

## 32. Interceding for One Another

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*Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.*

*(James 5:16-18)*

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### James Broadens the Circle

In the previous chapter, we dealt with the command of the Lord to call the elders in times of sickness or weakness, and we noted that the sickness mentioned has to do with sin. There is not always a direct relationship between a sickness and a specific sin, but there can be. We concluded that in times of illness and weakness, we need the intercession of the elders and the supportive love of the communion of saints.

We also noted that this does not always happen. Involving one another spiritually in our sicknesses and sins means that we have the maturity of faith. Some do not want to call the elders, and others are not properly cared for when they do call. In this regard, we must strive for improvement, indeed for perfection.

The sickness that James mentions in the previous verses has something to do with sin. We noted that already in the closing words of 5:15: “If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.” This line of thinking follows through in 5:16, where James continues to write about forgiveness of sins.

He writes, “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed,” that is, saved. In order for sin to be forgiven and removed, it needs to be confessed. Let us say that this is a prime Scriptural rule: confession is required for forgiveness.

“Confess your sins to each other.” The Romanist church has based the practice of confession and penance on this text. Roman Catholics go to the priest, confess their sins in a special booth, and he gives them absolution,

that is, forgiveness of sins. But this text does not support such a practice. No human being can grant absolution, for that is the privilege of God alone. We may proclaim that someone is forgiven, but that is not the same as granting absolution. Besides, we have the impression that in 5:16-18, James broadens the circle.

He writes that we are to confess our sins to one another, to pray for each other. He also ends his letter with a call to bring someone back from his sins. Look at 5:19 briefly: “Brothers, if one of you...” It is the task of everyone. We all need to pray for each other and seek to bring each other back to the right path of faith and obedience. It is also a matter of mutual discipline and mutual confession. Would we not all agree that James here goes beyond the circle of the elders, and involves the whole congregation?

As mature Christians, we are called by the Lord to intercede for one another. We will see the situation presented, the solution proclaimed, and the surety provided. Confession and intercession go together for the progression of the body of Christ.

## **Confession**

Note the word “therefore” at the beginning of 5:16. James is still dealing with elders visiting a sick person, and that person is called to confess his sins before the elders. That is the connection with the preceding verse. How can the elders intercede for us if we do not tell them what the problem really is, what lies hidden under the surface, perhaps?

“Therefore” means that, seeing that there is forgiveness, we ought to confess our sins to one another. The word “confession” here does not only mean that we admit to having said or done something wrong, against God’s will, for that is not always the hardest thing to do. Sometimes, a sin is so obvious or becomes so public that there is little use in denying it. Confession goes a little farther than just taking ownership of a sin. It is not simply saying, “Yes, I did that.” Confession means that we fully and deeply confess what we said or did as a sin, without excuses and without any pointing at others. True confession means that we have a deep sorrow over sin, and heartily wish to see it removed.

The sad reality is that sin causes separation and estrangement. This is true in every relationship, but especially among Christians in the church of Christ. Imagine that someone has committed a sin that only one or two others may know about, but if he does not confess that sin from the heart and seek forgiveness from the Lord, it remains an obstacle, a stumbling block.

The more people who know about his unconfessed sin, the greater the estrangement becomes.

Someone once said to me, “Well, that’s risky business, to say the least.” Whoever “confesses” makes something known, and opens himself to reaction and perhaps ridicule. Generally, we are not so forgiving, and it is easy for us to hold a grudge against someone, especially in sensitive or even intimate matters. Is it not better just to keep matters to yourself? Do we not have a certain privacy when it comes to our sins? Does everyone have to know “what I did last summer”? Are there no “secrets” allowed? Is every sin one that needs to be confessed to others?

### **Confess to Each Other**

I raise these questions because we must understand that James does not at all mean that we must go about constantly telling everyone about our sins. That would lead to disaster. He does not say, “Confess your sins to *everybody*,” but “*to each other*.” Look very carefully at these words, because the Bible must be read accurately.

The situation presented here is that there are those to whom we must confess our sins. We do not confess to all, but to certain persons. And one person does not do all the confessing, while the other listens in priestly dress, for the text says, “Confess your sins to each other.” The confession of the one needs to be reciprocated by the confession of the other. It is a situation where mutual confessing takes place.

We cannot just go around telling everyone about our sins. There are sins that remain hidden between God and every person. To God we say, “Forgive and clear away my hidden faults forever” (Ps 19, *Book of Praise*). We cannot even properly discern each and every sin committed, but the Lord can, and we had better keep an open line to him!

