

## 30. A Life Open to God

---

*Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.*

*(James 5:13)*

---

### Shallow Advice?

We come now to the final section of the letter of James. In the closing verses, James actually returns to the opening verses where he wrote about prayer: ask God who gives generously without finding fault (1:5). There, he also added that we must believe and not doubt, for God does not give to those who live in unbelief (1:6).

In all the trials of life—and James has described a number of them—we must persevere in prayer. That is undoubtedly the mark of the mature Christian. A true Christian is a praying Christian, under all circumstances. Maturity of faith means having an *open line* to heaven, to our God and Father. Do we have this? Or is prayer always an after-thought, something that we must do but that we try to get out of the way as soon as possible?

Having said this, it may seem that in this passage, James is rather naïve, at best, or simplistic, at worst. Is this now the acme of pastoral advice? “If you have trouble, pray. If you are happy, praise God.” Surely we knew that already. Sometimes, however, is not more needed than just prayer or thanksgiving?

When we experience trouble, we probably pray, but when there is no change in our situation, we might begin to wonder what is the sense of continuing in prayer? Certainly, we can be happy sometimes, but who is able to sing psalms all day? How many praise songs do we sing per day? One? Or none? When is the last time we spontaneously broke into a psalm of praise to the Lord, because we are so happy to be his child in Christ?

I say this aside from the fact that, in the next verses, James speaks about praying in time of sickness, and about calling the elders, being anointed with oil, and then being healed. Just like that? Is it that easy? Life experience shows us that things can be quite different.

James writes these things as a command. Pray! Sing! It’s not an option; it’s a mandate. But do we not have to be in the mood for that? There are circumstances when prayer or praise is perhaps the farthest from our mind. Can we

just generalize, as James does, and say, “Trouble? Pray! Happiness? Sing!”? This pastoral advice seems rather shallow.

Yet James is talking about the maturity of faith. This is not a piece of pastoral advice to either take or leave, but a command of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our life must be governed by prayer and praise. This does not come easily or automatically, but it is something we must work towards. The Lord Jesus asks of us a life that is open to God in prayer and praise. We will consider the character of our prayer and the exuberance of our praise.

## **Commands**

The first command that comes our way in this passage is, “Pray!” This is a little more accurate than the NIV translation which reads, “He should pray.” “He should pray” may be taken to mean that prayer is a good thing, something that we should consider. The original is stronger, in the imperative sense. And it does not mean that we should pray now and then, perhaps for a while to see if it works, but we should pray constantly, on an ongoing basis. We need to be in conversation with the Lord at all times. The lines must be open every day.

The same is true of the expression, “Let him sing songs of praise.” This is also a matter of daily occurrence. It does not mean now and then, even in an official setting, but every day, whenever there is reason and opportunity. We will come back to that, but we note now that both verbs are in the imperative present: we are under a royal command to lead a life of prayer and praise, that is, if we want to be mature in faith.

What does James mean by the expression, “Is any one of you in trouble?” What is this “trouble” in which we might find ourselves? The word used in the original means literally to suffer, to undergo evil. Most often, this verb is used to describe the suffering caused by others, such as persecution, as also happened in James’ time. It may also be used to describe the trouble of the poor being exploited by the rich (remember James’ previous warnings). In any case, the word “trouble” implies that the suffering comes from the outside and is caused by others. It is also a severe suffering, not something light.

James does not restrict his advice to a situation of persecution, however. Instead, he keeps it general because he wants this command to cover all aspects of our life. Whenever there is trouble, regardless of what kind, our first action must be to pray. That should be the first thing on our mind when

trouble strikes. “I must pray, for only then can I find rest, receive hope, and have courage.”

## **Humbling Ourselves**

I know that not everyone appreciates such an emphasis on frequent and constant prayer. Some people speak in prayer as if God is some kind of a “buddy”. The required reverence is sometimes lacking. James does not encourage that kind of friendly one-on-one type of prayer. The word that he uses for “pray” literally means to beseech, to beg.

In prayer, we are not to be brazen and demanding, but we are to humble ourselves before God and beg him for his mercy. We do not deserve anything but condemnation. We are subject to all sorts of misery, the misery that we have brought upon ourselves through our sins. Whenever we suffer evil or are in trouble, we must first realize that there is no one else to blame but ourselves. We certainly may not blame God, who is good to all, nor does it make sense to place all the blame on others, for we are with them in the same reality of sinfulness.

We have to get on our knees. The verb “to pray” could be seen here as a supplication. We humble ourselves before the Lord and our fellow man. Trouble comes, but we do not lash out in anger. Difficulties arise, but we do not take matters into our own hand. We take it to the Lord in prayer because that is where it belongs. He wants to hear us express our need to him. He wants to help us in our needs, so that we can deal with and overcome them.

In our prayer, we recognize that we are sinners and have no rights. We can plead only on God’s promises in Christ, coming to the Father in his name. And we know that God will give us his answer.

## **Ask, Seek, and Knock**

I was again reminded of the “Sermon on the Mount”, to which James has referred throughout his letter. In Matthew 6:25-34, we read Jesus’ words about not worrying, for the Lord can and will take care of all our material needs. We must first seek the Kingdom of God, and he will add to us every spiritual blessing, also material blessings. In this passage, Jesus again calls us, “you of little faith.” We must not think lightly of God’s ability to provide.

Rather, we must go forward in God's service, one day at a time, and we will see how he richly blesses us.

The other part of the "Sermon" I want to focus on here is found in Matthew 7:7-12. There we read that we must ask, seek, and knock. "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." Here we again have a passage that some people might tend to take with a grain of salt. Sometimes we ask, but it is not given, or we seek, but do not find. We knock, but the door is not opened. When we explain why this is so, we add all kinds of qualifiers: we have to ask in accordance with God's will; we have to seek the right things in the right places; we have to knock steadfastly at the proper door.

