

PRAYERFUL PROMISE-KEEPING

James 5:12-18

Sermon for Peace Church

July 26, 2009

PURPOSE – To call people to a life of prayer in light of the promises they make in Christian community.

MAIN IDEA – Through prayerful community we fulfill the promises we make in the Christian life and lead effective, powerful lives for God.

I. INTRODUCTION

Let's open our Bibles to James 5:12 (p. 1885)

1. As we continue through this letter, now near its conclusion, our passage today begins with a CHARGE fit for this Profession of Faith occasion.

Verse 12 – *“Above all, my brothers, do not swear – not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your “YES” be yes, and your “NO”, no, or you will be condemned.”*

(i) Inspired by the Holy Spirit, James is telling believers to say what they mean & mean what they say – to make their word their bond!

= Don't become a person who, if you're really to be trusted to do what you say you'll do, must “swear” on it.

I.e. – “I'll be there on time. I mean it. I really do –swear to God!” (Mother's grave / cross my heart & hope to die) ... NO!

(ii) The person who makes a promise in that way is obviously a person whose CREDIBILITY has slipped! So he must make attempts to BOLSTER IT with a vow!

- “Don't do that!” states James – and his half-brother, Jesus said the same thing in his Sermon on the Mount. ... “Become people who WILL DO WHAT you say you'll do!

Let your yes be yes, your no, no!

NOW LET ME MAKE A COUPLE OF COMMENTS ABOUT THIS BEFORE READING THE REST OF TODAY'S PASSAGE.

2. The reason that this charge FITS is because these 3 young ladies have just given a PROMISE to us = their word.

A few minutes ago, I asked them:

Do you promise to strengthen your love and commitment to Christ by sharing faithfully in the life of the church?

Do you promise to honor and submit to the authority of the church?

Do you promise to join with the people of God in doing the work of the Lord everywhere?

... to which they responded: I DO

(as have all of you who've joined the church in full fellowship_

Congregation too – to them we pledged our “love, encouragement & prayers” ...

... So now, James / Jesus / the Scriptures say: “Let your YES be yes”

(i) CHURCH LIFE IS ALWAYS ENTERED INTO WITH PROMISES / (sometimes called VOWS).

They are very sacred.

A. When you 3 were yet babies, your parents made vows when they brought you first into the faith of the church at baptism:

- *Do you promise to do all in your power to instruct these children in the Christian faith?*

- *Do you promise to lead them by your example into a life of Christian discipleship?*

B. When elders / deacons / ministers of the Word are installed into church leadership, they make vows:

- *Do you promise to do the work of your office faithfully, in a way worthy of your calling?*

- *Do you promise to submit to the government and discipline of the church?*

C. When a man and woman stand before God to enter into the covenant of marriage – (also a ministry of the church) – they do so with vows:

- *I take you to be my wife/husband, to have & to hold from this day forward, for better / for worse, for richer / for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, as long as we both shall live.*

Covenant Life – the church & family – is created by VOW-MAKING.

3. And we do this because it's WHO GOD IS!

- He is a covenant-making God for his people in Jesus Christ! – He promises, girls, to PRESERVE you, SANCTIFY you, PROVIDE for you, SATISFY you, FORGIVE you, to GUIDE you.

(i) So in response, we make promises back to Him & His people

- I will serve you, follow you, build your people up, seek first your kingdom ...

A. Lewis Smedes writes (outline), *“When we make and keep promises we are most of all like the God whose name is “I am he who will be there with you” (Ex. 3). Among all the dimensions of the mature person in Christ, none comes closer to the character of our Lord than the daring to make a promise and the courage to keep the promises we make.”*

(ii) So to promise is GOD-LIKE. It’s acting out of the NOBLEST ASPECT of our human nature, made in the image of God. It’s an act of FREEDOM, a CHOICE – an “act of the will” to bind yourself to others. It’s daring. It takes courage.

4. But the BEAUTY of this is that it CREATES OUR LIFE TOGETHER.

Because God says, “I am the One who will be there with you”, we now have life together. We have relationship. We have a future together, one with some certainties in place!

The thing about the future is that there are a lot of uncertainties to it. So it can be anxiety producing. Who knows what tomorrow holds? – Yea, you girls are slated to go to Highschool ... but after that? Job? Relationships? Education? ... = many uncertainties!

BUT ... God is the one who says, “I will be there with you” ... and His word is His bond – He doesn’t have to swear to say that He really means it. If He says it, He means it. If He says it, He’ll do it!

