JAMES

WESLEY BIBLE STUDIES
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Sola fide. Those Latin words became a rallying cry for the reformers of the sixteenth century. Long burdened by legalistic requirements that called upon Christians to earn salvation by good works, reformers like Martin Luther found freedom in the biblical truth that salvation from sin is obtained by faith alone. Not surprisingly, some of these same leaders were troubled by the writings of James, whose letter is filled with references to faith but places a corresponding emphasis on actions. Rather than seeing faith as the end of the journey, James views it as the beginning. Seeing the inextricable link between our thoughts and actions, James chooses to emphasize what he sees as the logical result of faith—changed behavior. James states, “Faith without deeds is dead” (James 2:26). It is no wonder that this little book has been ignored by some Christians, including Luther, who famously referred to it as an “epistle of straw.”

Indeed, the book of James is challenging, for the author refused to allow Christians to sit still in their relationship with Christ. James constantly pushes believers go further, grow deeper, and strengthen what faith they already have. For James, faith is good. Yet he, like Peter (see 2 Pet. 1:5–9), urge us through their letters to add virtues to it. In James we read not faith alone, but faith and.
FAITH AND ENDURANCE

Few biblical writers deal as straightforwardly with the issue of suffering as does James. His classic advice to “consider it pure joy” when suffering trials is both often quoted and often ignored. James insists that faith must naturally grow into perseverance if we are to mature. This letter insists that facing difficulties develops and stabilizes our faith and that God provides for the personal and spiritual needs of each individual regardless of what we suffer. James does not coddle believers with the notion that failure is normal in these trying times of ours. Instead, believers are urged to embrace suffering as a means of developing an even stronger faith and lifestyle. Don’t settle for merely accepting the notion that God is good. Live as if you believe it is true, would be James’ advice.

FAITH AND ACTION

There is a direct relationship between what we believe and what we do. Most of us understand that. We know that belief affects behavior. James tersely advises Christians that their lifestyle is a clear indicator of their faith. The implication is that those who claim to have faith but act in ways contrary to the gospel are really kidding themselves. Faith alone, if not accompanied by appropriate action, is worthless. In James we find some of the classic biblical texts that urge Christians to “walk the talk.”

FAITH AND LOVE

There is perhaps no better measure of our faith than the result it produces in our relationships with others. Much of the practical advice in James bears directly on this point. If we believe what we say about God’s love for us, that should result in improved relationships with others. We will keep our words in check so we don’t harm others by gossip or hurtful talk. We will treat others
fairly, not showing favoritism to the rich or slighting the poor. We will pray for one another. James sees our personal ethics as a litmus test for our profession of faith. If we love God, we will love others.

**FAITH AND WISDOM**

With its emphasis on practical living, the book of James has much in common with the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, particularly Proverbs. For James, living by faith boils down to a series of everyday actions. Faith means being tolerant of others, reserving judgment about the future, and avoiding the entanglement of loving money. We hear in James a direct echo of the teachings on practical living that Jesus set forth in His Sermon on the Mount (see Matt. 5–7).

Christians believe that Jesus is alive. If this is the case, James might ask, “Are you acting like it?”
Does prayer work? Most of us would say yes without giving the question much thought. We know what the “right” answer is. But when we face an intractable illness, a broken relationship, or a personal tragedy and pray repeatedly for God’s intervention yet see no result, we may come back to that nagging question, “What is the value of prayer?”

Knowing that all believing people will face this problem sooner or later, James addressed it head-on in his letter. Without apology, he offered the straightforward advice that we should pray with confidence for healing. Why? Because prayer works. This study will boost your confidence in the power of prayer and cause you to seek God’s help for the problems you face.

COMMENTARY

It is fitting that such a practical epistle about living the Christian life end with a discourse on prayer. Prayer is one of the foundation stones of the Christian life.

Tradition tells us that James’ knees were compared to those of a camel—rough and callused because of time spent on his knees in prayer. Words become more powerful when they are supported by a man who practiced what he preached.
Pray in Trouble and in Joy (James 5:13)

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise (v. 13). Immediately, James proposed two times when prayer is a necessity: in trouble and in joy. More than simply addressing two isolated occasions, the intent is obvious that prayer fits both these occasions and all others in between.

