

Adult Teaching Resources

September 27, 2015



Serious Church

True Faith — James 2:1-26

Pure Speech — James 3:1-12

Highborn Wisdom — James 3:13-4:10

Fervent Prayer — James 5:13-20

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Fervent Prayer

James 5:13-20

FIT Teaching Guide

by Rick Jordan

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Before the Lesson: For the Transformational Exercise, bring a container of olive oil and a small bowl to pour the oil in — and a cloth (to wipe your hands after placing oil on class members' foreheads). It may be that you are aware of a member of your group who has returned from a spiritual “wandering” experience. You might ask the person ahead of class time if they would be willing to share their testimony of wandering from God/Church and of returning — at the end of the Information session.

Fellowship Question

Use *one* of the following to break the ice, to begin discussion, and lead into the study:

What is the most recent thing you “sealed”? (an envelope? A sandwich bag? Etc.)

When was a time your name was on a church's prayer list?

Information

It has happened to all of us. We get word that a loved one is very sick. They are undergoing tests. They are considering optional treatments. Maybe they are even “getting their house in order” with a will, living will and power of attorney. As believers in a God who hears prayer, we begin to pray that they will be healed. We might also place a call or make a visit or fix a dinner — but all is couched in prayer. Sometimes the prayer is answered, sometimes miraculously. But, at other times, they remain ill, or get worse, or die. We wonder — did prayer do the person any good at all?

We are not the first to question the power or impotency of prayer. First century Christians saw loved ones die of illness and/or suffer pains of persecution. James had some teachings to offer them.

[Have a class member read James 5:13.]

When is the appropriate time to pray? (any time; all the time regardless of circumstances; in extreme times of joy or of need; etc.)

Do you think most people turn to prayer more in times of crisis or in times of success? Why?

In good times or bad, we should pray. The Psalms give us models of prayer when things are

Information *continued*

going our way and when things are going against us.

[Have a class members read Psalm 30:1-4 and Psalm 86:1-4.]

These songs were written centuries before James took up a pen. We can imagine that the urge to turn to God in urgent times has always been with us. It is as if the need to pray is built into our “spiritual DNA.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

THE BIBLE LESSON writer notes: “James offers no instruction as to what to pray for... The important thing is not *what* we pray, but *that* we pray.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

[Have a class member read James 5:14-15a.]

Most churches keep a prayer list of some sort. Undoubtedly, most of the persons listed are dealing with an illness. In prayer meetings, in Sunday School class rooms and in worship services, their names are lifted to God. Surely, that is a good thing. Do we take the further step James teaches of gathering elders to pray while anointing with oil? If not, why not? (inconvenient; takes time; seems “magical”; not culturally appropriate for us, etc.)

What would the sick person gain from this type of visit, even if healing did not come immediately? (presence of caring believers; assurance of support; turning from focus on the illness to focus on God, etc.)

If prayer is not a magic wand and if it is not a means to manipulate God — “we’re doing our part, so You must now do Your part” — what is the purpose of prayer for the sick?

In spite of James’ seeming guarantee that all will be healed, we know from experience that this is not the case. [Read the following comment from the online resource: “Digging Deeper — Not all are healed”]

“There are times when God, for God’s own purposes, chooses to heal a person in what seems to be miraculous fashion. There are other times when, despite all our prayers, people die. We cannot claim to understand the mind of God or the reasons why this is so. When God does not choose to intervene with miraculous healing, that does not mean God ‘took’ that person; only that God allowed the sickness to follow the course of nature. Until the Lord returns, we all die.”

How have you worked through this issue of unanswered prayer? (or, was it a prayer that was answered, but not the way you hoped?)

[Have a class member read James 5:15b-18.]

Is there a connection between sin and sickness?

In some worship services, members of the congregation are invited to spend a moment in silence considering and confessing their sins to God. Then, the minister offers a Scripture or other word of assurance that God forgives sin. Have you been in such services? How has that time set aside for confession affected you? If you’ve not been in such services, how do

Information *continued*

you think a weekly time set aside to consider and confess sin would affect you?

