

The Difference Prayer Makes

Jonathan Rue

James 5:13-20

06.07.09

'What Difference Does God Make?' Series

Tonight is the last night in our series from the book of James called, *What Difference Does God Make?*

SLIDE:

What Difference Does God Make? Series Graphic

James understood that in order for God to really make a difference in our lives, our faith must go way beyond merely believing in him, but rather our faith will begin to impact the way that we live our life—in our habits, in our attitudes, in our lifestyle. We here at Joshua House really want to be people that don't just give cognitive assent to some doctrinal position. We don't want to be people that simply have a philosophical belief in a higher power. We want to be people that are being shaped into who God wants us to be. I want to be a person that is growing and developing and becoming a better human being because I know God. Not just smarter because I know things about God. I want to be a better human being because I know God and I'm allowing God to make a difference in my life.

Well in this last section, James is going to talk to us about something that is not unique to Christianity, something that is not unique to Judaism, something that is not even unique to all forms of theism. This is something that even agnostics do, people that don't know if there's a God. This is something, whether you are currently a follower of Jesus or not, that you probably have done in your life. James is going to talk to us tonight about **prayer**.

Now of course prayer looks very different for different religions and different people and different cultures, and prayer looks very different depending on how desperate your situation is. But essentially, all prayer is, is talking to God. Prayer is communicating to God through words, either through thoughts or spoken words.

Some of my favorite prayers are the prayers of people that normally don't pray, but find themselves in a position of desperation and so are driven to reach out to God. They aren't concerned with how formal their prayer is or concerned about saying the right words, they just offer a simply cry of desperation: "God, if you're real, please help me!"

There's something so pure in that. A cry for help. A cry for a sign that God is there, that He sees you and is with you. Have you ever spoken out that kind of prayer?

Yet for many people that start going to church, something funny begins to happen. We start to pray in front of other people, and become concerned that we sound right. Because prayer in church is often quite a formal experience.

In fact, for most of Christian history, prayer was a very formal event. For the history of the church, before 50 years ago, followers of Jesus prayed with a great deal of reverence and honor and respect to God. Prayer meetings were often composed of a series of formal prayer speeches.

If you were to say your prayers before bed 200 years ago, it might sound a little like this. This is an old Puritan evening prayer that someone might pray at the end of their day before they fall asleep.

SLIDE:

A Puritan Evening Prayer:

Giver of all, another day is ended and I take my place beneath my great redeemer's cross, where healing streams continually descend, where balm is poured into every wound, where I wash anew in the all-cleansing blood, assured that Thou seest in me no spots of sin. Yet a little while and I shall go to Thy home and be no more seen; help me to gird up the loins of my mind, to quicken my step, to speed as if each moment were my last, that my life be joy, my death glory.

I'm sure that your evening prayers sound very similar to this. Probably not. But when we get around people that pray like this, we start questioning:

- "Is that really how I am supposed to pray?"
- "Is that how I need to speak to be heard by God?"
- "Do I have to use the right words?"
- "Do I have to use words like 'thy' and 'seest'?"
- "Is that the language that God speaks?"

So it can feel like there is a certain style and lexicon of words that you have to use in order to pray correctly. That you have to "say thy prayers correctly" to be heard by God.

SLIDE:

Saying thy prayers correctly

I want to show a clip of a situation where someone was asked to pray even though he had absolutely no idea what he was doing, and he tries so hard to say

the right words that he thinks that he is supposed to say. Let's watch this clip from Meet the Parents.

**VIDEO:
Meet the Parents**

Now perhaps you can sympathize with Ben Stiller, here. Have you ever prayed out loud before in front of other people? It is scary! Prayer can be a terrifying thing to do for the first time in front of people when you think that you have to say things just the right way. It's kind of like singing in front of other people, a cappella. Sure, I'll sing in my car along with the radio. I'll sing softly in a larger crowd like this as we're all singing, but I'm not going to stand in a group of 10 people and just sing out something all alone while other people listen to me. Praying can feel that way.

Prayer can be a terrifying thing to do alone in your room before God if you feel like you have to phrase things in just the right way to be heard from God. And we have all thought about what is keeping God from answering our prayers, right? What am I doing wrong? Why isn't God responding? Why hasn't he rescued me yet? Maybe I did something wrong in my prayer.

