



Westminster Presbyterian Church  
 Knoxville, TN  
 September 29, 2024  
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble  
 Sermon: “The Prayerful Imagination”

### **James 5:13-20 (NRSV)**

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

Elijah was a human like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

### **“The Prayerful Imagination”**

On Wednesday night, my son and I simultaneously came down with really bad colds, matching fevers and headaches, so I had occasion to test out James’s recommendation, that, if:

*Any among you are suffering? They should pray.*

While I didn’t call upon Elders at midnight as the fever set in, I did pray. In fact, I remember, in my fevered half-sleep, thinking, ‘This is going to make a great sermon illustration’:

*Are any among you suffering? They should pray.*

And not to discount the effectiveness of prayer, but my son and I were home, still sick, on Friday. But our prayers continued, on into Friday evening as the news came out that Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee were facing unprecedented flooding in the wake of Hurricane Helene.

You probably have seen pictures of Montreat Conference Center, where many of us have cherished memories of youth conferences and other formative events at that scared place, now devastated by flood waters. Throughout the weekend, many of my former neighbors and congregants in Asheville and Black Mountain reported damage from flooding and downed trees. And that devastation is likely only to increase today and in the coming days, as every road in and around Western North Carolina, even Highway 40, is damaged or blocked off.

By the way, if this sermon seems more scattered than usual, it's probably best to admit now, I wrote it yesterday morning, with a head full of cold medicine and a mind pre-occupied with the news coming from my former congregation in Asheville.

If there ever an authentic sermon written about prayer, here you go: *Pray for one another*, says James.

But let's just go ahead be honest, right now, prayers get a bad rap these days, don't they?

On the one hand, verses like those found at the end of the Book of James call to mind a certain Christian worldview, that claims that if you are faithful in the right way, and if you pray fervently enough, the Spirit will cure what ails you.

*The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective*, says James.

Christians are guilty taking verses like that and spinning off into magical ways thinking about prayer. This thinking is often accompanied by other spiritual cliches that you hear from time to time. Things like:

- “God never gives you more than you can handle.”
- And “Everything happens for a reason.”
- And “God helps those who help themselves.”

None of these things are found anywhere in Scripture. And it doesn't much experience to realize that life often does and will give you more than you can handle.

But still James does say that,

*The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.*

I'm a former hospital chaplain. I've prayed beside countless bedsides in hospital rooms. I can tell you: I'll never fault anyone who asks for prayers for healing.

And yes, in my experience, prayer can certainly be *powerful and effective*, but that doesn't mean it's a transaction with God or the magical route to a miracle cure. From what I have witnessed, getting better or getting worse has nothing to do with how much faith you have.

So, when James says, *The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective*, it begs us to think more deeply, about what 'powerful and effective' actually means.

So, on the one hand, verses like these at the end of James get a bad rap because Christians claim prayer can produce miracles (which implies, that if it doesn't work, then you must be praying wrong, or believing wrong); and then, on other hand, prayer *also* get a bad rap because of, you know 'thoughts and prayers.'

'Thoughts and prayers' have become shorthand for passivity and inaction in the face of tragedy. When there's a mass shooting; when there are catastrophic effects from climate change and overdevelopment; when innocent civilians get caught in the crosshairs of war, those in the halls of power are famous for offering their 'thoughts and prayers' instead of taking difficult stances or offering practical solutions to real world problems.

So, let's start out, by admitting, prayers get a bad rap these days, and rightfully so.

And yet in the midst of this inadequate prayer talk, there's James, here at the end of our Bibles, nonetheless telling us,  
*Are any among you suffering? They should pray.*

What do you want from us, James?

At this point, we should remember how important words are to James. A couple of weeks ago, we read his warning, that "The tongue is a fire" and "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire" – James, chapter 3.

And a few weeks before that, we heard his injunction, to *be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger* – James, chapter 1.

Adding to those verses, James commends his readers, not to *speak evil against one another* (4:11); and even, not to *grumble against one another* (5:19). More than

any other book in the New Testament, James is convinced of the power of words, to build up and to tear down.

But it's not just words that James is concerned with. He is equally concerned that our words and our actions match. In fact, if you know anything about James, its likely his famous saying that, *Faith without works, is dead.*

*But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I, by my works, will show you my faith. – James chapter 2.*

James wants our words and our actions to match. He would be outraged to hear 'thoughts and prayers' used as an excuse for inaction.

In fact, immediately before his famous line about faith without works, he gives an example: *If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?*

James doesn't have patience, for useless spiritual talk.

And yet, this is the same book, that says, at its end, *Are any among you suffering? They should pray.*

Prayer, then, is anything but passivity or a quick fix. Instead, James is concerned with how our prayers shape our actions, and, in turn, how our actions shape our communities.

When we pray, our focus shifts; we think not just about ourselves but one another; and even when we pray for ourselves – and James says that we should pray for ourselves – our attention is not just on ourselves but the self in relation to God. We remember, that God is so close, all we have to do is shift our attention, and we are in direct communion with the divine.

