

FAITH TRACKS

JAMES 5:13-20

The book of James teaches us that faith makes a mark. A follower of Jesus is like an animal in the forest. A deer or a wild turkey leaves tracks – *so will a Christian*. You'll see evidence of where they've been, and how they've lived, and what they've done. They'll leave tracks.

Unicorns don't leave tracks, because they're a figment of imagination. Bigfoot doesn't leave tracks because he doesn't exist. And if he did, you can bet a former governor would track him down, bag him, and mount him. Jackalopes don't leave tracks. *Have you ever seen a jackalope - a jack rabbit with antlers?* Of course, you haven't – there's no such critter. Imaginary animals don't leave tracks. You have to be real to leave tracks.

And the same is true with Christians. Imaginary Christians – pretend Christians - don't leave tracks. They confess a faith in Jesus, but they've never surrendered their life to Him. Thus, there's no *evidence of faith* in how and why they live. There're lots of folks – especially southerners - who have a false sense of security. *They walked an aisle, and mouthed a prayer* - but they were doing what their parents expected, or impressing a girlfriend, or scared down the aisle by a pastor who kept dangling them over the flames of hell. It didn't really mean anything - yet today they assume they're right with God. Sadly, these are pretend Christians and their life leaves no tracks.

Yet the book of James explains that a true Christian is different. Real Christians leave tracks. Let me summarize what James teaches us... A genuine faith effects how we handle trials, money, and temptation. Faith doesn't just stir up intentions, it provokes action. It dictates how we treat people less fortunate than us. Faith isn't like an air traffic controller taking a nap - faith actually works.

A genuine faith effects the tongue - *how we talk* and *what we say*... It doesn't conform to its surroundings, it seeks wisdom from above. Rather than blend in with the world, faith *stands up* and *stands out*. Faith walks humbly and bows to God. It leaves behind *knee prints*. Faith lives today in light of eternity... Faith endures... Faith connects with other believers... Faith prays... Faith confesses... Faith cares... Faith seeks to restore a fallen brother... [Real faith shows up in real life!](#)

The last few verses in James 5 deal with prayer. But look carefully at this morning's passage, and you'll see an underlying theme - **community**. Yes, James champions the power of prayer, but he talks about prayer in the context of community... *"Is anyone among you suffering..." "Call for the elders..." "Confess your trespasses to one another..." "Pray for one another..." "If anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back..."* All this talk on prayer is in the context of community. Real faith talks to God, but it talks to Him *for* and *with* other Christians.

We pick it up this morning in 5:13, James writes, *"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray."* Remember what we are together – we're a family! We're bound together by mystical cords – the Holy Spirit makes us one! There are spiritual ties that hold us together, *and here's a promise*... as you grow in Christ your spiritual family will become more important, not less important. If the trajectory of your spiritual journey seems to be moving away from God's family you need to wake up – there's something wrong – pride and self-righteousness cause us to think

we can go it on your own. I'm sure you've heard the old saying, "Blood is thicker than water." But those who walk in the Spirit realize that "Spirit is thicker than blood."

James writes, "*Is anyone among you...*" He assumes we're together. We're one body in Christ! And here's what everybody's body is quick to identify... *where it hurts!* We all can talk about our aches and pains. Right now if I wanted to engage you in a conversation the easiest way for us to get started would be for me to ask you about your ailments. Most of you would open up and spill the beans. Rarely do we sidestep our hurts. But don't miss the obvious. If five, six-year-olds are playing on a swing set and Johnny takes a tumble - none of these kindergarteners will be inclined to examine or treat the boo-boo themselves. Their first instinct will be to call a parent. This is why James writes, "*Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.*" If you've got a boo-boo, let's take it to the Father!

As Christians prayer should be our *first retreat*, not our *last resort*. Later James is going to talk about how Doctor God *offers a variety of healings* and He *heals in a variety of ways*. Yet our initial impulse any time we suffer should be to pray! Before you call 911, or make a doctor's appointment, or pop a pill – ask the Lord! Turn your *cares* into *prayers*.

