

## *The Life of Faith*

James 5:13-20

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Today, we finish this series in James as we've looked at what does it look like to practice faith and to learn the wisdom of the faith? Today, I wanted to finish with the theme the life of faith as we look together at James 5:13-20. Hear, now, God's word, James 5:13-20.

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing 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 sins, he will be forgiven. 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. 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.

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.  
[ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Now, we ask you, O Lord, that you would meet us as we together worship you as we hear from your word. We ask you, O Lord, to equip your people, to encourage your people, that we seek to live a life of faith. We ask you, O Lord, to enable us by your Spirit to walk in wisdom and dependence on the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, we ask you, Lord, teach us. And I would ask you, help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

Now, many of us as we're writing letters to one another have very cultural and traditional ways of ending letters. And by any measure, this doesn't feel like a conclusion to a letter. But, in fact, in many ways, it is a perfect summation of all that James has been talking about in the letter that he has written. His desire is that for the people of God who are experiencing suffering and trial look to the Lord in wisdom to live a life of faith when they don't know what is coming around the next corner, or we don't know what is going to happen in the next day or week as we have learned over the last several months. It is a letter that is full of a word that I don't like using very much. It is practical. It isn't to say that other parts of the Bible are not practical, because they are. But in many ways, what James is attempting to do is to get down into the details of our lives where we often live in very direct ways, in ways that the rest of scripture does it sometimes by inference or we seek to apply them. Here, he gets down into the nitty gritty of the Christian life.

And as I read through this several times in preparation, it led me to this idea. It is more than many of our translations have at the beginning of this last section where it says, "The Prayer of Faith." But it is more than just a prayer of faith because I believe what he is instructing us in his summary is the life of faith.

So as we look at this together this morning, I want us to consider the different aspects of the life of faith that James covers in these few short verses. He tells us different perspectives on the faith, that it is a comprehensive faith, that it is a prayerful faith, that it is a confessing faith, and that it is a community of faith. So it is comprehensive, it is prayerful, it is confessing, and it is a community, all of which means to equip us to walk this life of faith. And whether you have been a Christian for a long time or you're new to

the Christian faith, or you do not know Jesus Christ as savior and you would not consider yourself a Christian, I believe this has something to say to all of us regardless of where we are in relationship to who Jesus is.

Let's begin together by looking at where James starts. I believe what he is describing in this first verse we read, chapter 5:13, is a comprehensive faith. Again, he says, "Is anyone among you suffering?" "Is anyone among you cheerful?" "Is anyone among you sick?" So in just those few short verses, he covers what I consider to be a comprehensive faith. What do I mean? It means that the Christian faith, if it has any value at all, must be a faith that encompasses the full spectrum of the human life. It must be able to be lived out in the complete experience of a human life. It must be able to give direction, compassion, and strength wherever we are in life. So if we are suffering, we are called to pray. If we are happy, we are instructed to give praise and gratitude. If we are sick, we are to ask others to pray for us.

So why then is that important? I think it is important for us to establish again and again and again that the Christian life is not meant to be only lived out in the midst of victory, success, and accomplishment. Nor are we, when we do experience those things, to feel bad for them, for it tells us if we are happy, we're to live lives of gratitude. The same is the case if we are suffering. There is absolutely no indication here that the problem is the faith. In fact, it is not the problem at all. In fact, what we must be honest in saying is that the Christian faith is robust enough to undergo the worst kinds of suffering, suffering that is brought about by our own brokenness and suffering that is put upon us because of the sin of others and the general brokenness of the world.

If the Christian faith in claiming to be comprehensive in the way James describes it, if the Christian faith in Jesus, who is at the center of our faith, is not able to be with us in the midst of these different stations in the bus trip of life, then the Christian faith is not worthy of our time. But James would tell us that wherever you are this morning, the Christian faith and Jesus, the gospel of Jesus Christ, meets us where we are. We ought not to feel bad or shame if we are experiencing happiness or rejoicing. We ought not to fall into despair and wonder if God is mad at us because we are suffering. But, rather, we turn to God regardless of our circumstances and ask Him to enter into where we are.

Consider this for just a moment. Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was well known Lutheran theologian during World War II, stood up against the Nazi regime to the point that he gave his own life in his execution because of his disobedience and his opposition to the Nazi party. Just prior to his execution, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote these words. And I believe it is instructive for us as we consider the Christian faith as to whether it is comprehensive or not. Here's what he says.

