

James 5 (16) – You Don't Have to Hide Anymore

When we examine James 5:13-18 in its context, we see that the prevailing emphasis is not about physical healing, it is about prayer. This is about spiritual encouragement for the spiritually exhausted. You bring your situation to God, placing your trust in Him personally (vs.13). Then, if you are becoming exhausted, you bring it before the elders (vs.14-15). The fact that you're admitting your weakness and submitting to the elders for prayer is in fact submitting to God's design for the care of your soul, and it is a further demonstration of submitting to God's purpose in the suffering. If a person will sincerely call for the elders of the church, transparently admitting their weakness and confessing their sins, then when those men pray, God promises to respond. He will comfort and strengthen the believer who comes in that way.

Sometimes, we may have not been patient or endured suffering as a soldier for Christ. We didn't put the matter into God's hands; instead we took matters into our own hands. We retaliated, or took oaths of vengeance. Perhaps God has calmed us down by taking the starch out of us. But the answer is the same, call for the elders to pray for you. If you will do that, God will not only strengthen you, He will forgive you. Don't suffer in silence. Rather, fulfill God's will.

Therefore – having discussed personal prayer and pastoral prayer, James turns to public prayer. James is looking back to the promises of vs.15; that God will respond to the faithful prayers of the spiritually strong on behalf of those who have become spiritually weak. Since that is true, we are encouraged to take up this sort of ministry within the body as a whole. This is the continuation of the prayer pattern that this passage prescribes. You've been praying personally (vs.13), and you haven't suffered in silence, you've taken it to the elders (vs.14-15). Now you are also called to lean on your brothers and sisters for spiritual support (vs.16).

This privilege and responsibility of prayer is not only for the leadership of the church, it is also the privilege and responsibility of the congregation. Mutual ministry in the body is part of God's design for the spiritual strength, health, and growth of the local church and its people. God intends on the church ministering to itself. The individual members will minister to one another which in turn benefits the whole body (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:7 / Ephesians 4:11-16). Accordingly, if this isn't happening, not just the person, but the whole body suffers.

Now when we speak of ministry, too often people think that this must mean teaching or counseling or leading a group. But remember that not many of us are supposed to be teachers (James 3:1). Yet we are all called to be ministers. And ministry to one another includes confession and prayer, which will bring spiritual encouragement and emotional healing. This is taking what we have been taught and applying it. This develops loving relationships.

We are made to be interdependent. It's hard to find healing for our hearts when we hide them. We need each other to help us break free, and then we will be able to help others live free as well. Yet while many are willing to trust Christ, they aren't ready to trust the body of Christ. What they don't yet understand is that while Jesus does offer a *personal* relationship to His disciples, He never promises us a *private* one. The church is not a casual group of individuals who just agree on a few things, it is a living body, and its members are connected so that they move *together*. Every member of that body needs help, and every member has some help to give.

We all need this, including the spiritually mature and strong. The truth is that pastors can be some of the least pastored people in the church. We need pastoring just as much as anyone else. We depend on those in our church to use their spiritual gifts to build us up. You see, pastoral ministry can be very lonely even though you are always dealing with people. Because of the weight of caring for souls, we are often heartbroken (2 Corinthians 11:28-29). This can be an obstacle to growth, and we are tempted to hide our own hearts, in fear of what might happen if we are found to be just like the rest of us. But what if the pastor didn't have to hide anymore?

Everyone, including the pastors and elders, needs vs.16 in their life. A pastor needs to receive ministry from the church members, a safe place to confess his own sins and weaknesses and receive the grace and feel the forgiveness of God in a tangible, interdependent way, as this verse teaches. Now I am not just trying to get you to come and "minister" to me. I am saying that when the church is a safe place for the pastor, it benefits the entire body, because it becomes a safe place for everyone else. Then none of us have to fake a level of holiness we haven't actually acquired. This doesn't mean that we are just letting everyone be. There is a great difference between a broken despair over our sin and a defiant demand that our sin be accepted. We aren't talking about accepting or coddling sin; we are talking about dealing with sin through confession and prayer. This is putting the power to change in practice. It means that we can collectively help each other, with mercy, and by grace, in the direction of Christlikeness. Then we are involved in the healing of each other, instead of hurting each other. Then we aren't just suspecting each other, gossiping about each other, and roaming about like the "sin police". Jesus wants the church to be a healing place, where we don't have to hide. This verse teaches us how.

Unfortunately this isn't true in many churches, and it turns the good news of the gospel into little more than a cliché and a rumor, instead of a living application of God's love. But what if you didn't have to hide anymore? What if you could confess your sins, and instead of being cast out and cast down, you could be lifted up as Jesus is lifted up in your life through prayer? What if your heart could finally be healed? What if you could start overcoming that temptation? What if you could stop that sin? What if we could expose the darkness to the light, our weakness to His strength, and learn to live as ministers of the gospel of grace to one another? What if we could actually show the love of God in action? Then the world would know that we are Christians.

