

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon series: THE TIES THAT BIND

Pray FOR and WITH One Another

(James 5:13-18)

Study #6

Introduction: Lost in translation...

Over the years, I have been lost in some great places.

Not so much while camping, although that has happened. Once, while I was with my then twelve and fourteen year old sons, Ben and Zach in the San Juan mountains of southern Colorado, I didn't know quite where we were for a couple of days. It worked out OK, of course.

But mostly I've been lost in other ways. Internationally. And it's all been because of Babel. Lost in translation.

In Mexico and Uruguay I have been lost in Spanish. In Kenya, I've been lost in Swahili. I have been linguistically lost in Russia, in France, in Germany, and in Belgium. I've been lost in some of the best places in the world.

I've been lost in conversation because I've been lost in translation.

No, it's not that we can't communicate when we don't know each other's language. But with the language barrier in place, personal connection is tough to make.

We can make use of an interpreter. We can use gestures. We can use the time-tested and completely unhelpful method of speaking slowly and loudly.

But without shared language, connection isn't there to the extent it can be when we both speak English or Spanish or Swahili or Russian.

Using an interpreter to speak with people is nowhere near as intimate or satisfying as simply sitting down and talking. There's nothing like a shared language to create deep and meaningful connection.

This morning, we'll consider another one of the Bible's "one anothers." We've seen that we are to forgive and love and serve each other. Today, we learn that we are also to pray FOR and WITH each other.

Today, we're not just thinking about developing a rich, personal prayer life. That's a really important thing and there are lots of great reasons for growing as a prayer warrior.

For instance...

- Praying nurtures my relationship with God.
- Praying changes me into the person Jesus saved me to be.
- Praying affects the world so that some things happen because I prayed that would not have happened if I hadn't prayed AND some things don't happen that would have happened if I had prayed because I didn't pray.

All of that and much, much more is true. But what I want to zero in on today is the dynamic that occurs when we who love and follow Jesus pray FOR and WITH each other.

When we who are brothers and sisters in Christ talk to our Father on behalf of or with each other, there is a bond formed.

Prayer is that shared language to which we can resort that builds community and unity and that forms deep and rich connections.

As we think together about the ministry we can have in each others' lives through prayer, we'll turn to the History Channel of the New Testament - The Acts of the Apostles - and will find lots examples of the followers of Jesus praying together.

Praying With and For Each Other When All is Well (from Acts)

WAITING (Acts 1)

In the very first chapter of Acts, before the day of Pentecost, the day on which the Holy Spirit would be poured out on the disciples in Jerusalem, all of them, all one hundred and twenty of them, *[1:14]...with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer...*

COMMUNITY (Acts 2)

Then, after the arrival of the Holy Spirit and after thousands had been saved through faith in Christ after the Apostle Peter's first ever sermon, Luke lists the most basic elements of first century Christian community. He says that they *[2:42]...were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*

LEADING (chapter 6)

When the church's first leaders (the apostles) outlined their calling they said that they would, *[6:4] "[devote themselves] to prayer and to the ministry of the Word."* Evidently, the apostles spent a lot of time praying together, as they listed prayer FIRST.

SEEKING (chapter 13)

When the leaders¹ of one church in Syrian Antioch, far from the mother church in Jerusalem, were seeking God's direction for ministry, they resorted to prayer. It was during this season of prayer and fasting that God gave that direction.

Luke tells us, *[2] While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." [3] Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.*

¹ Listed are Barnabas, Simeon (Niger), Lucius, Manaen, and Saul. (13:1)

BLESSING (chapter 21)

And, then, when the mature and much older Apostle Paul (now, NOT known as Saul, but Paul) was about to leave the city of Tyre to go to Jerusalem to face guaranteed persecution, it was as natural as falling off a log for those with him to pray with and for Paul.

[21:5] When our days there (i.e. - Tyre) were ended, we left and started on our journey, while they all, with wives and children, escorted us until we were out of the city. After kneeling down on the beach and praying, we said farewell to one another.

The early church prayed with each other and they prayed for each other, and they did so regularly. Going before God in prayer together united them, empowered and equipped them. Prayer was their common, heart language.

And prayer - community building, connection forging prayer - holds a very prominent practice in all the New Testament writings.

