

When the Church Prays: For One Another – James 5:13-20
 Mordecai Anderson
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Introduction:

Jim Cymbala is the pastor of the Brooklyn Tabernacle in Brooklyn, NY. As a young man, he preached to a, then struggling congregation of 30 people in an old, dilapidated building in 1971. There were nights he went home discouraged, even to the point of tears that the church wasn't effectively changing lives or reaching souls for Christ. They were in the most populated city in the East (New York), the city that never sleeps, but this tiny, tired church wasn't even making a dent.

Frustrated and stressed to the point of physical illness, Jim took a short vacation to refresh. And during that vacation the Lord energized him and encouraged him. And when he returned, this is what he said to his church:

“Brothers and sisters...While I was away, I was calling out to God to help us—to help *me* understand what he wants most from us. And I believe I've heard an answer. It's not fancy or profound or spectacular. But I want to say to you today with all the seriousness I can muster: *From this day on, the prayer meeting will be the barometer of our church. What happens on Tuesday night (during the prayer meeting) will be the gauge by which we will judge success or failure because that will be the measure by which God blesses us.*

“If we call upon the Lord, he has promised in his Word to answer, to bring the unsaved to himself, to pour out his Spirit among us. If we don't call upon the Lord, he has promised nothing—nothing at all. It's as simple as that. No matter what I preach or what we claim to believe in our heads, the future will depend upon our times of prayer. This is the engine that will drive the church.”

That was a bold move, but I think he had a point. The church was uprooted from its traditions and stagnancy, and it began to grow. Over the next 20 years, God saved thousands of people through the ministry of that church. To this day, that church continues to hold a Tuesday Night prayer meeting.

The first century church devoted themselves to prayer, too. Perhaps that's why the Bible says that the Lord added to their number DAILY those who were being saved. It wasn't just on Sundays or Wednesday nights that lives were changed, but every day! There is power in prayer.

In James 5:16 we are commanded to pray for one another. When we pray for one another, we call it intercessory prayer. We speak to the Lord on their behalf, because we believe that it's the best way to help. We intercede for others because prayer makes a difference. I believe when the church prays for one another, that's when we become what God intended for us to be.

And the bible specifically mentions several categories of people for whom we should be praying.

I. Pray for Ministers, Missionaries, and Elders.

James 5:13 – 13Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

Have you ever been in trouble? What this verse means when it asks if we're in trouble is: are we suffering, or are we facing misfortunes or afflictions. Haven't we all been in trouble at one time or another?

We have difficult decisions to make.
 We have painful illnesses to overcome.
 We have troubled relationships to mend.
 We have disorganized finances to sort out.

Most of all, we have spiritual battles in our lives. We struggle with temptation, and we are tempted not to trust in Jesus Christ. And the Bible says we need to pray about those things, but we need to pray FOR OTHERS who face them, too.

Jesus said blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness. My experience has taught me that spiritual troubles are the most difficult to overcome and are most often experienced by spiritual leaders. Paul often asked for his listeners to pray for him to preach the Word. "And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Colossians 4:3-4, NIV.

Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. 2And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2, NIV.

Missionaries need our prayers. Many who live in foreign countries trying to share the Gospel are threatened, beaten, and even killed.

Most Americans once thought persecution of the church was something of the past. But we now know that there have been more Christian martyrs in the last 100 years than in the first 1900 years of the church COMBINED.

We need to pray for Johnny & Helen Scott who are finishing their training in Bible Translation before going to live among a people who have never read God's Word. We currently give Johnny & Helen \$100.00 a month as a church, and together with other gifts, they have 76% of their financial support, which means they have a budget deficit. They need our prayers first and foremost. Let's pray that they will gain the full 100% of their financial need, and let's pray that they will complete their training on time. Let's pray for their continued courage to be away from family and friends and to face an unknown future among a primitive people. Let's pray for their marriage to continue to honor Christ. Let's pray that Johnny and Helen will have the wisdom and passion to drive their efforts. Let's pray that they will be successful in translating the Bible for people who desperately need to hear it.