(i) Likewise, in Christian community – church, family - we give ourselves to one another in the context of UNCERTAIN FUTURES.

We pledge to be there for each other, with our hearts & gifts – because that’s who God is. We don’t just bail on one another when times get tough.

So PROMISES CREATE LIFE TOGETHER IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

A. That’s why VOWS are so sacred.

... That’s why the Scripture calls us to become people whose YES is YES and NO, NO!

5. But that’s also why we have the rest of our passage to read this morning.

- Cause we NEED HELP to keep our vows

(i) You needn’t look far & wide to see that:

– Church membership today is treated lightly – people who’ve given their word to the community easily abandon it – so churches become almost like restaurants – switched as easily as deciding to go to Subway instead of McDonalds. (That’s exaggerating – but there’s much consumerism in a COVENANT community!)

- Even marriage break-up is not uncommon in the broader Christian community.

The reality is that ALL of us as human beings need A LOT of help to keep the holy promises we make. It takes DARING. It takes COURAGE. It takes HELP

Hence we have these words ... v. 13 - ***Read James 5:13-18***

II. KEEPING VOWS IN GOD-DEPENDENT COMMUNITY

“Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven & earth.” – Ps. 124:8

Yes, promises CREATE life together. PRAYER – in community – SUSTAINS that life!

1. In the Christian life, we learn to make our promises with this IMPORTANT ADDITION (we said it this morning):

Do you promise to Lindsey, Tessa and Alexis your love, encouragement & prayers? ...

We do ... WITH THE HELP OF GOD!

(i) One of the Reformed liturgical orders for marriage states:

Christian marriage is a joyful covenanting between a man and a woman ... In this covenant they acknowledge that the great love God has shown for each of them enables them to love each other. They affirm that God’s gracious presence and abiding power are needed for them to keep their vows, to continue to live in love, and to be faithful servants of Christ in this world ... FOR HUMAN COMMITMENT IS FRAGILE AND HUMAN LOVE IS IMPERFECT, BUT THE PROMISE OF GOD IS ETERNAL AND THE LOVE OF GOD CAN BRING OUR LOVE TO PERFECTION.

There is HELP in God. There is HOPE in God. There is HEALING in God.

“His love brings our love to perfection” – for the promises we make in Christian community.

(ii) How do we access this love? - THROUGH PRAYER!

Prayer is the KEY that opens the door (of Christ) to the help of God!

Promises CREATE life together ... PRAYER SUSTAINS that life.

2. Verse 13 – *Is any of you in trouble? He should PRAY.*

TROUBLES – GUARANTEED – come in life together!

I.e. - Those you are covenanted with do not meet your expectations – Difficulties come!

(i) What do you do? PRAY!

A. Pray not as a last resort, but as a first resort! ... *You can do more than pray after you've prayed; but you can never do more than pray until you have prayed.*

Someone once said, "You want a better church? Spouse? Pastor? Elder? All you need to do is start praying for the one you have!"

DIFFICULTIES COME IN LIFE TOGETHER ... PRAY

3. *Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.*

This is prayer at the other end of the spectrum. Joy comes in life together ... PRAISE GOD!
In life together needs are met, dreams are fulfilled. God provides through one another.
PRAISE HIM!! PRAISE HIM!!!

(i) Together we can do good things for God, much greater than if alone.

I.e. – I'm seeing this with our Dominican Republic Mission Trip – people rally together in support of this cause of building a school for Shelley & Guille. Not only our church, but Spirit of God, Kingdom Ministries have gotten behind this. And not only other churches, but the broader business community of our area.

BLESS THE LORD, O MY SOUL – and forget not all his benefits!

PRAISE ENCOURAGES OUR LIFE TOGETHER

4. Verse 14 - "*Is any one of you SICK?*" – A THIRD CONDITION

- The word can refer to either physical or spiritual sickness – it literally means "weak".

(i) There's nothing like life together to reveal your weakness spiritually.

> "I can't go that far with you – I don't have the strength / the courage / the patience / the wisdom / skills. My love-tank is empty. I'm weak!"

(ii) Whether it's physical or spiritual weakness, let's note a few things from James' counsel:

A. First, DON'T ACCEPT DEFEAT! God is there to HELP! You have the agency of prayer.

In this case, the command is to call the ELDERS for prayer. You – the sick person – are to take the initiative. It's not as if the elders here will be tracking you down. Part of your faith is to take initiative!

