

Just pray...and watch things change

Text: James 5:13-20

Friends, there are many sources of inspiration for people to create funny comics – religion and church are no exception.

I particularly like this one... (Jesus telling Joseph “you’re not my real dad”)

And church comics are often a great way to speak to issues in a congregation that need to be dealt with...

Tithing for example (show tithing comic)

And one of my favorites – which I can’t seem to find online – was about the “birds of pray”

I’ve made my own version here...

The point of this little comic is that sharing our needs for prayer with each other can easily turn into gossiping and

judging and that in prevents us from asking our fellow Christians to pray for us.

Now, we’ve been looking at prayer this past month. Learning what the scriptures have to teach us about it with the goal of becoming more intentional about using prayer to cause a revolutionary change in our lives and the lives of people around us.

And friends – nothing would be more revolutionary than people being able to share the needs, very personal needs with fellow Christians without fear of judgment and gossip.

Now, I think that the groundwork for this kind of prayer revolution is already in place among us here at Valleyview.

Because by God’s grace, we are not a gossiping congregation – but we can still use the encouragement the scripture offers us to make prayer something we do with other Christians and to share what our needs are with our fellow Christians.

So – as we get ready to hear what God has to say to us about praying with each other, we should recap what we’ve learned so far...

First, we learned the Bible not only encourages us to pray more often – it commands it. Because life happens and we can confidently go to God with requests about anything at anytime.

Second, we learned that Jesus promises us that if we pray in his name God will hear us and grant the requests that we make.

But, praying in Jesus name is not a magic phrase - it means that our prayers will be full of thanks for the love God has shown us by sending Christ.

It means we understand we’re asking God for resources because we’re full partners in Christ’s mission to this world - so we can ask God for whatever we need to fulfill that “Kingdom” mission and God will supply it.

Third, we looked at how praying in this way can seem to be one more good thing to do among the many things which want our limited time.

But, good news – the bible teaches us that God provides Prayer Help via the Holy Spirit.

He will help convince us that while there are many good things to do – prayer is one of the best things and so He motivates us to pray, He gives us the right words, He even pray for us when we can’t.

So that brings us up to this morning where we are focusing on praying together with our fellow Christians.

Now, in many ways this passage in James 5 takes all the principles we’ve learned about prayer and shows us how the early church put them to use in their everyday church life together.

So while we know that while prayer is something personal and private, what we are learning this morning is that it has to mature into something that is shared among fellow Christians – among other who bear Jesus' name...

Now, I have yet to be in a church that didn't pray – but there are ways in which some churches and the people in them use prayer that leaves a lot to be desired.

Sometimes people use prayer to preach their point...

Here's how this plays out in a group setting. *Sister what's her name* prays "Dear Lord, help *brother so and so* to understand that He shouldn't wear tacky clothes to church."

And *Brother so and so* then prays "Dear Lord help *Sister what's her name* to mind her own business" and perhaps if *Sister* is very influential and intimidating He just prays it silently.

Or prayer can be misused as a way of showing your level of spirituality. I once heard this in a prayer meeting... "Dear God, please show everyone else here tonight the truth that you've revealed to me..."

Now – if we're honest, we're all guilty of misusing prayer in church... right? Because what we know about sin is that it takes what is good and twists it – even prayer...

So this is why the Apostle James is writing to give advice to believers on how prayer should be used in our life together as a church community.

He starts out in verse 13 stating what we were looking at in the first session on prayer. Is anyone in trouble? – Then pray!

That echoes what we looked at the Apostle Paul saying in Phil 4:6 "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

James just assumes that his readers will know and understand that if they pray in Christ's name they will be heard and responded too – so he continues on saying “Is anyone happy – sing songs of praise!

That is common sense right? When God answers your prayers, when He relieves the trouble you are in then you should thank him... and what better way to do it than by singing praise. It really expresses your thankfulness to God.

Now, this is where James' begins to transition from the kind of prayer that we can keep private and personal into the kind of prayer that is at the heart of a church.

I suppose you can sing by yourself – and maybe that's for the best, but when you are happy and you want to praise God you don't want to do that by yourself, you want to share that with someone, with others who have experienced that sort of thing too.

So, prayer is moved into the heart of gathering together as Christian community – into church and worship.

James does this by linking prayer with praise, and it's important to note this because we need to be reminded that singing to God is prayer.

Ironically this is highlighted for us this morning as we are not able to do much in the way of music and song in the absence of our band.

So in the absence of music this morning we are reminded all the more that the music portion of our worship is more than just getting notes right and sounding good... its actually talking to God and expressing some things that can only come out in song.

That's why some of the songs we sing are very personal and relational in their lyrics.

It's giving you a chance to say some things to God that you might need help in articulating.

In the past the Church has done a very good job at singing songs – “hymns” which tend to say very theologically correct things about God, and that's good...

“A Mighty fortress is our God, A Bulwark never failing”
(A Mighty Fortress is our God)

But there's a balance to be had – we also need to communicate to God what our feelings are, and many of the new songs that are written help us to do that, and to do that together!

“so take me as you find me, all my fears and failures... let mercy fall on me” (Mighty to Save)

It might feel uncomfortable for you to express emotion to God like this, in a group – but it's healthy for your life and growth as a Christian.

Next James describes what the healthy usage of prayer looks like in a Christian community and it's not like that prayer chain comic I showed you earlier on, no “Birds of Pray” here!

First, James says that if people are sick they should ask for their elders – their “Presbyters” to come and pray for them. Yes you heard right, their Presbyter – that is the Greek word for elder. A “Presbyterian” church is a church where elders help to minister and lead.

Now friends look closely at who James is giving this directive to – its not addressed to the elders...