When we pray, we remember:

We are not as isolated as we imagine; and the source of our deepest calm, is closer than we think; and so is our purpose, and so is our neighbor.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Here, I am echoing an insight from Martha L. Moore-Keish, *James* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 197: "Yet healing, and 'salvation,' come in a variety of forms, not just instantaneous dramatic restoration of physical health. Healing may involve the calming of an unquiet mind or the realization of joyful purpose by

Especially in praying for our neighbor, we remember:  
 How closely we all are connected.  
 And those we are in relationship with are human beings,  
     just like us,  
     in need of grace, understanding, and forgiveness,  
     just like us.

All these things come from prayer, and they are truly miraculous. When prayer makes you feel connected with your community and at peace with your creator, that is a miracle; and from that connection come countless acts of compassion, both small and great. And in that way, prayer can and does change the world.

*Are any among you suffering? They should pray.*

Many of you have heard me talk about the Duke University religious historian, turned popular author and podcaster, Kate Bowler. For those of you who don't know her story, when she was in her mid-thirties, Dr. Bowler was just starting her teaching career and her family.

She started experiencing extreme abdominal pain that was dismissed by one doctor's office after another, until she finally got tested and those tests showed she was in stage 4 of colon cancer, at 35 years old.

Before being diagnosed with cancer, Dr. Bowler was already a historian of the prosperity gospel, and she had written a book about televangelists, and what she, with well-earned contempt, calls 'spiritual nonsense,' though she often uses a word that I can't use up here, instead of 'nonsense' when she talks about it.

Following intense chemotherapy and surgery, she became an unlikely success story with her cancer in remission, but she does not attribute this success to the strength of her prayers or the superiority of her faith. Instead, following these experiences, she's become an even harsher critic of the type of Christian magical thinking that I talked about earlier.

She started a podcast entitled *Everything Happens*. Not "Everything Happens for a Reason." But just *Everything Happens*. Because good or bad, prayers or not,

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someone in despair. Frequently, healing involves the mending of broken relationships, allowing for freer communication where there has been misunderstanding and hurt."

everything happens, on the righteous and the unjust alike. And she's written a devotional book entitled, *The Lives We Actually Have*. And she's written a memoir, *No Cure for Being Human*.<sup>2</sup>

In each of these, Bowler is deeply attentive to the way the Spirit moves in our lives, not in some magical, 'God never gives you more than you can bear' and 'the right prayer or the right faith is gonna cure you' type of way. No, she says all that is still nonsense. Instead, she writes about the ways the Spirit actually sticks with us, and actually carries us, especially on our hardest days.

An example, just Friday night, as the storms surged and my fever broke, I heard Bowler speak on a podcast,<sup>3</sup> talking about her initial days getting treatment for her cancer, and she said, in the midst of those horrible, horrible days, when she didn't know if she was going to see the next year, "I just felt so loved. So, carried, by love and by prayer." She says that Duke University Hospital was right next to Duke Divinity School where she was also a professor, and her colleges, many of them ministers or spiritual practitioners, would stop by, to pray with her, or anoint her head with oil. And she didn't feel embarrassed or ashamed by these expressions of care. She just felt loved.

She felt so loved, in fact, that she asked her colleagues afterward, about the feeling that she had throughout, of 'God being so close,' when she was at her most desperate. And over and over, these theologians at Duke Divinity School, told her: 'Yes, that's actually a thing, that the mystics and the saints of the Christian tradition talk about, all the time. At their most desperate, in the lowest points of their lives, they would have this feeling of being in the closest communion with God, unlike anything they've ever felt before.'

And Kate Bowler said, in this interview, that this communion with God and her community that she felt, it wasn't the cure for her cancer. It wasn't magic. But it was, nonetheless, a miracle.

The miracle is, that God has a special place in God's heart, for those who are at their lowest. The miracle is, that communities can pray, and we can each other of just how close God is, not despite the hard times, but in and through the hard times.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://katebowler.com>.

<sup>3</sup> *Soul Boom with Rainn Wilson*. "Kate Bowler, Can Faith and Anger Coexist?" YouTube. [https://youtu.be/w1Ikf3aMSH4?si=yzMl9Lj-fze\\_bx8U](https://youtu.be/w1Ikf3aMSH4?si=yzMl9Lj-fze_bx8U)

And you know what?

- If prayer, can turn us, into the type of community that circles around those who are otherwise most at their wits end, most in need of care and love and prayer,
- If we, by our prayer, and by our actions, can convey, to this hurting world, that God has a special place in God's heart, for those who are at their lowest,
- And also, when *we* are at our lowest, if we can also remember that this also includes us, that this also means us, in the heart of God.
- Then what James says remains true: about how *The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.*
  - It's not a miracle cure but it sure is a miracle.

Friends, this is why we pray.

Not because 'God never gives us more than we can handle';

Not because 'Everything happens for a reason.'

No, we pray for different type of miracle:

The miracle of God forming us into a beloved community.

The miracle where we witness, that when things become more than we can handle, we see, just how closely God holds us.

So let us prayer this week.

*Are any among you suffering?* Asks James.

*They should pray.*

We should pray.

In this hurting yet beautiful world, let us pray without ceasing.

Amen.