It is the privilege of the believer to go to God in prayer when faced with trouble. The command to pray here is not limited to any particular kind of trouble. Whatever trouble one finds oneself in, it is an opportunity to pray. God is concerned about everything that troubles us and does not intend for us to carry the burden of trouble alone. As we bring our burdens to Him in prayer, He is able to answer our prayer and lighten the burden. It is also during times of affliction that we are humbly aware of our tremendous need for God.

A vital part of being created in the image of God is that we have emotions just like Him. God is not only there for us in times of trouble but also in times of joy. Singing songs of praise is the appropriate response to happiness. God has provided our happiness, and it needs to be expressed back to Him. The quality of our singing voice has little to do with praise in song. We are conditioned to hearing public singing of high quality, but there is nothing more lovely than praise coming from the heart intended for God’s benefit, not for the benefit of a human audience. A clear evidence of a joyful congregation is the exuberance expressed when singing praise to God. Worship music lacking the emotion of joy is less than attractive to anyone. Praise is the highest form of prayer.

Pray for Physical Healing (James 5:14–15)

God gives a clear command to the sick. He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with
oil in the name of the Lord (v. 14). Given the poor medical treatment of the day, this command is understandable. Prayer was the only recourse and hope of recovery for Christians in the first century. With advances in medical technology of the present day, many illnesses that were potentially fatal then are now of little concern. Consequently, prayer often becomes a plan of action only when medical treatment fails. But prayer should be the first response of the Christian. We should be more dependent on God than on the doctor.

WORDS FROM WESLEY

James 5:14

Having anointed him with oil—This single, conspicuous gift, which Christ committed to His apostles (Mark 6:13), remained in the church long after the other miraculous gifts were withdrawn. Indeed it seems to have been designed to remain always, and St. James directs the elders, who were the most, if not the only gifted men, to administer it. This was the whole process of physic in the Christian church, till it was lost through unbelief. (ENNT)

The elders of the church (v. 14) should become involved with those who are sick. The sick are not just to call out to God, but they are to look to the elders of the church to pray with them. One of the joys of the Christian life is the community of believers; no one must suffer alone. The body of believers supports, encourages, and prays for each other. Turning to God does not mean we foolishly ignore medical treatment.

There is some evidence that the anointing oil used at this time was purely a medicinal treatment rather than a spiritual symbol. It was characteristic of early Christians to care for the sick. If the anointing with oil was medicinal in nature, then this verse presents a valid case for combining medical technology with spiritual dependence on God. Prayer for the sick is not commanded as a
placebo, but it is clear that the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well (v. 15).

It is the responsibility of the sick person to contact the elders and request prayer and anointing. There are always those in the church who expect the elders to invite themselves to the laying on of hands. Certainly prayer can be given on behalf of the sick without their request, but the laying on of hands and anointing with oil are clearly to be at the request of the sick. Once that request is made, it is the responsibility of the elders to respond accordingly. The healing is always a work of God. The elders pray in the name of the Lord.

This promise should not be used as a guarantee that God will always heal—if we have enough faith. Too many Christians have placed blame upon themselves when a healing did not take place, assuming that their faith was weak. This passage must be kept in balance with all of Scripture. Often God will heal, but if physical healing is not in the best eternal interest of the individual, healing does not always take place.

Pray for Spiritual Healing (James 5:15–16)

It is not by accident that James immediately moved from physical healing to the forgiveness of sins. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven (v. 15). Jesus was interested in physical healing, but He was even more concerned with spiritual healing. Often, before healing someone physically, He would heal them spiritually by saying, “Your sins are forgiven.” He came first to redeem sinners and forgive sins. Physical healing is valuable only as it leads to spiritual healing. Prayer is the avenue for forgiveness of sins. There is no other remedy for sin, other than confession and repentance.

