

October 11, 2026

**The Letter of James**  
**IX. Two Things Are Needed: Prayer & Church**  
**James 5:13-20**

Dr. William P. Seel  
Easley Presbyterian Church  
Easley, South Carolina

Brother James ends his letter where he began – by telling us to pray. He started out by telling us to count it all joy when we meet trials because trials can be a pathway into deeper faith.<sup>1</sup> And the key to walking that pathway through trials into deeper faith, said Brother James, is prayer: *“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask God, who give generously to all without reproach.”*<sup>2</sup> That was at the beginning of his letter. And now, this morning, at the end of his letter, the very same instruction: *“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.”* Prayer, Brother James goes on to say, is the key not just to enduring suffering, but really to everything that is good and joyful and faithful in the life of a Christian.

Pray, says Brother James. I have called him “Brother James” all through this sermon series – maybe you have noticed and wondered why, since I don’t ordinarily refer to other Biblical letter writers in that way. Well, Brother James because he is our brother in faith. But, Brother James, more importantly, because he was the actual brother of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And that fact is particularly appropriate in light of his counsel to us to pray. You see, the early church had a nickname for Brother James – they called him “Camel-knees.” And this is the story behind the nickname.

Remember how Jesus’ family, including his brother James, had been rather slow of heart to believe that Jesus really was the Messiah. And because of that, after James did believe, he was never off his knees in prayer – as if to make up for the lost time of his years of disbelief. Always on his knees – so much so that when he died and they were placing him in his coffin, they saw that his knees were hard and worn and stiff and callused. After all that prayer, all that time spent down on his knees, his knees looked like the knees of a camel. “Camel-knees” because Brother James was a man of prayer.<sup>3</sup> So when he tells us to pray – that prayer is central to the life of faith, he is speaking not just the Word of God, but the words of his own experience before God.

What do our knees look like? I do not doubt that there are great masters of prayer in our midst – I know that there are. Those who have spent much time over many years on their knees; and for whom, therefore, conversation with God comes as naturally as breathing. But it has also been my experience that many of us struggle with prayer. There are a hundred excuses why – we’re too busy, prayer is too hard, we’ve prayed big prayers in time of crisis that we feel weren’t answered in the way we thought they should be. Actually, right there is one of the biggest faults in our approach to prayer – expecting it to be an automatic, guaranteed transaction wherein we put

in our penny of prayer and out will pop our desired gumball of grace. That's not how prayer works. More to the point, that's not what prayer is. Prayer is not a transaction between us and God.

Rather, prayer is communion, a personal encounter, a private conversation between us and God. Prayer is not transactional – where we give God this prayer and He gives us exactly that gumball we asked Him for. Prayer is relational – we come before the One who made us and we tell Him about our day, chat with Him about our yesterday, share with Him our concerns about tomorrow. We ask Him for things we think we need, certainly – He invites us to do so. But what prayer is, what makes prayer matter, what makes prayer central to the living out of our discipleship is the simple fact of our connecting with God. That drawing closer to God. That lingering into deeper relationship, into deeply connection with God. Yes, God gives to us in response to our prayers – just as Brother James says He does. But prayer is not a transaction we conclude to get stuff from God – it is a relationship, a connection, an on-going conversation and communion that is meant to sustain us, bless us, and guide us on our journey all the way home to our Father's House.

And that is why we need prayer not just as an emergency hail Mary in time of crisis – we need prayer for the whole of our Christian life in the same way we need oxygen for our earthly existence. As oxygen sustains our bodies, so prayer sustains our souls, sustains our life of faith. And so maybe the biggest reason why we don't pray – why we don't have “camel-knees” of our own – is simply because we are not yet convinced of this, simply not yet truly aware of how deeply we need prayer. But we can be convinced – and, if we live this Christian life long enough, with serious intent enough, we definitely will become convinced.

