

Some coaching in prayer!

James 5:13-18

Sometimes in the early evening I take Theo and Harvey the dog up to our local park
for a run-around in the fading light,
and we're not the only ones up there at that time of day:
the sporting clubs are out and about
holding their training sessions before the weekend's game.

Who is the most vocal person on the field at that time?
It's the coach of course,
calling out instructions to the team members as they go through their paces.

Now I've never coached a sporting team but I imagine it would be hard work,
because there are a number of things you have to balance:
A good coach is full of encouragement, helping the team to keep going
and to maintain their focus, to avoid distractions.
A good coach might also set a bit of a vision, this is what we can achieve
if we maintain our fitness, if we keep working at it.
And a good coach will also correct improper technique, won't they?
Put your feet in this position, use your arms like this, breath in this fashion.
I think it would be hard to get all those elements coming together.

As I said, I've never coached a team myself, but I have *been* coached,
and I don't think any of my coaches nailed all the elements.
I had a rugby coach who was big on inspiration, but hopeless on technique.
He would give tremendously passionate pre-game speeches
but couldn't really tell us what to do on the field.
And I had a tennis coach who was great on technique
but didn't really push his charges to aspire to anything.
It's hard to get it right.

Coaching has a place not only on the sports field but also within the Christian church.
In fact it goes all the way back to Jesus and his disciples, doesn't it?
From the beginning of our history, Christians have coached one another.

One example of this spiritual training is found in the letters that make up the NT.
We've discovered this as we've read through the letter of James, haven't we?
He has lots of practical things to say about how we relate to one another,
about how we use our speech, how we use our money,
And today as we finish our series in the book of James
we're hearing him speak about prayer.

Now prayer is one of the most basic aspects of the Christian life.
It's not complicated; it's nothing more than talking to God.

But people still feel they need coaching in it.
Often when we are putting our service rosters together
one of the hardest items to fill are the places reserved for our public prayers.

Prayer is something that many of us feel we could use a little help with,
and in today's passage James offers us some advice.
I think he does pretty well as a coach;
He's big on encouragement and inspiration as well as correction,
and I myself have been led to reflect of my own prayer life this week.

So what does coach James have to say in terms of our prayer life?

We're in James 5, verse 13.

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.

You may have a couple of questions
regarding the practice of calling the elders and anointing the sick with oil.
The significance of these two instructions
will become clearer as we progress through this passage,
and so we'll come back to those instructions before we're through.

But what I'd like to draw your attention to *right now*
is the idea of prayer being the appropriate response
to *each* and *every* occasion that you might find yourself in.

In good times and bad, it's always a good idea to bring your situation before God,

Depending on the context,

James expects we'll pray different prayers at different times:

If we're in trouble, we'll cry out for help.

If we've been blessed, then we'll speak, maybe even sing, to God in praise.

If we've sinned,

then we'll come before him confessing our sin and receiving his forgiveness.

If there's a human experience, then there's a form of prayer to go with it.

More than once I've heard Christians admit

that they tend to pray more in some circumstances than others,

sometimes only when things are bad, sometimes only when things are good.

But James wants us to see an opportunity in every circumstance.

This is the opening word of encouragement that James has for us,

And it's a point that I often need reminding of.

Often when *I'm* faced with a problem *my* first thought is to think
"what do I need to do? What have I forgotten to do?"

And I often have this feeling
that it's really my responsibility to get out of the mess that I'm in.

And while its true that we are responsible creatures
and that we can be active shapers of our situation,
it's also true that we are creatures in relationship with our Heavenly Father
and that he implores us to come before him in prayer, regardless of the issue.

You know, one of the benefits of training
is that your body learns how to respond automatically in various situations,
whether you're an athlete facing an opponent
or a soldier learning to handle yourself in battle.
If you've been well trained, you'll be very quick to respond in the proper way.
James wants to condition in us an automatic response of prayer.

What's *your* first response when disaster strikes? Panic? Blame? Action?
Let it be prayer.

What your first response when good fortune comes your way?
Self-congratulation? Posting about it on Facebook? Hitting the shops?
Let it be prayer.

What about when you recognize your own sin?
Denial? Depression? Some sort of penance? Let it be prayer.

And when we do pray we can be confident that God is a God who answers.
Have a listen to the following promise in verse 15.
James has been speaking about praying over the sick,
and then he makes this startling promise:
And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up.

It's a bold promise, isn't it?
It's almost unbelievable, perhaps even irresponsible for James to write this.
We know that some kind of further explanation is needed here,
because we know that not everyone who is prayed over manages to recover.
How are we meant to handle what James has written here?

People have approached this problematic verse in different ways.
Some have noticed that James speaks of a prayer offered in faith
And so the assumption is that when people stay sick,
then there mustn't have been enough faith in the prayer!
That point of view doesn't really fit with the rest of the NT.
Jesus says you only need a small amount of faith;
faith the size of a mustard seed.
So that kind of thinking doesn't really help us here.

Other people suggest that the kind of healing on show here
is spiritual healing rather than physical healing; that is,

what's promised is simply forgiveness rather than a physical miracle.
 And that interpretation does have some merit,
 because James does speak about sin and forgiveness at the end of verse 15,
 If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.
But, a purely spiritual reading doesn't fit *perfectly* with what's written here.
 The talk of oil and of elders being summoned indicates a physical illness,
 and so it feels a bit unusual
 for James to cite a physical illness as the problem,
 but to only promise spiritual forgiveness as the solution.
 It's bit like a clunky gear change in logic, it doesn't quite flow.

