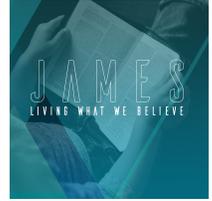


DISCUSSION GUIDE :: SESSION 10

LIVING WHAT WE BELIEVE
THE POWER OF PRAYER
JAMES 5:13-18
04/02/2017



MAIN POINT

Prayer has the power to move God to work in our lives and the lives of others.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

How important is prayer to you? What is the purpose of prayer? How often does God answer prayer?

If you believed that God would answer your every request, how often would you pray?

How often do you pray? How has prayer shaped your life? How would you define a good prayer life?

Prayer is an opportunity for us to communicate our desires to God with the assurance that He always hears us and answers us. Jesus said, "Whatever you ask in My name, I will do it so that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13). That is an amazing promise!

James teaches us, however, that not all our requests get answered the way we might like them to be. He writes, "You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and don't receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your evil desires" (James 4:2-3). Asking "in Jesus name" isn't a guarantee that He will give us whatever we demand; rather, asking in Jesus name means we are asking by His work on our behalf and for His glory. Our requests must be for kingdom purposes and not worldly desires if we hope to have God answer our requests.

In this study, we will look at some of the amazing things that God does for us through prayer. Hopefully, we will believe and be encouraged to be more consistent in our prayer life, and that we will be bold to bring any request we might have to our heavenly Father without hesitation.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 5:13-14.

How does prayer help us in our suffering? What are some obstacles to prayer when we are suffering?

How often have you seen someone call for the leadership of the church to pray for them in sickness? Would you call on them? Why do you think that the early church used oil for anointing?

It can be very difficult for us to pray for ourselves while we are suffering. If we are in a season of grief, or if we are battling with depression, it can be hard to express ourselves to God or anyone else. Suffering exhausts us. However, James encourages us to take our cares to the Lord.

Singing praises, in many ways, is much like praying. In fact, many hymns are prayers set to music. For example, “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” says, “Here’s my heart, Lord. Take and seal it. Seal it for thy courts above.” The entire hymn is a prayer to God for help. Prayer and singing praise are not so far separated then. Both are us communicating praise and voicing our desires to God.

One thing that is often underestimated is the power of prayer of godly leadership on our behalf. Notice in this text that this prayer isn’t a distant prayer—it is intimate. The elders are close enough to touch and administer the oil for anointing. They are close enough for their concerns to be seen and heard. James instructed the elders to use oil because it was used as medicine, and it represented the presence of the Holy Spirit.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 5:15-16.

Whose faith has the power to “save the sick person”? Is this a guarantee of health if the elders of the church pray over someone? If they do not get well, does that mean it is a lack of faith?

Why do you think that James mentions sins in connection with sickness?

When James talks about being “sick,” he seems to be talking about more than physical illness. The Greek word translated “sick” here is also used in Hebrews 12:3—“For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, so that you won’t grow weary and lost heart.” There, the word is translated “weary.” James likely speaks of believers who not only deal with physical illness, but also who have become weary in the faith.

Though sin may sometimes cause illness (1 Corinthians 11:29-30), we know this is not always the case. The disciples once asked Jesus, “‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ Jesus answered. ‘This came about so that God’s works might be displayed in him’” (John 9:2-3).

We know that God does not guarantee us physical healing, but we do know that confession and repentance lead us to salvation. Ultimately, God will heal us in the resurrection when we receive our new bodies that will never be touched by sickness or death.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 5:17-18.

Why do you think James includes the example of Elijah? Why do you think James emphasizes that Elijah was a man “with a nature like ours”?

Why did Elijah pray to God to withhold rain? Why do you think that God granted Elijah’s prayer in this?

How can suffering lead us to restoration?

Elijah was a prophet through whom God worked many miracles. Through Elijah, a widow’s son was raised from the dead through the power of prayer (1 Kings 17:17-24). Through Elijah, God withheld rain from the sky through the power of prayer. Through Elijah, the God answered with fire from heaven, demonstrating God’s superiority over Baal (1 Kings 18:20-39).

