

SORRY, HELP AND THANKS!

Sermon, September 30, 2018

Text: James 5:13-20

Over the past month we've read the epistle to James almost in its entirety, skipping over just a few sections here and there. We've heard this brother of Jesus counseling we are not only to hear the Word but we are to do it, because faith without works is a faith that DOESN'T work, and a faith that doesn't work is in reality no faith, it is dead faith. We've been admonished by his cautioning against showing partiality or favoritism, and we've taken to heart his sober reminders to us of the destructive evils of a loose, uncontrolled tongue. And now, we've just read some of his closing remarks. His final words of wisdom in the closing chapter of this letter to the church in Jerusalem concern three main responsibilities of the church. **Praying, Healing, and Rescuing.** **Praying:** being constant in prayer, **Healing:** caring for the sick and needy, and **Rescuing:** doing what we can to lovingly turn people around who have wandered from the truth, helping to rescue them from the very real short and long term consequences of their ways.

The first responsibility James cites is *praying*, as if to say, "*Don't even attempt the other two responsibilities until you get this one right!*" James asks in so many words, "*Are any among you in trouble? Pray! Are any among you cheerful? Pray! Are any sick? Pray! Have any sinned? Pray!*" Pray for yourselves, pray for one another, pray for your loved ones. There is a line I've used in many wedding homilies: "*There are nine words to repeat, and repeat often, in a successful relationship of marriage. Those nine words are, 'I was wrong, I am sorry, I love you.'*" Well, in a similar vein, there are only THREE words (not nine) to repeat often, in our prayers. In fact, we can effectively boil down all prayers to three basic petitions we should pray frequently and often. (1) "*Sorry!*" (2) "*Help!*" and (3) "*Thanks!*" Acknowledge our sinfulness, asking for help, and acknowledging our gratitude ... all are acts of submissive but loving humility toward God. And as we read in chapter 4 last week, "*Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.*" And as we are lifted, we will change ... and be better equipped to effect change in the world about us.

Biologists tell us our bodies are approximately 60% water. You know, it doesn't take much to affect water for good or ill. We all know water is profoundly influenced and affected by its environment. It doesn't take much to pollute water. Well, I think if we are 60% water, then it stands to reason we are profoundly affected by influences in our environment, as well! It matters what we look at, it matters what we listen to, it matters where and how and with whom we spend our time! Our words, our thoughts, our environment, how and where and with whom we spend our time, what we look at, what we read or view, all these influences affect us on a deep physical and spiritual level in ways we don't fully know and/or realize. And it stands to reason that spending time in prayer, spending time in the presence of Purity and Holiness, profoundly affects us for the good in ways we won't fully realize ... just as does spending time in the presence of impurity profoundly affects us in so many negative ways. Not to take the analogy too far, but bringing ourselves into the presence of God will make quite a splash in the water of our lives! James tells us when we pray, we not only draw near to God, but God draws near to us ... and things *change*. If nothing else, WE change. For the better. So, PRAY! That's the primary responsibility of the church cited here by James.

The second responsibility of the church cited by James is to heal ... to do what we can to care for the sick and the needy. Verse 14: "*Is 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. And 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.*" Just as a brief aside, and not all scholars agree on this, but in this particular context anointing with oil may have been a common medical procedure; it may have been synonymous with "apply medication." Pray, **AND** give medicine! ¹ The phrase "*the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well*" is translated in the Revised Standard Version: "*... the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick.*" The Greek word "save" used throughout the New Testament for salvation also carries the meaning to be made **well**, to be made **whole**, to be restored, to be healed. Salvation was not just about saving souls; it was and is about saving, salvaging *whole* people body, soul and spirit. In fact, the Latin stem of "salvation" is the word for "salve" or "healing ointment." And the Greek phrase translated "raise them up" can mean either "raise from sleep" or "raise from death." I could do a whole series of sermons on the topic of seemingly unanswered prayer; suffice it to say for now we know in our own experience that not every prayer, anointing or laying on of hands will result in a return to physical health, no matter how earnest or faith-full the prayer and/or the one(s) praying. Even Jesus Himself did not have all His prayers answered as He hoped (*see. Gethsemane*), nor did He heal every sick person He encountered in the Gospels. And James isn't promising physical healing will always come from our prayers. Properly translated, I believe the promise here is that the prayer of faith indeed has the power to save and raise up. In short, God will heal and make whole ... sometimes even in this life! In the meantime, we are to be faithful to pray and apply the healing arts.

