

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Faith to Faithful

(Studies in the book of James)

Back to the Basics

(James 5:12-20)

Study #12

Introduction: Ending on a “basic” note...

Whether NFL coach Vince Lombardi actually began his time with the Green Bay Packers with his, “*Gentlemen, this is a football*” speech is really not clear. What is unquestioned, though is Lombardi’s focus on the fundamentals of the game. It’s the stuff of legend. He was the champion of “*back to the basics*” coaching.

Every champion of every sport is a champion of the basics. It’s true for football or basketball (see Tim Duncan – the Big Fundamental), soccer or hockey, tennis or golf.

“*Back to the basics*” is a good thing in education, too. Before our kids can do advanced computer programming, they need to master a few math and science basics.

New diets and new exercise schemes appear every week. But there’s really no need to mess with the basics of *eating right* (fruits and vegetables, nuts and meat – and not too much) and *exercising right* (get your heart rate up for a sustained period of time a few times a week; do the stuff that gets you strong).

It was that great theologian, Waylon Jennings, who said it best, “Maybe it’s time we got back to the basics of love.”

This morning, we’re not heading off to Luckenbach, but we are turning our attention to the little book of James. And James takes us “*back to the CHRISTIAN basics*” as he wraps up his letter.

Review...

I will admit that preaching through the book of James has been a challenge for me. That’s OK. Listening to me preach through James has likely been a challenge for you, and that, for a variety of reasons.

In my defense, interpretive questions have abounded in nearly every passage. But it’s been even worse when we have thoroughly understood James’ point, because in those places, the application has often been brutal.

From the very beginning of the letter, James has been urging you and me to walk with Jesus and to love. Follow Jesus and carry out the Royal Law – **[2:8] *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.***¹

Today, as we conclude our study we’ll see words that focus on a basic life before God. James highlights the importance of prayer and radical love, but he begins with a word about personal integrity.

We are instantly aware of how critical this matter is when James starts off with, **[12] *But above all...***

Personal Integrity (v. 12)

[12] *But above all, my brethren,² do not swear, either by heaven³ or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes it be yes, and you no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment.*

¹ After having lived with James over the months of our study, I am convinced that among his chief themes, developed throughout the letter, has been to creatively paint a picture of what it means to be like Jesus. Summarized, that means: Love.

² Note the address to “brethren.” This, as most everything else in James, is explicitly addressed to believers in Jesus. (the main exception being 5:1-6)

³ Invoking God’s Name (“heaven” is a euphemism for God in this verse) in common speech (“*With God as my witness*” or “*I swear to God*” and the like), even if sincere, certainly leads to irreverence. And the practice of swearing an oath can involve us in the sin of blasphemy.

By “*swearing*” James is almost certainly not referring to what we today call profanity. Nor would he object to our taking an oath in a legal setting in a court of law.⁴

What he is talking about is when we add an oath to our words to make clear that we are really, really, really serious.⁵

He’s saying that without adding any kind of an oath, people should know that they can always trust what we say. We say what we mean and we mean what we say.⁶

When questioned about the facts of a case we simply tell the story. No embellishments. No exaggerations. Just the truth.

When asked if we were responsible for something that went wrong, we own up to it. We don’t hide behind a vague answer.

To convince others that we are telling the truth, we don’t need to say, “*I swear! I really mean it [this time].*” Our friends know that we always “*really mean it*” this time when we simply say it.

With respect to personal growth and maturity, this word from James about says it all, (“*...above all*”)⁷ and it echoes what he said earlier, that **[3:2] *If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.***

⁴ Although the fact that an oath is administered makes the case that James is making, namely, that because of a lack of integrity, people do need to be held to oaths!

⁵ Not too different from what we did when I was a kid, declaring our truthfulness with crossed hearts and “hopes to die” and other sacred formulae.

⁶ In Genesis 19:14, Lot appeared to his sons-in-law to be jesting when he warned them of the coming destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Maybe if he had said, “Cross my heart and hope to die” they would have taken him seriously?

⁷ We could say that it summarizes all that James has said about the use of the tongue throughout the letter. Don’t accuse God of tempting you to sin. (1:13) Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. (1:19) Bridle your tongue to the purposes of God. (1:26; 3:3-12) Empty platitudes do no good at all when what is needed is material aid (2:14-17) Be careful teachers, stricter judgment is coming against you. (3:1) Don’t speak against or complain against each other (4:11; 5:9)

James calls you and me to be people of such unimpeachable integrity that our word is our bond. We are solid, trustworthy people in a shaky world.

