic idea of confession.

[16 : 44] Where you go to a priest to receive absolution. That is nonsense. We have one high priest. That's the Lord Jesus Christ. The confessing sins to one another is what? James tells us the reason.

That we may be healed. Not just physically, but spiritually. We confess our needs to one another. Confess our weaknesses. And the language here suggests this should be habitual.

It should be the characteristic of the way we are. We admit our need for God's grace. We say to one another, I'm struggling with my temper. Can you pray for me?

I'm struggling in work because I don't like my boss. Will you pray for me? That's the kind of confession that James is talking about. The contrast is, I'm sure we all know, it's easy to pretend that we've got it all sorted.

James says, don't do that. Confess your weaknesses to one another. Confess your sins. What is it you need help with? What is it you're battling with right now? What are the temptations you face?

[17 : 43] What are the sins you cave into? Is it anger? Is it self-pity? Is it pride? Is it lust? Is it to do with money?

Seek other people's help. Ask them to pray for you in this. And the reason for confessing our sins, James says, is so that we'll be healed. It's not so that we turn the church and become Jeremy Kyle show. Or Oprah Winfrey show.

You know those kind of television shows where people come in. I've seen some in hospital waiting rooms. It is awful. I wouldn't otherwise watch them. People come in and confess their deepest, darkest secrets. And it's all about glorying in their shame.

And kind of getting around as a celebrity by how terrible a mess their lives are. The church is not to be like that. Equally, the church is not to be a place where we all pretend we've got it sorted. We're all nicer than we are.

A friend of mine said to me a few months ago about his church being the perfect church. He had his tongue firmly in his cheek when he said that. What he meant was people come in on a Sunday morning and they all present very beautifully, very perfectly, and they have a nice conversation over coffee, and they go away again.

[18:48] And no one admits a need. No one admits a fault. No one admits their brokenness. And so it's an impossible church for someone to come into who is needy, who is helpless, who needs to experience grace.

That's exactly what James doesn't want. And yet it's a... That kind of church, the kind of perfect church my friend described, is exactly the kind of church where double-mindedness is rife. Because no one can be honest with themselves and with others. That's why James is encouraging this kind of mutual prayer and confession. That the church should be a showcase of God's grace, rather than a showcase of our perfection, or of our sin.

He tells us how important prayer is at the end of verse 17, doesn't he? The prayer of a righteous person has great power in its working. There was a C of E vicar one day, he was sitting in his room in his rectory, preparing, or praying actually, at his desk.

And the window cleaner was working on the windows of the house. And the window cleaner got to this window and looked in, and he needed someone to go and refill the bucket for him. So he knocked on the window, and the vicar, rather disgruntled, got up, opened the window, said, what can I do for you?

[20:05] He said, oh look mate, you're not doing anything, can you fill this bucket up for me please? They're not doing anything. They're not doing anything. They're praying. This is my work. Get yourself and we can get the window cleaner. Can't we?

You look in it, but prayer doesn't do anything. Prayer is just sitting at a desk doing nothing. You've got to remember, prayer is the work. The prayer of a righteous person, we'll come to that phrase in a moment, has great power in its working.

There are untapped resources there. Think about some of the deserts in the Middle East. They look barren and unproductive, like the vicar sitting at his desk, getting unproductive.

Yet underneath, are vast oil resources. So it is with prayer. It might look unproductive to people looking on. Yet it's a way to tap in to those great reserves of God's power.

Prayer has great power in its working. So James is encouraging us to pray. Pray whatever the weather. Pray when you're suffering. Pray when you're happy.

[21:05] Pray when you're sick. Pray for one another. And he finishes with this great encouraging example, verses 17 and 18. You see the example there. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.

It's easy to think of these Old Testament heroes as being very different. Being some kind of superheroes of the faith. Like Superman or whatever. But no, Elijah was a man with a nature like ours. If you read through 1 Kings and 2 Kings, where his story is, you see he was a man like us. He got tired. He got depressed. He got into self-pity. There were moments of pride. He was a man like me and like you. He was not perfect. He was righteous in just the same way we are righteous. Not through moral perfection, but through trusting in God's promise. And so he was accounted righteous through faith. And what does Elijah's story?

James goes on, verse 17. He prayed fervently that it might not rain. And for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. And then he prayed again. And heaven gave rain and the earth bore its fruit.

[22:13] Prayed fervently. In the original language, it literally says, he prayed in prayer. In other words, he was kind of single-minded in prayer. That's what he was doing. But then you think it's a curious example.

James has been talking about prayer being effective, and particularly in a realm of healing. So why does James use this example? In 1 Kings 17, verse 21, we read of Elijah stretching himself out on the widow of Zarephath's son, who is dead, and praying fervently that he be healed, raised to life again, and he was.

So, has James forgotten that? Why does James not use that as an example of fervent prayer if he's choosing Elijah as an example? Well, maybe it's because James actually has something bigger in

mind.

Maybe James has a deeper healing in mind. This example of Elijah and praying for rain spans the beginning of chapter 17 of 1 Kings and to the end of chapter 18.

What happens in the intervening period? Well, there's drought, three and a half years. But then, and if you know your Sunday school stories well, you'll know there's a big contest in the middle. The problem in those days was that Israel, under King Ahab, had forsaken God.

[23 : 26] Instead, they were worshipping the Baals. They're not wholeheartedly following God, they're worshipping a false god, Baal. And that's why there was no rain in the land. Elijah had prayed, and in response to God's covenant promises in Deuteronomy 28, where God had said if Israel was unfaithful to him, he would deprive them of rain.

So that's how Elijah prayed. But then, there's a showdown in 1 Kings 18. And Elijah has this little contest. He gets the prophets of Baal on top of Mount Carmel.

