

Sermon – 09/26/21

Text – James 5:13-20

Theme – “What If...?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is our fourth and final sermon on the book of James, based on the Epistle lesson I read a few moments ago. It really is an interesting passage, this section of James’ letter. Again he deals with very practical, concrete matters. He starts off with a series of “what if” questions about how we might be feeling; then gives a little pep talk on the importance of prayer; and, finally, finishes off with an exhortation to call back those who stray from the faith.

James begins by asking: “*Is anyone among you suffering?*” What a question! It seems that we are always suffering. Maybe not **greatly** suffering, but there never is a lack of things about which we can complain. Health problems, major or minor. Financial difficulties, although few of us are in danger of starving or being tossed into the street. Family issues, from squabbling kids to dying parents. Political concerns. National security worries. Disease scares. You could go on and on forever. Are we suffering? Well, of course we are! That is the nature of life, ever since Adam’s fall into sin. We live in a fallen, broken, dying world where all of us suffer daily.

Thankfully, for most of us, our suffering is minimal compared with the suffering of others around the globe. I’m sure the people of Africa, where civil wars have been raging for years and years, would *love* to trade places and problems with us. So would those who live under tyrannical governments. Or those who no access to the freedoms and wealth we take for granted. But still, we DO suffer, don’t we?

So, what is James’ answer? Pray. Take those problems, those pains, those worries to God. And then trust that He will deal with them in the way best for you. Not necessarily that they will be gone, but

that He would give you the wisdom and strength to trust Him in the midst of those problems. That is important for us to keep in mind, for all too often we get the mistaken idea that just because we pray about something then God ought to order things as *we* desire. But note well – James never says that our prayers will be answered in the way we want; what he *does* say is that when we suffer, we need to bring it to God in prayer. And then, as children who trust their dear Father, we leave the matter in His hands and rest in peace. (pause)

James' next question is more positive: he asks "*Is anyone cheerful?*" All too often we are NOT cheerful, even though we have the greatest reason to be so: we have forgiveness and eternal life, we have God's mercy and grace and love, we have salvation and heaven. How can we *not* be cheerful when we contemplate all that? And when we do, we will find that we do just as James suggests: we sing God's praises. But do we do that very often? I have to confess that I do not, at least not as much as I should. No, the times of my complaining far outweigh the times of my praising God. So, it is good for us to hear James' reminder here of what should be a frequent and heart-felt thing for us: singing God's praises, thanking Him for all the blessings He showers down upon us daily – blessings of body and of soul. And not just because it pleases God to hear these things (although I am sure it does); not just because it is good for us to be reminded of all these blessings; but also because others will hear and see us, and they will want to have that same joy in their lives. (pause)

Now we get to one of those questions and answers that have puzzled and confused people over the years. James asks:

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.

Going back to what I said just a few moments ago, note well what James says here – and what he does NOT say. Some have read these words as sort of blanket promise that whenever a Christian is sick, and

the proper prayers are said by the right people, then he will automatically recover from that illness. But is that what James really says?

No. He *does* say that if one is sick, then he should summon the elders (meaning the church leaders, especially pastors) for prayer. And James *does* say that such prayer will “save” the person, and that he will be “raised up” – but that does not necessarily mean this “saving” is physical healing, nor that the “raising up” is getting out of the sick-bed.

Sometimes God does grant the physical healing we seek, but sometimes (in His infinite wisdom) the answer is “no” or “not yet”. That does not mean that God is mean or cruel or neglectful or fickle. It doesn’t mean that God is going on back on His promise. Perhaps God is using the continuing sickness for some good purpose. Or He is delivering the person from future and greater suffering by allowing death to come. Whatever God does, we *know* to be good and right and loving. That is His nature, which He has proven in so many ways but most of all in the gift of salvation in Christ Jesus. If He loves us that much – that He would take our own hell upon Himself – how can we ever doubt His will and ways in other matters?