Indirectly yes, it is an instruction to elders that they must be ready and willing to pray for people as part of their spiritual leadership - but James is speaking to ordinary Christians.

Friends – you are to ask your leaders for prayer! It's a scriptural command. Just as you can ask God for help, ask your spiritual leaders to pray for you.

You need God, but you need your Christian community too.

To help us get the point James brings in the example of sickness. And it's a good one for a couple of reasons.

First, sickness breaks our pride - we can often tough it out through many situations and troubles in life by keeping up a good front - but sickness often knocks us off our feet, and renders us incapable.

We are forced to ask for help from others with the daily chores, cooking, cleaning, and taking the kids to soccer.

It's harder to hide our need for help when we are sick – so ask the elders to pray for you.

Secondly, sickness and sin are related.

Throughout the scriptures Sickness is often used metaphorically to help us understand the nature and the scope of sin.

And in actuality all sickness and disease that we experience is a result of Adam and Eve's initial sin of rebellion against God.

Don't misunderstand this as thinking that you have a terminal illness because God is trying to punish you... its more like you have a cold, the flu, or cancer... because Sin has twisted God's creation and it affects everyone.

Sickness is a deviation from God intentions for His creation.

And in some cases, yes - sickness and sin are directly connected consequentially to our lives.

We can get sick as a direct result of our own personal disobedience of God's command, or because others close to us have done so – think of sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol related diseases...

So, by bringing up the subject of sin and sickness James is telling us that there is a deeper issue at hand that needs to be addressed in prayer other than just sickness..

James wants to encourage us to open up and share about what really plagues us and afflicts us.

Maybe we're open to asking for help with being sick? But what about asking the elders for help with our sin?

James wants to encourage Christians to take this risky step of asking for help with sin as well – that's why he gently leads into the subject by talking about asking for spiritual help with sickness.

Hey it's great that people are healed when the elders pray for them - but remember sickness is just the symptom of the underlying condition all of us have, inherited from Adam and Eve – our sin.

So let's be honest with our leaders about that and ask them to pray for the particular sins we struggle with. Pride, lying, stealing, sexual immorality, it affects us all... and we're all affected by it.

In fact James goes on to say don't just limit being honest about sin with your elders, confess your sins to each other.

Why? Not so that we can have a gossip fest, not so that we can "feel ok" because "whew - everyone is doing it, I guess I'm not so bad after all!" but so that you can pray specifically for each other.

We're all in the same boat when it comes to sin – we all need the Holy Spirit to change us, get rid of things that are acts of the sinful nature and replace it with his fruit – remember we talked about this last week too.

Wouldn't church be a revolutionary place if ordinary people could speak with other ordinary people about their need for prayer to overcome sins in specific ways?

Friends, James wants to see prayer being used by congregation members ministering to each other! Not just leaders and elders...

So he goes back to the sickness metaphor again and says if you pray for each other you will be healed – in other words, You'll begin to overcome your sin – with the help and accountability of your Christian community.

AA and other 12 Step programs have this truth figured out friends – why doesn't the church? It's right here in the bible!

Ok, I'll pause to let you take that in – what a radical concept the bible has about us being a church together, pretty far out of our comfort zone, pretty different from church simply being a place you attend to enjoy a Sunday service...

So how do we begin to move more towards obeying what James is teaching us to do with prayer here?

Our culture of tolerance and non-judgment can go a long way towards helping us get there – but our "live and let live mentality" isn't quite what James is describes here.

Our society arrives at tolerance and acceptance by saying there is no such thing as sin, unless it's really really bad – like murder or pedophilia, there is no reason to be judgmental.

But that's like denying you're sick and don't need a cure!

Friends if we've bought into what our society believes then James' message to us about praying with each other about our sin might be a bit of a rude awakening.

The truth is we are all sick – not just the murders and pedophiles. We have sin that needs to be dealt with – so the truth is I'm not ok, you're not ok, we're not ok...

Now this kind of reminds me of Dr. House – and how he is so blunt with his patients they find it rude and insensitive. Not to mention he is very politically incorrect... but he always cures his patients!

In fact Dr. House can be compared in many respects to another biblical character that James makes reference too – Elijah.

He was rude, crude and not the most sensitive guy... but he was loyal to God and the Mosaic Covenant.

So if ordinary Christians are to use prayer to help other ordinary Christians deal with their sin - Elijah is a good example for us.

The NIV translates what James says about Elijah as “He was human just like us.” But the original Greek might be better translated as “He was afflicted by the same things...” meaning sin.

But James says “the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective”

What James means here friends echoes what we learned about praying in Jesus name, that it is prayer for God’s kingdom purposes.

Elijah’s prayer for rain and no rain wasn’t just a demonstration of his personal power – it was part of what God called him to do as His prophet to the nation of Israel and to King Ahab.

So to friends, being reminded that we are all affected by sin isn’t simply being rude for shock value, it isn’t meant to put another person down so we can lift ourselves up...

It’s so that we can pray for each and pray with each other! It’s easy to admit you are sick and need help when you know the cure is available.

And certainly prayer is there to ask for healing of our sickness, but never forget that the healing of sickness is representative of what prayer can do for the deeper cause of all our sickness – sin.

So James concludes this section of his teaching by saying *“Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.” (vs. 20)*

So, friends let's be honest with each other about how we struggle with sin - so that we might each administer the cure of prayer for and with each other and start to be healed.

What an amazing place our church will become when we begin to do this...

So just pray – with and for each other ... and watch things change. Amen.

So friends this morning we are going to do just that – we're going to take some time to pray with and for each other, with those who are sitting around the table with you.

And to help us spend some time going through this I've got some cheat-sheets in the middle of the table for you with some instructions on that. So please take one and we'll go through that together...