He says, okay, you guys build an altar, and you try and get Baal to send rain. You pray for Baal to send rain. Of course, they dance around, they cut themselves, and no rain comes. Because Baal is not a real god.

Then Elijah sets forward and says, okay, I'm going to pray for rain on God's altar. And you will see who the true God is. Now listen to how Elijah introduces this contest.

1 Kings 18, verse 21. Elijah came near to all the people and said, how long will you go limping between two different opinions?

[24 : 33] If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Baal, then follow him. See the problem? In Elijah's day, Israel were double-minded.

They had two opinions. They were kind of pretending to serve the Lord, but also serving Baal. What's the problem for James' readers? They're double-minded. They are not wholeheartedly serving the Lord, but they're living this kind of secular world view at the same time.

They're limping between two opinions. So the real healing that we're praying for here, the ultimate healing we're praying for, is for the Lord to turn back hearts. The Elijah story goes on that the fire fell, the rain, and then the people said, the Lord is God, the Lord, he is God.

Then Elijah prayed for the rain to come, and the rain came. See really, Elijah wasn't merely praying for weather. Underneath it, he was praying for the Lord to turn people's hearts back to himself wholeheartedly.

And isn't that the problem of the people James is writing to? Their double-mindedness? Can't that be our problem as well? What will it take for us to wholeheartedly follow this God of grace?

[25 : 51] It will take him to turn our hearts back. And how is that possible? It's possible because prayer is effective, and the Lord is good and gracious. So that's what this encouraging example is about.

They're to encourage us to pray for one another. To pray for one another with all our weaknesses, with all our sins, with all our illnesses. To pray that the God of grace will turn our hearts back.

Prayer taps in for those eternal resources of grace and goodness that can do that for us. So what are the areas you need prayer for? What are the areas I need prayer for?

Who have you got praying for you? Let's not pretend all is fine. Let's not be a perfect church where we don't have any problems. Let's pray when we're suffering, pray when we're happy, pray when people are ill.

Above all, let's pray for one another. That the God of grace will do his great work of turning hearts back wholeheartedly to himself. So let's pray any weather. And more briefly, these last two verses.

[26 : 59] Pursue any wanderer, James says. Verse 19. My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

If you look at almost every other letter in the New Testament, they all finish with nice greetings and words like grace and peace. James doesn't do that. He stops short. Why?

Because this is his whole point. He wants us to turn one another back. He sees people wandering in this congregation. He wants them to turn each other back.

Now what is wandering from the truth? Wandering from the truth is not really wandering from mental ascent to a set of doctrines. It includes wandering from believing something.

Also wandering from the behaviour that goes with that belief. And what is this truth? Chapter 1 verse 18 is the word of truth that saves us. It's the gospel truth.

[28 : 02] It doesn't just save us, it sanctifies us. Chapter 1 verse 21 as we receive this word with meekness. It changes us. And all through this letter James has been showing, these believers are showing us how easy it is to wander from the truth.

We do it when we're hearers of the word but not doers of the word. We do it when we profess faith but our lives remain unchanged. We do it when we're very in to listening to God's word being preached but never do it and we don't actually get on with caring for the widows and the orphans which is the true religion that pleases God as James has told us back in chapter 1.

We see double-mindedness in failure to control our tongues. Just grumbling against one another. And you see the urgency in which James tells us to pursue any wanderer.

Because anyone who does that will save his soul from death. The stakes are high, aren't they? If you're out for a walk down the south coast and you're wandering on all these cliff-top paths and then there's a diversion leading inland saying warning land erosion take the safe path.

You take the safe path if you turned around and saw someone coming behind you then just wandering on the old path next to the cliff edge would you just let them do it? Will you say that's okay, that's their choice, that might interfere with their lives?

[29 : 25] No, of course not. We want to rescue them, we want to pursue that wanderer, bring them back onto the true path. How much more so should we do that in the church? We see people wandering away as their attendance becomes less and less.

Perhaps the things they say or the things they do you see they're not really wholeheartedly following the Lord. Surely we should plead with them to come back.

We're not just saving a trip to the emergency room or to A&E; falling off a cliff. Save their souls from death and cover a multitude of sins. Yet how do we respond when we see people wandering?

There's so many of us who are very British about it, can't we? I'm sure somebody else knows them better, they can talk to them. Or, I don't know them very well, I'm not perfect, I couldn't do that. It's the leader's job, they should do it.

I'd love to help but I don't have time right now, there's a lot of pressure at work, family life is very busy. Or, I'm sure they'll be fine, they've been strong Christians in the past, I'm sure they'll be okay.

We can make any one of a number of excuses, can't we?

[30 : 35] Yet James reminds us the stakes are high, pursue any wanderer. One writer says that surely this constitutes one of the most neglected responsibilities in the church today.

Churches will be so good at welcoming newcomers through the front door that we neglect people disappearing out the back door. So how do we go and pursue any wanderer?

Well, we pray for them, certainly. We go and talk to them as well, encourage them, be with them, lead them back. What did the Lord Jesus do for me and for you when we were wanderers, where we were lost sheep?

In the parable of the Good Shepherd, the Good Shepherd leaves the 99 to go and wander off and find the one that's wandered away. Jesus came all the way from heaven to the cross of Calvary to seek and to save lost sinners like you and me.

As we pursue any wanderer, we're doing what the Lord Jesus himself has done for us. And we thank him for it, don't we? The Sovereign Lord is so good to his people.

[31 : 46] He uses even hard times to bring us back to himself. So we should pray any weather. We need to pursue any wanderer. Double-minded as we can be, we need to pray the Lord would unite our hearts and minds and love him wholly.

Remember, prayer has great power and it's working. Let me finish with Elijah's words. Answer me, O Lord, answer me. That this people may know that you, O Lord our God and that you have turned their hearts back.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.