

Week 15: *James: Prayer*

Hook



Main Point: Prayer is how we stay connected to God and live in fellowship with Him.

A recent study by the Pew Research Center (2021) found that fewer Americans say they have close friends¹ – and a 2025 survey reported eight percent of Americans have no close friends at all.² The number of close friends Americans claim to have has dropped significantly since the 1990s.³ Meanwhile, another report by Cigna (2018) revealed that nearly half of Americans feel alone or left out, and 43 percent say their relationships aren't meaningful.⁴

We are more “connected” than ever – phones, messaging, social media – but meaningful conversations are decreasing. People often scroll past each other rather than sit with each other. We live in a time when people are surrounded, but silent. People are near, but loneliness abounds.

Q: How might our relationships – especially within the Church – be suffering because of reduced communication?

Q: What obstacles prevent people from having strong relationships with others? Do you feel that these challenges have also impacted people in the Church?

Q: What are the dangers of being an isolated Christian? Who in your life checks on you and engages you in meaningful conversation?

Transition: Once again, James will challenge believers to live out their faith in today's lesson. And in the close of chapter 5, the call to action is to remain in one another's lives, restoring relationships, praying with and encouraging one another, and pursuing fellow believers who are wayward.

RECAP: In this study, we have learned that James is wisdom literature, applied wisdom that gives practical advice for real everyday situations from a Christ-centered perspective. In chapter 1, James touched on some main ideas – wisdom, trials and temptations, true religion and being doers of the Word. In chapters 2–5, he returned to those topics and went into more detail, describing how to apply them to our lives:

- That showing partiality to the rich is a sin because it is not loving the poor as ourselves
- The difference between the law of works-righteousness and the “law of liberty” and why we should choose grace
- That faith without works is dead, using Abraham and Rahab as examples from the Old Testament to show us how faith is demonstrated by action
- How difficult it is to control our tongues and the damage it can cause when we don’t
- How godly wisdom is shown through action
- That friendship with the world is enmity with God
- That we should live our lives remembering God is God, and we are not
- That no one should mistreat others for financial gain or live in self-indulgence
- That believers can persevere through suffering by looking forward to Christ’s coming again to make things right

We’ve now come to the last few verses of James. He closes his letter by talking about prayer. Prayer is how we connect with our heavenly Father who loves us. It’s not just communication; it’s communion with God. We can and should pray at all times, in all situations, because God is with us through every situation in life. Prayer is our lifeline. It’s powerful and effective.

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James 5:13–15 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 [Read]

Talking Point 1: We can and should pray in every circumstance at every moment.

Q: Why might James have listed many different situations in which we should pray?

Q: What did James believe prayer can do for us?

Jesus talked a lot about prayer in His ministry with His disciples, and the apostles talked a lot about prayer in the New Testament. In the Jewish faith, the three primary spiritual disciplines were prayer, almsgiving and fasting. This is why Jesus addressed those three practices in the Sermon on the Mount when He talked about doing all spiritual practices with the right motivation in our hearts – not to be seen by other people but out of love for our heavenly Father (Matthew 6:1–18). Jesus said that hypocrites love to pray standing on the street corners, so they look righteous to other people, but they don't really live out their faith. Those who really live in fellowship with Jesus see prayer in a completely different way.

For those of us who live in fellowship with God through Christ, prayer isn't something we do as a show of our holiness before other people. It isn't something we just do before meals or before bed at night or only when we have a hard situation that we need God's help with. Prayer is a constant part of our lives, as essential as food, as regular as breathing. Paul told the Thessalonians to pray without ceasing – every minute of every day.

James's example of two opposite situations in which we should pray – when we are suffering and when we are cheerful – says essentially the same thing. We should pray in every circumstance of our lives, not because James was putting pressure on his readers to do more spiritual stuff but because staying in constant communication and communion with God is how we can make it through every circumstance with the peace and joy of the Spirit. It's how we walk in step with the Spirit and live in fellowship with God. Understanding our faith as living in fellowship with our heavenly Father rather than a checklist of religious stuff to do completely shifts our understanding of prayer.

Prayer connects us to God in a supernatural way that can't fully be explained by human natural logic; prayer strengthens our communion with God. It's like the way we connect

with other people by spending quality time with them, but it's even deeper than that because God knows our every thought and His Spirit lives inside us. We can't put on a façade with God; He knows us even better than we know ourselves. God already knows us fully, but spending time with Him in prayer and other spiritual disciplines helps us know Him more and more over time. Not just know *about* Him but *know* Him in personal relationship. It's not just talking to God and listening to Him; it's connecting with Him.

Jesus is the head, and we are His body (1 Corinthians 12). Jesus is the vine; we are the branches (John 15). Jesus is the cornerstone; we are the living stones built upon Him. Scripture also uses the term "fellowship" with Christ – the spiritual and communal bond between believers and the triune God, and with one another through Christ. This signifies partnership, sharing and union. We can and should pray in every circumstance of our lives, good or bad. God is with us in every circumstance, so we should talk to Him about every circumstance. God's Spirit walks with us through every circumstance, in every moment.