Vs.16 is a ministry key. In this church, our "pool of prayer", the "prayer time" during the singing part of the service, and our "dinner on the grounds" are vital opportunities for this very type of ministry. You are not designed to carry the weight or walk the path alone. Yes, we are never alone as we walk the path with God, but He has designed it so that we also walk with others along the way. Your way doesn't work, it only makes it worse. Your hiding out is hurting people, including me. Do yourself and all of us a favor, and get involved. I'm calling you out, out from your hiding place. You don't have to hide anymore.

confess your sins to one another and pray for one another – this requires transparency and humility. You have to want to be free, to be healed. Are you still in love with your sin? Confession means saying the same thing that God says about it. Confession doesn't just mean saying that you did it, but that what you did was wrong. This confession to others is made after we have first confessed to God. You've been praying personally (vs.13), you've taken it to the elders (vs.14-15), and now you also come to your fellow believers for spiritual support (vs.16).

Sometimes this does involve personal sins. But many times this is not about sin as much as it is about weakness. This is someone who is struggling in a difficult situation, they are spiritually exhausted, weakened, and they need emotional and spiritual encouragement and healing. Of course, if they have been in this state for a while, and they haven't told anyone else, their sin may be that they've been hiding out, suffering and struggling in silence, instead of following God's design and means of grace for their life. You have to confess, you have to agree with God that your way doesn't work, it only makes it worse. You don't have to hide anymore.

Many if not most commentators tell us that this has to do with the confessing of sins to those we have sinned against, like when we seek forgiveness from them for our trespasses against them. We take the issue to God and then we must also take it to the person we sinned against. I don't think that this is the only thing James has in mind here, but in any event, there are some dangers to avoid in this process. We must use discretion when talking to others, whether we are the one who is confessing or the one who is being confessed to.

When it comes to the matter of personal sins against us, the goal of confession is forgiveness, and this not an opportunity for future vindictiveness. Without the forgiving heart and the faithful prayers, this won't heal, it will cause further harm. The point is that we are supposed to turn this confession into a matter of prayer that seeks for reconciliation and restoration. Both sides of this will need to pray for each other and trust God. We have to watch our motives.

We also must be careful when it comes to matters of accountability or counseling. The one who is confessing needs to be careful not to fall into a sort of unhealthy exhibitionism. You don't have to tell every sordid detail about your particular sin. You don't want to tempt others with your own temptations. And the one who is being confessed to needs to be careful not to fall into a sort of unhealthy voyeurism. You don't have to know every sordid detail about a particular sin in the life of another. We need to bear each other's burdens, but we also must be careful not to fall into the same sin that is being confessed (cf. [Galatians 6:1-2](#)).

You aren't supposed to talk to everybody about everything. This is one reason why the process often starts with the elders. If they know what's going on, they can help protect you and defend the truth and put an end to gossip. They can advise you on a wise course of action. Of course, the elders don't have to necessarily know everything about everyone either. It just means that you must be wise, and they should be a good place to start.

The area of commission should be the area of confession. If we sin against someone, or offend someone, we don't go to anyone else, we must confess to that person, and ask forgiveness from them in order to be set right with them. If someone sins against us, or offends us, we do the same thing. James is not advocating for the public confessions of private and secret sins. If I sin privately against my wife, I confess to her privately. If I sin against my family, I confess to my family. If I sin against the whole church, I must confess my sin to the whole church. We shouldn't privatize publicly committed sins that affect many, or publicize privately committed sins that should be confessed to the individual alone. If the sin I commit is a sinful thought in my heart alone and not an outward deed, I confess my sin to the Lord alone. Imagine the injuries that would be done if everyone just expressed everything that was on their minds. This verse is not a call to tell everyone how you feel or confess to someone the evil thoughts you have against them.

There is a danger of treating believers like personal priests. When confession of sin becomes penance rather than repentance, there is a danger of turning to others to help us quiet our guilty conscience. It might wind up like a “confession circle”, where the act of verbalizing our struggle is seen as the healing itself. But it isn’t. Confession is with an eye towards repentance, it is not the healing itself. The prayers for cleansing, forgiveness, repentance, reconciliation, and restoration, these things matter. Yet so many programs have us doing penance before people instead of turning to Christ which alone quiets and cleanses a guilty conscience before God. The confessing becomes a fix, it stills our noisy soul for a while, but we receive no real cleansing, so there is no real healing or godly change. We may even be “cleaned up” on the outside but our hearts are still not clean on the inside. When we’ve found a godly and compassionate person who will pray for us, we can all too easily start to go to that person for relief of a guilty conscience and then not go to Christ for forgiveness. When we do the former and not the latter, we have fallen into the trap of turning a friend into a personal priest.