We understand how critical integrity is. We hear Scripture’s call to step up to the plate, put away all falseness and grow as people of the truth.

So, integrity is crucial and what he has to say about integrity is the smallest third of what he has to say today. He moves on from here to urge you and me to be unalterably committed to a life of prayer.

So far, James has only mentioned prayer a couple of times.⁸ But, according to all that we know of his practice, James was quite a pray-er.

One ancient church father⁹ said that James spent so much time on his knees, praying, that his knees became as hard and callused as a camel’s knees (which, I will assume are hard and callused...).

So, so let’s listen to what old “Camel Knees” has to say about prayer.

His first words speak to how beneficial prayer is for us, no matter where we may be in life.

The Power of Prayer (vv. 13-18)

Applying God’s Power to Ourselves Through Prayer (vv. 13-15)¹⁰

The sufferer is to pray (v. 13a)

[13a] Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray.

⁸ **[1:5] if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God; [4:2] you have not because you ask not...[4:3] you ask with wrong motives.**

⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, who lived ca. 260-340, and is usually called the greatest early historian of the church.

¹⁰ “Among sincere followers of Christ there is not yet complete agreement in the interpretation of all the points in this section.” (Adamson). This must be the byword of the book of James and the understatement of the year for this passage!

Any and every kind of suffering is in view here. Emotional distress, persecution, physical illness, poverty-induced suffering - it all fits under the broad umbrella of “*suffering*.”

There are lots of perfectly wonderful things that you can do when you are suffering. Get a job, see a doctor, flee your tormentors, find a wholesome diversion, or seek the comfort of friends.

And there’s not a thing wrong with any of these. But James wants to be sure that we don’t miss out on the one most important response to suffering.

His counsel is that if we are suffering, we should pray.¹¹ When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, make it your practice to turn to God in prayer.

And we pray, not because prayer will bring guaranteed relief from our suffering, but because prayer will draw us near to God. It will remind us to rest in the care of a Father who loves us. It reminds us of the promises of God.

So, are you suffering? Listen to James. Pray. Not ONLY pray. There will be other things to do, too. But pray. Pray first. Pray often. Turn to a God who loves you.

And what if, right now, things are going well for you? Well, turn to a God who loves you!

The cheerful are to sing praises to God (v. 13b)

[13b] Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises.

The Lord is the focus of our prayers when there are dark storm clouds brewing. He is the object of our praises if the sun is shining.¹²

¹¹ Author Isaac Bashavis Singer, quoted in Eugene Peterson’s *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, says, “Whenever I am in trouble, I pray. And since I’m always in trouble, I pray a lot.”

¹² The praises referenced here were likely the psalms of the Old Testament scripture. Typically, people sang to the accompaniment of a musical instrument, harp or something similar. But, a *Capella* singing was not unheard of, either.

A worshipful, MUSICAL, grateful response enlarges our hearts for a greater capacity to follow the Lord.

Next in the list of those for whom prayer should be a top priority (the list James gives us is not exhaustive!), are those who are “*sick*.”

The sick/weak are to call for the elders of the church (v. 14-15)

The elders will pray and anoint with oil (v. 14)

[14] Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church, and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil¹³ in the name of the Lord

Now I am not going to try and pull a fast one on you here. My version of the Bible reads “*sick*” just like your does. And we have certainly prayed and held special prayer meetings for those who have been sick here at Northwest.

But, the word we translate “*sick*” here can also be rendered “*weakness*.” In fact, in many places in the New Testament, it is translated “*weak*.”¹⁴

In saying what I’m about to say, I’m not at all discounting the need to pray for those who sick and diseased. But I am suggesting that

¹³ Throughout the Old Testament, anointing with oil was the normal means of recognizing God’s sovereign choice of a prophet, priest, or king. I disagree with those who hold that the oil was for medicinal purposes. While I understand that olive oil was used (externally and internally) by physicians, what James is describing is a prayer meeting. Comments like, “At the bottom line, in James we have God and medicine, God and the doctor.” (Robertson) seem to me to miss the point.

¹⁴ See especially 1 Thessalonians 5:14 where believers are to “*help the weak*” (same word as here)

James had a different scenario in mind here than praying for someone with a physical illness.¹⁵

Remember that this letter was written to persecuted Christians. James was writing to encourage those who had been driven from their homes, were considered second-class citizens, who were despised just because they were Christians.