But James wants us to know that Elijah was just like us. Elijah had his moments of weakness for sure, like when he asked the Lord to kill him because he had completely despaired! (1 Kings 19:3-5). Elijah simply prayed. He had the same access to God that every believer has. If we pray, we will see God work in our lives and the lives of those for whom we pray.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Do you think that you could commit to praying at least once per day for requests that others give to you?

Consider keeping a prayer journal to write down the prayer requests that others make, and to journal things that you pray for on your own. This might help spur you to more consistent prayer, and it will help you keep track of when God answers your prayers.

Remember to pray for those who are sick and for those who are suffering. James told the church's leadership to anoint the sick with oil and pray for them. Perhaps you could make it a practice to not only pray for those who suffer privately, but also make it a point to pray with them personally.

PRAY

Offer a time for group members to pray aloud, thanking God for salvation through Jesus Christ. Thank the Father that He allows us to bring all of our concerns to Him, and thank Him for listening to and answering our prayers. Ask the Lord to be with the sick and suffering in our congregation, by name if you know of any requests. Ask the Lord also to bring others spiritual healing, and to grant us the humility to confess our sins.

COMMENTARY

5:13. Christians pray both in times of trouble and in times of joy. In times of trouble Christians often fall victims to self-pity, anger, or morbid introspection. James directed Christians to pray rather than surrender to these wrong responses. Trouble includes physical and emotional stress arising from both ordinary trials and special spiritual difficulties. During such trouble we are to "keep on praying." Sufferers must not stop their prayers after a quick prayer for help. They must live in an attitude of prayer.

Happy describes a cheerful, elated mood. This is not a giddy, flippant outlook but a mood of cheer and optimism. Prosperity and pleasant experiences in life can cause a person to forsake God due to complacency or worldly contentment. Instead, life's good times should lead us to sing songs of praise to God as the author of the blessings. The same verb can be translated "make music" to the Lord (Eph. 5:19). This command does not demand the use of music but calls for the expression of words or thoughts to praise or thank God.

5:14. Sickness includes all types of bodily weaknesses—physical, mental, or spiritual. Here the reference is primarily to physical illness. The sick person should take the initiative to call the elders of the church to pray for him. The elders were church leaders who had the task of pastoring and providing spiritual leadership for a congregation (Titus 1:5). We would normally expect them to be able to pray with effectiveness. These elders are called on to perform two tasks.

First, they pray over him, suggesting that they stand over the bed of the sick person. This is a special participation in prayer beyond the normal experiences of intercession. The fact the ill person was confined to a bed implied a serious or painful sickness. Second, they anoint him with oil. The act of anointing with personal touch and contact served to strengthen the faith of the sick person. This refers to olive oil, which served as a symbol of God's healing power. The oil had no healing power in itself. The experience of anointing with oil appears elsewhere in the New Testament in reference to physical healing (see Mark 6:13).

This practice had two benefits which encouraged more fervent prayer for the sick. The elders of the church would pray with more fervor because they had been at the scene of sickness. The sick person could become more aware of the encouragement which could come from their fervent prayer.

The word for "sickness" can refer to spiritual weakness (1 Cor. 8:11). Usually, however, the presence of spiritual sickness is noted by the appearance of a qualifying phrase such as "in faith" (Rom. 4:19). The absence of the phrase here lends support to the suggestion that physical sickness is the concern. The word for "sickness" was used to describe the physical sickness of Lazarus (John 11:2-3), the nobleman's son (John 4:46), and Dorcas (Acts 9:37).

5:15. The prayer offered in faith is a prayer based on confidence that God can and wants to heal. This does not imply that if a person has a sufficient degree of faith, God will automatically answer the prayer. Rather, it suggests that believers have a right to faith in all of life's situations.

Those who pray in faith receive two promises. First, these prayers will make the sick person well. Second, the statement

about the forgiveness of sins suggests that in some instances illness may be due to the sins of the sick person. In such instances the healing provided a sign that God had forgiven the sins.

With these promises God still retains his freedom to do his will and work things out in the ways best for the kingdom. Prayer can bring healing, but lack of healing does not show that the one praying lacks faith. Neither does it show that the prayer is somehow invalid or God is somehow incapable of healing.