James uses the story of Elijah's prayers to illustrate the effective prayer of a righteous person. THE BIBLE LESSON writer notes: "As a prophet, Elijah acted on God's instructions rather than his own initiative, and the vocal prayer was designed as a public affirmation that God was with Elijah."

Simply deciding that these people should be punished with a drought or relieved with rain would hardly point to Elijah's righteousness. Indeed, it could have been a sign of pride. "I am so close to God, look what I can do!" But, a humble submission to what God instructed Elijah to pray was a sign of his righteousness.

However, sometimes we want to take God's power into our own hands. And other times, we become disillusioned because God did not use divine power to answer our prayer as we itemized it. Either way, we wander from God and from the community of God.

[Have a class member read James 5:19-20.]

The temptation to wander from God and God's people is not uncommon.

A favorite hymn of many, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," concludes with these words:

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,

Prone to leave the God I love;

Here's my heart, take and seal it,

Seal it for Thy courts above.

If we look to the dictionary for the verb "seal," we find that one definition has to do with *preservation*. So, a sandwich bag is sealed to preserve freshness. A deck is treated with wood sealer. Another definition has to do with an *official* seal, such as a wax seal on an important document. How do these definitions relate to the phrase, "seal my heart"?

[It may be that you are aware of a member of your group who has returned from a "wandering" experience. You might ask the person ahead of class time if they would be willing to share their testimony of wandering and of returning.]

Transformational Exercise

[For this exercise, the teacher will go from person to person. You will dip your finger into a bowl with olive oil and trace a cross on the forehead of each person who wants to receive prayer and anointing. Do this solemnly and slowly as you silently pray for this person's needs. You might whisper a blessing or prayer, such as "We pray for healing, Lord," or "God is with you always."]

Today, I would like for us to have a time of prayer for healing. There may be healing you need in your own life. It may be a physical healing or an emotional healing or a healing

Transformational Exercise *continued*

of relationships. What is broken or ill that you want to bring to God? I would like to pray silently for you and trace a cross on your forehead with olive oil. If all is well for you and your soul, you probably know someone else who needs prayer for healing. I invite you represent them by accepting prayer and the oil on their behalf.

As I approach you, simply lift your hand if you would like to receive the prayer and the anointment.

[Once you have anointed those who have requested it, close in a prayer something like this: *This oil has no magic in it, O God. It simply represents your Spirit within us and our willingness to submit to your work in our lives. We pray for healing, because we believe you can heal. But, if the healing does not happen or does not happen in the way we expect, we will continue to trust that you will be with us, never leaving us, never forsaking us. Amen.*]

Comments or Questions for Rick Jordan? You may send comments to the lesson plan author at rjordan@cbfnc.org. Rick is also available to lead workshops and conferences on Christian Education, with particular emphasis on how best to use the FIT Faith model.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Morning prayer — Martin Luther is famous for having once told a friend he had so much work to do on the next day that he would have to spend the first three hours in prayer just to get it all done. Luther probably has few followers who adhere to a similar calculus regarding prayer. Indeed, most of us would be more likely to say we have so much to do that we have no time for prayer at all.

Wrapping up — James closes his letter with words of advice on various subjects. In 4:11-12 he warns against judgmental attitudes and oath taking, and in 4:13-17 he cautions against presumptive or prideful behavior that leaves God out of the equation. He rails against wealthy people who exploit the poor in 5:1-7, and in 5:8-11 he encourages those suffering in poverty to be patient in the hope of Christ’s return.

James then closes the letter by returning to one of his initial pleas, urging his readers to practice fervent prayer and to care for each other.

James is not alone in choosing to close his letter with a reference to prayer. Note words from near the end of other New Testament letters: Rom. 15:30-32; Eph. 6:18-20; Phil. 4:6f.; Col 4:2-4, 12; 1 Thess. 5:16-18, 25; 2 Thess. 3:1f.; Philem. 22; Heb. 13:18f.; Jude 20.

Joyful prayer — Prayer seems to come naturally in times of heartache or sorrow, but James counsels prayer in times of joy, too. Earlier, James reminded his readers that all good things have their source in God: “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (1:17).

