

HOW TO PRAY

Pastor Jeff Wood

Oct. 1, 2017

Last week the message was preventative maintenance. We tied it into the hurricane and said the time to handle and face and overcome a hurricane is not when the winds are already whipping you but before. The Bible emphasizes God's care for unity and one of the helps to it is to jettison grumbling and quarreling. So when we are not facing any grumbling, we looked at not giving it any quarter down the road. The topic had us asking if we personally care about unity and whether we actually are in active renewal to have grumbling be less and less a part of our own lives.

One of the antidotes to grumbling that we cited was prayer. James says we get sideways with life and each other, we quarrel, because because because... we have forgotten to pray. On this world communion Sunday, when we think of God's church around the world being a house of prayer for all nations, when we at Table commune with God, let's consider appropriately today, prayer.

Several years ago I installed a new dishwasher in our house. When I did that I found there was a small screw that was to go in an obvious hole. The difficulty was that the hole, while obvious, was very difficult to get to. I know because I tried and tried for twenty or thirty minutes before I began to think nasty things about the engineer who designed that dishwasher. Then I remembered a "thingamajobber" I had in my tool caddy. It is a magnetizer and it makes the tip of a screwdriver into a magnet. Then you can

perch a screw on the end and move it, even horizontally as I did, to bore it into its place. That magnetizer was something powerful and effective for helping me with my dishwasher problem.

Communication is the key tool for relationships. Prayer is the effective tool for relating to God and better facing life.

In the name then of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, these words:

James 5:13-20

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

¹⁷Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

¹⁹My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, ²⁰remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

The word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth and from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace.

There you have it, from James, a distillation of the Christian life. Kind of simple and pretty, it is: You sing to God in the good times and you pray to God in the hard times. That's the Christian life. That's the Church, people continuously singing together and praying together. James in this passage mentions first, and spends the most time with, the praying part.

Life has, simply put, hard times. Of the hard times James doesn't say about those problems, "Ignore them," or "Run from them," or "Be hyperactive about them." He says what? "Pray about them."

I spend a good bit of my boyhood in the tropics and occasionally you'd meet an islander who was pretty native going about the beaches and boonies always barefoot. They'd build up a mat of callous on the sole of their feet. Amazing.

James, the New Testament writer who is teaching us today, was, as I told you when we opened this series, nicknamed, "Camel Knees." It had to do with the fact that he spent so much time on his knees in prayer. So much time that he developed a great callous on each one. James shares what he knows about.

He led the Jerusalem church in its infancy through all those start-up difficulties. He led the Jerusalem church, which was the first church, in its infancy and through all the persecutions. Through all the theological confusion. James, apparently, prayed through it all. He shares what he knows about. He says, "Don't run from them or ignore them or get hyperactive about them." He says, "Pray about them." problems."

How do you do that? There is a lot that could be said about that but begin by noting that James would say --

You must get around to it. You must get around to actually praying. Do not count thinking about your problems as praying about your problems. Do not think of attending a class on prayer or reading a book on prayer as the same thing as praying. I've got lots of books on prayer and one of the reasons is that it is easier to have books on prayer or to read books on prayer than it is to pray.

We learn to pray by praying. We pray by praying. The first church I was called to was a large church with five or six pastors. Consequently, all but the senior pastor would preach only once or twice a year. It's hard to learn to preach preaching just once or twice a year. You learn to preach by preaching regularly. You learn to pray by praying regularly.

Maybe you say, "Don't hold me back from getting after today by asking me to stop and pray." Or maybe you have so much to do that you think, "I can't dilly dally with prayer." Or maybe you say, "I'm not in the mood so I'll wait til tonight when I'm in an appropriate mindset." And one day leads into the next day which leads into the next day. Seems dirt simple but to pray about your problems you must actually get around to praying.

Praying is just talking to God. Set an appointment just like you do with a business associate or with a doctor. Put right there on the calendar. You don't pass on those appointments because you're not in the mood. Perhaps going for a walk and talking with God just like you'd do with an exercise buddy is the ticket. Are a "Dear Diary" person? You could talk with God in diary-format, "Dear God." But figure out whatever it is for you that will actually help you to pray. You and I must get past intending to pray and get to actually praying. Find what works for you ... and what works for a season may not work forever. Pray ... and pray meaningfully for you.