I.e. – *“Do you want to get well?”*, Jesus asked the paralytic of 38 at the pool in Jerusalem.

B. Because this form of prayer involves calling the Elders, we can assume that it's not for every sickness. Discernment is needed. The sense of the passage is that it's not so much for common colds. It would be for sicknesses in which you are STUCK! You are not sensing any progress.

When you're STUCK with a particular physical or relational or spiritual illness, CALL THE ELDERS! Please make this more a part of their ministry than it now is.

C. The teaching here is to “anoint with oil”, as part of the prayer. This is nothing magical. The oil is a sign of the Holy Spirit. It's a physical way of claiming His presence upon the person. It facilitates faith. It makes God's presence that much more obvious.

E. Verse 15 – the prayer offered in faith “WILL MAKE the sick person well”. No doubt about it! “The Lord will raise him up”. You will see breakthroughs. Just how quickly they happen depends on God's timing. Ultimately His timing incorporates the next age – (there've been people I've anointed and prayed for with cancer who didn't recover until that age) – but, that said, it's amazing at how often God's timing for healing comes sooner than I would expect – when we follow the directives of Scripture..

THE PRAYER OFFERED IN FAITH WILL MAKE THE SICK PERSON WELL.

- We don't doubt that one bit. So we wait upon God for his timing.

F. Then James adds, “If he's sinned, he'll be forgiven.”

Notice the “IF”. He's not implying that there's sin behind every sickness. But he's also saying that there could be. So it's part of the elder's ministry to ask, *“Are you aware of any unconfessed sins in your life?”*

It may be that there's bitterness behind your illness ... deep hardness.

Biblically, there's a general relationship between sin and illness.

Ps. 32 – (About the blessing of forgiveness) ... *When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer ... so blessed is he whose sins are forgiven.*

5. If there is a recognition of unconfessed sin: Verse 16, *“Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”*

Unconfessed sin brings illness & division. It isolates you.

And leads anyone to become a VOW-BREAKER!

But through confession we are healed – and continue FORWARD in the vision of life together!

(i) This does not imply the Roman Catholic confession box. This confession of sin is more organic and relational.

“Confess your sins to ONE ANOTHER” – this is a vision of LIFE TOGETHER in the Christian community. Yes, Elders receive confessions as part of their healing ministry, but more than that is implied.

This verse means cultivating relationships of trust and transparency – so that people know even the parts of you that struggle or are of not of God are known and healed.

This is a DEEP VISION of Christian community. It’s a call for authentic friendships. It’s a call for small group life. It’s a call for TRUST & TRANSPARENCY.

This is a vision to work toward so that we don’t become vow-breakers. There is safety & strength in transparency.

It doesn’t mean you go BLABBING YOUR DIRTY LAUNDRY to any and every person. It means you seek to cultivate relationships with people you come to trust to know you, even your struggles & failures - so that they can pray for you in the name of Christ Jesus.

... and YOU WILL BE HEALED!

VOW-KEEPING requires an active life of prayer:

- Personal Petitions
- Praise
- The Intercession of others
- Confession in transparent community

You cannot be who God wants you to be without prayer

V. CONCLUSION

1. So James finishes our section by stating how POWERFUL& EFFECTIVE prayer is, using the EXAMPLE OF ELIJAH!

- He was a man no different than you! He was a human being. He was righteous in Christ ... and lived for righteousness in the fellowship of the Spirit.

He was part of God's covenant community. He loved God and His people.

(i) So he prayed that the skies dried up!

- Because he knew that God's people were going astray. They needed an awakening! He prayed for drought – that they might turn back to God. God honored his prayer. For 3 ½ years, it did not rain!

Then he sensed it was time to pray for rain. He had his famous confrontation with the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel – to show all the people that the Lord is God – abandon their false values ... and then the rains came!!!

2. PRAYER CAN DO ANYTHING GOD CAN DO – said E.M. Bound

PRAYER IS NOT OVERCOMING GOD'S RELUCTANCE – said Martin Luther – IT IS LAYING HOLD OF HIS WILLINGNESS.

Will you become a praying Christian?

Will we become a praying church?

3. Through prayer, troubles are overcome!

Through prayer, sins are forgiven and sickness healed.

... and it's THROUGH PRAYER that vows are kept ... for the building of Christian community

... to the glory of the covenant-making God. Amen!