We also need to pray for our elders here at FIF. Would the elders stand? God has called the elders to be shepherds of the congregation, and to be examples to all of us for our Christian walk. They are commanded to maintain unity in the church, to instruct from the word of God, and to be overseers of the ministries of the church. That's a high calling. Just like all of us, these men are not perfect, but they have embraced this important role with the hope that God will mold them into the kind of men they need to be. They need our prayers. We should pray for their marriages to be strong, and for their children to serve the Lord. We need to pray that they will have courage to do what they need to do and discernment to know when and how. We need to pray that they will walk and lead this church in the direction God wants us to go. Let's also pray that when they have doubts or reservations about their abilities that they will trust in God to be their strength.

I also ask you for your prayers. I believe God has called me to be in ministry and to serve this congregation. But I also know that I often make mistakes and fall short of the task God has laid before me.

When he got up to preach at Southeast, my mentor Bob Russell had a small group of people slip into a back room to pray for him the whole 30 minutes. While he was giving the sermon on stage, they were on their knees in the back room asking God to give Bob strength and wisdom and courage to speak the truth.

So pray for me as your minister. Pray for your elders. Pray for missionaries like Johnny and Helen Scott. And pray for young people who may one day consider serving in the ministry. Jesus said in Luke 10:2, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the

harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” So pray for others to consider being a servant of God, and pray for those already serving.

And the Bible specifically mentions to...

II. Pray for those who are sick.

James 5:14-15, “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. 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.”

Christians probably do a better job praying for those who are sick than for any other category, but we could do a better job. First,

1. Be Specific. We have a prayer list not for our Sunday morning worship, but so that you can take this home and use it in your prayer time. It’s okay to pray for the Lord to be with someone who is ill, but it’s a lot better to pray about the exact need that’s mentioned.
2. Recruit the elders for help
 - When the elders pray, there is special power from God. There’s nothing mystical about having the elders pray over a sick person and anoint with oil. But from time to time this is exactly what our elders have been and will be called on to do. What the bible means here is when someone is very sick, we should have the most spiritual men in the church pray for them and offer the best medical treatment available, because oil was medicine back then.
 - Understand, though, the elders’ prayer and touching a person with olive oil is not a magic formula, and it doesn’t always work. It didn’t work for Paul who said he prayed to the Lord about a thorn in his flesh, but the Lord didn’t take it away (2 Corinthians 12:7). And another time Paul had to leave a coworker in ministry behind because he fell ill and prayer didn’t make him well (2 Timothy 4:20).
 - But it does work often, and there are members of our congregation for whom it has worked.
3. It’s a prayer in faith. That doesn’t mean if the person doesn’t get well that there was not enough faith. Even Paul wasn’t healed. God’s ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. But in faith, we pray and let the Lord’s will be done.
4. But here’s the bottom line when it comes to praying for those who are sick. Most significant is not their physical wellness, but their spiritual wellness. Verse 15 says when they are lifted up in prayer, their sins will be forgiven. So being obedient in faith and having elders pray will at the very least heal the person spiritually, and that is the most important thing. In heaven, there will be no more sickness, pain, or dying. And when Christ forgives our sins, we get to go there.

III. Pray for the guilty.

James 5:16 says, “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.

It says here we should confess our sins to one another. If we have confessed our sins to God, and we have made amends with the offended party, but we still don’t have peace about it, then we should confess to a Christian brother or sister. Sometimes we need to hear someone else say, “I forgive you”.

When James says this, he implies that the church is going to minister to each other. A healthy church is one where everyone is a minister, and everyone’s needs are important to everyone else. One of those needs is we have to offer forgiveness and grace to one another. And when you pray for someone who is guilty, you are asking God to forgive them and lead them not into temptation.

Hebrews 13:3 says “Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” Most people in prison are guilty of a crime. And yet, the Bible tells us to pray for them. We are all guilty of sin, and God knew that when others pray for us, in spite of our guilt, it restores us.

Now, I know the idea of confessing your sins to another person can be terrifying. We're afraid what others might think of us if they knew who we really are and what we've really done. We fear they won't like us as much or we will be embarrassed if word gets out. So let me try to eliminate some of those fears.

