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DON'T DO WHAT JOE MADDON DID James 5:12-20

It was Game 2 of the National League Championship Series between the Los Angeles Dodgers and the Chicago Cubs. The winner would go to the World Series. The Cubs were hoping for a chance to repeat as World Series champions, while the Dodgers were hoping to go to the World Series for the first time since 1988. The Dodgers won game 1, but game 2 was a nail biter. It was tied 1-1 in the bottom of the 9th inning. The Dodgers got a runner to second with 2 outs. All it would take was a base hit for that runner to score and win the game. The Cubs' manager, Joe Maddon, a great manager who has a World Series rings already, knew it was time to bring in a new pitcher to nail down that final out of the inning. He had his closer, Wade Davis, the Cubs' best relief pitcher and one of the best in baseball, fresh and ready to go. However, he reasoned he might need Davis later if the game went into extra innings, so instead of using him he brought in John Lackey. Lackey walked the first batter he faced, then he gave up a dramatic 3 run home run to the Dodgers' Justin Turner, ending the game in spectacular fashion. The Cubs never really recovered from that 4-1 loss and the Dodgers went on to the World Series as a result.

Maddon had a reasonable rationale for why he made the choice that he did, and he defends his decision to this day. But the reality is he had a tremendous resource available to him that he failed to employ, and the result was disastrous. As I said, Maddon is an excellent manager, and may some day be in the Hall of Fame as such. But to me, he made a big time mistake with that one. Unfortunately it is all too common, for most of us make a mistake that is rather like his. We have a tremendous resource available to us, but we often don't employ it, so we end up with unfortunate results. You will see what I mean as we look at James 5:12-20, the final section of this book.

THERE'S A WAY TO HANDLE HARD TIMES

Verse 12 is a bit of a puzzle at first glance. James says, "Above all, do not swear." Just let your yes be yes and your no be no. We get his point that we should have integrity and just say what we mean. But what's behind this statement? Why is it here? Some of the ancient Jews were a bit tricky about that swearing thing. They rationalized that if you promised to do something and swore by God, who is eternal and unchanging, you had to keep your word. Your promise had to be permanent as God is permanent. But if you swore by something on the earth, since it is temporal

and constantly changing, then you could break your promise. Like the earth, your word could change.

This was a way of using rationalization and a loophole to cheat other people. Jesus warned against this practice in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:37 after telling his audience not to swear by anything he said, “All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.” James echoes that message.

This doesn’t mean if you are called to testify in a court case and asked whether you promise to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help you God, that you are disobeying if you say, “I do.” That’s not what either Jesus or James were concerned about. They were both teaching that we need to simply have integrity with no attempts at dishonest trickery.

The puzzling part of this verse is why James would begin it with the words “above all.” That sounds like it’s the most important thing he wanted to say. That would be curious given some of the important instruction he has written. Is this really a higher priority than everything else he said? One scholar has pointed out that similar phrases occur in other letters of that time introducing a conclusion. I think the significance of the phrase would be “finally,” or “in closing.”

Then James launches into a discussion that I believe I have misunderstood all my life until I studied it for this sermon. Studying this passage the past few weeks has totally changed my understanding of it. The way I have taken it for so many years leads to a problem. That problem appears in verse 15 where James says, “The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.” That’s a blanket statement that prayer for a sick person will be answered and the person will be healed. That verse makes me feel a little sick, because it doesn’t seem to work out in life.

Years ago there was a woman in our church at the time who was diagnosed with breast cancer while she was pregnant. Her doctors urged her to immediately begin chemotherapy. But those treatments would have harsh, possibly even fatal effects on her baby. She refused to be treated. She knew the risk she was taking, but courageously insisted she would protect her unborn child even at the cost of her own life, if necessary. She took that pregnancy to term and gave birth to a healthy baby. Only then did she begin the chemo treatments. Sadly it proved to be too late. Though she fought bravely after a number of months it became apparent the treatments were not working. She called for the elders of the church to come and

pray for her. We did just what James instructs in these verses. But she did not get better. She continued to decline and a few months later we had a funeral for her.