I'd urge you some time soon to take some time to page through the letters of Paul and Peter and John, and just look for references to prayer. Pay attention to the prayers they prayed as they wrote their letters.

You'll find out just how central prayer has been from the very beginning of the Jesus movement.

You'll find prayers for spiritual growth,² prayers for ministry impact,³ and prayers that God would meet physical, material needs.⁴

It is a biblical norm that Jesus followers will pray for each other. It would be abnormal for us to NOT pray for each other. That was the way it was in the early church and that's the way it is to be in 2014, too. You should be able to trust that your friends in Christ are praying for you.

² See Ephesians 1:15-19; 3:16-19; Philippians 1:9-11; Colossians 1:9-12; 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13; 5:23; Hebrews 13:20-21.

³ See Ephesians 6:18-20; Romans 15:30-32; Philippians 1:19-20; Colossians 4:2-3; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-10; Acts 4:24-31.

⁴ We find prayers for people's release from prison (Acts 12:5; 2 Corinthians 1:8-11) and for their release from terrible "thorns in the flesh." (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

So, it is a great thing to pray FOR and WITH each other. The book of Acts tells us that when they were looking forward to advances for the Gospel of Jesus, building community, needing direction, the first Christians prayed together.

When the theme is positive advance, the right thing to do is to pray WITH and FOR. The common language that unites us as we go forward is prayer.

And in one short passage found in one of the New Testament's shorter letters, a passage that stands out for its masks-off honesty, we read that praying FOR and WITH each other is also exactly what is needed when all is not going so well.

We're going to end our time together by spending the next few minutes in that passage. It is located near the end of the letter written by James, which you'll find near the end of the New Testament.

Praying For and With Each Other When All is Not Well (James 5)

Fun Facts to know and tell about the letter of James:

Most scholars believe that the author of this little letter was one of the half brothers of Jesus.⁵ This James was a man who, AFTER Pentecost, rose to become one of the chief leaders of the early church in Jerusalem.

He is writing to believers in Jesus who have had to leave Jerusalem (his audience was Jewish) due to persecution. James wrote, not to a particular church, but to folks who had been scattered throughout the Roman Empire because of their faith in Jesus. The letter is filled with the kind of wisdom that would be crucial for those being opposed for their faith.

There are several sections in this letter that pose great challenges to interpretation. Those are tough passages.

⁵ The other possible candidate for writing this letter is the Apostle James. But as this letter was written *after* the persecution of Christians began in Jerusalem, which caused the church to scatter (1:1). Give that the Apostle James was killed at the beginning of that persecution, he no doubt didn't write this letter.

The passages that aren't tough to interpret pose even greater challenges to application. James is a tough, honest, hard-hitting little letter.

But it is a gold mine to people who are facing tough times. And in the last part of the last chapter of this letter, James tells us how we can help our fellow Christians who are facing tough times. Not surprisingly, James advises prayer.

By the time we come to the end of this letter, James has already mentioned prayer a couple of times.⁶ According to all that we know of James, prayer was an integral part of his personal life.

Church history tells us that James was quite a pray-er. One ancient church leader⁷ said that James spent so much time on his knees that he had callused knees like a camel.

So, we listen to ol' "Camel Knees" on the subject of prayer as he first focuses on the personal side.

If Suffering or if Rejoicing... (5:13)

[5:13a] Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises.

No matter where you are on the emotional spectrum today, pray. No matter what life has been like for you lately, pray.

Prayer is the perfect response to physical illness, financial reversal, depression, or broken relationships. Praise is the perfect response to life when everything's turning up roses.

There are other possible responses when suffering. Of course, self-pity and loud complaining are to be avoided. But you could get a job, think positive thoughts, see a doctor, flee your tormentors, or seek the comfort of friends.

⁶ See 1:5; 4:2, 3.

⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, who lived ca. 260-340, and is usually called the greatest early historian of the church.

And there is nothing wrong with doing any of those things. But James' counsel is that before turning to those other things, pray. First, pray. Nurture a prayerful response to hardships.

And then nurture a praise-full response to delightful things. As James has already written, **[1:17] Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...**

It's only right to thank and praise the Giver of all good gifts when a good gift comes your way.⁸

Now, in what follows, James moves from the individual focus to a larger community focus on prayer.