He's writing to urge them to remain faithful to Jesus and it rings perfectly true to me that James was urging prayer to those who had grown discouraged (*"weak"*) while ***"fighting the good fight of faith."***

He tells us that the person who is sick and tired of the challenges of the life of faith is to take initiative, call the elders of the church,¹⁶ and invite them to his (or her) home for a special time of prayer.¹⁷

James mentions "anointing with oil."¹⁸ Anointing was a symbolic gesture in ancient times that pictured, among other things, the presence and the power of the Spirit of God. (1 Samuel 10:10; 16:13; Psalm 23:5; 92:10)¹⁹

When the elders arrived, they were to anoint the discouraged Christian with olive oil and pray.

¹⁵ I am deeply indebted to J. Ronald Blue for the insights into verses 14-15 regarding "sickness" vs. "weakness" (*Bible Knowledge Commentary*, The Book of James).

¹⁶ "Church elders" points to at least a rudimentary organization like that in the early chapters of Acts.

¹⁷ While "elder" can refer to a chronological status, here it is a statement of office and speaks of the state of the early church's organization, even at this stage. As the recognized spiritual leaders of a congregation it made/makes sense that the Elders would be invited to participate in the ministry of intercessory prayer.

¹⁸ The grammatical construction leaves the anointing with oil as subsidiary to the praying, which is the main thing.

¹⁹ Oil was also used to bestow honor (Luke 7:37-46), to aid good health (like giving relief from the sun as an ancient sunscreen, Ps. 104:15) and to symbolize gladness (Isaiah 61:3).

As the oil was applied and the prayers were offered, the Christian who may have felt like he was at the end of his spiritual rope would be encouraged to again walk with God.

The "prayer of faith" will restore (v. 15a)

[15a] and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up...

Faith is assumed on the part of the elders, or they wouldn't have come to pray. Faith is also assumed on the part of ***"the weak"***, or he wouldn't have called the elders to come over and pray. James assures us that such faithful praying will result in restoration of the discouraged.

Our God honors the prayers of His people. He says "Yes" when the thrust of our prayers is to renew a downcast heart for service and love and hope.

So, the discouraged believer who has *faithfully* taken the initiative to ask *faithful* elders to pray for him, and is then prayed for and anointed with oil in the Name of Jesus, will be wonderfully encouraged.

What is going on here is much more than a "good ol' boy" back-slapping time of mutual affirmation. It is God sovereignly working to restore His child to spiritual vitality.

From the first century to today, this ministry of intercession on behalf of the distressed, the discouraged, and the depressed has been a special ministry of prayer for elders in churches.

It is a ministry that the elders here at Northwest joyfully offer to you.

Today, if you find yourself in a place of discouragement due to hardship of any kind, weakness of any kind, please call one of the church elders. We would be honored to come alongside of you, anoint you with oil, and pray for you.

The time in prayer will be used to bring restoration. We've seen it over and over again. It will even serve to reveal areas for needed growth, to prompt repentance, and to bring cleansing forgiveness.

Sin will be forgiven (v. 15b)

[15b]...and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.

Among the reasons for anyone's discouragement might be sin. Sin might be involved and it might not be.

But underlying, unconfessed sin may well be uncovered during the time in prayer. Forgiveness and cleansing will come as those sins are brought to the light of day, exposed, and repented of.

So, brothers and sisters, when you're discouraged and about to throw in the towel, too down to pray for yourself, call for your elders to pray for you. When everything's coming up roses and you're cheerful, pray. When you are suffering, pray.

And that's not all James has to say about prayer. His next words continue on the theme of prayer, highlight this month's memory verse - and may just stretch all of our comfort levels.

Applying God's Power to Each Other Through Prayer (vv. 16-18)

Confess sin and pray for each other (v. 16a)

[16] Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

The prayer in view here is not restricted to elders. Every believer in Jesus is invited to this ministry of prayer.

And the prayer in view is in the context of confession of sin. Regular and reciprocal confession leading to heartfelt prayer for each other is an essential for life in the church.

Now, relax. James does not give us a command here to confess all our known sins in a public gathering. But, don't relax much.

- We are to confess "**sins**." We don't make general comments about how sinful we are. We specify particular sins we have committed.
- The confession of sins to one another is Part One. Part Two is prayer. The process is aborted if the human-to-human confession doesn't lead to prayer to God.
- The confession is not an organizational act; it's family business. It's not hierarchical, but Christian to Christian.
- The confession is not for shaming and it's not exhibitionism. The one who confesses does so to receive forgiveness and to restore to spiritual health.