That left only 2 possibilities. Either we did not have enough faith, for James qualified that it had to be a prayer “in faith,” or the promise is not true. I have no trouble believing that the problem lay with us, that we just didn’t have the necessary faith. Unfortunately, in my experience the overwhelming majority of the time any elders pray for a sick person, that person is not healed. Furthermore, that promise presents a logical problem. Every time a person gets sick they just need to call for the elders, have them pray in faith, and that person will be healed? Then no one would ever die of disease. That can't be true. I suspect this verse bothers some of you as well, so I am going to spend considerable time working through this passage to explain what I now think it means.

You might think I came to this passage looking for some loophole, some way to explain this promise away. I did not. I long ago came to a theological explanation for this passage, so I felt no need for some sort of loophole. But as I have studied this passage I came to the conclusion that we’re on the wrong track altogether with it. I will tell you up front, the great majority of scholars do not accept the position that I am taking on this passage. Scholars and Bible commentators who are way smarter and more knowledgeable than I, do not agree with the way I see this passage. However, I have solid reasons for understanding it as I do.

At issue is the term translated “sick.” That term literally means “weak.” It can refer to any kind of weakness. It can refer to a physical weakness or an illness, which is what the translators believed it meant here. It most often means to be sick. Luke 5:15 says of Jesus, “The testimony about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses.” The same word is used in James 5:13. However, it did not always refer to physical illness. Romans 14:2 refers to a person who is weak in faith. The same word is used there and clearly does not refer to being physically sick. Romans 8:3 says, “what the Law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh.” Again, this is spiritual weakness, not physical illness.

So we have two possible understandings of this word. Did James mean, “Is anyone among you sick” or did he mean, “is anyone among you spiritually weak”? Context tells us how a word should be understood when we have multiple possible meanings. I submit to you that it is the latter. I believe that the context strongly suggests that second option is correct.

Follow the logic of what James says in these verses. He began by asking if any among them was in trouble. The term translated “trouble” meant to suffer evil or hardship. The answer to that question was yes. They were pretty much all going through a rough ordeal. They were being persecuted severely and most of them were living in grinding poverty with no hope of change on the horizon. Last week we saw that was the major emphasis of the previous section of the letter. James was encouraging people who were suffering to endure, to persevere. This question picks up on that theme.

James tells these suffering believers that the right response to their painful circumstances was for them to pray. So all should pray. But they might not all need to pray in exactly the same way, because while they might be experiencing the same circumstances they might not be in the same place spiritually. Not everyone who goes through ordeals responds to them the same way. And we see that reality in this passage. There are two ways they could react to the difficulties of their lives, and we see them in verses 13-14.

James asks, “Is anyone happy?” That seems unlikely. Who is going to be happy about being abused and oppressed? That reminds me of the commercials on TV that say some people hitting their heads against a beam or ringing sour milk. No one is happy about that or about being oppressed. Who is going to be giddy about being in troubling circumstances like theirs? The word James used can mean “cheerful,” but I think there’s a better understanding of it. In Acts 27:22 Paul is on a ship that is caught in a massive storm and all on board are pretty sure they’re going to die. But Paul said, “I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost.” Again he said in verse 25, “Keep up your courage, men.” In both verses the word translated “keep your courage” is the same word James used in verse 13 that is translated “happy.” James said, “In the difficulties you face, is anyone keeping up his courage?” We know some would. Some people rise to the occasion when faced with hardship. James knew that some were continuing to trust God, to rejoice in his grace and love, and were examples of strength and faithfulness. James told them what they should do is pray in a particular way. They should sing songs of praise to God. Praise God that he is strengthening you, and keep praising him because that very act will encourage your hearts.