I'll never forget the couple who came up to me after a service and asked me to pray that God would bless them with a child. We prayed, and nine months later they came back holding a baby in their arms... Think of the angst and money they saved by foregoing all the fertility treatments! Kathy and I did some of those treatments, and 30 years later I still haven't fully recovered from the embarrassment of walking into the doctor's office with a paper bag holding my specimen... *if you know what I mean!* In the end, Zach came into the world as an answer to prayer anyway. I'm not saying God is against fertility treatments! *No so!* God uses all kinds of doctors and remedies. But before you seek a *practicing physician* consult *the Great Physician*. *When we suffer, our first recourse is to pray!*

There's a woman in South Dakota named Diane, who's now received several personal phone calls from the Governor of her fair state. South Dakota doesn't have a huge population, but it's odd that Diane gets personal calls from the Governor. The last call he made was to check to see if Diane was satisfied with the road repairs the state had made... Well, a national news agency heard about Diane's familiarity with the government, and asked her to explain... This was her simple answer, "*I have found that shaking the tree from the top gets the fastest results.*" When Diane has a need she doesn't beat around the bush with underlings, she goes straight to the top and evidently she has his ear...

This is the attitude James encourages us to adopt. If you have a need take it straight to the Tip Top. Pray. Ask God to intervene on your behalf. James writes, "*Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.*"

But he also says, "*Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.*" In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul tells us when one part of the body hurts the whole body hurts, but when one part of the body rejoices the whole body rejoices. Joy as well as pain ricochets and reverberates through the body. If you're suffering it's a sin to keep it from people who love you... But if you're rejoicing and praising God – if you're on a spiritual high – if you've been blessed – it's also sin to stay silent. You should tell somebody.

There's a disease common among Christians known as "*cheerfulitis*." Its terminal. There's no cure. It begins in the heart and spreads quickly... *soon your mouth smiles, your hands clap, your arms raise, and your feet want to dance*... The only relief for *cheerfulitis* is to sing or hum... To keep from exploding with joy, you have to express your praise!

And this is where we cheat each other! We're quick to *share our sufferings*, while we *hoard our hallelujahs*. If we barked of our blessings, as often as we prayed for our pain, we'd be a rich source of encouragement. When folks see you coming do they expect to be *bummed* or *blessed*?

"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick?" And the implication is we'll be *all the above* at various times. Life is a roller coaster. You suffer some... Rejoice a lot, if you've got eyes to see the blessings... And you get ill... The man God made was resistant to disease. A sinless body warded off sickness. Deadly viruses and harmful bacteria bounced off Adam and Eve. But after the Fall, cracks and chinks showed up in their immune system. Adam and Eve had to start sanitizing their hands, and washing off germs. Today, humans are susceptible to illness. I'll never forget a trip to Haiti. I survived the Haitian bush – *the malaria and tarantulas*. But on the flight home I sat next to a woman who was deathly ill. I flew and got the flu. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. And it can happen to any of us...

All it takes to get sick is to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, *but likewise all it takes to be healed is to be in the right place at the right time*. You'd think the best place to go if you're ill is to a hospital - not necessarily. The odds of contracting an infection in a hospital are sky high. No, the best place to go when you're sick is to church! *As long as you're not a baby in the nursery – and you don't hug a lot of folks – you ought to come to church when you're ill*. This is what James tells us in verse 14, *"Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord."* It's odd that the most popular excuse I hear for skipping church is *"I didn't feel like it"* or *"I was under the weather"* or *"I had a headache."* Folks stay away from church when they're sick, but that's the best time to come.

Luke 5 recounts the story of a paraplegic whose friends brought him to Jesus. The house where Jesus was teaching was packed to the gills with people, so they tore a hole in the thatched roof, and lowered him to Jesus. But I love how Luke prefaces this story. Verse 17, *"Now it happened on a certain day, as He was teaching, that there were Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting by, who had come out of every town of Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was present to heal them..."* Apparently, there are times and places where God's healing power is more available. God shows up especially and deliberately to heal the sick. And one of *God's healing hot spots* is the church! Whenever you meet with God's people, and you're sick, call for the elders (*the pastors and leaders of the church*), and ask them to pray for you. They'll lay hands on you. They'll anoint you with oil in the name of the Lord, and pray over you.

The elders don't worry about checking your health insurance coverage before they treat you... They don't charge a co-pay... They don't make you sit in a waiting room... And the elders never required you to pee in a cup... The elders are people who love you. And here's what they'll do... First, they'll anoint you with oil... In the ancient world olive oil was associated with physical healing. It moistened, and cooled, and renewed.