When you take James 5:16 seriously you move you from the sidelines into the heat of battle. You move from the shallows into the deep end of the waters of life in the Body of Christ. It means you're not content to play church, anymore.

So...

Is there someone or is there some small group of someones with whom you are relating deeply enough that you could "**confess your sins**"? Is there a life context in which to apply James' words?

It is my hope and prayer that if you are a part of our church, you can identify some one or two or three people you know well enough to bring your confession and know that you will be prayed for.

If you can't identify such a person, it is my hope and prayer that you will develop such relationships. And that you will begin to develop them today.

This is where plugging into an Adult Bible Fellowship or a Care Group is so helpful.

When you get together with someone you may not know all that well during the week to go deeper, you will start to develop just the kind of heartfelt friendship you will need when it's time to confess, to repent, to find restoration, and to be prayed for.

You and I can have great confidence that God will work through a confession that culminates in intercession (“**and pray for one another**”). We see that confidence at the end of the verse.

Trust that prayer offered by the righteous accomplishes a lot! (v. 16b)

[16b]...The effective²⁰ prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

When you are walking with Jesus, when you are leading a righteous life - not a perfect life, but a life that is pointing toward God – and you pray, your prayer is energized by God.

You get the chance to participate with God in touching the life of your friend who confesses. You make a difference. God uses you to effect real change in others - through prayer.

And the human example James uses to drive home this point is one of the best known and most respected prophets of the Old Testament: Elijah.

Exhibit A: Elijah and the Power of Prayer (vv. 17-18)

Elijah, though a prophet, was essentially like us (v. 17a)

Along with Moses, Abraham, and David, Elijah is the most often mentioned Old Testament character in the New Testament.²¹

Elijah performed miracles over a ministry spanning decades. These miracles are recorded for us in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. He was mightily used by God and was revered by James’ first century readers.

But James reminds us that after it’s all said and done, Elijah was only human. He was no superman. He was subject to the same weaknesses as you are and as I am.

But just look at his prayer life.

Elijah’s meteorological prayers! (vv. 17b-18)

[17] Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly²² that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. [18] Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

Elijah was living as God’s man in a time of great rebellion by God’s people. The king of Israel was the idolatrous Ahab. His queen was the wicked Jezebel.

Together, Ahab and Jezebel had turned the hearts of the nation completely away from the Lord.

In 1 Kings 17, Elijah spoke to King Ahab and told him that a long period of drought was coming. James tells us that Elijah had actually prayed that this would happen – and, sure enough, for three and a half years, it didn’t rain in Israel.

Among the effects of that period of drought and famine was the beginning of a return to God among the Jews. So, as James says, Elijah prayed again, and the Lord sent rain.

I want us to note two items from the example of Elijah.

Prayer, the essential thing

First, with all the things that Elijah may have done during the time of his people’s rebellion, all the projects he started, the works he

²⁰ The word “effective” translates a Greek participle, from which we get our English word “energize.”

²¹ He has been called the “grandest and most romantic figure Israel ever produced.”

²² James uses a Hebrew idiom to render Elijah’s prayer, “Praying, he prayed” to emphasize the fervency of his prayer. “He really prayed.”

worked, the deeds he did and the sermons he preached – it is mentioned here that he prayed.²³

Elijah’s story tells us that what is worth our time and efforts and energies and works, is worth our prayers.

Prayer is our way of saying that it is what God does that is most important. Prayer says that my work must flow out of His power. Prayer speaks “God” into what may look like hopelessness.

Prayer, partnering with Almighty God

And second, note that of all the illustrations James could have come up with to encourage his readers whose friends confess their sins to them, he chose Elijah. He chose a man who prayed.

That’s because the change effected in Elijah’s world was effected by means of prayer.²⁴ And the ministry of prayer is for you.

- God will use your prayer to encourage you when you are suffering.
- He will use your prayerful rejoicings to “center” you in worship when you are cheerful.
- He will use your prayers for your brothers and sisters as you and they engage in mutual confession and intercession.

This emphasis on the power of God (unleashed in prayer) joined to the power of loving, relational engagement seems to me to be very much at the heart of James’ whole letter.²⁵

And we see that amazing God/us cooperation in the last two verses of the book.

²³ Agreeing with Adamson, Hiebert stresses that James’ point is not that Elijah prayed fervently, but that he prayed, given all of the other things he might have done.

