

Faith that Works: Right-Related Faith Works

James 5:13-18

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Today we are in our second last week in the book of James. So go ahead and open your Bibles to James chapter 5. If you're just joining us today James is almost at the end of the Bible just after Hebrews. You can grab a copy from the pew and follow along, page 856.

... I'm not sure if you have any favorite characters in the Bible. I totally do. In the Old Testament I love David and I love the prophet Elijah, and in the New Testament I love Peter. And I love all three of them for the same reason. We are going to start today by looking briefly at two of them because they frame the text in James perfectly.

So Peter is a colourful character. He's Jesus' number 1 disciple even though he's not the smartest kid on campus – he's not the Apostle Paul. He's a say it like he sees it guy. He's a shoot from the hip find the target later kind of guy. And half the time he shoots himself in the foot.

So he isn't perfect, but he's real. When bad stuff happens his default isn't to just consider it pure joy. He gets his back up. He's aggressive. His hands are in his pockets, but his fists are clenched just in case he needs them quickly.

Now some of you can relate to this kind of personality, and others of you can't. Some of you are naturally loud and aggressive, and others of you are quieter, but there is something about Peter that we can all relate to, and that is his ability to get it wrong. And I love this about him.

So the night Jesus gets captured He tells His disciples, you are all going to deny Me and fall away. And Peter is so confident he's different than everyone else that calls Jesus a liar: "All these other blokes might do that, but not me. I'll die rather than disown you."¹ And Peter honestly believes this about himself.

But then Jesus lovingly says, no Peter, you too. You might be passionate, you certainly are confident, but you aren't better than everyone else – no one is – you're going to deny Me too. Actually just to make the point here, before the rooster crows, you are going to deny Me 3 times!

And this is exactly what happens. After Jesus has been brought to the high priest's house for questioning we read:

¹ Mark 14:29;31

And when some there had kindled a fire... Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with [Jesus]."

But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know Him," he said.

A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them."

"Man, I am not!" Peter replied.

About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with Him, for he is a Galilean."

Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown Me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:55-62)

Can you imagine that look from Jesus? This is when it clicks for Peter. He gets that he's just like everyone else, and it eats him up. Now this is a blue collar fisherman, he's not some arts student – I'm an arts student so no offence to you if you are too – but Peter's not the crying type. He's a strong man. He has convictions and he sticks with them. Other people are weak, but he's got his act together. But here the truth comes out; when it comes to living for Jesus none of us have it together. We all deny Him. And Peter gets it, and he weeps. I love that.

Or how about David. David's a colourful character as well. He plays the harp, which is about as soft fingered as you can get – Peter doesn't play the harp! But then David also kills lions and bears and giants. And people write songs about him. They sang:

"Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands." (1 Samuel 18:7)

Now these lyrics aren't that catchy in English, but this song topped the charts, everyone was singing it. And it ticked King Saul off as you can imagine. But this is who David was. He was a super soldier. He was a ladies man. He killed giants. And He played the harp, but don't mess with him about that.

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But the best thing about David was his passion for God. So the Bible says:

After removing Saul, [God] made David their king. God testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse, a man after My own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.' (Acts 13:22)

That's what God said about David. "He will do everything I want him to do." But then if you read the story you might wonder if God got His guy wrong. I mean like Peter, David is far from perfect. In spite of having it all as the King of Israel he becomes a murdering, lying, adulterer simply because he can.

One day he sees one of his soldier's wives taking a bath and he decides to seduce her – she can't say no because he's the king and he'll kill her if she tries. And then she gets pregnant, and so David kills her husband. And then in a seeming magnanimous act he marries this poor pregnant widow. What a great guy!

And nobody says nothing. He gets away with it. Months pass. There is no investigation. And there is no sense of guilt or remorse from David. Not until God sends a prophet to let David know; "Oh, by the way I saw what you did, and I'm not happy about it." But before David gets caught he's just getting on with life as usual.

And this is something history tells us, if people can get away with something they will. If you could steal and cheat and push people down who are in your way and get away with it – if you knew you wouldn't get caught – human nature in history says you would do it.

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Oh not me! I'd never murder anyone. I'd never commit adultery. I'd never deny Jesus. Right, that's because you're better than King David and Peter.