The promise of raising up the sick person refers to physical restoration to sound health and not to participation in the final resurrection. The verb for "making the sick person well" is sometimes used in the New Testament to describe "spiritual deliverance." The Gospels also use it for restoration to health (see Matt. 9:22). Sick person describes the experience of weariness (Heb. 12:3). Raise up describes the increased physical vigor of those who have experienced healing (Matt. 9:6; Mark 1:31). This seems to suggest that both verses 14 and 15 refer to physical healing and not to spiritual deliverance.

The Bible text here does not qualify the promise of healing in any way. It provides an absolute promise that the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. This poses a problem because it is obvious that believing prayer does not always produce bodily healing. Paul left Trophimus at Miletus sick (2 Tim. 4:20). We must always understand that this and other promises of the Bible (see Mark 11:24) contain an implied condition. God will grant the prayer whenever it accords with his will.

Thus, we cannot take this statement as a guarantee that every prayer offered with a sufficient degree of faith will be answered. The intercessor must approach God in an attitude of faith, but the request will be granted only if it accords with the will of God (1 John 5:14). Whenever God does not provide instant healing, the prayer is still useful because it provides encouragement and help for the person who is sick.

The concluding words of verse 15, If he has sinned, he will be forgiven, recognize that the sickness may be due to sin. When the sickness does come, the ill believer must examine himself before the Lord to determine if sin is the cause of the sickness. The grammatical construction shows that sin is not always the cause of sickness (see Jesus' teaching in Luke 13:1-4; John 9:3). Some sickness, however, is due to sin (1 Cor. 11:30). If sin is present, the Bible offers hope. It assures the sick person that forgiveness is available. Sins are sent away because God no longer holds them against the sinner. He forgives completely.

Some interpreters have suggested that this passage discusses two types of healing: physical and spiritual. The reference to experiencing forgiveness seems to suggest this possibility. Such an interpretation would require that the action of making the sick person well in verse 15 also carries with it an additional meaning of spiritual wholeness. The meaning of the context is satisfied, however, when we see simply a reference to physical healing. We should not give the words of the text more meanings than they require.

5:16a. Because God hears the prayers of penitent people and forgives sin, Christians should confess their sins to one another and pray for one another. The mention of "healing" at the conclusion of this verse makes it likely that the sins to be confessed are those which have caused illness. The healing shows the purpose of the mutual confession and prayer. Since the intent of the confession of sins is to experience physical healing, it seems best to refer the command to the confession of sins which may hinder healing. The confessor of sins is seeking healing by the act of admitting sins.

Two interesting observations come from this verse. First, the entire church is to be involved in this praying. It is not confined to the elders. Second, the power to heal appears in the act of praying, not in the elder or other one praying. Confess means "to say the same thing." It suggests that in confessing, we must identify the sin by its true name and call it what it is. We must acknowledge and repent of specific sins, not merely offer a general confession of guilt. Placed so close to the discussion of prayer for the sick, this verse likely has its primary application in confession of sin by people who are sick. However, the application is easily extended to confession of sin in any of life's situations.

This confession of sin seeks to secure faithful prayer support for stumbling Christians from trusted spiritual friends. It is not urging a careless confession to just anybody. Such a type of confession might cause more harm than good. It is confession to dedicated, trusted prayer warriors who will intercede for you with God.

5:16b. This verse concludes by showing the powerful effect of prayer. Translators have disagreed widely over the translation of the last half of this verse. Some translators emphasize that James was commenting on the effect of the prayers of righteous people. Other translators emphasize that James taught that righteousness and earnestness were requirements for uttering powerful prayers. The translation of the niv emphasizes the former.

We learn two features of effective prayer in this verse. First, prayer must come from righteous people. A person must have a living faith shown by an obedient life. Second, effective prayer must have energy or persistence. Effective prayer comes from the heart of a believer whose passion is to see the will of God worked out in life.

5:17. Elijah is spotlighted as one who prayed earnestly with power. A man just like us teaches us that Elijah had human weaknesses and frailties just like our own. The exact length of the drought in Elijah's time was not mentioned in the Old Testament (see 1 Kgs. 18:1). Jesus mentioned the same length of time as James (Luke 4:25).