²⁴ There was a partial turning to the Lord in Israel as a result of the drought and the ensuing famine. See 1 Kings 18-19

²⁵ It was C. S. Lewis was affirmed that as God has given us the power to make things happen in our world by our works, He has also granted us the power of causality by means of prayer.

The same James who tells us to pray for our brothers and sisters also says that prayer can’t be a substitute for sacrificial, risky, personal effort to restore when he or she wanders. Prayer can’t be an excuse to not engage.

The Power of Redemptive Love (vv. 19-20)

[19] My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, [20] let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins.

When a Christian Strays

So, try to picture a Christian brother or sister “**straying from the truth.**” I don’t think that should be too hard to do.

We are all frail and subject to straying. The enemy would love to trip us up and regularly sends temptations our way. The world in which we live is no friend to faith. So, any of us might stray.

But, for now, picture yourself standing firm by God’s grace. Again, not perfectly, but you’re walking by faith.

As you walk by faith you observe one of your brothers or one of your sisters in Jesus stumbling in any one of the ways James has mentioned throughout the previous five chapters.²⁶

Maybe they are being quick to anger, quick to speak, slow to listen. Maybe they’re not bridling their tongue. Maybe they show partiality toward the wealthy or to the popular at church. Or, perhaps they complain against each other.

The list could go on, but you get the idea. Quick. What should you do?

You – Jumping into Action!

²⁶ In verse 20, James is speaking of a Christian who has fallen - either into false doctrine or sinful practice.

Well, James doesn't tell you to go call the elders. While never wanting to dismiss the importance of prayer, here he doesn't tell you to pray. Here, he commends ACTION.

He gives us no specific guidelines or how-to's. No script as to what to say or an action plan detailing what to do. He does, though, beautifully picture a scene of restoration.

When you see someone "straying", love requires action. So, do something.

Intercept him on his way to the adult theater. Interrupt him as he gossips. Rebuke her for her harshness with her kids. Call her on the carpet for running roughshod over her employees.

You, a 2016 Nathan

And be crafty about it, like the prophet Nathan was when King David was guilty of the sins of adultery and murder.

Nathan didn't just barge into the throne room and rebuke David for his sin.

No, he told David a story about a rich man who stole the pet lamb of his poor neighbor, slaughtered it, and ate it. That story provoked David's moral outrage – and THEN Nathan pointed a bony finger in David's face and thundered, "*YOU are that man!*"

It is altogether possible that God is calling you to be Nathan in a 2016 David's life.

Will it be risky? Sure. Are there guaranteed positive outcomes? Nope.

But if you are willing to become involved at this level with your brother or sister in Jesus, if you love them enough to put personal safety aside and "***turn him back...from the error of his ways***", you have passed from self-centeredness to love.

THAT is the picture of the church as a redemptive community. That's you bringing your friend in Jesus back from the brink, restoring to health and vitality.

James says that when you're willing to take the risk to redeem, you do two things. First, you save your brother's soul from death.

The On-going Work of Redemption

Saving a soul from death

Sinful straying is just that serious. Sin pays the wages of death, and no higher.

For someone who has never trusted in Jesus for eternal life, that death is eternal separation from God.

But for the believer in Jesus, who's eternal future is secure, sin still wreaks havoc and kills. It has a deadening effect on our relationship with our Savior. We die relationally toward our friends in Christ. We are desensitized to the Spirit's work in our lives.

If you care enough to confront and turn your straying brother or sister back, you are opening the door to life.

To engage someone who is traveling away from the Lord and to invite him to repent is a courageous act with no guarantee of success. But, if the man turns, your love has made an investment that will pay eternal dividends.

In addition to rescuing from death, James says that loving engagement will cover a multitude of sins.

Covering a multitude of sins

By doing the hard, risky work of lovingly turning a straying believer back to the Lord, you open the way for him or her to experience a fresh awareness of forgiveness and they will be renewed for service to God.

That's spiritual re-cycling.

Every Wednesday, I fill our big blue trash can with paper and plastic for the re-cycler to pick up and haul off for use in another life.

I've taken larger metal and rubber objects to Great Northwest Recycling on Grissom.

Whether it's San Antonio Public Works or Great Northwest Recycling, those old scraps are put through the wringer and re-purposed.

This is what James has in mind, but with an infinitely more valuable product. He is envisioning you and me, today, being involved in the ministry of re-cycling, reclaiming and restoring members of our family in Christ to spiritual health.

Back to the basics, indeed.