But that is not what the Lord Jesus says. His words are, "Ask, seek, and knock." There are no qualifiers except the general ones that always exist in Scripture, that is, asking, seeking, and knocking in submission to God's will in complete humbleness. We must do these things with the acknowledgment that we may ask, seek, and knock only for what has been promised us, what is necessary for body and soul. But this passage in the "Sermon on the Mount" also has the aspect that we may not think lightly about the Lord or his goodness and grace.

We who are evil give to our children what they need. Would God, who alone is good, then withhold from us that which we need to serve him? He who spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, will he not also with him give us all things? Our God took care of us in the greatest need of our life, and removed from us the guilt of sin and the power of death; will he then fail us in lesser matters?

## **Prepared to Give**

The character of our prayer is that it remains in tune with the Scriptures, recognizes God's goodness in Christ, and therefore trusts that he will provide. When trouble comes, whatever it may be, we do not run all over the place in desperation and panic, but we go first to the Lord Jesus and tell him our woes and needs. And then, believing in him, we take whatever steps need to be taken in order to resolve the problems that we encounter.

The character of our prayer also means that we ourselves are prepared to give. The Lord Jesus stressed it in the "Sermon on the Mount": do to others what we would have them do to us. That is the golden rule, so to speak. If we do not give when asked, help someone search when he requests our help, or open when someone knocks, what do we expect the Lord to do? James has

stressed this more than once in his letter. A mature Christian who dares to ask the Lord is also himself prepared to give, to help, and to open doors for others. We cannot be self-centered and Christ-oriented at the same time. We cannot ask God to listen to us if our ears are closed to our neighbor's pleas.

The point is not, "Will God hear my plea?" He does. Rather, the point is, "Do I as a mature Christian deal with others as I would have them deal with me? Do others in need find a helper in me?" In this regard, we all fall short. I know that I do, for sure. But we must be willing to learn that the very character of prayer, which depends on grace, must come from a heart that is made gracious in Christ.

### **Singing Psalms**

Is any one of us in trouble? Let us then pray, and we will experience that there is no limit to what God can do. The same holds true for the other side of the coin. Is anyone happy? Let us then sing songs of praise. James also keeps it general when he speaks about being happy. He does not specify what might make someone happy in the congregation. The word "happy" is again a rather shallow translation. The RSV has "cheerful". The KJV has "merry". But no matter which word is used, it essentially means being of good courage, being encouraged, and therefore being happy, cheerful, merry.

Sometimes good things happen, causing us to be happy and giving us courage to continue. Usually when this occurs, we love to share our good fortune with others. "Guess what happened to me!" But nobody can get as excited over our own particular blessings as ourselves. Another person might listen and say, "Well, isn't that nice," but their happiness is not the same as our own. We can even come away a little less happy sometimes, saddened that the other person is not as excited as we are.

James again writes that we should go first to God. We tell him all our sorrows, and we may also tell him our joys. This part of 5:13 literally reads, "Is someone happy? Psalm!" This would, of course, mean to sing a psalm. Some people might sigh and think, "Singing *psalms* does not really express my joy." The NIV is much nicer, it would seem: "Let him sing songs of praise." But this is exactly what a psalm is: a praise song.

The verb associated with the word "psalm" originally means to play the lute. Nowadays we would say the guitar. In the course of time, however, instead of denoting the accompaniment, "psalm" came to mean the song that was

sung. That is most important, is it not? It is not the instrument that is decisive, but the song!

Using the root word “psalm”, the notion of singing does indicate a certain exuberance. It is a spontaneous breaking out in a song, indeed, a song that thanks and praises God for his grace. And again, not every song will do. It must be a song that is in line with Scripture. We must praise God for the right reasons with the proper words.

## **Exuberant Praise**

As we have set certain times for prayer (even called “quiet times”), so we have set times for praise and worship. We do not easily break out in a song of praise, especially when others are around. We might feel embarrassed, fearing the disapproving looks of others, and so keep our joy bundled up inside and maybe hum a tune when we are on our own.

But nothing is so infectious as a nice song. Singing the praises of the Lord can be done at all times and in every situation. Paul and Silas sang songs in prison, and all the doors flew open. Of course, doors do not always open like that, but *heaven* always opens when we sing! In heaven, they love a good song of praise, and we can read about it in the book of Revelation. In heaven, there is great appreciation for the song of God’s children on earth.

During World War II, an uncle of my wife was imprisoned in The Hague in what had been a hotel before the war, but had ironically been dubbed the Orange-Hotel. One evening, a number of the prisoners, including this uncle, was told that the next morning they would be taken to the dunes and shot. These men -and almost all the prisoners in that building- sang psalms and hymns all night long. In the morning, they were taken to the dunes, but these young men had been greatly encouraged and the Nazi guards were actually embarrassed to carry out the sentence. The exuberance of praise had overcome the misery of death.

We may indeed be happy, but then we must also acknowledge the Lord. What better way to praise the Lord than in a song? Life has highs and lows, but at both times we go first to the Lord. In our highs, we praise him for his goodness, and in our lows, we beseech him for his grace. Then we can do all things in him who strengthens us.

In 5:13, James does not give us two rather shallow commands, but he characterizes the life of a mature Christian in a few words. Trouble? Pray! Happy? Sing! For this is the bottom line in the life of a Christian who has grown to a mature faith. Maturity means that, by faith, our life is open to God in Jesus Christ, in steadfast prayer and exuberant praise.