

The Ministry of Prayer
James 5:12-20
November 25

James is the most practical book in the New Testament. James does not deal extensively with doctrinal issues in his short letter. Instead, James focuses on the relation between faith and life. He concludes his epistle with a challenge for believers to deepen their prayer experience. In doing so, James reminds churches that nothing is more practical than a ministry of prayer.

What does James affirm about the ministry of prayer?

First, prayer trumps oaths in importance (5:12). Many biblical scholars fail to note a connection between 5:12 and the preceding section. The phrase "but above all" provides a strong connection, however. The Christians James addressed needed patience and endurance similar to Job in light of suffering and persecution. Perhaps one form of persecution suffered was a malicious maligning of the character and integrity of some individuals. The attacked individuals responded with oaths to the truthfulness of public statements. James commands Christians to stop defending the truth with oaths. Simple speech adequately defends the faith

Second, prayer provides the proper foundation for life (5:13). James asked two questions to emphasize the necessity of prayer in any circumstance. On any given day, some church members suffered and some exhibited cheerfulness. The terms "suffering" and "cheerfulness" describe personal attitudes or emotions. Suffering here described an internal stress a believer may feel in response to external circumstances. Prayer provides the proper response to either suffering or cheerfulness. We often turn to God in difficult days and neglect God during sunny days. For James, singing is one form of prayer. As you worship Sunday, sing with an attitude of prayer.

Third, prayer ministers to the sick (v. 14-15). Individuals with health problems dominate the prayer list of most churches. Indeed, an emphasis on pray for the ill is biblical. The situation described in these verses is that of an individual with a life-threatening illness. To "pray over" an individual implies that the illness confines the person to bed. The initiative in prayer ministry begins with the sick person informing the church of his/her need and requesting the elders to come. The Greek word translated "anoint" is not the term used elsewhere in the Bible for ritual anointing or application; hence, anointing with oil does not have a religious connotation. Ancient people commonly used oil for medicinal purposes (Lk. 10). The Bible instructs sick believers, therefore, to combine prayer with available medicine for ministry to the sick.

Fourth, prayer mutually benefits Christians (5:16a). The Scriptures command Christians to confess to one another. The phrase "one another" limits the extent of the confession to two believers. Nowhere does Scripture command Christians to air dirty laundry. The subject matter of the limited confession is sinning against another brother or sister. Sincere confession prepares for reconciliation and a renewal of the relationship. Confession, combined with prayer, functions as the highest form of love. The purpose of mutual confession and prayer is healing. Christians actually make themselves sick physically because they refuse reconciliation. Healing of the relationship may lead to a spiritual revival. During the famous Shanghai revival in China, God moved in mighty ways after Southern Baptist missionaries mutually confessed and prayed.

Fifth, prayer ministry is not limited to super-saints (5:16b-18). Elijah, a famous prayer, was a man, not a super-saint. Earnestness served as the key to the prayer effectiveness of Elijah. Intensity is lacking quality in the prayers of most Christians. Perhaps our prayers remain unanswered because we do not care much about them in the first place. Desperate times

motivated the earnest quality of Elijah's prayer. From a human perspective, the entire nation appeared to follow Baal, the pagan rain god. Elijah attacked the heart of Baal worship by praying for God to withhold rain.

Sixth, restoration is a form of prayer ministry (5:19-20). Restoring Christians who have wandered from the truth is an important ministry. One should approach such a delicate ministry only after extensive prayer. The results of assisting to restore Christians are eternal.