"We call the name of the one before whom all evil in us cringes, before whom fear and anxiety must themselves be afraid, before whom fear and anxiety shake and take flight, the name of the one who alone conquered fear, captured it, and led it away in a victory parade, nailed it to the cross, and banished it to nothingness, the name of the one who is the victory cry of the humanity that is redeemed from the fear of death. Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified and lives, He alone is the Lord of fear. It knows Him as its Lord and yields to Him alone. Therefore, look to Him in your fear. Think about Him. Place Him before your eyes and call Him. Pray to Him. And believe that He is now with you and helps you. The fear will yield and fade, and you will become free through faith in the strong and living savior Jesus Christ."

That was written for us by one who was about to be executed and was suffering at the hand of evil. He does not demonize others. He recognizes evil in himself. And, yet, he knows that the Lord Jesus Christ died because of evil and yet lives and was victorious over sin and death, and that Jesus is present not just in our rejoicing but is present in our suffering. And he calls us to call on Him.

And so I tell you wherever you are in your Christian life and whether you don't even know Jesus, I invite you to Him with this reality. Look to Jesus Christ because if He and the gospel of Jesus Christ

cannot be present, give guidance, give compassion, give grace, give gratitude, give strength whether we are in a place of rejoicing or in a place of suffering and all the bus stops of life in between those two, then it is not worthy of our worship. But I find that what James appeals to here is the same thing which Bonhoeffer gave voice to before he was executed. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. And He gives us not a slender emaciated faith. He gives us a robust, comprehensive truth upon which our lives can be built. And so James says, pray, give praise, be grateful, and call others to pray with you.

But it isn't just a comprehensive faith. It is a prayerful faith. And so, here, we turn to the specifics of what James calls one of those groups within this experience of faith. He says if any of you is sick, "Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing 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." What he is describing here is a prayerful faith that is in the midst of the challenge of illness. And I know that you, Columbia Presbyterian Church, are acquainted very well with the difficulties and the power and the challenges of illness. And we need to tease out a couple of things in this verse so that we are not led into confusion and theological error. And these verses have often been used to bring about a lot of confusion and error. So let's think about it for just a minute.

For James and for many of the biblical writers, there was oftentimes closely tied the belief and the truth that the presence of sin and illness often existed together. But the Bible is very clear, and Jesus Himself tells us in the gospel of John, that we cannot draw a straight line between illness and the presence of a particular sin. And what's interesting is we know that James still holds that, that while there is illness that can be brought about because of sin, not all illness is the result of it because James uses the operative word "if."

Notice what he says. "And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." What is he doing? He's threading the needle. And I encourage all of us as Christians to remember as we look at scripture to allow it to speak with the full nuance that it intends to. And that is what James is doing in teasing these things apart. He's saying a couple of things. First, it is not a magical process by inviting the elders to your home to anoint you with oil that suddenly on the other side of that you will be healed. But what it is calling for is to involve the community in faith, involve the ones who are charged with shepherding your soul to pray over you.

But nor is there any indication that healing was confined to the apostolic period. Rather, what is in view is a healthy faith that seeks dependence and trust in the Lord so that we cry out to Him in our illness asking the Holy Spirit to help us to examine our hearts, which is what Christians are called to do in a life of humility in the life of faith anyway. But when we are sick, sometimes we feel our humanness. We feel the sense of our weakness. And it is perfectly appropriate during that time, as is every day, to ask that the Holy Spirit would help us to see if there are any sins operating in our lives not because we're looking for a straight line between sin and our illness, but it is a moment oftentimes, as I have found in my illness, that it causes Randy Lovelace to stop and to be quiet. And I am grateful for those times where it has caused me to pray. It causes me to stop my doing and to lay before the Lord and to ask Him, Holy Spirit, examine me and see if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me as the psalmist says in the way everlasting. Or as the psalmist says, do not allow any presumptuous sins to reign over me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord.

These are opportunities when we are sick or ill to ask that the Lord bring not only physical healing but spiritual healing, but to be careful in understanding the two are not always connected. They're not connected for James, but they're also not completely disconnected either. It requires nuance. So as the normal way of living a humble Christian life, a dependent and trustful life, a prayerful life, so we are called to ask the Lord to bring healing.

But what do we do then? This verse when it says, "And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up," does it mean that when we pray to the Lord for healing that we will be healed? Well, yes. But the question is what do we mean by that?

This last week during the Black Lives Matter march here in Columbia at the Mall of Columbia, I had the opportunity to meet several pastors, one of whom was pastor Rogers Barnes, who is an associate pastor at Saint John's Baptist Church here in Columbia, a man of faith who walks in dependence. And it was a great opportunity for him and me to just share our lives together. And I was grateful that that march brought an African American pastor and a white pastor together, and we were able to share our lives together and learn more of one another's life.