No, actually the reality is all of us fall in this boat, that's the point of characters like David and Peter. None of us are good. These are the best guys in the Bible, and they are screw ups who need God's forgiveness and mercy. And you're a screw up too. And so am I.

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So how come Peter is the number one disciple? How come it wasn't John? I mean nothing bad gets written about John. And why is David presented like such a hero in spite of the Bible being so honest about his failings?

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The single reason is that these men had the kind of relationship with God that He wants us to have. Get your mind around this. God's not looking for a few good men and He certainly isn't looking for perfect people. What He's looking for is men and women who will catch a glimpse of who He is and what He has done for us in sending Himself to earth to die in our place, to recreate us into His image, so that we can re-enter the relationship we were designed to have with Him in the beginning. He wants us as friends.

Now this certainly doesn't mean He's not awesome and terrible, but after showing us His incredible sacrifice of love, the people God's looking for are those who will fall in love with Him. God didn't die to buy us as indentured servants – if service was His goal He could have easily forced that on us. But He went to the lengths He did to woo us, like a man woos the woman he wants to marry.

In '99 I got to work on this. I hustled down to the house at 1312 Garvin street every chance I got and I shoveled snow, and chopped wood and, washed dishes, and cut the lawn, and chatted up the soon to be mother in law, all with my eyes on the prize. I wanted that young lady to love me, and I wanted her dad not to shoot me. And this is what God wants for us too – except the shotgun part. He wants to win our affection.

Now here's where the analogy breaks down. I chased Nikki because she was the best thing I'd ever seen. But it's different for God. God doesn't chase us because we are the best thing He's seen, there's nothing impressive about us other than that we bear His image. But He chases us because He wants to re-forge that image. He chases us not because we are good, but because He gets glory when unworthy people are re-made worthy and take the form of His beautiful bride.

Let me dwell here for a bit because this is one of the most important points I can ever tell a bunch of church folk. Here it is: You're not good. You aren't. And if you think you are you aren't God's kind of person. You aren't a man or a woman after God's own heart like Peter or David. And that's because the people God gets excited about – the people who provoke Him to pleasure, the people He is proud to be called their God – aren't good people they are poor in Spirit people.

And "poor in spirit" is just the Bible's way of saying "humble." Poor in spirit people do things that proud people don't. So what do they do?

They serve instead of demanding to be served. They aren't judgmental looking down their noses at the poor, instead they extend mercy. They do what the Word says, they don't just hear it. They watch their tongue really carefully. They pursue heaven's wisdom instead of earthly wisdom. They see their life in relation to eternity and so don't boast about the future that hasn't happened yet. And they walk in patient expectation of the return of Christ. The fact that Jesus is coming back excites them.

Now if any of this sounds familiar that's because this is what James has been talking about for 4 chapters. James has been describing two kinds of people who find themselves in church. One kind actually has a relationship with God – they love the Saviour who died for them. While the other person knows everything about God but lacks love. They really aren't after His heart. And as a result these two people live out their faith differently. One of the has faith that works, and the other has faith that deceives themselves.

And James is still on about this so let's pick it up in chapter 5 verse 13.

[Read James 5:13-14]

I love the way James starts this off. He says "Is there anyone here who's in trouble? Got any trouble in your life? Is there anyone here who's happy? You're doing alright? Have I left anyone out? Okay, let's just get a bit specific; is there anyone here who's sick?

His point is everyone should have their hand up. All of us fit into this somewhere. And then he says no matter where you are at God should be at the centre. You should be praying, you should be singing, you should be calling on the elders of the church.

Now I want to really emphasize this, because the way I think we usually read this – indeed the way I read James for a long time – was that this letter is kind of a list of dos and don'ts for how to be a Christian. People have described James as the Proverbs of the New Testament – wise things to do to live in a good way.

And so when we come to a text like this we think, okay this is going to be about how good people pray more and sing more. And James does call for praying and singing, so if you hate those things you are going to feel his challenge. But that's not the main point. While there are some similarities between James and the book of Proverbs, James has a lot more in common with Jesus than with Solomon. And that's because James' number one desire is to spur on faith that works. He wants to help us not just do the right things – the Pharisees were doing all the right things – but he wants us to have the right heart empowering our action.