But we also know that many people do not respond to hard times with grace, strength and faithfulness. They get beaten down, discouraged, hopeless. They give in to self-pity, maybe even bitterness, perhaps resentment at God because of what he has allowed in their lives. We might describe such people as weak in faith. Isn’t that what James does here? What seems like the most likely other alternative to

keeping up courage, being physically sick, or being spiritually weak? I'm pretty sure that James was addressing people whose faith was wavering, who were struggling to keep believing and who were tempted to give in to the pressure. Their faith was weak.

That idea is strengthened by the fact that James tells his readers that the elders should anoint the person with oil. What's that about? We know that in the first century oil was used medicinally and I've always thought that's what James referred to here. There are examples of oil being used that way in the Bible. But oil also can have a symbolic significance. In his commentary on James Dr. Douglas Moo of Wheaton College wrote that oil, "symbolizes the consecration of persons or things for God's use and service."

So anointing with oil said to the weak person, "You belong to God. You are set apart for him. Your role in this hard time is to bring him glory as you stand firm in faith. Only by doing that will you fulfill your consecration, your purpose in this world." It spoke not to being physically sick, but to their need to be strengthened in faith!

Verse 15 says, "the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well." However, the original language actually says the prayer in faith will "save" the sick person, not make them well. Even more to the point the term translated "sick person" is different than the one used in verse 14. Consider Hebrews 12:3, which says, "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." The root of the word translated "grow weary" is the same one used in James 5:15. So the point is the person James is concerned about is weary, not physically ill.

At the end of verse 15 James says, "If they have sinned, the Lord will raise them up." If we assume a person that is sick is in view here then the conclusion must be that James was saying maybe the person's illness was a result of sin. There is some precedent for that in the Bible, but the Scriptures often say that is not the case. Job's friends got into trouble because they used that kind of reasoning. If things had gone this bad for Job and he got this sick it must be because he has been a brutally bad sinner. And they were totally wrong. In John 9 Jesus comes on a man who was blind and his disciples essentially asked, "Who sinned to cause this, the blind guy or his parents?" Jesus said, "Neither one. It has nothing to do with somebody sinning, it is for the glory of God." So it would be a bit odd for James to suggest if someone was sick it was because they sinned.

However, it would be totally logical to assume that if a person was weak in faith, if they were have a big time spiritual struggle, that they might already have sinned before they called the elders. They might already have compromised, maybe even badly. James gives some reassurance. If a person admitted their struggle in their faith and knew they were messing up so they called for the elders to pray for them, James says God will forgive them. Their failure is not final. God still gives his grace, so all is not lost even though they've already messed up.

One last point should be noted. As the passage comes to an end what is James talking about? In verses 19-20 he talks about what a good thing it is if someone turns a person who is wandering from the faith back to the Lord. You save that person's life. Is that referring to someone who is physically sick? No, he is still addressing the issue of someone who is weak in faith to the point of being tempted to just walk away from Jesus. That's on James' mind all the way through this section of the letter. He says it is a great thing if we help that person, pray for him, and restore him to walking with the Lord.

So James gives a terrific promise. If someone is struggling in their faith, maybe has already made some terrible choices, but that person admits their struggle, confesses they need help and asks the elders to come pray for them, that person will be strengthened, or as James says literally, "raised up." God will answer that prayer and the person will be given strength and enabled to stand. This passage says nothing about praying for physically sick people. It's fine to pray for them, but that was not what James was referring to. So this is not some hard to understand blanket promise of healing of physical disease. That's never the issue in this passage.

The message for us is that we should not be surprised when hard things, painful things, things that cause us to suffer, happen to us. Last week James gave some encouragement that can help us. This week he gives a powerful tool that can strengthen us and enable us to keep up our courage. That tool is prayer. Praise God if you are suffering but standing firm. For those who are suffering and weak, who are crumbling under the pressure, pray for them. If anyone knows they are wavering and they ask the leaders to come pray for them, those prayers will be answered and that person will be strengthened.