As I have stressed often, this letter is about the maturity of faith. Mature faith is faith that has ripened and is functional. Elders are considered to be mature in faith, or they should not be elders. If we confess a sin to the elders, deep confidentiality is involved. They should know how to assess the sin and its effect, and they should know how to bring it before the Lord. They may not gossip about it, or even take pleasure in another person’s downfall, but must be deeply moved over that person. An elder or deacon should be able to cry

with someone, not laugh over him. Do we really know what the elders and deacons feel when sin is apparent and is confessed? They are deeply moved.

The situation that James presents especially is one where sin has disrupted a relationship, in a marriage, a family, or the church. That sin needs to be confessed to the ones who are affected, and they, in turn, need to confess their wrongdoing in the matter. It is not a matter of saying, “Okay, I did this, but you did that!” A “tit-for-tat” confession is no confession at all. We should simply say, “I did or said this, I was wrong, and I sinned.” Then we must let the other person come up with his own confession. We cannot bargain at the sinners’ table, or trade off our sins one against the other, as in a poker game; rather, we can just confess to one another our own sins.

### **The Solution Proclaimed**

James is asking here for spiritual maturity in dealing with sin. We must be able to say, “I confess my sin to those I have affected, and I may then expect a mature response in the same faith we share.” We are not pagans, animals, or even just people; we are Christians, members of the one, glorious body of Christ. Shall we not act that way?

What is proclaimed here as the solution? I struggled with using the word “solution”, for I do not mean an easy, quick fix. There is no quick fix for sin. We have to know that before we commit a sin. The word “solution” is not meant in that manner. That is why I added the verb “proclaimed”: the solution is proclaimed. It is not discovered through a master’s degree in social work, but is proclaimed by the Lord Jesus Christ.

James writes, “. . . and pray for each other so that you may be healed,” that is, saved from a particular sin and its choking grip. When someone comes to us and says, “I did this, and it is a sin,” what do we do? Do we engage in damage control? No, but the flood gates of prayer go open. “Before I need your forgiveness, I need *God’s* forgiveness. Pray with me, please pray with me.” Let us stop hassling each other, and start praying for each other.

We must stop screaming at each other, and instead pray with each other. Is there a whole lot of screaming going on in our homes? Who screams? Mom or Dad, or the children? If so, then we must stop it. Screaming at one another is so immature, especially from the viewpoint of faith. There is no screaming allowed in our homes, not by anybody. Our houses are houses of prayer

because we are all temples of the Holy Spirit. There should be a rule in every Christian family: “No screaming allowed. My house is a house of prayer.”

Is prayer a solution? In the eyes of some people, no. The way some people go about things, prayer does not resolve anything. But a solution is a way on which we go, and on which we must learn to stay. I have mentioned a number of times that James’ letter is a commentary on the “Sermon on the Mount”, the great sermon of his own Lord and brother. Jesus said, “There are two gates, and two ways. You will have to take the narrow one. Squeeze in together through the narrow gate, because you have to walk side by side, arm in arm through that gate.” We cannot say to our brother or sister in Christ, “You go first through the narrow gate because I cannot go beside you, and then I will follow.” In the church of Christ, we had better learn to make some room, to squeeze in, and to walk together, for that is the maturity of faith!

### **The Prayer of a Righteous Man**

Now James has already anticipated the objection that prayer does not really do much in a given situation. He cuts off that thought rather abruptly. He has little patience for such talk, and so he writes, “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” Pasturing the flock does not mean humoring the flock. How much patience can we have when someone persists in immature behavior?

Yes, the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. I am going to translate this a little more literally, because the dynamic equivalent could use more dynamics: “the petition of the righteous has much power because it is energetic.” “Energetic” means literally that it does the job. It gets right in there and works deep down.

The word “prayer” here is more accurately rendered as a petition, even a constant beseeching. It speaks of a great need that must be filled. It also means persevering in prayer, and getting down on our knees to beg of God. Do we think that less will do? In a petition, there is no trace of self-righteousness but humility that is part of true confession. “We beg of you, Lord!”

In some circles, there is the idea that we must be very familiar with God in prayer. Then we get loose formulations and quaint phrases, but no beseeching. “Lord, if you have a moment, it would be kind of cool if you’d help us out a little here...” God is not cool. I am glad that this kind of praying is not generally found among us, because that type of prayer has no effect. But sincere

and humble prayer has much strength —staying power— because it has *energy*. It works. We should never underestimate the energy of prayer.