In a nutshell you could say James is describing what a relationship with God looks like – and this is what Jesus did too. So in verses 13 and 14 he says wherever you find yourself in life – whether you are in a good spot or a bad one – make sure God is at the center. Paul said it like this:

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

Jesus people are Jesus people whether there are difficult things going on or whether everything is going great. Jesus people are about Jesus. They bring Him into everything.

So I've got an incredibly amazing woman in my life. I should have saved this sermon for Valentines Day! I love her. I love spending time with her. I love talking with her. I love seeing her at the end of the day when I get home. She's my favorite person in the whole world. Not my kids. 20 years from now I'm kicking them out of the house, but I'm going to keep my wife.

Here's the point: when something great happens to me Nikki's the first person I want to tell about it. And when something bad happens to me she's the first person I want to talk about it with. She's part of every aspect of my life.

And James says this is what a faith that works relationship with God looks like. If we love Him He will be part of every aspect of our lives. And this is what set David and Peter apart from the rest. As flawed as these men were, they were men after the heart of God. David just wanted to praise God; Peter couldn't get enough of being with Jesus.

So what do you get passionate about? What gets you excited? What do you spend most of your free time doing and your money pursuing? What do you love most? Is it God?

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Now as you think about this if you are convicted that your life doesn't line up with what Jesus wants from you let your heart be cut open. Let it bother you, don't just push it down and ignore it. Don't say, well that's good for spectacular people like David and Peter, I'm just average. Let your conscience come to the surface. This is what James wants to happen.

James knows what he has said is going to cut – it's going to cut everyone because nobody's good. But James isn't just trying to beat us up. There is good news here for sinners. And the good news is that God saves sinners. This gets Him excited because it brings Him glory to save people who totally don't deserve it. He's into that.

But He doesn't just save us from sin, everyone He saves is saved into relationship with Himself. He saves us for the kind of life that David and Peter lived. Not perfection, but a hunger for more of Him. A soft conscience. A willingness to be corrected. And a desire to please God by relating to Him. He wants our love. He wants to be our first love.

He wants to be so central that when you get in trouble the first thing you think of is going to God in prayer. And when you're happy the first thing you think of is singing praise. And you burst out into song, maybe it's when you are in the shower, maybe it's when you are in your car, maybe it's right here at church, but you sing praise because you are full of joy. Do you pray and sing like that because of what you've received from God?

God gets excited about people who do. Not because they are better than anyone else, they aren't. But because they get Him – they understand what He's done for them and their response is to gush with love from their heart, and their mind and with all their strength. They bring Him into everything. And James says this kind of person has faith that works.

And then we get to some real crazy stuff. Look at verse 14 again.

[Read James 5:14-16]

James brings the church into our relationship with God and says, hey when righteous people pray God's power comes down. Now "righteous" is a word that describes people who are in a "right relationship with God." These aren't sinless people, they're people like David and Peter. And James says your elders should be like this. Your leaders should be righteous people, they should be faith people.

So when you are sick call the church. This means step out in faith. Say, hey I believe that if you pray God can heal. And there are two kinds of healing James talks about here. There is physical healing and there is healing from sin, and we call that kind of healing "forgiveness."

And James ties these two healings together and he says "confess your sins to each other so that you can be forgiven and healed.

So God heals our spirits and our physical bodies when we get into community with each other and confess and pray. Church is the place where the power of God comes down. Now this doesn't mean don't go to the doctor if you've got cancer. Who are you to say God isn't going to work through that. But come and get prayed for because God is the one who holds the keys to life and death, He is the one who heals. So get prayed for and then go to the doctor.

Friends, if you don't pray you are stealing the opportunity to see God at work from yourself. So when I don't pray and then recover, then all I can say is "well the doctor gave me a great prescription." But in the same scenario if I've prayed then when I'm healed I see God's hands moving throughout the whole thing. "I'm so excited. I was sick, and I went and got prayed for, and God led me to this doctor who had a different take on things than I'd heard before. And I went through this procedure and now I'm better. Thank you Jesus!" God gets the glory. And sometimes God heals instantaneously too, so get prayer.

