

“AUTHENTIC: Prayer is the Key”

James 5:13-20

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • June 4, 2017

This morning we come to the end of our current sermon series called “authentic.” For about the last two and a half months we have been studying of the book of James, which is all about how to have an authentic Christian faith. This book is just so practical and pertinent, it’s almost like it was written this year. But in fact it was one of the earliest New Testament books written.

Throughout the whole book James has been most interested in what we could call practical theology. For James, theology is not so much about thinking or believing or saying the right things about God. The point of theology is primarily about having the right priorities and *doing* the right things, especially in the way you relate to other people.

As we have seen, there are several key themes in James. He begins by encouraging patience in the trials and difficulties of life. Sometimes you will hear people who claim to be Christians say that when you become a Christian that you won’t, or shouldn’t, have any more problems. If you have enough faith, they say, God will make sure that everything is smooth sailing. But friends, that is not in the Bible. In fact Jesus is very clear that following him is hard and you should expect to suffer because of it. For a long time in our country that hasn’t been the case. Only recently, as the number of professing, practicing Christians has declined, have we seen people really experience negative consequences for their faith in Jesus. James reminds us that when we experience those kinds of trials because of our faith that we are to “count it all joy.” Not that we’re happy about the circumstances but because it has a way of purifying our faith, helping us focus on what we truly believe.

A couple of key themes in James are important byproducts to being challenged because of our faith in Jesus, and they are related. One is a growing dependence on God. One of James’ key themes is the importance of

faith and the prayer life that goes along with faith. We’ll talk more about prayer in a few moments. The other result of patience in challenging situations is humility. James admonishes us about jealousy, boasting, speaking down to others, and as we saw last week, exploiting others for our own gain. The remedy for each of these is humility. Humility is the opposite of pride. Humility allows us to see other people as our equals, created in the image of God. And so humility prevents us from speaking behind someone’s back or exploiting them.

Throughout the Bible, pride is considered the most deadly sin because ultimately pride separates us from God. Pride is at the root of idolatry, which is putting something else in the place that Jesus rightfully deserves in our life: King and Lord. Now you may be thinking, “I don’t think I struggle with pride. I don’t boast or gossip or demean other people. I don’t exploit anyone. I guess I’m good here.” Here’s the thing. Pride is sneaky. You don’t have to be like Don King, the boxing promoter, who said, “I never cease to amaze my own self. And I say that humbly.” Today’s passage shines a light on our pride and on the humility we need.

James begins by saying, “Is anyone among you suffering?” The word for suffering is kind of a broad term. It literally means, “Are any of you having a difficult time?” Any of you ever been through anything difficult? Maybe financial trouble or legal trouble or a sick family member? Anyone lost a job or had a difficult relationship? Did I leave anyone out? Probably not. James says if any of that describes you, the first thing you should do is pray. You know why James had to say that? Because prayer is not always the first thing we think of. We either feel sorry for ourselves or we start trying to solve the problem on our own. Why? Pride. It takes humility to pray as your first response to difficulties in life.

Second, James says, “Is anyone cheerful?” Hopefully you can say yes to this one sometimes. Life’s not all lemons (I hope). Again, though, James says the proper response is prayer. This time it’s prayers of praise in the form of song. The word for “sing praise” is closely related to the word for psalm, and the Psalms are songs about situations in life. Some are songs of praise and some are songs about suffering. That’s why many of the Psalms resonate with our real life experiences. Once again pride can sneak in and keep us from praising God when things are going well because we’re tempted to think we did it ourselves. James reminds us that everything we do and everything we have is a gift from God and he should be praised.

James then says, “Is anyone among you sick or weak? 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.” Notice that the responsibility is on the one who is sick to call for the elders to come pray. He goes on to say that we are to confess to one another and to pray for one another that we may be healed. I suspect this is the area we are most vulnerable to sneaky pride. It takes great humility to genuinely ask others to pray for us. Some of us really struggle with this. I know I do. We justify it by saying we don’t want to inconvenience anyone or that we’re going to get better with some medication or whatever our excuse is. But James reminds us that there’s more at stake here than just physical healing. Our willingness to humble ourselves enough to allow others to pray for and with us in some way affects our forgiveness and salvation. Again, I think the issue is the separation from God that comes with pride. It takes great humility to call and say, “I *need* you.”

Let me just say that part of our reluctance is also fear. We may be afraid that we won’t be healed. James says, “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” We think, what if we don’t have that kind of faith. Thankfully, James gives us the example of Elijah the prophet and he begins by saying, “Elijah was

a man with a nature like ours.” In other words, Elijah wasn’t super-human. He was just like us. He was a sinner just like us. But he prayed. A lot. It’s interesting that James says Elijah prayed fervently that it might not rain. When you read the story in 1 Kings, the drought wasn’t the *result* of Elijah praying. Rather, Elijah had such a close relationship with God through prayer that God revealed to Elijah his divine will and Elijah was able to be a part of what God planned to do.

I think the same applies to us today. We should have the kind of prayer life that keeps us close to God so we can be in his will every day. That’s the point of calling for the elders to pray. You may or may not actually be healed physically. But having the leaders of the church pray with you can have the power to stimulate your faith to trust God fully with whatever happens. By the way, the anointing with oil serves to further stimulate faith. Human touch is a powerful thing. Medical studies have proven that human touch can actually help patients heal faster. If that’s the case in medicine, how much more is it true when the touch is from the Body of Christ.

Finally, James ends his letter by saying, “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.” The Christian faith is a team sport and there’s no “I” in team. It’s not just “Jesus and me.” The church was God’s idea. We have responsibilities toward one another. We are to pray with and for one another. That also means that when we see someone drifting away from Christ and from the church we have the responsibility to *humbly* and lovingly try to bring them back into an active relationship with Jesus. That’s real, biblical love.

So there you have it, the message of James is humility enables us to pray and humble prayer is the key to authentic faith.

Amen.