

Community of Confession and Prayer

James 5:13-20

Scripture

James 5:13-20 ¹³ Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. ¹⁹ My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Main Idea

Background

James closes out his letter of practical Christian living with this section on community. There are a number of topics in the passage that have caused Christians to wrestle with James' meaning. For the sake of our study, we'll be zeroing in on James' remarks concerning sin in the community, confession and prayer.

Calvin is very helpful with topic of confession in pointing out that there are two types of confession we should practice with one another. The first is when we commit a sin against another person. We are called to confess that sin in order to reconcile with that person. The second type of confession is for what Calvin called the "cure of our souls" – for our spiritual well-being. He says, "Therefore let every believer remember that, if he be privately troubled and afflicted with a sense of sins, so that without outside help he is unable to free himself from them, it is a part of his duty not to neglect what the Lord has offered to him by way of remedy." (Calvin, Institutes, Book III, 4.12) The way of remedy God has offered is to confess our sins to one another.

Focus

This study's central focus is on corporate confession and prayer. These two community practices are extremely rare in our modern context, but James helps us see why it is worth it to recover them.

Starters

- Share a story where God heard the cries of your heart and answered your prayers.

Discussion

Q1: According to James, sin is as serious as death (1:15, 5:20). So, James calls for us to be open about our own sins in order to receive healing and forgiveness. Why is this so hard for us and why do you think God calls us to sometimes confess our sins, not only to Him, but to one another?

A1: It's fairly apparent why it is so hard for us to confess our sins to one another – we're prideful! We want to protect our image and reputation. We want to keep the "I've got it all together" image intact. We don't want to depend on other people. We're also afraid. We fear that others will reject us or look down on us. We're afraid people aren't gracious and compassionate like Jesus (and sometimes we're afraid He isn't either). We're afraid people won't understand our struggles and that the pain of opening up our lives will be all for naught.

Why does God call us to risk such pain and embarrassment? Because humility, brokenness and weakness open us up to receive his grace. Our pride prevents us from receiving God's forgiveness

in its all its glory because we're unable to stop thinking "I'm better than this," "How could I mess up like that – shame on me!", "I need to get my act together"... All this keeps us at the center and finds its root in pride.

Confession allows us to be who we are before others. There is freedom in truth – truly being ourselves –struggles, failures and all—with others frees us from pride, self-sufficiency and the self-reliance. Isolation with our sin can lead us to deception and despair. God sometimes calls others to be the reinforcing voice of his grace and compassion.

Q2: Sickness is not always the result of sin, but James talks of healing and forgiveness together in verses 15 & 16 (following the example of Jesus' healings, i.e. Mt. 9:1-7). Read Psalm 32:1-7. How does the Psalmist describe the effects of unconfessed sin? Can you identify with the experience the Psalmist speaks of? How does this help deepen our understanding of our forgiveness in Christ?

A2: In this Psalm, David describes the effects of his unconfessed sin as effecting every fiber of his being. Because he was estranged from God and had not yet turned back toward him – his life seemed to be slowing depleting. Apart from repentance and faith, sin leads to death – the complete cutting off of our whole selves from God's goodness. This is what David was feeling.

Help your group to see the wholistic nature of sin and its destructive effects. Share your own experience of this. Let this be a time when the seriousness of our rebellion against God is felt in the stories of others and in David's story in the Psalm. And let this be a time where the group can rejoice in the sweetness of our forgiveness, cleansing and wholeness in Christ.

Q3: For James, the seriousness of sin also means that we confront those in our community who may be wandering away in sin (5:19, 20). Why do you think this is something our modern church largely avoids? How does James help change our attitude toward confronting sins in others (v19, 20)?

A3: This is a tough topic to tackle. But James doesn't let us off the hook. We do have a very hard time of doing this in our modern day. We live in a culture where it is taboo to tell anyone that anything there doing is in any way wrong. And that attitude has seeped into us. We hesitate to help people see the "errors of their ways". After all, who are we to tell anyone something like this – we're not perfect people.

James doesn't say you have to be perfect to step into the life of a "wanderer" and help him/her turn around. The Scriptures tell us perfection isn't required to help others see truth in their errors – this is actually the function of love. (Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. – I Peter 4:8). James paints a picture of the gravity of wandering from the truth – to wander away is to move toward death. When the wanderer turns back, he/she finds salvation and the covering of his/her sins.

It may be awkward and love definitely requires gentleness and wisdom, but how can we not give someone the medicine they need to live. To not do so is to pull the plug – that's what James is saying.

Q4: How can we, as a community group, be most effective and consistent in praying for one another (5:16) in and out of our group time?

A4: This question is really dependent on the personality and unique make-up of your group. This is another time to be creative and pursue something realistic and do-able so that this one-another might become an ongoing part of your community group.

Prayer

In response to the call to pray for one another, let's spend an extended time in prayer practicing just that. Using the Lord's Prayer as an outline, we'll pray together. Try and make the focus of your prayers corporate, i.e. pray for the group as a whole or people in the group. It may be a bit uncomfortable a first, but it will help us break out of the habit of focusing on ourselves in our prayer lives.

2 or 3 people pray under each heading:

"Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name."

(Praise God for his Fatherly love and care, His holiness, His sovereignty, Pray that you would all, more and more, see God as Holy)

"Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven"

(Pray that God's kingdom would come through the vocations of the group members, Pray that your group would have a clear sense of calling and the will of God in their lives)

"Give us this day our daily bread"

(Pray for God's provision in the daily lives of your group, pray for families' specific needs)

"And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

(Pray that your group would know the freedom of walking in confession and forgiveness and that each would extend forgiveness if they have been wronged)

"And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

(Pray that sin would not lead any astray, that marriages would be strong, that children would know Christ, that pride, money and possessions wouldn't have a grip on group members)

"For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

(End in praise of the great glory of God)