As he did also in chapter 1, James writes about the prayer of “a righteous man.” This does not mean a sinless man, but a man who believes and is justified by faith, and in whom we see the effects of faith. Remember from the “Sermon on the Mount” that the tree is known by its fruit. We should never confess our sins to an unrighteous man, for he will abuse that privilege or lead us to further sin. Indeed, we must confess, but then to a man who is mature in faith, proven in life as a child of God. To some people, we cannot say anything, but to others, we can tell all.

And when a righteous man prays, hell trembles. The gates of heaven open. Legions of angels pour out. Things do start to happen. Things do get different. It may not happen all at once, for maturity is a long process, a matter of steady growing, of learning how to bend and how to rise in Christ, but it will indeed happen.

## The Surety Provided

I thought of saving the two verses about Elijah for another chapter, but they are too closely connected. In 5:17-18, James provides an example, or rather, a surety. A surety is something that gives us assurance, that actually makes us certain that prayer is powerful. We tend to doubt things, and therefore we need sureties. True sureties are found only in Scripture.

We may wonder why the Holy Spirit, through James, chose Elijah. There are many examples from Scripture that could have been chosen instead, such as Moses or Hannah. Why this particular prophet? In the time of James, there was a lot of focus on Elijah. Many non-Christian Jews were ardently waiting for Elijah to come as the herald of the Messiah. Jewish literature and also apocryphal literature contained many stories about Elijah, to the point that he had become a mythological figure and a real hero of the faith in some minds.

Yes, Elijah was a righteous man and a powerful man of prayer, but notice how James introduces him in 5:17: “Elijah was a man just like us.” Why does he write that? Because Elijah was no different or better than any of us. He was a common man despite his mythological proportions. We should not put Elijah on a pedestal, for he stands where we ourselves ought to stand. What is the lesson? Do we have to be like Elijah? No, but we have to be ourselves, being as Christ wants us to be.

What is striking about Elijah is that he *prayed*. James writes, “He prayed earnestly.” What is meant by “earnestly”? Does it mean simply that Elijah

really meant it when he prayed? Of course he did. Perhaps a better translation would be, “He prayed passionately.”

In I Kings 18:42, we read, “Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.” Have we ever prayed like that? I do not mean that we literally have to assume that prayer position, but something about it is very striking: the deep reverence before the LORD. The great Elijah is but a small man before God.

## **Intercession**

There is something else here that is rather important. Elijah’s prayer is not for himself. Actually, he himself is later afraid of Jezebel’s threat and runs away. Elijah’s prayer is one of intercession. He is praying for others, for God’s people, for the communion of saints. How much time do we spend on that? There are a lot of things we can ask for ourselves, but how often do we pray for others? For the office bearers? Paul dared to ask the church more than once, “Pray for us!” Do we pray for the church? Prayer and intercession are not the same thing. I think that we can also say that most of Christ’s prayers were not for himself, but that he interceded for us, and still does so in heaven.

Elijah prays. This is not the point, as such. James does not mean to say that if we pray long and hard enough, God will hear. We cannot force God with our prayers. Yes, we must persevere, but God cannot be forced. He wants to be beseeched, that is, he wants us to seek him constantly, to seek his grace and never to give up in this respect. “Our eyes look to our Master’s face till he provide us grace” (Ps 123).

Elijah’s praying goes on for quite a while. He is deeply tested. Why should God in grace turn his face towards Israel again, that stubborn and hard-necked people? Let the land roast until all is dead! Satan would have torched the place. Elijah loves God’s people deeply, however, and therefore he continues to pray without malice. And finally, a cloud rises from the sea, as small as a man’s hand, and when it rains, it pours. Do we want to know whether God hears prayer? Then we must read our Bible. There are many examples. The matter is sure: the prayer of a righteous man has power and energy.

Let us not be amazed by all the Elijah tales. Rather, let us be amazed that God is gracious. Let us rejoice in this: that God provides us grace, takes away our sins, and in that way heals all our illnesses in his compassion. He gave his own Son as our surety. Let us rejoice in having a Mediator in heaven who intercedes for us every day. Let us also learn intercession. Since we now pray in Jesus’ Name, it is all the more sure: our God is Yahweh, and he will save us

from sin, death, and infernal agony. What we need to do is learn how to pray. And then we can see how the spiritual maturity of the church is deepened and enhanced, on the way to the perfection of faith