Now us Baptists can get kind of freaked out when we talk like this – anybody willing to say "amen" to that? But it's important for us to remember that this isn't Pentecostal stuff, this is Bible stuff, so we're stuck with it. Now I don't want to get bogged down here, but I want to say two things.

So first, if you are an elder here – we call you deacons, but the Bible calls you elders – then we need to be prepared to pray for people for healing and the forgiveness of their sins. And we don't have any oil at the church, but maybe we need to get some.

So that's the first side of this. And the second side is, if you are sick or you're struggling with sin then put your faith in God for healing and come to your church leaders for prayer and confession. We aren't the healers, God is the healer, but James says God heals when we pray.

Now one reason people don't pray for the sick is that we mistakenly think prayer is supposed to be like the magic in Harry Potter. So if Harry gets the spell right he gets results. But prayer doesn't work this way because prayer isn't powerful, God is powerful. But He's also God and so He does what He wants.

And we get afraid that if we pray and God doesn't heal then our faith will be shattered. But that's ridiculous. Our job isn't to dictate the results – the results are God's business – but our job is to have faith and pray. James says this is what people who have faith that works do. And God gets excited about people like this. And James says, "Hey! People get healed!"

Alright, we are going to leave that there and go on to verse 17.

[Read James 5:17-18]

Elijah is the third character I love. He's a big wig like David and Peter. He's a man who saw the power of God move in spectacular ways. He's the guy who challenged the 450 prophets of Baal to a god showdown on Mt. Carmel and won. He's the guy who told the wicked king Ahab:

As surely as the LORD lives, no rain or dew will fall during the next few years unless I command it. (1 Kings 17:1)

It takes guts to say something like that! He's the guy God lead to beg from a poor widow who was just about to bake her last loaf of bread for her son and then starve to death – a real positive lady. This must have taken some gall, but Elijah told her "hey that's great, just give me a room and bake me some bread first." And she does! And her oil and flower don't run out until the famine finishes. This is Elijah!

But do you see what James says? He says: "there was nothing special about Elijah. He was a human being just like you and me. He just prayed. God is the one who stopped the rain." His point is we worship the same God Elijah did.

The only thing Elijah had was a right relationship with God. But this doesn't mean he was perfect. Only two chapters after he stopped the rain Queen Jezebel told people she was going to kill him and Elijah got scared and ran into the desert and then in a classic depressed stupor got super pouty.

He told God “Woe is me. I’m the last person who hasn’t bowed the knee to Baal.” And God interrupts him, “actually I’ve saved 7000 who haven’t bowed the knee.” But Elijah doesn’t hear. He says “I just want to die. Can you kill me God?”² Elijah gets depressed and scared because of some angry lady!

Now if as you hear this you are tempted to say, “Come on is this guy for real? I mean if I saw what Elijah saw; If I called fire down from heaven, and ate food from infinite containers, and raised people from the dead – all things Elijah did – then I’d tell that Jezebel where to go and how to get there – I’d say it right to her face.” But wouldn’t you though?

I mean, who do we think we are? Do we have anything on Elijah or David or Peter? Probably not. But then James turns this right around and says, and actually Elijah didn’t have anything on you.

You see he’s just human. Just like David. Just like Peter. Elijah’s nothing great.

All he had was faith that works. And this is available to you and me too. This is what God wants for us. And the only thing it takes from us is to get over ourselves and go to God with everything we’ve got.

Friends, God isn’t looking for spectacular men and women, He’s got all the spectacular He needs wrapped up in Himself. He’s looking for flawed people who will stop thinking they are so great and start going to Him all the time.

He wants people who will get so enamored with Him that we will pray when we have needs and sing for joy when things are good. He isn’t interested in people who can hobble along themselves but need a bit of a crutch. He wants people who need Him like an astronaut needs his space suite on the moon. And He wants people who go all in when He woos them. He wants people who will love Him back. This is righteous; this is what a right-relationship with God looks like.

And James says it’s this right relationship with God that makes our faith work. This is what God wants from us. So brothers and sisters put Jesus at the middle of everything you do and expect Him to show up.

² 1 Kings 19:4