Jesus called the Holy Spirit "the Advocate" or "Helper," the Greek word *parakletos*, which means "one who comes alongside." The role of the Advocate is to teach, lead, guide, help, comfort, and intercede for us. But the literal meaning of the word, "to come alongside," gives us excellent imagery for imagining our relationship with Him in prayer. The Spirit dwells within us, but we can also imagine Him coming alongside us and walking with us through our day, like an ideal best friend, a perfect life coach, and a loving father, all rolled into one. Imagining Jesus walking right next to us all day long can help us understand what it is like to pray without ceasing.

God knows what we need even more than we do, so we should come to Him no matter what the circumstance is. Our loving heavenly Father is ready and able to help us with whatever we need in the moment. If we need wisdom, He will give it generously (James 1:5). If we are suffering, He will comfort us, teach us, grow us through it, and use our suffering for our good (Psalm 147:3; Romans 5:3–5). No matter the situation, God is the right person to talk to about it. In prayer we submit ourselves to God's will for our lives and ask Him to mold us into who He wants us to be.

Q: Describe instances when you have felt closest to God. What spiritual disciplines or practices have helped you feel most connected to Him?

Q: What benefits do you think you would see in your life from strengthening your prayer life?

James 5:14–18 (we are reading some verses again) and John 15:1–7 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Prayer is powerful because it connects us to God's power.

James started by telling the people to pray in all circumstances, both suffering and joy. But then he zeroed in on one particular time it is important to pray – when we are sick. Some people have misunderstood or misused this passage of Scripture to teach that physical healing is always just a prayer away, if only we do it right, with enough faith and the right kind of anointing oil. But we know from experience that God doesn't always physically heal people when we ask, and it can be extremely damaging to someone's faith to suggest that their loved one wasn't healed because they weren't praying hard enough or they weren't righteous enough.

The word used here in James for "sick" doesn't necessarily mean physical sickness or disease. It literally means "weakness," which can refer to physical illness, but typically in the epistles, it refers to a weak faith or weak conscience (Romans 6:19; 14:1; et.al.). And in verse 15, "sick person" also means more generally "weak" or "weary." Remembering the historical context, James wasn't referring here to physical illness, but those who had grown weary in the midst of suffering. Those who were feeling morally or spiritually weak. They were to call for the elders to pray for them; church leaders were instructed to encourage the timid and help the weak (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

The elders were to pray and anoint the weak person with oil. In Greek culture, oil was used for medicine, perfume, religious rituals, and even to enhance performance in sports. But in the Bible, a special ceremonial anointing oil was used to symbolize the presence of the Holy Spirit upon someone when they were set apart for a sacred task. But oil could also be used in a common everyday way for grooming, refreshment or a way of bestowing honor. The term for *anoint* here refers more to the everyday usage. The elders weren't using this oil for supernatural physical healing, but for spiritual strengthening and refreshment. The fact that it was spiritual, not physical, healing is also supported by James saying the weak person's sins would be forgiven. This is not a statement that physical illness is always the result of sin in someone's life – Jesus denounced that false belief (John 9:3).

This doesn't mean we can't pray for those who are physically ill; of course we can and should! But this verse isn't a promise that if you pray hard enough, God will heal someone physically this side of Heaven. He may or He may not, depending on His will for that particular situation.

James asked the elders to pray for the weak because the elders were set apart for the Lord's service and called to strengthening the weak of their flock. But this doesn't mean

their prayers were more powerful than the average believer. James said the prayers of every “righteous person” have great power (v. 16).

James told the people to confess their sins to *one another* and pray for *one another*. Healthy Christian community is characterized by love, concern and transparency. The kind of involvement James describes here will certainly help believers not to give in to discouragement and fall into the traps of the Enemy. We need one another.

Q: What practices and habits can help you abide in Christ all the time?

Q: How do we make sure we’re a LifeGroup where people feel safe to confess sins, share burdens, and ask for prayer?

Q: In what ways does confession and prayer with fellow believers fight discouragement?

James 5:19–20 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Followers of Jesus have a heart to bring back those who wander away.

Q: In what ways does this passage remind you of the imagery of lost sheep that Jesus used?

Q: Why might James close his letter with a call to bring the wanderers back?

In these last two verses, James closes with an encouragement to his readers to do for each other what he has been doing for them in this letter – correct them in the ways they have wandered astray and lead the back to the narrow path. The word here for *wandering* isn’t just an accidental wandering away, as if the sheep just took a wrong turn. The word more literally means being “caused to wander,” “led astray,” or “deceived” (Luke 15:1-7). The Enemy can use false teaching to lead people astray, but he can also lure us away with sin and temptation, worry, doubt and fear. Scripture even describes Satan’s work as “the snare of the devil,” a trap he sets for us; to capture us so we will do his will instead of God’s will (2 Timothy 2:26).