Well, in this last section, James is going to teach us about how to pray. And he is going to alleviate our anxiety that the effectiveness of a prayer is has nothing to do with how formal or informal our words are. Effective prayer has nothing to do with using the right words or the right style of prayer. It doesn't matter if we are laid back and slow or speaking a mile a minute. It doesn't matter if we're eloquent or sloppy in our words. It doesn't matter if we say thee, thou, thine or prefer slang words.

But, James is not saying that all prayers are the same. There are some things that we do in prayer that do matter, that do make an impact on the effectiveness of our prayers to God, that do make all the difference in the world. I've called tonight's talk The Difference Prayer Makes. Let's pray.

**TITLE SLIDE:
The Difference Prayer Makes
Jonathan Rue
James 5:13-20
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'What Difference Does God Make?' Series**

If you have a Bible, please open it to James 5:13 where we read this.

SLIDE:

James 5:13-20 (TNIV)

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. *14* Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. *15* And the prayer offered in faith will make them well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. *16* Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

17 Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. *18* Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

19 My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring them back, *20* remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the way of error will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Now, what James is doing in this text is assisting us to learn “what helps prayer to work.”

**SLIDE:
What helps prayer work?**

What James is not telling us is *how to make prayer work*. We can't do that. We can't make prayer work. Prayer involves us coming to God and bringing our requests to him and allowing him to speak to us. Prayer is not how we can twist God's arm to do what we want. Prayer is never an area that we retain power over God to get God to do what we want.

Prayer involves us making a request to God and prayer involves allowing our hearts to become aligned with God, so that what He wants becomes what our prayers are asking. And so *the power of prayer is located deeply and firmly within the sovereignty of God*. The power of prayer does not lie in anything we can do in order to make it work. The effectiveness of prayer comes from the sovereignty of God.

But there are some things that we can do to help prayer to work, to help God hear us better. And to help ourselves align with his will more and more and so this is what James is outlining here. And the first thing that James tells us, is that if we are going to pray to make that prayer effective, we need to *pray in faith*.

**SLIDE:
Praying in faith**

And we see this in verse 15.

SLIDE:

James 5:14-15 (TNIV)

Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. *15* And the **prayer offered in faith** will make them well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.

So James is telling us that the kind of prayer that is effective is the prayer *offered in faith*.

So prayer offered in faith is first of all not prayer offered in doubt, where we don't believe that this can or will happen, but are just going through the motions of praying. When we pray to God, a requirement is that we believe that God can do it. That he does have the power, the resource, the ability to accomplish what we ask of him.

And secondly, prayer offered in faith is not prayer offered in certainty, like we can make demands upon God and "claim our destiny" or our desires from him. We can never presume upon God and make demands that he act. That's just not helpful. I mean do you like it when people do that to you? When people demand that you do something for them now, without giving you any freedom of choice over whether you feel like doing that for them or not. This is exactly why I'm not sad to be out of the food service industry. When it comes to food and coffee drinks, people don't ask politely, people demand.

Have you ever been around parents that let their kids demand all the time? It drives me crazy and the kid isn't even asking me for anything.

God does not enjoy when we pray with a list of demands, and "claim that he has already done something that we are just asking him for now. It's annoying when we do it to each other and it's annoying when we do it to God.

Prayer offered in faith means that we believe that God *can fulfill the prayer*, **and that we believe that He is good even if he chooses not to give us what we want**. See that's how it works. If you come to God because what he can do for you, you have totally missed the point and god is not going to give you what you want. But if you come to God for God. And if you'll follow him whether or not he does anything for you, then you've got it right, and God just might bless you beyond what you could ever have imagined. That is what praying in faith means.

Praying in faith also means that prayer isn't some sort of religious equation. Praying to God is not like putting quarters in the giant vending machine in the sky. Sometimes we think of it this way, like we add our prayers into the slot and

expect a return is owed us. And when our snickers bar doesn't come out, then we kick the machine and get mad. That's not what prayer is. Prayer's also not some sort of a magic incantation or religious ritual or spell that we speak in order to make something happen. With that model, just like the vending machine, we are in control. But we are never the ones in control in prayer, God is. Always. And because of that, prayer is relational. It is communicating with the living God what our desires and needs are.