You must ask and act, act and ask. It isn't one or the other but both/and. I once read, "Don't just do something, stand there." That's the encouragement to pray. But the Christian life is also, "Don't just stand there, do something." It is both/and. If you have a chemistry test and only an hour to study for it. If you

spend the whole hour praying, that isn't going to cut it. If you spend the whole hour studying, that isn't going to cut it. Pray and then study.

Speaking of cutting it, there's a butcher who has a lot of meat to cut. He knows because he cut a lot yesterday and there's more today. He wants to get after it and someone says, "Take some time to sharpen your knife." He could say, "I can't take the time" or "I'm not in the mood." But does that help him? Just so, "Lord, I have a chemistry test in an hour and I ask you as I begin to study to make my mind sharp and help me to recall to the best of my ability when the test begins." You have just there asked and acted, acted and asked.

This comes up in this passage with the word, "Oil." With a sickness let the elders anoint with oil. Oil in that day and age was medicinal. It was used for soothing and cleansing and all the best physicians used it. So what is being said here between the lines is that if you are sick, use medicine and use prayer. Some small parts of the Christian family you know don't believe in utilizing medical science. They use other kinds of science freely but here they insist on nothing but prayer. That viewpoint doesn't take into account this kind of passage.

Get around to praying about your problems but don't let praying be an excuse for not working on your problems. Don't let working with them be an excuse for not praying and don't let praying be an excuse for not working.

You must share your problems and prayers with others. James has said to go to the elders. He has said to confess to one another. With issues on the inside and with the soul, go to others. Now also, with issues on the outside and with the body, go to others.

That's one of the great things about belonging to a specific church. You have real people with real names who are leaders and pray'rs and you can go to them. It isn't that you have no one. Nor do you have to go to the whole town. You have some specific people you can and should go to.

Do you remember the story in the life of Jesus that had to do with a paralytic? He couldn't get to Jesus for a miracle so his friends grabbed his palate, hoisted him to the roof, dug through, and lowered him right in front of Jesus. What the text says exactly is that when Jesus saw *their* faith he healed the man. It doesn't say when he saw the paralytic's faith he healed him. It says when he saw *their* faith. How do you pray about your problems? With others.

Do you know that God shares your problems with others? If he does, you can. I woke up one night not having seen Jack for months but he was on my mind. I prayed. A few days later I found out he had been in an automobile accident that night I prayed.

One night our Christian neighbor was awakened in the middle of the night. She didn't understand why she was awake but she was impressed to pray for a friend. So she prayed for her earnestly and the time was 2:00 a.m. That woman at that very moment was in the midst of final labor. Her baby was born at 2:17 a.m. God woke up that neighbor, Cindy, and shared a prayer request about Ann with her. If he shares prayer requests, you can too.

You must have a clean life. The verse does not say that the prayer of anybody is powerful and effective. The prayer of a *righteous* man is powerful and effective. Psalm 66:18 says that if I regard iniquity in my life God doesn't hear my prayer. This isn't about have a squeaky clean life as much as it is

about having a right relationship with God. Righteousness is having a right relationship with God. If your relationship with him has jumped the rails, don't act like it hasn't. Say, "I got off track and I'm sorry." Now the communication can flow.

Think of it this way. If you live like a jerk, and come "Hail fellow well-met" into my office and ask for \$5, I'm not very inclined to give it to you. If you are my child and there's something "not right" (unrighteous) between us and you ask for \$5, I want to talk with you about what's "not right" between us. I don't want to just hand over \$5. If we are good, if integrity in our relationship and a commitment to each other, then I'm much more likely to give the \$5. Same with God says James.

It really isn't quite right to say that prayer is powerful and effective for our problems because it isn't prayer by itself that is powerful and effective. It is that prayer connects us in conversation *with God who is powerful and effective*.

I read once about transatlantic surgery. Very cool. The patient was in Europe and the doctor was in America. Via telecommunications and robotics the doctor didn't tell a doctor at the other end what to do but the doctor actually physically performed the surgery himself. Wow! The telecommunications and the robotics are very powerful and effective but they're nothing without the surgeon.

James assures us there is one who is willing to touch our lives ... through prayer.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

*If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call. pastorjeffwood@gmail.com
www.welovefirst.org
www.facebook.com/welovefirstsebastian*