But then again, there IS a sense in which we can take this particular promise of God, through James, in a physical way. That is, we do have God’s promise that He will raise up our bodies on the Last Day. Fully restored, completely healed, totally without blemish or failing or weakness. Perfect, just as were Adam and Eve before the Fall. Perfect, as is the body of our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. What will that be like? Well, we can only imagine and guess since we have no framework for understanding perfection now in our bodies. Even the strongest and healthiest of us have imperfections and flaws, we all get sick and age and die. But not then. Not when our Lord will raise us up at the last. No, then we WILL be perfect – in body as well as in spirit. What a joyous promise that is! How that should fill us with anticipation AND peace. How it helps us accept and deal with the suffering and death

that follows us now, which threaten us at every turn, which Satan tries to use to drive us away from trust in our heavenly Father. You will be healed. You will be raised up. If not now, then certainly then when our Lord comes as Judge of all! (pause)

James continues:

And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

This section is very important. And James starts off with the most important part of all: the forgiveness of sins. It all starts there; it all comes back to that too, for us as Christians. Forgiveness is at the heart of everything for us because without it nothing else matters. But with forgiveness we have all things, as Luther says in the Catechism.

So James reminds us of the need for us to continually live in repentance, to daily confess our sins and our need for (and trust in) the work of Jesus Christ for us. What a great thing it is for us to be able to confess our sins – not just to God – but also to one another, and to receive the forgiveness in His name. We have that confession and absolution in the worship service. It is available in private settings with a pastor. And we are privileged to be able to speak that forgiveness to each other as Christian brothers and sisters. It is a rich and full menu of forgiveness that God sets before us, indeed!

When we confess our sins to God directly, we can be sure He hears and grants that forgiveness for Jesus' sake. But He also blesses us with being able to hear that forgiveness proclaimed and given to us, face to face, from other Christians. And there certainly is a benefit to that which we should not underestimate. When I sin against Lisa (and I do), and when I ask her to forgive me (which I do, but not as often as I should), I know she forgives me even if she does not verbalize it. But how much more sure am I, how much more confident am I, how much more at peace am I when she *tells* me! And so it is

when we hear that absolution and forgiveness spoken to us from another, on God's authority and based on the work of Jesus.

But notice James goes on to say that we should pray for one another too. Do we do that? I hope so. But I have to confess that I do not pray for others as I should. All too often my prayers are fixated on me and mine, and not nearly as much on others. May God forgive me! Perhaps you do a better job of that than me, perhaps not. But James wants us to remember that we need to pray for our neighbor, for his needs of body and soul, just as we need to pray for ourselves. And then he attaches God's promise to it – he says that God heeds such prayer, that it has “*great power*”. Now, he does not mean that the power of such prayer is in us, or our holiness, or our merit with God. No, the power is in God and His promise to hear – and answer – such prayer. He hears us because we are His dear children, and what Father does not listen to His children? What Father would not do all He could for them, to give them what is best? (pause)

And that brings us to the final part of our lesson this morning, where James says:

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the Truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

What a wonderful promise that is! God condescends to use poor sinners like you and me to be His instruments in saving others from damnation. He allows us to be a part in His mission, His work, His gracious gift by using our words and lives in speaking and demonstrating the Gospel.

And again, I would have to say that I have not been as good at this as I ought. All too often I have left opportunities of telling the Good News go when God has granted them to me. I have not embodied God's love as I should, and so others have not been able to see His goodness and grace reflected in me as clearly as they should have been. I have made a mess so many times that I wonder

how God could ever say this about me, as James does. But the fact of the matter is He does say this about me. And you.

God uses each of us to spread the Gospel. Of our failures we are all too aware, but perhaps we forget just how much God does through us. Parents, think of how He uses you to teach your children – in word and deed, and by example of living the faith. Church leaders, Sunday School teachers, ushers, acolytes, musicians, altar guild members, choir members – it is through your service that the Gospel is preached and taught here. Whenever any of you put an offering in the plate, you too are involved. Or when you remember me, or the church, or our school in your prayers again you are part of this ministry. Just attending worship each week gives a powerful witness to the community. Or the kindness you show your neighbor, the friendliness to a visitor or stranger, the words and actions which show God in so many ways – all these too make us partners of God. We could go on and on, but I think you get the picture: God does use us, perhaps more than we ever even realized or thought about. (pause)

When we began this little series of sermons on James, I said that this was an immensely practical book of Scripture. One that teaches and proclaims a living of the faith. And so it is. Faith does always result in works, just as James says. But it is that faith in the work of Jesus Christ that saves, and which motivates and empowers us to live the Christian life. So live that faith, today and always. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS – Offertory/Offering
FE – Offertory/Offering