- First of all, this is not a Catholic confession where you tell a priest your sins and he gives you a list of prayers to pray to be forgiven. The Bible says we can confess our sins directly to God and he will forgive us. So this is not about our forgiveness.
- This is about accountability. And when you tell a trusted friend who is a mature Christian, they can help you and encourage you to break the habit of sin. Just like Weight Watchers. Weight Watchers works because you go to a meeting where other people know your struggles, and they can help you meet your goal. And just like any 12-step program will tell you to have a sponsor, and others who will hold you accountable to your commitment. The Bible teaches us to have accountability.
- And the Bible teaches us to keep a confidence. Gossip is a sin, just like murder or adultery. And if we are filled with the Holy Spirit, then when a Christian brother or sister confesses something to us, we will keep the matter private. And we will not judge them, but we will encourage them to get right with the Lord.
- The devil will tempt us to keep our sins private, so we will keep failing our God. And he will tempt us to spread rumors and go public with secret matters. Satan will try to divide the church that way, but a church that prays for the guilty and encourages one another to be faithful to God's word is Satan's worst nightmare.

Pray for those in trouble, pray for those in ministry, pray for those who are guilty, and...

IV. Pray for Governing Authorities

1 Tim 2:1-4. 1I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone— 2for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 3This is good, and pleases God our Savior, 4who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

The Bible here compels us to pray for our government whether we agree with them or not. Whether they are Christian or not.

I read a Christian Author this week (Bob Russell) say, “It's easier to pray for your [political] leaders when you helped vote them into office. It's more difficult to pray for them when they have a different ideology than you do, when you disagree with many of the decisions that they make, or when their integrity is in question. But remember the kind of culture in which Paul was writing. They'd never heard of a “Christian” government. They lived under a pagan Roman regime that was corrupt to the core and at times persecuted them mercilessly. Yet Paul commanded them to pray and even be thankful for those in authority.”

James 5:17-18 says: 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.

Elijah was a prophet sent to bring the nation of Israel back to the Lord. Many of them had abandoned the one true God and been sucked into the popular pagan worship of the fertility gods and Baal. And so Elijah prayed for God to intervene by bringing a drought, and the Lord did.

Then he prayed at a particular time that it would rain again, and the Lord answered that prayer in order to prove that the fertility idols had no power, and that the only one and true God controls everything. As a result, many of the prophets of Baal were killed, and the nation repented.

The only answer for our nation will be for Christian men and women to begin to pray for our country. I was reminded last night at the Eastern NC Men's retreat that we need to be in prayer for our country and its leaders. There is no political solution to our nation's problems. No candidate, no law, no judge ruling will be the answer. Our country has one hope and that is Jesus Christ. And those of us who wear his name need to seek his face in prayer so that He might spare us from his judgment.

God says in His word, "if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." (2 Chronicles 7:14, NIV).

Lastly, the Bible teaches us to pray for our enemies.

V. Pray for your Enemies

James 5:19-20 – 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.

Our church leaders pray for you, that no one will lead you astray, and that you will not abandon the church or the teachings of scripture. But it's not always easy. We might say that those who wander from the truth are enemies. They reject the teachings of Jesus to love one another and to resolve our differences. And when someone abandons the truth they often become divisive within the church and cause unnecessary controversies.

"Avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. 10Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. 11You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned." Titus 3:9-11, NIV

It can be hard to pray for an enemy – someone who criticizes you, or despises you, or who bullies you around. But it can also be hard to hate someone for whom you're praying. Rather than retaliate with evil of your own, Jesus taught us to respond with prayer and love.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:44-47. "I tell you: Love your enemies^[1] and pray for those who persecute you, 45that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"

And Jesus not only taught us to love our enemies, but he modeled it. When he was dying on the cross at the hands of his enemies, Jesus prayed to the Father "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Luke 23:34, NIV. And as Jesus did, and as we mature in our faith in Him, we will follow his teaching and his example and do likewise.

Conclusion

Pray for one another. Pray for each other even if your fellow Christian is not a leader in the church or our government. Pray for her, even if she isn't sick, even if he's not an enemy. Pray for each other, even if we didn't mention their need today, because they may still need your prayer to remain faithful. Paul said,

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the

day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God (Philippians 1:9-11, NIV).

When the church prays for one another, it's a healthy body. The more we remember one another in prayer, and the more we genuinely care for one another, the more unity we will have.

Jesus prayed for each of us (John 17:21). He longs for us to be united, and one of the best ways to accomplish unity is through prayer.

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