When we have personally wronged, wounded, or sinned against someone else, we are to go to them directly, in private. This is what we need to do when we are seeking forgiveness (cf. Luke 17:3-4). Forgiven people become forgiving people who also seek forgiveness. I have written about this topic so much, and so have others, but let me just say that if believers would just get this one aspect of their lives and their relationships right, it would be the biggest revolution the church has ever seen. We don’t want to do it, or we don’t really mean it, but a full, heartfelt confession will kill that deep hearted pride we all have inside.

We also might go to someone in private when we are in need of mature help. When we have troubles and doubts, when we have been going through a spiritual battle and we feel weak, when we have been persecuted and taken advantage of, when sickness and strife have us down, when you are stumbling, when sin seems to have a stranglehold on us, and we need biblical instruction, wisdom, counsel, and encouragement, we need the prayers of our brothers and sisters in Christ. It’s spiritually stupid to just hide out, and it is spiritually smart to get help, and follow God’s will by following God’s design for restoration when you have fallen. To try and do it all alone is spiritual suicide. You won’t make it right by going against God’s design for you to make it right. He has provided a way to get help, to get healed, to get right. You don’t have to hide anymore.

This confessing of sins to one another might also include a public confession. Sometimes a person might stand before the whole church body and confess as part of becoming a member, as they are publicly renouncing their former life (cf. Acts 19:18-20). It might be someone who was known for their sin who wants to publicly confess their repentance before their baptism. It might be that someone needs to confess as part of the restoration process of church discipline (cf. Matthew 18:15-20). Maybe someone has sinned in a public and/or scandalous way, or maybe their sin has infected the body, like bitterness and gossip and slander, and it has spread, and they want to publically confess and ask for forgiveness. For example, it is clear that at some point the man who was excommunicated from the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 5) returned, confessed his sin publicly, and asked to be restored to the fellowship (2 Corinthians 2:5-11).

I know people don’t ever seem to do that, but maybe this is why people never seem to get healed in their hearts, and why some of us never seem to get over other peoples’ past problems.

that you may be healed – This is talking about spiritual healing and restoration to the weak and those who are sinning (cf. Hebrews 12:12-13). James is talking about how we struggle with sin and how we can be weakened through trials and what to do about it; this is a bookend to how he started the letter back in chapter 1. We need to speak to God on each other's behalf. We need to be humble and honest with each other about our sins. We need to confess and to pray, because it is not just humility and not just honesty but healing that we seek. We can be healed from some besetting weakness which is interfering with our spiritual walk. And if there is a physical sickness that has occurred because of sin, physical healing may occur.

Discipleship is truth transferred through relationship, and local churches need to provide an atmosphere that is conducive to sustaining and transforming relationships. Friendships of accountability and training are central to our growth in holiness. When believers can sense and see that others are on the same team, and that there are things we can do to advance our team together, we will do just that. Again, this verse gives us a vital key to that godly goal.

Every Christian is in need of transformation. We need God's Word to guide and to motivate us. We need to hear His principles from the pulpit, and we need to encounter them in our daily Bible reading. But we also need to see those principles in action, with living examples. Otherwise church may be a place where we hear preaching about Christ, but it isn't a fellowship of people developing and displaying life in Christ.

You might protest that you've been hurt trying to do this. I am so sorry to hear that. People that pass judgment on those who come to them for prayer aren't righteous, their self-righteous, and they need some spiritual healing themselves. So maybe you went to the wrong person, but this doesn't mean that you are just supposed to go at it alone. Our spiritual lives need maintenance. If you don't confess your sin, if you don't seek the accountability of your elders when needed, if you are not involved with praying with and for other people, it will eventually catch up with you. What is within our hearts eventually, for better or worse, comes out. Our souls will grow what we feed them. If you want to grow in your sanctification, you have to be honest with Christ, yourself, your family, and your church. When you're honest and admit your sins, your need for Christ, and your need for assistance, then you can begin to deal with your need for repentance and greater sanctification. We become more like Christ and more happy when we stop living for and to ourselves. This is not just in terms of ceasing our self-centeredness, but our self-hiding.

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Our righteous standing with God is based on the righteousness of Jesus. Our union with Him means that we can begin to live righteously, not perfectly, but purposefully, and our prayers are effective to that end, as James reminds us. Of course, you aren't going to be healed from sin if you cherish that sin, and God's light won't heal your hurt if you hide out in darkness. Scripture warns us against isolation (Proverbs 10:17, 12:1, 13:18, 15:5, 10, 31-32, 18:1-2), and the first step in getting clean is coming clean. We can keep a short account with sin. We can find healing for our emotional hurt. We can find spiritual strength. We need the energetic prayers of faithful believers, empowered by the Holy Spirit, submitted to Christ. We might say that we trust God, but we reveal a lack of trust when we fail to follow God's design. He has made provision for dealing with our sins, being encouraged and strengthened in our weaknesses, and living a godly life. Prayer is a powerful force. It's time to come out of hiding, and be healed. You don't have to hide anymore.