For example, Gerald Sittser, in a wonderfully helpful book on prayer entitled, When God Doesn't Answer Your Prayer, tells of how he came to understand his need for prayer. He was volunteering at The City Gate, which is a food kitchen for the homeless in downtown Spokane, Washington. And as he was working one day, he fell into conversation with another volunteer, a fairly new volunteer, by the name of Kevin. Sittser learned that Kevin was also fairly new in town, and so asked him how he had found out about The City Gate. Kevin said:

*“Some people I met earlier this week told me about it. So I came. Now here I am, serving already. I guess they needed the help.”*

*“So what do you do? I mean, for a living.”*

*“Right now I'm unemployed.”*

*“Where are you living?”*

*“I'm sleeping on a friend's living room sofa until I get my own place. I just met him last week. It keeps me off the streets.”*

*“Do you have family here?”*

*“Not really. I have two kids, but I haven't seen them for a while. One lives in Portland, the other is in jail.”*

*An uncomfortable silence followed. I felt heat rise in my face, the first flush of embarrassment. I wanted to steer the conversation in another direction. But I had run out of questions. I*

*had done it again, broken one of the cardinal rules of ministry. You don't ask stupid middle-class questions at The City Gate.*

*Then Kevin looked at me and, as if to pardon my stupidity through an act of pure generosity, said, "I was a heroin addict for seventeen years. I lost everything – my job, my family, my health. I just got out of treatment. Jesus helped me kick the habit. I don't know what I would do without Jesus."*

*Suddenly everything had changed. I was no longer the heroic outsider who visits The City Gate once a week to serve the "less fortunate," as we like to call them. I was standing in the presence of a saint who knew that without Jesus he would probably be dead . . .*

*I forget all too quickly how much I need Jesus, how much we all need Jesus. When I'm at The City Gate, I see with greater clarity what I know to be true in my head but not always in my heart – why Jesus came, whom Jesus spent time with, how much Jesus loved the needy. I don't envy their circumstances, but I do envy their awareness – raw, constant, and deep – of their need for God's grace. My life is so padded with wealth and privilege and success that I run the risk of becoming dull to God, too "spoiled by God's indulgence," as John Calvin put it. The City Gate reminds me of how much I depend on God, even when I don't realize it. I enjoy many of God's earthly gifts, but I tend to ignore the giver . . .*

*As I look back over the many years I have prayed, I see a common theme. In many cases I prayed only when I really had to, when hard times forced me to. I was desperate for something; I knew I needed God's intervention, God's help, God's grace. I prayed when starting a new job because I felt inadequate. I prayed when a loved one was sick because I felt helpless. I prayed when there were problems in our home . . .<sup>4</sup>*

But what Sittser says he has now learned – what life has at last taught him, what the Holy Spirit has at last confirmed in his heart, what his own spirit has at last proven willing to accept – is this: *"Whether or not I feel it, my need for God is as great as my need for air, water, and food. Without God, I am dead."*

Without God, we are dead. That is what Brother James is telling us. That is why he tells us to pray in any and every circumstance. Because prayer connects us to the God who is our life, who is our source of life, and who is our sustenance at every moment of our life. We need prayer because prayer connects us to the One who gives us life and breath and meaning and purpose and love and healing and mercy and joy and keeps us on the path which leads us to the Kingdom forever. Prayer is the key, says Brother James – Camel-knees. Because camel-knee prayer is the key to our discipleship, the very heart and soul of our life with God and in God and for God.

But there is something else Brother James tells us that we need in order to live the life of discipleship. He sort of slips this in here at the end of his letter – and it's not explicitly stated in

what he says, but it is present nonetheless. He tells us not only prayer – connection with God, but also that we need the Church – connection with fellow Christians. If anyone is cheerful, let him sing, says Brother James – but how much more rewarding is it to have others singing with you, rejoicing with you? If anyone is sick, call for the elders and have them lay on hands and anoint with oil. John and I regularly offer the laying on of hands and anointing with oil to those facing surgery or illness or some crisis in life – and I can testify that there is something truly powerful in that connection of human hands laid on and of oil applied and of fellow Christians coming together in prayer for another. If anyone sins, says Brother James, let him confess; if anyone wanders from the truth, others of you in the church go and bring that wanderer back. Church, says Brother James, Church. We need prayer – connection with God; but in order to live out the Christian life in the real world, to be sustained and guided and supported on our path to the Kingdom, we also need Church – we need connection with our fellow Christians.

