

## **A FAITH THAT WORKS: “Dear God, Can You Hear Me?”**

**James 5:13-20**

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**WATCH/LISTEN:** [www.fbcjc.org/sermon/dear-god-can-you-hear-me/](http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/dear-god-can-you-hear-me/)

*Prayer: Dear good and gracious God, may all the words spoken here this morning and all of our thoughts and prayers be beautiful and acceptable in your sight. Amen.*

So a little girl named Elly wrote this letter/prayer to God. It said, “Dear God, I want a pony. I asked Santa, but he didn’t hear me. God, can you hear me? Love, Elly.”

Well, maybe we haven’t prayed a prayer just like little Elly’s, but I imagine that we have all wondered if God has heard our prayer at one time or another.

We’ve been taught that prayer is important.

Did you know that, according to Google (who is never wrong, right?) prayer is mentioned over 650 times in the Bible!

There are a lot of good questions that come to mind when we’re talking about prayer:

- 1) Matt. 18:20 says, “Where 2 or 3 are gathered together in my name, I am there among them.” Does this mean God isn’t present and hearing our prayers unless we have several people praying with us?
- 2) Matt. 6:6-7 says, “When you pray, go into your room (some versions say “closet”) and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”

The Message says it this way, “Here’s what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won’t be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.”

So, is it better to pray with a group or to pray alone? Are both ways valuable? In all my many years (and I’ve lived a lot, in case you haven’t noticed...), I’ve never had anyone refuse me when I asked if I could pray for them. Years ago, we used to occasionally go out to visit homes in a neighborhood—we would knock on the door, introduce ourselves and ask them if they were connected to any church. If they said, yes, then we said, “That’s great!” We’re not trying to get you away from them, we’re just checking to see if there is anything we can pray with and for you about? I don’t recall anyone slamming the door in our faces, but I guess that could have happened, but we actually found that most folks were receptive and would say something like, “Sure, you can pray for my family,” or “a relative who is ill.”

I heard a chaplain who served with our Armed Forces say that in the foxholes of battle, nearly everyone is crying out to God.

As early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century some Catholic priests brought Christianity to Western England, Ireland and Wales. This was a time where the gospel flourished far and wide due to the way those priests lived out their faith. When they arrived they found a people who were very superstitious, worshipped many different things and had some practices that we would think were not very “Christian.” The priests did not go in and begin telling them how wrong they were and how they were likely all going to hell. Rather they became wonderful, kind neighbors who took in orphans and shared their gardens with all and even joined in some of their merry-making without doing anything immoral. People were surprised at these folks who accepted them as they were, but showed such love to everyone!

This became what we know as Celtic Christianity. As they became believers they took the Bible seriously! They had prayers for nearly every action one would take in a day: a prayer for building the fire in the morning; a prayer for hoeing in the garden, a prayer for going out the door and one for coming in, and on and on. They were so conscious of God’s presence with them that this became their normal way of life. This was perhaps the only time the Gospel flourished to such an extent since the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Acts! It was transformative!

That’s the kind of living James was talking about, long before it happened in Western Europe!

We’ve been studying the book of James all month and now, on the last Sunday of the study, we find James summarizing all the good advice and admonitions he has been giving along the way. In this chapter, he pulls it all together under the umbrella of Prayer.

If you are one who likes to take notes and summarize things in points, this passage is just for you!

Point #1: “Pray! Pray about everything! If you’re hurting, pray; if you feel joyful, sing!

If you’re sick, call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master. Believing-prayer will heal you and Jesus will put you on our feet”.

Through the years on staff here we occasionally had people who asked if our pastor and/or staff would pray over them and anoint them with oil. Each was a very sacred time. Did any of those folks walk away completely healed of their affliction? I don’t think so, but what they did walk away with was a new peace of mind—a new sense of comfort and strength. Those of us who participated in those times also felt a renewed sense of God’s presence and healing in some way. There are many kinds of healing that can come to us besides being completely free of our sickness.

Point #2 “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

The power of confession, openly and humbly, cannot be over-estimated. There is something mysterious and healing when we speak aloud. Also notice that healing can come to both the one who confesses and the one who hears the confession.

How hard it is to admit to weakness, to wrong-doing, to saying hurtful things or passing gossip that could do harm to another?! When we become aware that we have done any of these things, it hurts to admit it and it is especially difficult to confess it to someone else! We fear their judgment and the possibility that they will never see us the same way again. Yet, over and over, we are told it is the right thing to do. We cannot control how the other person will react, but we can have the peace of knowing we did what was needed.

We can't forget that if we are the one someone is confessing to, we also have a responsibility to react with grace and compassion. It may be an overworked, trite saying, but "there but for the grace of God, go I" is something to remember.

Point #3: "Try to re-establish relationships with those who have strayed from the narrow way." How does one do that, without sounding harsh and judgmental? Man! This is hard! It requires soul-searching and looking into our own hearts to see what our purpose or motive is.

As he wrote these words James knew this was tough! He saw fellowship being splintered as various people tried to gain power or tried to divide the congregation. He knew that as long as they (and we) continue on that path, it would lead to permanent division among the fellowship.

Rev. Sharron R. Blezard did a study of how people lose their faith and connection to a community of faith, a church, over time. She came up with this list:

Risk Factors for Poor Spiritual Health include:

- Chronic lack of participation in a faith community
- Failure to practice spiritual disciplines of prayer, study and worship
- Over-reliance on the pleasure of worldly consumption and excessive selfishness and greed.

This list is not to be used to judge our fellow church members, it is to encourage us to be sure we are committed to staying on the best path for spiritual growth.

The book of James says a lot about both being and doing. We follow Christ not because we're SUPPOSED to, but because that's who we are. We are the Body of Christ. We love and help each other; we encourage one another; we listen... and we pray for and with one another.

In the movie, "Shadowlands," about the life of C.S. Lewis, Lewis is heard to say: *"That's not why I pray, Harry, I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God; it changes me."*

Prayer is more about changing us than changing someone else--or our circumstances. We can never fully understand why some prayers seem to be heard and answered and others seem to go unheard. But God does hear.

William Loader, an Australian pastor says, *“God does not need persuading to care; the language of prayer, like a touch of oil, engages us in symbolism of compassionate outreach which is good for our health and the health of others.”*

When we hear our name spoken in prayer as someone else prays for and with us, there is a wonderful calming just hearing someone else praying for us. It IS a kind of healing, even when we don't know the outcome.

As the song says, “He knows my name; he knows my every thought; he sees each tear that falls and hears me when I call.”

And so, Rev. Blezzard reminds us: *“We pray. We worship. We learn about how to be God’s people by reading the Bible. We find ways to serve—to do spiritual exercises that both help the world and strengthen us. We develop relationships within our faith community that are healing and helpful. And we learn to be generous—to share the many good things God has given us with others. This is our path in following Jesus and living a really good life.”*

For the glory of God and the good of the world. Let us pray.