

James 5:16-20 - The Power of Confession and Prayer
Sign Title: The Power of Confession and Prayer

November 6, 2011

Good morning Faith family. We began studying James on March 13th. Today is our last message in the book. We did it in 27 messages. After this morning, we have a rather broken up Christmas series called, *Christmas from the Book of Psalms*. In the new year, we start a study on the Song of Solomon called *Solomon on Sex*. It will be a hot series for a cold Iowa winter. Hopefully I will still have a job when we complete it.

I will conclude this morning with some reflections on what the book of James taught us. Before we do that, we have five more verses to go. There is enough material in these verses for at least two sermons but I will keep it tight and we will wrap up the book of James this morning.

For the last two weeks, we learned what to do when things are good and when things are bad. When things are good, we sing songs of praise, which are prayers of thankfulness. When things are bad, we pour out our broken heart to God in prayer knowing that God responds to the cries of his children. If we are facing serious troubles, such as life-threatening sickness, James tells us we shouldn't pray alone but we should ask the spiritual leaders in the church to come and pray over us. Later this morning, we will see that one of the reasons James tells us to do that is because the prayers of a righteous man or woman have great power. The elders of a church, as the spiritual leaders of the congregation, should be men of righteousness so their prayers are effective for God's people. That is one reason you ask them to come and pray with you.

If it is God's will, he will bring healing. Last week, we learned it is not always God's will to bring healing, but we should pray for it and ask him for it. God delights to answer our prayers, but we have to trust that the way he responds to our prayer for healing is what is best for our good and for his glory. It is not always God's will to heal. If it always was God's will to heal, Christians would never die. As you can see from the evidence of history, people do that quite regularly.

The end of verse 15 had a little catch phrase that was interesting. James says, "and if he has sinned, he will be forgiven." Some sickness is an act of God's discipline upon us for our sin. Nothing gets our attention like sickness. If sin is the cause of our sickness, confession is the cure. Today, we move beyond prayer in our troubles and joys, and prayer for serious sickness, to the role of prayer in the life of the church.

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 is working. James 5:16 (ESV)

This is an intriguing verse. Why do I have to confess my sins to somebody? Can't I just confess them to God? Why is confession necessary to be healed? What kind of healing is he talking about here? Let's see if we can bring some clarity.

What does it mean to confess sins to each other?

Let me quickly say I don't believe this is telling us we need to have mass confession services or even small group confession services where we rummage through every conceivable wicked thing we have thought or done and make it

public. I don't believe he is talking about mass corporate confession. This is interpersonal confession.

Confession promotes spiritual health.

While the health James is talking about can be physical, in the context, I think it is appropriate to understand it as relational health. The Greek word here translated as healing in the ESV is often used to talk about healing metaphorically, in other words, healing from the consequences of sin or moral diseases. In James 5:16 it is talking about relational healing in the church. There are two times when we need to focus on confession for prayer and confession for the health of ourselves and the church.

When I am wrong.

As long as we are sinners, which will be the rest of our earthly lives, we will regularly do and say things to others that are sinful or simply unkind. Not only do we frustrate our relationship with God in these things, but we damage our relationships with others.

We often forget how sin works. We think sin is a one-and-done deal. After all, when we choose to sin God extends his forgiveness through Christ and we move on. It is not that easy. Every time we allow a sinful attitude to win, we allow that attitude to begin to form a sinful pattern in our life. Sin is very powerful and, like a cork screw, it quickly tries to anchor itself as a pattern in our heart. Sinful patterns become habits, sinful habits become bondages. Even though we are forgiven by Christ, the more we give in to sin, the more difficult it is to change the developing pattern of sin in our hearts.

We often think of sin just personally and that we are the only ones who suffer from our sinful choices. The people around us are also affected by our sinful choices. Our choices to be selfish hurt others. Our choice to vent our anger on others hurts them, not just us. Before long, we have broken relationships all around us. We become bitter because we won't admit to being wrong. Our relationships need to be healed. James says that for relational healing to happen, sin must be confessed to one another and forgiveness extended.

So what are we to do? We are to confess our sins to one another so our relationships can be healed. How does this work?

Confession must be made to the person against whom I have sinned and from whom we need and desire to receive forgiveness. (Motyer, James, pg. 202).