¹ For an interesting article on this topic, see <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/118-anointing-with-oil-james-5-14>

Jesus spent His three years of public ministry preaching, teaching and healing. The first generations of Christians continued to be known as preachers, teachers AND healers. Throughout history the church became the center for healing of all sorts. During the flowering of monasticism the cloistered ground of the herbarium, the herb gardens, became the community pharmacy. The herbalist monks, the physicians of their day, tended body and soul. When the Black Death, the deadly plague, spread across all of Europe in the middle ages, there was no known cure, yet visiting the sick, tending to their spiritual needs as well as their physical comfort, was faithfully carried out by Christians, clergy and laity. When everyone else was running away and out of town, Christians stayed and offered the “salve” and “salvation” of Christ, though there was no guarantee they would not themselves be infected; indeed, many were. But they were heavenly minded people, who worshipped a God who did not abandon this suffering world, but personally entered into the pain and suffering of this world to redeem it, thus demonstrating that human life is worthy of saving. So they did what they could to offer the “salve” and “salvation” of Christ.² Most Puritan pastors were trained in medicine. Cotton Mather, Puritan pastor in 17th century Boston, is known even by secular historians as the first significant figure in American medicine for his role in the development of the smallpox vaccination. As medicine continued to develop, it was Christians who took the lead in establishing hospitals to meet human needs in the name of Christ. Today there is hardly a major American city that does not have a hospital with a Christian or denominational name in its title. In the German language, the word for “nurse” is “krankenschwester”, which literally translates into English as “sick sister.” It is an ongoing etymological and historical reference that the women who were known for working with and caring for the sick were primarily nuns, or sisters. In short, the church has always been in the non-profit health care business, it’s only been a relatively recent historic development that this became the purview of the government ... but that’s another sermon.

The first responsibility is **praying**, the second is **healing**, and the third responsibility of the church is **rescuing**. Verse 19: *“My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.”* The Reverend Clarence LaVaughn Franklin, former pastor of the New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan, had a unique perspective on the Parable of the Prodigal Son which I think relates well to this responsibility. The late Rev. Franklin is probably better known as the father of the late “queen of soul” Aretha Franklin, but in his time he was a celebrity in his own right; he was one of the first ministers to have sermons recorded on vinyl records for sale and distribution long before daughter Aretha’s music was sold. (*C.L. Franking passed away July 27, 1984, after having been in a coma five years following being shot twice at point-blank range. It was just after midnight on June 10, 1979, he was shot during an attempted robbery at his home in Detroit.*) This week I just listened to his sermon on the Parable of the Prodigal Son (*which I downloaded for 99 cents on Amazon Music Prime*). He pointed out the Prodigal Son is the last of three parables in Luke 15 where Jesus tells about lost things. First, Jesus tells of a lost sheep, which is lost **property**. Second, He tells of a lost coin, which is lost **money**. Third, He tells of a lost **child**. In the story of the lost sheep, a shepherd went back over his steps and searched in every valley until he had regained his lost property, the sheep. In the story of the lost coin, a woman swept under every bed and behind every door and in every corner until she had found her lost money, the coin. But in the story of the lost child, no one went out to look for him! Nobody went after him. They all just let him go until he came back. Rev. Franklin went on to make the wry observation that people will retrace every step and consult every lawyer in town in order to recover lost property. People will turn the house upside down, work extra shifts or launch special appeals in order to try and regain lost money. But too few will do what it takes to go out and try to regain lost children ... lost friends, lost spouses, lost neighbors ... and that is what James specifically wants us to do in this third responsibility of the church!

Living in a church community is about taking care of property; it is a conscientious and responsible thing to do to rescue the church property from physical decay and neglect. But as James reminds us, living in a church community is also about taking care of the human “property,” about doing what we can to rescue those who are suffering from spiritual decay and neglect, about lovingly and caringly going after those who have wandered from the truth. When people wander from the truth, we tend to let them go and leave them alone. We tend to wait on them to come back before making a move toward them. If they never “come to their senses,” as did the Prodigal Son, well, we just leave them alone in the name of “tolerance” or “privacy.” And sometimes, I know, that really is all we can do. But James *is* encouraging us to do what we can to search people out and bring them back when they’ve wandered away out of loving concern for their well being. We can do this in all sorts of ways ... we can send them notes, messages, give them calls, let them know they are missed, pray for them ... and help rescue them from the very real short and long term consequences of wandering away from what is true, right and good.

So to review in reverse order: The third responsibility of the church is rescuing those who have wandered from the truth, the second is caring for the sick and the needy, and the first is to pray. And as we pray, spending time in the presence of our God, we become better equipped to effect change in the world about us as we set about the healing, saving, rescuing business to which we are called as a church.

² *This ministry of healing and mercy was also instrumental in bringing about the rapid growth of the early church; see <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/so-heavenly-minded-that-we-are-earthly-good1.pdf>*