There are those in any congregation who are suffering from frailties - be they physical or emotional. Life can be hard. And James gives counsel to those who have been beaten down by life's hardships.⁹

If Sick or Weak... (5:14-15)

[5:14] Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; [15] and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.

Now I am not going to try and pull a fast one on you here. My Bible reads "**sick**" just like your does. But, I am going to suggest that we expand our application of what James is saying beyond those afflicted with medical ailments.

I absolutely do believe that church leaders should pray for those who are physically sick. The elders here at Northwest have done so numerous times over the years and we are delighted to do so.

⁸ The cheerful believer might be tempted to boast (as if his pleasant circumstances were all his doing), or to forget the Lord (see Proverbs 30:7-9). But, a worshipful, MUSICAL response enlarges our hearts for a greater capacity to follow the Lord.

⁹ I am deeply indebted to J. Ronald Blue for the insights into verses 14-15 regarding "sickness" vs. "weakness" (*Bible Knowledge Commentary*, The Book of James).

I am saying, though, that James may primarily have another audience in his crosshairs, namely, those who are suffering "*weakness*."

The reason I say that is simple. Most every time the word that we translate here "**sick**" (Greek - *ασθενησ*) occurs in the New Testament, from the book of Acts forward, the meaning is very clearly "**weak**." The emphasis is on being morally or spiritually weak due to suffering or due to sin.¹⁰

Further, when you look forward to verse 15 and see the word "**sick**" again, it is an entirely different Greek word (Greek - *καμνω*) from that used in verse 14. It literally means "*to be weary*."¹¹

So, it is my understanding that James was not primarily talking about people with physical illnesses here. He is primarily speaking about people who are weak and weary. Due either to the normal sufferings of life or to overt persecution or to suffering a moral failure, these folks are discouraged when it comes to living for Jesus.

James tells us that the person who is sick and tired of persecution, who is exhausted from the pressures of serving Christ, or who has fallen into sin and is ready to throw in the towel (spiritually speaking) is to take action.

That weary Christian is to call the elders of the church and ask them to pray.¹²

When the elders arrive, they are to anoint the tired out, discouraged believer with oil. Why anoint? Why oil?

¹⁰ See especially 1 Thessalonians 5:14 where believers are to "**help the WEAK**" (same word as in James 5). Also, to see how the word may be used in either sense, note Romans 6:19; 8:26; 1 Corinthians 2:3; 15:43; 2 Corinthians 11:30; 12:5, 9, 10; 13:4; Galatians 4:13; 1 Timothy 5:23; Hebrews 4:15; 7:28; 11:34.

¹¹ See Hebrews 12:3; Revelation 2:3, where the sense is obviously exhaustion in spiritual service.

¹² As the leaders of the local assembly, it is natural to call the elders to pray as those who were the spiritually mature, and who were experienced in intercessory prayer.

Well, throughout the Old Testament, anointing with oil was the normal means of recognizing God's sovereign choice of a prophet, priest, or king. You would anoint someone to show that God's blessing was on them. The word that indicates this type of blessing is "Xrio." It is the same Greek word from which we get the word "Christ."¹³

And there was another kind of anointing with oil in the ancient world. This anointing was for the purpose of bestowing honor. It was for refreshment.¹⁴ THAT is the word James uses.¹⁵

So, you're at the end of your spiritual rope. You're ready to throw in the towel and stop serving Jesus. You're exhausted. Defeated. Discouraged.

You read what James writes here and you decide to reach out to the leaders of the church. You invite them to come over because you need help to keep on keeping on.

And just like that, the elders show up. They come over to cheer you up with oil and to lift you up in prayer.¹⁶

Faith has prompted this whole get-together.

If you who called the elders didn't believe that they would come and that their presence would be helpful, why would you have called?

If the elders didn't believe that God would honor their loving visit with encouragement and restoration, why would they have come?

¹³ See Luke 4:18 - the anointing of Jesus, the Messiah; Acts 4:27 and 10:38- Jesus, anointed Messiah of God; 2 Corinthians 1:21 - Christians, anointed to serve; Heb 1:9 - reference to the anointing of a Jewish priest.