So the power of prayer is never located in any object. And so we see in this passage that James says that we are to anoint the sick with oil in the name of the Lord. And so many people throughout church history have taken this to be some sort of a magic ritual as if healing was located in the oil, instead of the power of the Lord. Now it was the case that in that time oil was thought to have medicinal properties. So in the story of the Good Samaritan, the Good Samaritan used oil as he dressed the wounds of the man that had been beaten along the side of the road. And oil was used by the disciples in Mark 6:13 when they were sent out two by two and so it's likely that oil was thought to have medicinal properties, but beyond that oil is symbolic of the Holy Spirit and it gives a physical sign that can stimulate faith as we experience in our bodies something of the reality of God's Spirit.

There are some physical signs that Jesus has given to the church like communion. We take a piece of bread and drink some juice or wine. And this is symbolic of the great sacrifice of Christ's body and his blood, shed for our sins. This doesn't mean that these elements of bread and wine contain magical properties, it means when we take them by faith, we experience something of the presence of Christ and are helped by the physicality of the bread and the wine.

So, offering a prayer in faith means that it's not a magical potion or incantation. This means that *you do not have to say just the right words and utter a phrase with just the right inflection for your prayer to be heard by God*. If you notice that most of the prayers of Jesus were pretty short prayers. Jesus didn't launch into wordy, theologically complex supplications before God. No, Jesus knelt down and prayed for people by saying things like, to a blind man, "See!" It's a pretty short prayer. To a paralytic, Jesus said, "Rise and walk." To Lazarus, dead in a tomb, Jesus said, "Come forth." There's not a lot to these prayers. The Holy Spirit did not answer these prayers because Jesus impressed him by his eloquence. These were prayers offered in faith, which is the same way that you or I are called to offer prayers—in faith. That's the first thing that makes our prayers effective.

The next thing that James points to as a way to help make our prayers more effective in the ear of God is that we should do all we can to pray with clean hearts.

SLIDE:

Praying clean

And what I mean by this is that our hearts would be clean before the Lord, that we don't come laid down with the baggage of sin. And so we see this in verse 16.

SLIDE:

James 5:16 (TNIV)

Therefore **confess your sins to each other** and **pray for each other** so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

James is saying that there is something that can get in the way of our prayers being heard by God, and that thing is sin. If we have sin in our lives, it can be a blockage to God working in our lives, to God releasing things to us that we're desiring. And so James says, therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other. If you want your prayers to have effect, if you want to be healed, if you want to be forgiven, he says therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another.

Now confession of sin requires the repentance for sin. Repentance is the act where we turn away from our sin and turn toward Christ. Confession is the act of then admitting our sin, of telling God, "I was wrong." The word itself in the Greek language is "homo lego"—"homo" meaning the same and "lego" meaning speak. So literally confession means "to say the same thing as or to agree with". So when we confess our sin and our guilt, what we are saying is that we agree with the charge that God has brought against us. We agree that we have rebelled against God.

And there are so many subtle ways that we try to avoid this, just like in our relationships with one another, we avoid at all costs real confession. And so we say things like, "I'm sorry IF I did something that upset you." "I'm sorry IF you're feelings got hurt by something that I did." The word "if" robs these statements of any value. And so the real meaning of these phrases, the way it comes across to the person that you've wrong sounds something like this, *"Obviously you're upset about something. I don't think I've done anything wrong, but just to get you off my back, I'll give you this token apology. And by the way, since I don't know whether I've done anything wrong, I certainly don't know what I should do differently in the future. Therefore don't expect me to change. It's only a matter of time before I do the same thing again."* (taken from C. Ken Sande, "Reconciliation Through Confessing Your Sins" —*Journal of Biblical Counseling*). That kind of a confession is not indicative of true repentance.

And what God is after is first of all that we would truly repent, truly turn from our sin and turn toward him, and then secondly that we would openly confess our sin. Now the temptation is for most of us is to just say, "ok, I'll confess my sin to God.

Just me and God in secret, nobody else is going to know.” But James here says therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other. So why is that? Why is James pressing us to not only confess to God, but to actually confess our sins to one another? Well, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a great Christian writer and pastor of the 1930’s and 40’s and he wrote this:

SLIDE:

Why is it that it is often easier to confess our sins to God than to a brother? God is holy and sinless, He is a just judge of evil and the enemy of all disobedience. But a brother is sinful as we are. He knows from his own experience the dark night of secret sin. Why should we not find it easier to go to a brother than to the holy God. But if we do, we must ask ourselves whether we have not often been deceiving ourselves with our confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sins to ourselves and also granting ourselves absolution. And is not the reason perhaps for our countless relapses and the feebleness of our Christian obedience to be found precisely in the fact that we are living on self-forgiveness and not a real forgiveness?... When I go to my brother to confess, I am going to God. —Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together