So to who do I need to confess my sin? Ask yourself what is the size of the circle your sin has influenced? Whatever the size of the circle, confession needs to be done in that circle.

If you have a heart sin that has been known by nobody else but God, then God is the one you need to confess your sin to and seek forgiveness from, although heart sins almost never stay hidden --- otherwise you get into this hurtful kind of confession where a man goes up to a woman and says, "I have secretly lusted in my heart after you for five years, would you forgive me?" Trust me, that doesn't go well. Another example would be a woman saying to her neighbor, "I have been jealous of your Cadillac Escalade for six months, will you forgive me?" Once again, I don't think that will go well. Secret sins need to be confessed to God, although, as we will see, it is hard to keep even secret sins

from influencing others. There is an exception to this I will get to in a few minutes. Hold on and we will get to it.

If you have a secret sin that has become a known sin or a sin that has affected others, now we must go to that circle and confess it and seek forgiveness. If it's my family, I confess it to my family. If it is the church softball league, then I confess it to the softball league. Sometimes we have secret sins that are affecting others and they don't know it is affecting them. Guys, if you are surfing the web and looking at porn, even though your wife may not know it, you are sinning against her and need to confess it to her. Ladies, if you are using Facebook and allowing other men, to say things that are suggestive or flirtatious or touch your emotional world, you are sinning against your husband, you need to repent of it and confess it to your husband. I know that is hard but you are sinning against him.

Sometimes public sin requires public repentance. I had a guy who cussed out the elders at a church meeting. The elders met with him and he agreed what he said was in a fit of rage and it was sinful. To his credit, he made a public confession of his sin at the next church meeting. These are the kinds of things that bring relational healing.

This is never easy stuff. It is never easy to know how big a circle of repentance and confession to extend. Sometimes we need wisdom from God to know to whom we need to confess our sin. I think the sign of a truly repentant heart is one that is willing to make it right wherever and to whomever restoration requires. As I say this, I know these words are bringing to mind unresolved

conflicts and unconfessed sin between people in the congregation. As I say this, I am asking, “Are you willing to obey God and confess your sin to those you have hurt so your relationship may be healed?”

For many of us, the important question isn’t about to whom we should confess our sin, but when someone comes confessing their sin and asking your forgiveness, how will we react? These are never easy moments. It tends to bring up painful things from the past. For some of us, it is easier to ask forgiveness than it is to extend it. Jesus makes it clear that we must have a spirit of reconciliation.

Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. Matthew 18:21–22 (ESV)

What does this mean? We should always have a spirit willing to extend forgiveness. Matthew 18 goes on with the parable of the unmerciful servant in which Jesus says *forgiveness flows from an understanding of our own sinfulness*. When someone asks for our forgiveness, we need to look at them and say in our heart, “I am no better than you. There but for the grace of God go I.”

The seeds of the sins of all men lie within my own heart. -Robert Murray McCheyne

It is only from the right perspective of our own sinfulness that we will have the capacity to forgive the sins others commit against us. It is when we realize we are no different and no better than others that we have the capacity to forgive.

We must confess our sins to others when we need relational healing but there is another time we need to confess our sins to others that we have not sinned against.

When I need help.

None of us have the capacity to live the Christian life on our own. There is no such thing as a lone ranger Christian. God has placed us in community with one another for a reason; we need help, support, encouragement and accountability from one another.

It is important for us to understand the tremendous power of having another brother or sister involved in our life in a relationship that is transparent enough for us to share areas of struggle. This is not for them to forgive you but for them to help. To have someone who knows me and to whom I can be accountable is so freeing and life-giving.

Why is this so important? Sin has a way of isolating us. It wants us to hide. It doesn't want anybody else to know. What was Adam and Eve's first instinct after they sinned? They hid themselves. When we sin, our instinct has been to hide ever since.

It is funny; to get in the church, you have to admit you are a sinner, but once you are a part of it, everybody acts like they are perfect. Let's just get this over with. Turn to the person next to you and say, "You are sitting next to a dirty, rotten, filthy sinner. Nice to meet you." Now that things are cleared up, we can begin being a little more transparent.

One of the great helps to overcoming a sin we are struggling with is accountability with another Christian, preferably one more mature than ourselves. Sometimes, just the relief of someone else knowing the sin we are struggling with is powerful enough in itself. That person can provide help. They can pray for

you. They can pray with you. They can encourage you and hold you accountable. When I need help, I need someone else in my life. Don't hide, don't run; confess it and pray for each other.