¹⁴ By using *aleiphw* and not *xriw*, James is not suggesting a ceremonial or ritual anointing as a means of divine healing. Instead, "he is referring to the common practice of using oil as a means of bestowing honor, refreshment, and grooming." (Daniel Hayden, *Calling the Elders to pray*; Bibliotheca Sacra, 138, July-September, 1981:264.)

¹⁵ *Aleiphw* - See Matthew 6:17 - anoint yourself and wash up when you are fasting, so that people won't know you're hungry.

¹⁶ The grammatical construction leaves the anointing with oil as subsidiary to the praying, which is the main thing.

And James assures us that the faithful presence and prayers of the church leaders will result in restoration of the sick and discouraged.¹⁷

God honors the prayers of His people, especially when the thrust of those prayers is to renew a downcast heart for service and love and faithfulness. There is no guarantee of a permanent state of restoration, or a "once and for all" restoration.

But God promises to move in sovereign power - God will raise up the sick/weak believer! - when faithful elders pray in response to a faithful Christian's initiative to ask for prayer for spiritual vitality.

From the first century to the twenty-first, this ministry of prayer on behalf of the distressed, discouraged, diseased, and depressed has been a special ministry of prayer for the elders.

What is going on is much more than a "good ol' boy" back-slapping time of mutual affirmation. God is right in the middle of this meeting of hearts. There is oil that refreshes and there is the shared heart language of prayer that unites and energizes.

And I want to speak to you, personally, about this ministry at Northwest.

To pray, and to pray for you who are sick or discouraged or oppressed, is something that your elders would be delighted to do for you.

But you'll notice (*[14]...he must call for the elders of the church*) that the ball is in your lap.

So call. If James is describing you, call. Write. Pull one of the elders here aside and ask him to pray for you. Ask him to set up a time for the elders to gather to pray for you and to anoint you with oil in the Name of the Lord.

¹⁷ The Greek word is the word we usually translate "saved." Here, the sense is that the "sick" or "weak" will be delivered from the oppressive weight that has kept them down. This demonstrates that a word ("saved") may be used in different senses in different places. "Sozo" may refer to being delivered from eternal judgment, being delivered from a sinking ship, or being delivered from deep discouragement.

There is nothing we'd be happier to do than to pray WITH and FOR you.

Now, my personal heresy (which I really don't think is heretical at all) is that while this is a practice that the elders should embrace and it is an initiative that every individual in the church is to feel free to request from the elders, this prayer ministry is a ministry that is to be practiced throughout the church by all, for all.

I say that because of the tie between verse 15 and what follows.

James makes a reference to **sin** at the end of his invitation to call the elders for prayer. And then he says that if sin has been involved in the sickness/weakness, the time in prayer and anointing will rectify that problem.

Now, if you are sick or weak or discouraged, I'm certainly not saying that sin is necessarily the cause! But, it might be.

And if it is, that sin might get uncovered in the process of anointing with oil, or in the honest exchanges in advance of praying, or during the time of prayer itself.

And then, there'll be opportunity for you to confess your sin and to receive cleansing from the Lord.

And what just might occur during a time of prayer with the elders can happen whenever we are honest with each other about our personal struggles with sin.

When I become aware of personal sin - through Bible reading, during a time of personal prayer, when I'm just being reflective, or when the Holy Spirit graciously convicts me - I can go to a trusted friend, confess, and pray and receive cleansing from God.

God is in it whenever we go to each other and confess and pray.

If Stuck in Sin... (5:16)

[16] Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man (literally, "the righteous") can accomplish much.

Now, relax. James is not telling us to stand up and confess all our known sins in a Sunday morning worship service.

I firmly believe that what he has in mind is of a more intimate confession, less public.

The confession called for here is nothing official or formal. It's between friends. It might be a one-on-one thing. It might be in the setting of a small group. Elders might be involved, but they won't necessarily be involved.

It is the honest admission of sins that is in view. And specificity is to rule the day when we come to our friends to confess. We don't confess how generally sinful we are. We confess particular transgressions of which we know we are guilty.

When we confess and when the person or people to whom we confess move forward with prayer to God for our cleansing and restoration, God will do His gracious work of healing.