This imagery should give us compassion for those who have gone astray rather than judging them for their choices in a holier-than-thou kind of way. Jude told us to have mercy on those who doubt. James tells us to seek after those who have been led astray, not just write them off. Jesus told us to show mercy to others as we have been shown mercy by God (Matthew 18:21–35). Earlier in the letter, James said to “judge” others by the law of freedom, showing mercy not condemnation (James 2:12-13). Those who have

wandered aren't the Enemy; they are victims of the Enemy. Our battle isn't against people, but the spiritual forces of wickedness (Ephesians 6:10–12).

When we see Christians who have wandered astray as victims of Satan's traps, snares and deceptions, our heart toward them is changed. It helps us to see them as Jesus sees them – as His beloved child who has been led astray (or for us, a beloved brother or sister). Instead of coldly judging them for their choices, we are concerned for them because they are going in the way that leads to death, not life. Because the way of sin leads to destruction – not only eternally but in this life. But the way of Christ is the way to life – not only eternally, but true flourishing in this life (John 10:10). James said bringing them back will save their *souls* from death. The word *soul* means “inner person”; bringing a brother back from his wandering will save him from the consequences and destruction of going down the wrong path in his life, like helping an alcoholic get sober. We don't want to leave our friends to destroy themselves with their choices; we want our friends to flourish in this life! We all know someone who has been captured by the lies of the enemy. Ultimately, prior to Christ we were all led astray by the schemes of the Enemy.

When Jesus talked about “removing the speck” from our brother's eye in the Sermon on the Mount, He was very clear that we had to first remove the “log” from our own eye (Matthew 7:3–5). Both Jesus and James condemned this hypocritical kind of critique of other people's sin without addressing your own (James 4:11–12). Before we try to correct someone else who has wandered away, we need to be sure we are qualified to do so – that we have taken the log from our own eyes, so we can see clearly to guide them back to the right path. And we need to check our motivations – that we are doing it with a heart of love and restoration rather than out of judgment, condemnation and superiority. Only those who are doing it from this motivation with the heart of Jesus for His people should be rebuking or correcting sin in someone's life (Ephesians 4:1-3; Galatians 6:1-2)

But if you are doing it from this motivation, with this heart, the call from James is clear – don't just let people wander off – go after them and bring them back! This is our calling and responsibility as the family of God, as the body of Christ, as the church community. It is our responsibility to sharpen each other as iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17) and provoke each other to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24) and rebuke and correct each other with the Word (2 Timothy 3:16). Not out of judgment, but out of love. The imagery of the path makes that clear. Our goal isn't to condemn them, but to bring them back to the path of life and flourishing. As human beings, we can never know the spiritual standing of another person with absolute certainty; only God knows their heart.

By bringing a “brother” “back” to the way, God may actually be bringing someone to salvation for the first time; we don’t know. Regardless, our call is the same. Don’t just let people wander off. Love them enough to bring them back.

Q: What are some common ways people are led astray from the path of following Jesus today? How can we combat those snares of the Devil?

Q: Reflect on all you have learned from the practical wisdom of the book of James. What lessons stick out to you most and why?

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Took

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The San Gabriel Mountains, located in Southern California, welcome around 4 million visitors each year.⁵ The San Dimas Mountain Rescue Team was formed in 1955 and has been assisting lost or injured hikers on the San Garbiel Mountains ever since; this all-volunteer rescue force is on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The motto of the group is: "Anytime, Anywhere, So Others May Live."

Transition to Challenges: May we be a community of believers who takes seriously the words of James 5 and commits to seeking out those who are wandering from the truth; "Anytime, Anywhere, So Other May Live." We need one another.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on all you've learned from the book of James. What are the biggest things that stick out to you and why? Which of the issues we discussed do you struggle with most and why? How is God leading you to respond to what you have learned? How can James's practical wisdom help you follow Jesus and grow in your faith?

PRAY for God to give you His wisdom to handle anything that comes your way. Ask Him to fill you with His grace, mercy and heart for others. Thank Him for walking with you in fellowship every day, and ask Him to remind you to talk to Him and commune with Him throughout your day. Ask Him to show you any ways you are not living according to His ways and help you see how to change to be more like Him.

ACT: Reread and reflect. Reread the book of James this week, ideally in one sitting, as the letter would have originally been read. Before you read, ask God to speak to you through His Word, and afterward reflect on the ways God is speaking to you and how He wants you to respond.

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/09/01/how-the-internet-and-technology-shaped-americans-personal-experiences-amid-covid-19/>

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/12/what-does-friendship-look-like-in-america/>

³ <https://www.businessinsider.com/americans-no-new-friends-2021-7>

⁴ https://www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/docs/IndexReport_1524069371598-173525450.pdf

⁵ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/visit/national-monuments/san-gabriel-mountains-national-monument>