It think things start to make more sense in verse 16

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.
 It's interesting that James brings sin and sickness together in these verses.
 I think what James has in mind is the type of physical illness
 that has been brought about by our sin.

We can become sick for many reasons.

Sometimes it's because of a spiritual attack,
 sometimes God wants us to glorify him by our patience in suffering,
 sometimes its simply because we're living in a broken world
 that's waiting for Christ's return.
 But sometimes it's because there's unrepentant sin in our lives
 and God is disciplining us.

We see an example in 1 Corinthians 11

when Paul rebukes the Corinthians for ungodly behavior
 with regard to how they share in Holy Communion.
 He says This is why many among you are weak and sick.
 Sickness can be God's discipline, a prompt to have us wake up and repent.
 if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, Paul continues
 we would not come under such judgment.

I remember when I was at theological college,

one of my lecturers admitted that whenever he became ill he always spent
 some time reflecting on his life to see whether there was an *outstanding*
 or *entrenched* or *habitual* sin that he needed to confess and repent of.
 Sometimes the answer was *No*, as far as he could tell, but he did this because
 he saw in the Bible this concept of God's discipline *in real time*.
 It seems to me that this is the type of sickness that James is referring to.

And so what is the promise?

The promise is that if the person has sinned, that is,
 if this is a disciplinary type of illness,
 then following confession and repentance
 the illness will lift and health will be restored.

So while upon first glance this might seem like an unusual promise,
 I don't think it's all *that* unusual,
 because it's simply a promise that God will listen to our prayers of confession.
 What does David teach us in the Psalms?
 a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise. (Ps 51:17)
 If we confess our sins and seek God's forgiveness,
 then our guilt will be removed, both in this life and the next.

Now, aside from the danger of allowing an ungodly life to make us sick,
 there is *another* danger for those believers who allow sin to go unchecked.
 James makes this point in a positive way in the last part of verse 16
 The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

There is a thread within the Bible
 which affirms that God bends his ear towards the godly;
 towards those who take him seriously,
 towards those who seek to live in a way that pleases him.

In Psalm 66, the psalmist tell us that
 if he had cherished sin in his heart, the Lord would not have listened.
 In other words, ongoing sin is a turn-off for God when it comes to our prayers.
 I've recently read something similar in my own personal Bible reading.
 I've been reading 1 Peter, and in ch 3
 he encourages husbands to be considerate towards their wives,
 to be treating them with respect, lest your prayers be hindered.
 If you start going off God's script when it comes to respecting your spouse,
 then God might stop listening!

This is not to say that a sinner cannot pray! Of course they can,
 otherwise how would anyone receive the forgiveness of sins?
 But when it comes to the ongoing life of prayer,
 then there is much power to be found
 if it's matched with an ongoing life of holiness.

James is reminding us to work on an important aspect of our 'game':
 Just like a coach might encourage us to work on our background fitness
 so that we're there to make the shot when it counts,
 so too James would have us watch our righteousness
 so that our prayers find their mark.

Presumably, it's the elders of the church who are good examples of this fitness,
 and who therefore have powerful and effective prayers—
 this is why James instructs the sick to call the elders to the bedside.

When we speak of elders we're speaking about those within the church
 who've been invested with spiritual leadership.

Some churches have an official group of elders,
 here in the Anglican church we don't have such an official group,
 but we do have unofficial elders –
 our staff, churchwardens, leaders of various groups.
 But whether they're official or unofficial
 we expect that they're people who have watched their life and doctrine closely,
 and who can therefore pray with great power.

The anointing with oil I think is simply a symbolic action to comfort the sick person.
 It's my view that religious symbolism in the Bible is used as a tool
 to help people comprehend the spiritual significance of what's happening
 In the OT oil was used to set people apart for a special role,
 In v14 oil marks the recipient as set apart for particular consideration by God,
 and so the smell and feel of the oil can be a tangible comfort for the anointed.

But the real power comes when faithful people decide to call upon a mighty God.
 James gives us an OT example in verse 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.

What's at the centre of the illustration here?
 Is James saying that righteous people
 will be endowed with supernatural abilities to do as they wish?
 Not quite; Elijah's prayer of withholding rain
 was a prayer for God to judge the sin of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel,
 so it was a prayer for God's purposes to be upheld,
 a prayer for God's plan to be upheld.

But God's plan can take some amazing twists and turns
 and he asks us to play a part in bringing these amazing things to pass.
 We're you amazed at the scenes from the Korean peninsula this week?
 Who would have thought we would see the two Korean leaders
 literally shake hands across the border?
 But what have we been praying for here in church over the last few years?
 It's early days yet,
 but could it be possible that God's plan for peace is being worked out,
 That our prayers are actually being answered in a mind boggling way?
 Of course it is, because as James is telling us, earnest prayer works!

And not only does he have a plan for the world, he has a plan for you!
 So keep praying before you take each step,
 remember to pray in response to each step as its taken.
 And make sure your steps are steps in godliness and righteousness,
 because that will help your prayers.

That's the end of our coaching session. At least for this week! Let's pray right now.