So confess your sins to each other. This is not about needing to confess to some religious professional, or to get in little groups and admit our sins or doing it before the congregation. It is simply about not hiding. It is saying we need to admit it if

we are weak and compromising and ask for prayers and for help.

WE HAVE A POWERFUL RESOURCE

The tendency is to get caught up in discussing whether we should expect people to be healed, and to miss the main point James was aiming at. That point is that prayer is a powerful weapon in the spiritual war, one we need to wield when we or our fellow believers are under attack from the enemy.

The end of verse 16 is one of those familiar and powerful parts of the Scripture that we tend to give lip service to, but maybe not really believe. “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” Prayer, James says, is effective. It makes a difference. It rescues weak, struggling believers, among other things.

Sure, that’s true, but my problem is I’m not really a righteous person. I can’t count on that promise because I’m not the righteous person James referred to. I wish I was, but I’m not. Maybe that pastor guy, who is really religious and never does anything wrong, is righteous, so his prayers are powerful and effective, but that’s not me. A few times people have said to me, “Pray for me, because I know that your prayers are more powerful than mine.” The idea is that obviously since I’m a pastor I’m more religious, more righteous than other people, so God will pay more attention to my prayers.

I appreciate the respect, but there’s a lot that is off base about that line of thinking. You can start with the idea that I’m more righteous or holy than other people. The only problem with that is, it’s just not true. I’m as much a fallen person, as far from the glory of God, as anybody else. But the bigger issue has to do with why God listens to and answers our prayers. Here’s a critically important truth: God doesn’t answer our prayers because we are righteous enough and thus deserve it, but because Jesus is perfectly righteous and he deserves it. We pray in his name, meaning we come to God asking on the basis of Jesus’ holiness, not our own.

Who is righteous before God? Romans 3:10 says, “There is no one righteous, not even one.” Verse 20 says, “No one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by works of the Law.” To be righteous is to be given God’s stamp of approval. How do we get that?

How do you get any stamp of approval? Usually we must measure up. How do you get the DMV’s stamp of approval that grants you license to drive an automobile? You have to take a written test that asks you questions about who has the right of way when you come to an intersection with stop signs in all 4 directions or what a

curb painted green means and other such arcane information. You have to pass that test, then comes the nervous part. You have to have an examiner sit in the car with you and grade you as you drive around the city. You only get the stamp of approval when you've passed those tests.

God has a test, too. If you want to pass his test what do you have to do? Jesus summed it up in Matthew 5:48. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." He had already illustrated what that meant. And it meant not even thinking bad things. That's the standard for God's approval. That's the standard for being righteous. That leaves us with a wee bit of a problem. How often in your life have you been perfect at anything? That would be about zero for me. And when the standard is "don't even think anything bad" it's over. I lost.

That's why Paul said there is no one righteous. No one passes that test. So James' promise is kind of an empty one, isn't it? The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. That's great, except there aren't any righteous people. It's kind of like saying that God will answer every prayer of every person who is 9 feet tall. Great, except there aren't any of those on the planet.

This is where we get good news. There is another way to get God's stamp of approval. Romans 3:21-22 says, "But now apart from the law (apart from the righteousness test) the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." You become righteous in God's eyes, you gain his stamp of approval, by faith in Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:30 says that by faith Christ has become for us "righteousness, holiness and redemption." Philippians 3:9 speaks of us "being found in him (Christ), not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the Law (in other words, having passed the test myself), but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith."

We get God's stamp of approval, not because we are really good, not because we earn it, not because we are better or more holy than someone else, but simply because we put our faith in Jesus. We trust that his righteousness, his earning it, is sufficient for us.