If we have manners enough to express thanks to other people who are kind to us, should we not also show gratitude for God’s abundant grace and generosity? We don’t send thank-you cards to God, but we can pray. Not counting saying grace at the table, when was the last time you spent time in prayer for no reason than to voice appreciation for God’s blessings?

Not all are healed — The New Testament epistles witness that not all are healed despite fervent prayer (1 Cor. 11:30, 2 Cor. 12:1–10, 2 Tim. 4:20).

I remember a time when a friend had a heart attack while traveling out of town. Many people prayed for him: his family, his church, his friends. A team of elders from a local church anointed him with oil and prayed for him. Despite all that, he died.

There are times when God, for God’s own purposes, chooses to heal a person in what seems to be miraculous fashion. There are other times when, despite all our prayers,

Digging Deeper *continued*

people die. We cannot claim to understand the mind of God or the reasons why this is so. When God does not choose to intervene with miraculous healing, that does not mean God “took” that person -- only that God allowed the sickness to follow the course of nature. Until the Lord returns, we all will die.

Sickness and sin — A primary theme of the Old Testament is that sinfulness leads to trouble, including sickness. Although the book of Job called that equation into question through the story of a righteous man who suffered, the belief remained prominent in Jewish circles, and James was writing to Jewish Christians. Thus, it is not surprising that he seems to connect sickness with sinfulness. The prayer of the elders (and presumably the sick person) results not only in healing but also in forgiveness of sin, James says (5:15), leading to his injunction for believers to “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (5:16).

While modern believers would be less inclined to assume that sickness represents divine retribution for sinful actions, we are quite aware that many behaviors do have a harmful effect on our health. Poor eating habits, smoking, sloth, and overindulgence in a variety of other things not only shorten our lives but also make them more painful and less productive. Sometimes, getting better is mainly a matter of “repenting” by turning away from destructive habits and adopting a healthier lifestyle. As James called for fellow believers to pray for the healing of the sick, the encouragement of a supportive community can help us to stick with healthier habits.

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

The Hardest Question is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

How can we best interpret James's teaching on prayer and healing?

Ralph P. Martin, writing in the Word Biblical Commentary, outlines four things to consider as we seek to interpret James's teaching on prayer.

First, Martin says, we should remember that James wrote to Jewish believers during an early and formative stage of Christianity. Communities of primarily Jewish believers held to a more ritualistic practice of faith that ultimately faded as the more open approach to faith championed by Paul won out. We note that the prescriptions James taught apparently did not catch on and become normative for the church, though in medieval times 5:14 became the basis for the Roman Catholic practice of "extreme unction," a prayerful anointing with oil when people are at the point of death. This is not to say that visiting the sick, anointing with oil, and praying for healing cannot be good and helpful things — but they should not necessarily be read as a prescriptive or normative practice.

Secondly, Martin sees a hermeneutical key in James's emphasis on facing adversity (v. 13). James may have been speaking mainly about hardships, suffering, or physical ills that result directly from living as believers in a time of persecution. The visitation of elders and others to pray with the afflicted would provide encouragement to remain faithful despite adversity. The references to persons going astray might have in mind those who retreated from faith in the face of discrimination or abuse.

Although v. 15 appears to offer a guaranteed connection between faithful prayer and healing, this cannot be unequivocally so. Earlier, James had noted that some prayers fail (4:1-3) while others succeed (1:5-6). It is possible that the promise of being "saved" and "raised up" has eternity in mind, though the more natural meaning relates to physical health. Still no one should be so foolish as to think believers will never die so long as they practice anointing and praying in faith. The promise of eternal life was not intended to describe life on this earth. Truly faithful prayer is always offered in a spirit of submission to God's will, not with the presumptive attitude that we can instruct God to heal certain persons. So long as Christ tarries, everybody dies.

Finally, we must note James's emphasis on corporate confession in these closing verses. Earlier sections of the letter indicate that James was writing to a fractured community in which divisions of class and economics caused ongoing discord. Encouraging mutual confession and caring concern for one another could help bring healing to the community — and that was James's ultimate goal.

(Ideas here adapted from Ralph P. Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 48 [Thomas Nelson, 1988], 214-16).