When I was twelve, I took up the trombone. Now the trombone is a wonderful instrument – and speaking as a former twelve-year-old boy, you can make some seriously awesome noises with a trombone, at least some of which are actually musical. For example, on Christmas morning, my brother and sister and I were not allowed to leave our bedrooms to see what Santa had brought us until our parents’ woke up and came to get us. So, being the oldest, it was my job to wake them up. And my brother and sister will testify that a trombone in the hands of a twelve-year-old boy is a really effective way to get your mother and father moving at 5:00 on Christmas morning!

But one downside to the trombone, as I suppose it is with taking up and learning any new instrument, is the dreariness of all the practice required to learn the instrument. Playing scales and endless solo repetitions of “Mary Had a Little Lamb” can really dampen your enthusiasm for learning to play a trombone. But then, one day, having mastered your scales and “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” the most wonderful thing happens – you sit down with a whole bunch of other twelve-year-olds who have been learning to play scales and “Mary Had a Little Lamb” on all sorts of different instruments of their own. The band leader raises her baton, and suddenly all that drudgery of solo practice time turns into something wonderful – suddenly you are making music, suddenly you are part of a band. Different instruments, playing different parts – but all blending together into a whole which is so much greater than even the sum of its parts.

And that’s Church. That’s why we need Church. It is crucial that we do our solo practicing in the life of the Christian faith – studying our Bibles, saying our prayers, and so forth. But there is something wonderful, absolutely beautiful, which happens when we get to do all those things and more with other Christians – when we come together as the Band of Christ, the Bride of Christ, the Body of Christ. I sing to myself all the time and enjoy doing so – but nothing beats the joy of standing up here and joining in with the choir and this congregation as we offer our praise to God. There are Sundays when that alone – that sound, that fellowship, that shared praise of God – when that alone is enough to bring me to the verge of tears of joy. We need Church, says Brother James – we need connection with other Christians.

Or this. A Presbyterian church in Ohio once sent out a survey asking its members to recount an episode in which they had experienced the love and care of their church family. The response was overwhelming. The stories just poured in, more than they had ever expected. Here are just a few:

*As a single mother with no family here, a very kind, thoughtful single mom asked us to join her extended family for a Mother's Day lunch. I would have been alone again on a holiday. How much I appreciated the gesture.*

*When our son was born, church members provided more food than we could have ever eaten . . . What a way to go out of their way to be sure we were all made to feel so special.*

*I thank God for someone who cut our grass all summer after my husband's heart attack . . . who decorated the outside of our house one Christmas when he was sick . . . who sent cards on "unofficial" occasions.*

*During a time when I was feeling very low and lost and alone, a member stood by my side – brought dinner, sent notes, and set up a time to walk and talk with me – her encouragement through friendship, prayer, and listening showed me how generous God's love is.*

*On Christmas Eve afternoon a special person who attends [our church] surprised me with a phone call asking me to please join her and her extended family for the entire day of Christmas – breakfast through dinner. Thanks to that wonderful, special heart of that woman, I did not take my life. God shouted that he needed me.<sup>5</sup>*

Church – we need Church. We need connection with other Christians to live the Christian life. That's the note Brother James ends on. Two things are needed to live the Christian life, to know the fullness of the goodness and grace of God's working in our lives and in our world. We need prayer – constant connection with God. We need prayer like we need oxygen to breathe! And we need Church – continual connection with our brothers and sisters in the beautiful and even musical fellowship which is the Easley Presbyterian Church.

---

<sup>1</sup> James 1:2-4.

<sup>2</sup> James 1:5.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Whyte, "Elijah—Passionate in Prayer," in Lord, Teach Us to Pray (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1923), p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Sittser, When God Doesn't Answer Your Prayer (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), pp. 33-34.

<sup>5</sup> Tod E. Bolsinger, It Takes A Church To Raise A Christian (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), pp. 172-173.