Now, this "***confessing our sins to one another***" thing begs a question or two of each of us this morning.

First, I have to ask. Is there someone or is there some small group of people with whom you are relating deeply enough that confession would ever occur? That is, do you have a life context in which to apply James' words?

I hope so. I hope that you are forging friendships with people that are deep and transparent and vulnerable. Around here we call that "masks-off" relating.

Personally, I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have a few friends with whom I can be brutally honest. They have been lifesavers who have patiently listened as I have confessed and who have then prayed for me.

Their presence and their prayers have been the instruments God has used many times to bring healing to my own soul.

If you don't have these relationships in your life right now, would you begin to pray - today - that God would grace you with one or two? Would you begin to take the first step toward someone to establish that kind of relationship? Would you take a risk and take your mask off, and confess your sin if that is your need?

God will bring healing to your soul as you do.

Second, are there people (or is there a person) you can think of right now to whom you should make confession?

Is there someone you have wronged? Maybe it is someone in the church. Maybe it is someone in your family. Think of people at work or school.

I believe that much of the discouragement, and depression, and "weakness" we feel can be related to the tensions that exist in fractured relationships. And it is only when we are willing to do all that is in our power to remove that tension by way of confession will we be, as James says, "**healed.**"

God will work through honest confession to bring about healing. To drive home that point James assures us that "***the effective prayer of [the righteous] can accomplish much.***"¹⁸

When a man or a woman who is striving to live a righteous life, who is pursuing holiness PRAYS - that prayer is energized by God.

God touches lives, makes a difference, effects change in others - through our prayer.

How do we know? As we close, we'll look to James' Exhibit A: the prophet Elijah!

Conclusion: The prophet Elijah...and YOU (5:17-18)

The Old Testament prophet, Elijah, is mentioned lots of times in the New Testament. He is a dynamic, exciting character. James mentions Elijah here, right after telling us "***The effective prayer of [the righteous] can accomplish much.***"

By the power of God, Elijah performed lots of spectacular miracles over long term ministry. He was used by God in mighty way. He was a righteous man. We place him on a pedestal for his faith-filled life.

And James reminds us that, Elijah was, after all is said and done, just like us. If we are tempted to think of Elijah as some sort of a spiritual Superman, we are wrong.

There is a bond of humanity connecting us with Elijah. He was subject to the same weaknesses as you and I are. We are just like Elijah!

And James invites us to reflect on Elijah's prayer life.

[17] Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly¹⁹ that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. [18] Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit.²⁰

Elijah lived in a time when God's people were in terrible rebellion. They were led by the idolatrous king Ahab. Sin was everywhere.

Now consider all the things Elijah might have done in response to that sin, all the projects he might have undertaken, all the sermons he could have preached. All good things!

¹⁹ James uses a Hebrew idiom to render Elijah's prayer, "Praying, he prayed" to emphasize the fervency of his prayer. The sense is, "*He REALLY prayed.*"

²⁰ During Elijah's day, the ruling king in Israel was the wicked Ahab and his queen was Jezebel, a cruel, wicked woman. During their reign, Israel had thoroughly turned away from the Lord, and they hated Elijah. During this time of rebellion, Elijah declared a long period of drought. Sure enough, for three and a half years, it didn't rain in Israel. Then, when the hearts of the people had begun to turn back to the Lord, Elijah prayed again - and God sent rain! (See 1 Kings 18)

¹⁸ Or (my own translation) "*...the hearty strong prayer of the righteous, works!*"

But what action, according to James, did Elijah actually take? He prayed.

In the same way, prayer is for you. God will use your prayers FOR and WITH your fellow Christ-followers to strengthen them when they are weak and to restore them when they have sinned.

Your brothers and sisters in Jesus have every reason to trust that you are praying for them.

And - to return to the theme I mentioned at the beginning - not only praying FOR but also WITH each other strengthens bonds like few other things can.

So, when someone here mentions a personal need, put your hand on their shoulder - right then! - and pray. Pray a twenty second prayer. Or set up a time when you can pray more purposefully - and do it. Look for someone with whom you might develop a prayer partnership.

And let's nurture the shared heart language of prayer as we learn to talk to our Father FOR and WITH each other.