And during that march, he received a phone call from his daughter that was very difficult news to receive. His daughter, who is in her 30's, a mother, a wife, and a daughter, received news that the drug that was being used to treat her leukemia would no longer be effective. And then he would receive a phone call from his wife who delivered the same news to him. And as we stood there together and as we considered in the midst of that march the suffering that he was experiencing, what do we say? As we talked together, we began to rejoice that while we hear James saying, let him pray, and the Lord who hears, "the Lord will raise him up," what this is saying is that when we pray to the Lord, the promise is to those who are His children. When we pray to Him for healing, He will heal us. But that healing doesn't always come the way we would desire or hope.

As this pastor and I discussed together, we declared one truth for his daughter, that she will be healed, or she will be healed. She will be healed in this life, or she will be healed when her body is raised from the dead and when she is with the Lord forever because when James uses the phrase here, "And the Lord will raise him up," it is a technical word referring to resurrection, that yes, the Lord does bring healing even after the apostolic age. The Lord does hear the prayers of those who pray for healing, and some, thanks be to God, have experienced miraculous healing and they've experienced the healing through the blessing and the gift of medicine.

But there are many of us and many of our loved ones who have not been healed in this way but who are now healed as they are with the Lord. And they will be healed, and their bodies will be made new at the resurrection. Thanks be to God. And what James is encouraging us to do is to pray, and to pray fervently, and to pray expectantly, not on our faith but our trust in the one who will raise us up on the last day.

And so here is the question. If this is a comprehensive faith, if this is a prayerful faith, James also says it is a confessing faith. But my question for us is do we really believe that? Because this is about to get very uncomfortable. When James says this is to be a confessing faith in verse 16, James says this. "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." And then he gives us the picture of Elijah and what God did through his fervent prayers.

A couple of things we need to state, here, James shifts from healing specifically on an individual body and now looks more broadly at the healing of the body, the church of Jesus Christ. And so what he's talking about, it is meant to be a confessing faith. And what do I mean by that? It is the practice of getting serious about our brokenness and asking others to help us, to encourage us, to keep us accountable, and to strengthen us. I mean, think about it this way. When he tells us, and this is the only place where it directly tells us, to confess our sins to one another, and I say to you church here at Columbia Presbyterian church and those joining us from other churches, how often is it really practiced, truly practiced, that we confess our sins to one another, not the sins that we've committed against each other, but we confess the sins to which we fall prey to someone else asking them to pray for us, being vulnerable with them?

James is actually leading us through this confessing faith to experience a broader experience of spiritual health. We're not going around like spiritual bumper cars on a Sunday morning. We pray and we talk about how we're sinners and we're in need of forgiveness. But on the outside, it looks like we've got it all together. We're doing just fine. How are you? Great. How was your week? Fine. Where are you struggling? Oh, you know, I'm really tired.

When do we honestly get real about the sinful patterns that we know exist in our lives? And it isn't an invitation to broadly confess it to anyone and to everyone in the body of Christ. But this is where life on life discipleship, this is where being in community groups seeking to build deeper relationships with one another, that there is someone or small group of people with whom you can be real and ask for prayer, with whom you can confess your own sin and your weakness. And they, praying with you and for you, are able to help you.

What's interesting is we talk all the time about reconciliation between us and God, right church? We talk about the gospel of Jesus Christ, how Jesus died on the cross for us, He was raised to life on the third day, and as we confess our sins to Him, Jesus forgives us because of His blood and gives us eternal life. And we get to say, thanks be to God, I am right with Jesus because of what He has done for me. I am forgiven. And I am reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. And that is right. We love talking about the vertical reconciliation, but we forget about the need for horizontal reconciliation, asking for others to walk with us.

It's like this. If you and I were on a bike ride together, and I get a flat tire, and I don't have a spare tube but you do, but I just keep riding along as if there's nothing wrong with my back wheel, and you're asking me, hey, how are you doing? I'm doing fine. You just keep going. I'm just going to hang out over here. Do you need anything? No, I'm good. And if you have a spare tube and you have the little compressed air to get me from where I am to where I need to be, which is back home, and I don't tell you that I have a flat tire and confess to you that I need your help, what does that make me? It makes me foolish for resisting the help and support of others.

So we are called here not only to pray to the Lord and to confess to Him but also to confess to one another. It is fully comprehensive, and it is fully confessing not just to the Lord but to each other. And in so doing, we get to support each other.

But it also means, then, that as we hear one another's confessions, and this is hard, we need to stay out of judgment. We, as those who hear the confessions of others, move towards them in relationship praying with them, reminding them of the grace that is sufficient in Jesus Christ, and to love them enough to keep them accountable, not being surprised by another person's sin, but recognizing our own sinfulness and brokenness. And when we see it in others, that draws out the love of Jesus Christ for another. Wouldn't it be beautiful if the church could work more this way? That it would be where we practice what we preach, that the church is to be a hospital for sinners which means we practice hospitality with sinners who need forgiveness. If the gospel of Jesus Christ, if our faith cannot be a confessing faith, then I tell you it is not worth our time. But James says that it is.