So let me paraphrase James 5:16. The prayer of a person who is righteous by faith in Jesus Christ is powerful and effective. Yes, but I haven't been praying enough, and I didn't go to church because I just didn't feel like getting out of bed, and I have been harboring some really ugly thoughts about this person that I'm really

envious of, and I even gossiped about them to make myself look better. Ah, so you don't deserve to have God hear your prayers? No, I don't. Well do you think Jesus does? Yes, I do. Are you in Christ by faith? Yes. Then in God's eyes you have the righteousness of Christ. Your prayers will be heard as though they are his prayers.

A number of years ago we had our family Christmas celebration. The unique thing about this one was a number of our kids' friends were with us. We had people sleeping all over the place in our house, including on the floor in the living room. Those kids were not our children. They deserved nothing from Laurie and me. Yet we included them in all our family celebration. They ate the food at the meals and even received presents. They didn't get those things because they earned them or deserved them. They got those things simply because of their relationship with our kids. We don't get privileges from God like his stamp of approval and our prayers being effective, due to our earning it. We receive all of that because of our relationship with Jesus. It is because when we put our faith in Christ, we are placed in Christ. When God looks at us he sees the righteousness of Jesus. It is so blinding bright it blocks out the darkness of our unrighteousness.

So when you see in verse 16 that mention of a righteous person, if you have faith in Jesus, that's you. Yes, but...No buts. As soon as you start thinking it's about how deserving you are you've gone off the Jesus righteousness plan and back to the old school pass the test plan. The only problem with that is God isn't operating by that plan, so why would you?

James backs up his assertion about the effectiveness of prayer. He reminds us of Elijah. In 1 Kings 17:1 Elijah told Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." Verse 7 says, "Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land." Elijah prayed and it stopped raining. Later he prayed that the drought would end and the rain would fall. At the end of chapter 18 after his great victory over the false prophets of Baal 18:45 says, "Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling." Elijah impacted the weather with his prayers!

Yes, but doesn't this make the point I've been concerned about? Sure God heard his prayers. He was Elijah, the great prophet, the man of faith! James answers "he was a human being, even as we are." He was a fallen man just like us. His prayers were heard for the same reason ours are, because of God's grace and for no other reason. If you don't believe me, read what happened in his life after his great victory. Jezebel threatened him, he got scared, tucked his tail between his legs and

ran like a coward. He ended up afraid, depressed, sucking his thumb curled up in a fetal position because he was so discouraged and frightened. Now there's a hero of the faith! He was a man just like us. Fallible, inconsistent, and sometimes failing. The point is, God is powerful and active and he answers the prayers of flawed, imperfect, fallen people who trust in Christ and live by faith. Their prayers change things in this world.

APPLICATION

If this is true, why is prayer such a problem for many, maybe most of us? Why is it one of the great guilt producers of the Christian life? Why do most of us feel ashamed of our prayer life? Why are we so consistently inconsistent when it comes to praying? Why are we so often like Joe Maddon, having this incredible resource available to us, but failing to employ it? There are several reasons for this.

WE THINK OF PRAYER AS A DUTY

It is common to fall into the trap of thinking of prayer as a religious obligation, something we are "supposed to do." Unfortunately as soon as we think that way it starts to become a chore, a task we do because we have to. It will never be something we do eagerly. We will just do enough to check it off the "to do" list.

Remind yourself that prayer is something you get to do. It is an incredible privilege, a great blessing, a powerful resource that has been given to you. The only person that will suffer from your failure to employ this incredible weapon is you. It does not damage God. It merely means you forfeit the strength, the comfort and the peace that come from talking to our heavenly Father, along with the power to influence events and people. Plus you fail to get the thrill that comes from seeing God answer your prayer and affect things in this world.