When I feel the need to hide something, that's the first sign that something has gone wrong. Are you hiding something this morning?

Sometimes, at the end of a message, I invite people to come forward for prayer with one of the elders. When you sit down to pray with people and you ask what they are struggling with, sometimes they will say they can't tell you. You will see they are wrestling with something that is tearing them up on the inside. They are wrestling with the struggle of carrying their sin versus the shame of admitting their sin. If we were to have an altar call this morning, would that be you? Do you need a mature brother or sister in Christ to confess your sin to so they can help you but you are wrestling with the shame of admitting it?

Today, swallow your pride and talk with an elder after the service. It is not just confession that brings relational healing, so does prayer.

Prayer is powerful.

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. James 5:17–18 (ESV)

James says the prayers of a righteous man are powerful. That means the prayers of a man who is transparent about his sin, who has confessed his sin and is merciful towards the sins of others has a powerful prayer life. To prove his point, James uses an illustration from the Old Testament --- Elijah prayed and it didn't rain for three years. This comes from 1 Kings 17. Elijah said it wouldn't

rain until he said it would then he went into exile. It didn't take long for him to be the person everyone was looking for. This led to one of the great moments of the Old Testament when Elijah took on the 400 prophets of Baal. Kids love this story. James' point is that Elijah was a man just like us, and look what his prayers accomplished. If Elijah's prayers were powerful, that same power through prayer is available to all of us.

I wonder, if we really thought our prayers were that powerful, would we pray more or less than we do? Why is there a the lack of prayer in our lives? We really don't think prayer does anything or we would pray more. Get more excited about prayer services and prayer opportunities. When you go to bed with your wife, pray together. Pray for your kids when you are driving them to school. Take every opportunity to pray with and for the members of the Faith Church family. Praying together brings relational healing. Church members praying together knits us together. In this passage, the Holy Spirit is daring us to pray with the expectation that our prayers are actually powerful and effective.

This is something we have to remind ourselves when we pray because, if you are like me, at times, my prayers feel so feeble. I can begin to think, what good is this doing? We start to interpret the effectiveness of our prayers from our limited perspective. Did you ever think things are not what they quite appear? If God says, through the Holy Spirit in the book of James, that prayer is powerful, shouldn't we take his Word for it? The importance of prayer at all times in all ways is James' last teaching point. In the last two verses he tells us what to do with everything we learned from the book.

Rescue those who wander.

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. James 5:19–20 (ESV)

James tells us we have a responsibility to go after those who wander from the truth and to save them from death. What kind of wandering is he talking about? It could be doctrinal, but from the tone of the book, it is more likely ethical wandering. It is claiming Christ but letting our tongue slander and our hearts grumble. It is knowing we are loved by God but remembering God has a purpose for us in our trials. It is knowing our identity in Christ but choosing to play favorites. The wandering James talks about is living inconsistent with the truth. Since we know the truth, James tells us to go after those who are wandering from it. Connecting our faith and our life is not optional. Going after those who are wandering from the truth in their lives will save them from a multitude of sins and ultimately spiritual death because there is no such thing as a faith disconnected from day to day living.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? James 2:14 (ESV)

Going after those who appear to be wandering in their connection between faith and life is something we often think just elders should do --- not so according to James. He challenges everyone in the congregation to lovingly keep one another from wandering. Here are a few challenges for us:

1. Don't give up too easily on people when they wander.
2. Just because people wander doesn't mean they can't be brought back.
3. We ALL have a role in doing this.

4. A little tough love covers a multitude of sins.

Final thoughts on James

It is hard to believe we finished the book! As I looked back on what we learned, the one thing that stuck out to me is the subtitle we used for the entire series, “Practical Christianity.” It is easy to compartmentalize our faith into something we think about just on Sunday, but James shows us that Christ connects with everything about us every day. James talked about how our faith in Jesus addresses trials, the way we speak, our swearing, our grumbling, our suffering, facing temptation, extending compassion to others, obedience to God’s Word, interpersonal conflict, greed, how to treat the poor, prayer and facing troubles of every and any kind. James is a practical book on how faith connects with life.

Conclusion

I want the blessing of the book of James be to part of my life and part of yours, so at the end of this book, let me pray for us on these things.



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