We too easily let ourselves off the hook and confess our sins to ourselves, but when we confess to our brother or our sister in Christ, we are bringing our sin out into the open, into the place where it can be forgiven and it’s in that place that we offer it to God. If you’re in a place of not knowing what God wants of you, not knowing how to move forward in your Christian life, not knowing what God has called you to in the long term, not knowing how to fix what’s broken in your life now, let me recommend to you that you start with this concrete action and confess your sins to somebody. Get a friend, a Christian brother if you’re a guy or a Christian sister if you’re a woman, somebody where you can open up to and say look, this is where I’m at, this is what I struggle with, this is what I’m offering over to the Lord. And allow them to hear you, to pray with you, and to offer the forgiveness of Christ, to speak it over your life. There’s such great power in this simple act. And yet we try so hard to complicate things and to rationalize and justify things because this is one of the hardest things you’ll ever do as a Christian, is to get honest with another human being.

If this is something you’re interested in and maybe you don’t have a real close friend here at Joshua House yet, I want to recommend that you check out one of our men’s groups or women’s group.

SLIDE:

Men’s Groups

Wise Guys (Contact Matt Freado: 614.302.2890)

\$5 Soul (Contact Jamie Luttrell: 614.286.4399)

Men Building Integrity (Contact Eric Johnson: erkjohn@yahoo.com)

Women's Groups

Hearts on Fire (Contact Leanna Hampton: 614.746.6643)

Gathering Place (Contact Celeste Johnston: 740.361.1236)

Three Strands (Contact Kelly Mazak: 614.707.1080)

Integrity.women (Contact Carmela Delgra: 614.264.1962)

Confession of sin isn't for super Christians. It's for all Christians. The great reformer Martin Luther said this:

SLIDE:

"Therefore when I admonish you to confession, I am admonishing you to be a Christian." — Martin Luther

And then the last thing James tells us about how to pray effectively is he tells us that we should pray earnestly.

SLIDE:

Praying earnestly

And we see this in verse 17.

SLIDE:

James 5:17-18 (TNIV)

Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He **prayed earnestly** that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.

18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

And so James uses the illustration of the prophet Elijah in the Old Testament, one of the most amazing prophets. This guy did incredible works, through the power of God's Spirit. And yet James says, he was a human being even as we are. He wasn't superman. He wasn't some other category of spiritual leader. He was just like us. He was a human being, flesh and blood, struggled with sin and doubt, with fear, with failure, because that's what it means to be human. He was just like us. And yet because he *prayed earnestly*, God did this amazing thing and withheld rain for 3 ½ years and then he prayed again earnestly and the heavens gave rain and produced crops. Elijah stands as a powerful example to us that if we earnestly pray, God can do amazing things. Bigger things than we could ever do by ourselves. Things that are beyond our control like changing the weather patterns. Incidentally, I am praying for weather patterns right now, as my fiance Staci and are going to the Caribbean in a few weeks on our honeymoon. I am earnestly praying to God that he would keep all hurricanes away and give us great weather.

And so praying earnestly means is that you actually have to mean what you say in prayer. You can't fake it. You can't pretend pray and think that God is going to hear you. You actually have to mean what you say when you pray to God. So, if you're asking God for something, James is saying that you've got to actually want that thing to happen.

If you're asking God to help you forgive somebody that has hurt you, but you have a commitment in your heart that you never will and you are nursing the pain and you're clinging to your bitterness with everything you have...but you know you're a Christian and that the Bible tells you that you need to forgive those that have wounded you. And so you toss up a token prayer: "Well God, help me to forgive this person." But in your heart, everything is saying, no way. I don't want this. What James is saying is, your prayer probably isn't going to be answered. That's not an earnest prayer, you don't really want it. You're not stepping into what you're asking God for, you're leaning back away from it.

Even that great British playwright William Shakespeare knew this one. He wrote:

SLIDE:

"Words without thoughts never reach heaven" —Shakespeare

God isn't interested in your pretend prayers. God hears prayers that are offered with an earnest desire for Him.

And this has nothing to do with the tone of voice that we pray in or the style of speech or the eloquence of the words that we use. This has to do with the earnestness of our heart. Do we really desire what God has for us? Or are we merely pretending? God can see straight through false prayers. He can see straight into our heart. And the only way to move God to answer our prayers is when we really ask him earnestly, desiring that he respond.