The last few years when our son in law, Michael, was in the Marines serving as a flight instructor, 3 times a year they would bring their students out to El Centro on what they called a "Weapons Det." They use the ranges out in the desert to train them how to use the jets they were flying as a weapons system. Carissa would come out for the 2 weeks of the Det and stay with us, while Michael was in El Centro during the week and would come over on the weekend. Every night when she was staying with us we would visit in the evening but it would all come to an abrupt halt when Michael would call. Not once did Carissa say in a grudging tone of voice, "Oh, that's Michael. I have to go talk to him." His call was the highlight of her day. She loved talking to Michael. It was no duty, it was her great joy. That's how we should view prayer. It is not a duty. It is a powerful resource given

to us by grace, and we get to employ it at any time, night or day, for any length of time, long or short.

WE THINK WE DON'T DESERVE IT

We think that somehow we have to deserve having God hear our prayers. We need to be on our best behavior. If we haven't been then we often feel like maybe the Father is not interested in us pestering him. And when we pray we need to do it like those great saints we hear about that would spend hours in prayer at a time. If we don't, well, God is disappointed with us.

Remember what makes you righteous before God. It is what Jesus has done for you, and nothing else. You pray in Jesus' name because it is his holiness and goodness that is the basis for your prayers. It is because you are in Christ by faith that God hears prayers, and for no other reason.

The fact is, we don't deserve it. Elijah didn't deserve it. Paul didn't deserve it. James didn't deserve it. Great praying saints like Andrew Murray or George Muller didn't deserve it. There is no one righteous before God...no one, that is, except for everyone who trusts in Jesus and prays in his name.

WE DON'T REALLY BELIEVE IN IT

The biggest reason we don't pray more than we do is we just don't think it will make any difference. We come to that place because we have all prayed about something in our lives and it make exactly zero difference, as far as we could see. If we really believed in our hearts that prayer actually changes things in this world, wild horses couldn't keep us from praying. We'd be like Daniel, who was threatened that if he prayed he'd earn a free night's stay in the Lion Inn. He promptly went home, opened the windows, knelt in front of them and prayed. Nothing could stop him from praying.

I used to suffer from terrible canker sores. Mine were huge, long lasting and agonizing. I tried so many things to cure them. I heard that taking the amino acid lysine could help, so out of desperation I tried it, and it did no good whatsoever. One day a friend told me that lysine won't help in the short term, but if you take it consistently over a long period of time, and if you take enough of it, it will make a difference. I didn't really believe it, but I figured it wouldn't hurt, why not try again. I began taking a larger dose and taking it daily, committing to doing it for months. I didn't quit when I got another man-eating canker sore. I stayed with it. Eventually I began noticing I wasn't getting as many of them. And when I did get

them they were nothing like what I used to get. Yes, they hurt, but they weren't nearly as large and painful and they didn't last as long. It made a difference!

Today I take lysine religiously. If we run out of it I get to the store immediately. If I miss a day I'm all right, but I will not allow myself to go for an extended period of time without it because lysine has changed my life. I take it because I believe in it. I have seen it work. And prayer is like that for us. If we believe in it, you won't have to preach to us that we ought to pray, nothing could stop us from praying. It changes our lives and even changes things in this world.

Yes, but what about the fact that sometimes our prayers haven't been answered and we've gotten discouraged? I could share with you some stories of amazing answers to prayers, but I don't think that's going to convince you of anything over the long haul. So I'm going to challenge you to try something. Keep a prayer journal. Write down what you are praying and date when you start praying it. Then when you get an answer to that prayer record the answer and the date. If you will do that over a period of months and years, you might find yourself convinced.

As I prepared for this talk I looked at my prayer journal. I discovered that over the past few years 100% of my prayers have been answered. To be fair, answers to prayers can come in 3 basic forms, yes, no or wait. All of my prayers have received one of those answers. But here's what's amazing. I did the math. 88% of my prayers have been answered yes. Only 5% have been answered no, and the few remaining are pending. You might think that high "yes" rate is because I am righteous, and you would be correct. But I am righteous by faith in Jesus Christ, and that is the only reason my prayers have been answered. So don't be like Joe Maddon. Put this powerful tool to use. Pray, and watch what God does.