But he ends here. He ends here after he gives the example of Elijah, whose prayer of faith accomplished much. And it wasn't Elijah's righteousness, but it was the fact that he trusted in God's righteousness and power. And the same is the case for us. For us to approach God with expectant faith knowing that He is righteous, that He is powerful, and we put our trust in Him for one another, and for ourselves, and for our families, and for the world, and for our communities, and for our neighbors, and the Lord hears our prayers. And we pray fervently, crying out to Him again and again and again. The promise here is that the Lord will hear us. But He will not always give us what we want, but He will give us what we need. And the Lord will work.

But James finishes this letter in directing us again to the community of faith when he says,

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.

What he's calling us to again, which I've already been referencing in different ways, is to remember that it's not just me, myself, and Jesus.

And Christian, I tell you if you are hearing my voice this morning, although you have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ, do not buy into the American lie of individualism. It's not just ourselves in Jesus. We are brought with a price and brought into a body, a community of faith. And that means we are to get serious about community, and the community of faith, and the church itself.

And here's what I mean. And I want to apply it this way because what he is saying here is if you see a brother or sister in Christ who's walking away from the faith, who is walking in sin, you need to go and call them in grace and love back to the faith. That's a scary thing to do particularly right now. Think about it. We live in, as I have been calling it over the last year ago, the new puritanical age. And that is we have all the rules that we love criticizing the puritans for, and, yet, there is no forgiveness. God's law leaves more room for forgiveness than the ten commandments that our culture puts forth because those ten commandments change from one day to the next, and there's no possibility of forgiveness. And we are both the producers of culture as well as we are the products of this culture. And, now, so often we are ready to blow other people's lives up. Instead of seeking to rescue another who is broken and in sin, we seek to often blow them up. And so no one really wants to be vulnerable. And we're afraid to speak truth to other people because, if we're honest, we're afraid of people speaking truth to us.

And the church of Jesus Christ, brought to life by the gospel of grace, Jesus Himself has called us to create a body of love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and faithfulness to Him and to one another, which means we are called to keep one another accountable, not to prosecute but to love. And those are two very different things. We can seek to speak into another person's life self-righteously and arrogantly, or we can do it in saying, I love you and I am worried for you. And all we can do is, through the gospel of grace and the love of Christ, call them back to the Lord Jesus. And their response is not up to us. What is up to us is the posture that we strike when we go to them.

And here is the reality. If we're going to live this community of faith, then we must be willing to reckon with the dynamite, the power of the gospel itself, that it brings us into an uncomfortable relationship with others horizontally. That means accountability, that means confession, but that we all together, united in Jesus Christ, seek to worship and love the Lord. And His grace and mercy bring broader healing and brings reconciliation vertically and horizontally. But it is uncomfortable. It is difficult.

And I actually would suggest to us here at CPC that I think, if we are to get serious about this community of faith and life of faith, it means that we're willing to ask the Lord to disrupt our comfortable lives. It means that we actually ask the Lord to show up on Sunday morning and to disrupt our comfortable worship, that we take seriously the relationships that we have with each other. Why? Because I finish with this quote from famous author Annie Dillard when she writes this.

"On the whole, I do not find Christians outside of the catacombs of suffering sufficiently sensible of our conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or as I suspect, does no one believe the word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets mixing up a batch of TNT to kill us Sunday morning. Ushers should issue life preservers, signal flairs, and they should lash us to our pews, for the sleeping God may wake some day and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out where we never will return."

That this life of faith means that we are united to a God who can still surprise us, who will awaken us from our slumber, draw us to Himself. And as He is holy, He is making us holy. As He has loved us, we are to love Him and to love one another. And in this life of faith, understand both in the rejoicing and in the suffering the faith Jesus meets us in it. And no matter our condition, we are called to pray. And no matter where we are in our Christian life, we seek to confess to one another. And in the walk of faith, do so in a community of believers. And our God, who is good but is not safe, as C. S. Lewis once said, will lead us to a

place from which we can never return because where He is taking us is far better than where we are to the glory of His name and to the building up of His church. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you this morning for your word. We ask that you would equip us and make us more and more like yourself. Help us, O Lord, to live this life of faith dependent on you, prayerful, confessing, and in community. Thank you, O Lord, for the gift of faith. Thank you for meeting us. And, O Lord, do not stop surprising us. Hear our prayers that your church would flourish, that the gospel of Jesus Christ would be more beautiful and more bold in our sight and in the world than it ever has been. May you do this, O Lord, and may you begin with us. In Jesus's name. Amen.