So the three components of really effective prayer are:

1. That we pray in faith
2. That we pray with a clean heart
3. That we pray earnestly.

And so if we do this, if we follow James' advice and pray in this manner to God, what can we expect out of prayer? What does prayer do?

SLIDE:

What does prayer do?

The first thing that we see in this passage is that prayer heals sickness.

SLIDE:
Prayer heals sickness

We see this in verse 14.

SLIDE:
James 5:13-15a (TNIV)

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. *14* Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. *15* And the prayer offered in faith will make them well; the Lord will raise them up.

When we are in trouble and we are sick, prayer heals our sickness. Prayer makes a difference in the physical side of life. We are not speaking to a God that only hears us but is unable to act. No, we serve a God who can intervene right into our situation in a supernatural way that goes beyond our understanding, that goes beyond our scientific knowledge. God created the world. God created every law and rule that governs the natural world. And God can break in and correct things in the natural world, correct things in our bodies that are broken. Now for many people, this is the hardest thing for them to believe about God—that he could actually heal physical ailments and sickness and disability, that God could actually interact with the physical world. They might believe that there is a God. They might believe that God exists and that God loves us, but have real difficulty believing that He could heal today.

Well, for God, this is the easy part. For God, reaching into the physical world is the easy part for him. He made everything and so he can fix everything. It's not hard for God. What is so much harder for God is the second thing that James talks about, that not only does prayer heal sickness. Prayer heals sin.

SLIDE:
Prayer heals sin

And this is immeasurably more difficult for God because he could not simply reach down and eradicate a cancer. To heal our sin, God had to send his son, to die on the cross and pay the penalty for our sins. And we see in verse 15:

SLIDE:
James 5:15 (TNIV)

And the prayer offered in faith will make them well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, **they will be forgiven.**

Forgiveness is the greatest need of every human being alive and it's also the most difficult thing for God to heal. But, because of the sacrifice of Christ, when we pray to God and ask for his forgiveness, it is granted. And in the same way

that we pray for healing of sickness, when we pray in faith, when we pray with a pure heart, and we pray earnestly for God's forgiveness, the wonderful truth is that because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, God can grant us forgiveness. And unlike our prayer to be healed of our sickness, unlike our prayer to be rescued from our troubles, we have a guarantee that we receive the forgiveness of God when we cry out to him in prayer. This is not dependent on how much you have sinned, how far you have wandered from God. No matter where you are in life, no matter what you've done, you are one prayer away from receiving the forgiveness of God. Even if you've wandered away, James ends his book by talking about those who have wandered from the faith. He says this in verse 19:

SLIDE:

James 5:19-20 (TNIV)

My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring them back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the way of error will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Now many of you may have wandered from the truth. I know that I did. And I had people that were praying for me every step that I took away from God. My grandmother died about 5 years ago, and at her funeral I had the opportunity to share some words in a eulogy. And one of the things that I shared about my grandmother was my gratefulness to God for her. Because I know that she prayed for me nearly every day of my life. She was so consistent in going before the Lord and praying for God to be with me, to grow me and develop me, to protect me, to keep me.

And I spent most of my childhood living in a great family that knew Christ and I had a relationship with Christ, but in college I began to wander from the truth. I began to walk away. Not from believing in God, but from living faithfully with God. And my grandmother was one of the people that continued to pray for me. There were many people that did in my life, but she stands out as one who I know prayed with consistency for me. And so even though I wandered from the truth, she was one of the people that helped to bring me back to faithfulness in Christ, to bring me back to a place where I could pray with faith, with purity, and with earnest desire, I could pray for the forgiveness of God and know that I have received it. And that is the greatest assurance of life. There is nothing greater than knowing that you have forgiveness for your sins, that you are standing right with God, that there is nothing that separates you, that you are not laid down by guilt and shame, but that you have been set free from the bondage of sin, and set free to live in relationship with God.

After Service Mentions:

Register for Breathe

Stop by the Children's Ministry Table in the Lobby

The Difference Prayer Makes

Jonathan Rue

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Saying thy prayers correctly

What helps prayer work?

Praying **in faith** (v. 15)

Praying **clean** (v. 16)

Praying **earnestly** (v. 17)

What does prayer do?

Prayer heals **sickness** (v. 14)

Prayer heals **sin** (v. 15)