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed (v. 16). Prayer combined with confession also brings healing to broken relationships
among believers. The purpose of confession is reconciliation and healing. Any confession that does not move toward that end is inappropriate. The *Beacon Bible Expositions* helps us understand proper confession: “Secret sins should be confessed specifically to God alone. Sins against persons should be confessed to those persons, as far as this is possible. Public sins should be publicly confessed.” James’ command of verse 16 is seldom heeded by Christians. Many divisions exist in the church today because Christians are hesitant to admit their offenses to each other.

**WORDS FROM WESLEY**

*James 5:16*

In the evening three women agreed to meet together weekly, with the same intention as those at London—viz. ‘to confess their faults one to another, and pray one for another, that they may be healed.’ At eight four young men agreed to meet, in pursuance of the same design. How dare any man deny this to be (as to the substance of it) a means of grace, ordained by God? Unless he will affirm (with Luther in the fury of his Solifidianism [“faith alone”]) that St. James’ epistle is an epistle of straw. (JJW, vol. 2, 174)

**The Power of Prayer (James 5:16–18)**

The only qualification given to the one praying is that the **prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective** (v. 16, emphasis added). Only one whose sins are forgiven and who is in right standing with God can claim power in prayer. “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened” (Ps. 66:18).

**Elijah** (James 5:17) is cited as an example of a righteous man who experienced the power of prayer. Although he was nothing more than a man **just like us**, he was able to change weather patterns by prayer alone. There is no doubt God was the source of Elijah’s power. It was not the power of Elijah that
was able to stop and start the rain. There is also no doubt that Elijah was the instrument God used to accomplish the miracle. Elijah’s prayers were the channels God used to accomplish His will. It is still the same today: The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective (v. 16).

It must be noted that Elijah . . . prayed earnestly (v. 17). Often our prayers are without passion. It’s not that we don’t mean what we pray; it is just that our entire selves are not thrown into the prayer. We want the answer, but we don’t want it desperately enough. We pray as if it doesn’t matter whether God answers the prayer or not; this is not earnest prayer.

Spiritual Restoration (James 5:19–20)

James clearly stated the possibility of wandering from the truth. For us to be responsible as moral agents, we must have free will. Each person is responsible for his or her own actions, choices, and decisions. Wandering is a choice of the individual, not something that befalls a person without his or her consent. The error of his way (v. 20) refers to free choice. This error is not an unintentional mistake. It is a voluntary act of misconduct.

It is the responsibility of the believers to do everything in our power to bring him back (v. 19). Our discomfort in confronting someone about his or her spiritual wandering is more than surpassed by the joy of saving someone from spiritual death. The salvation of souls is the greatest work in which the believer can participate, but keep in mind that we are only participants. No person can convert another. Even God has chosen to limit himself in that He will not convert a sinner apart from the free will of the sinner him- or herself. As we labor together with God for the conversion of sinners, each person remains accountable to God for his or her own choices.
When the sinner’s sins are forgiven by turning to God in repentance, God will cover over a multitude of sins (v. 20). God fulfills His promise to forgive us when we confess our sins to Him (see 1 John 1:9). We need to make sure our personal life is right before God and encourage others to do the same.

**WORDS FROM WESLEY**

*James 5:19*

As if he had said, I have now warned you of those sins, to which you are most liable. And in all these respects watch not only over yourselves, but every one over his brother also. Labour in particular to recover those that are fallen. *If any one err from the truth*—Practically by sin. (ENNT)
DISCUSSION

Part of the way we learn faith, trust, and hope is by investing our hearts and lives in prayer.

1. Describe the specific steps James listed in this passage concerning prayer for healing.

2. What is the relationship between confession and healing?

3. Elijah is used as a biblical example of effective prayer. What other examples can you name?

4. Do you think James’ instructions are meant to preclude the use of modern medicine? Why or why not?

5. Can you think of other Bible verses or stories where Jesus commended someone for his or her faith?

6. Why does prayer so often seem to be a last resort for Christians?

7. Do you believe miracles still occur? Explain.

8. Have you ever helped to “turn a sinner from the error of his or her way”? Without revealing incriminating details, tell about the change you saw in the person’s life as a result.

9. What are some ways we can draw near to God?

PRAYER

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.
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