For some of James' readers to anoint with oil was like us saying *"take some medicine."* If you cut yourself, apply so Neosporin. If your head aches, throw down some Advil. If you tear a tendon or break a leg, consult an orthopedic. The Bible never forbids surgical and medicinal

remedies. God heals in two ways – *supernaturally and naturally*. Physicians and medicine are tools in God’s hands. *All healing* is a miracle. God designed the human body to renew itself, and medicines assist in that process.

Yet in Scripture, oil is definitely symbolic. The anointing of oil is a way of focusing our faith – conjuring up in our minds the power of the Holy Spirit. Biblical oil is always olive oil. And olives remind us of Jesus. The garden where Jesus suffered was called “*The Garden of Gethsemane*” or “*oil press*.” At the crucifixion, like an olive, the body of Jesus was crushed so we could be whole. He was wounded so we could be healed. The cross makes possible the healing work of God’s Spirit.

So here’s what our elders do... They’ll take olive oil and gently pour it on your head. Or they’ll take a fingertip full, and dab it on your forehead. It’s like the old Brylcreem commercial... *just a little dab will do ya!* The application, or anointing, of the olive oil becomes a focal point. It’s a tangible point-of-contact where we release our faith and focus our prayer.

This is also what happens when our elders pray. James says, “*let them pray over him.*” In addition to the oil they lay their hands on your head – or if appropriate, the spot of your ailment. And don’t worry, our elders have far more tact than the TSA scanners at the airport. No elder pat downs at CC. The laying on of hands works like a spiritual “*Tag, your it!*” We can talk about your healing, but when I lay hands on you, I tag you. It’s your turn. Now we expect something supernatural to happen to you.

So when you come to the elders for prayer, *here’s what we’ll do...* We’ll dab on the oil – we’re relying on the power of God’s Spirit, not our on... We’ll lay on hands and release our faith. We’re saying, “*Tag you’re it!*”... We’ll pray and ask God to heal... Then we’ll expect Him to do it... It’s interesting, the Roman Catholic Church practices what appears to be a similar practice. The *sacrament of extreme unction* is where the priest anoints a person with oil – yet for the opposite purpose - it’s a preparation for death. How ironic, when the NT practice is a means of healing and life.

Remember I said when you come to the elders, the last step we’ll take is to expect God to heal and answer our prayer. And this expectation is the vital ingredient. For it’s not just prayer that saves the sick - verse 15 puts it, “*And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up.*” People are healed when we pray – not doubting - but in faith. This doesn’t mean we command God, and boss around the Almighty. No way. We approach God boldly, yet humbly. We just ask. Like a child asks His dad, we ask believing that He can do it, and He wants to do it... but He knows what’s best and whether He chooses to do it is up to Him!

Again verse 15, “*And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.*” Not all disease is the result of sin. You can get sick doing good. I’ll never forget a friend I took to Haiti. A woman brought her terribly sick son to be healed. Pastor Dave stepped up to anoint him with oil, and lay hands on him. I prayed too, but at a distance. It probably wasn’t much of a prayer of faith... *Pastor Dave prayed*, but he never washed his hands. Dave got sick as a dog! He spend a night and a day throwing up. Pastor Dave got sick doing good. You can’t always tie every sickness to some sin.

But there are other times when a physical ailment is directly brought on by a person’s sin. Lung cancer is usually caused by smoking too many cigarettes. Sclerosis of the liver is normally the result of too much alcohol. When God chooses to heal such a person he or she realizes

they've been given a second crack at life. They not only rejoice in their healing, but they seek to be freed from their sin. They receive healing *and* forgiveness.

This is why James says in verse 16, **“Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”** Notice, James is talking about healing, but the path to healing is the confession of sin. Sometimes physical ailments are psychosomatic. The stress of guilt or shame has an adverse effect on us physically. Spiritual sins can elevate a man's blood pressure, or attack his immune system, or rob him of sleep. Often the lines etched in a woman's face are caused by the guilt she's carried in her soul. Secret sins that get buried spiritually find a way to push to the surface in the form of physical maladies. Sin is harmful to our health.

This is why the confession of our sin is a key to the healing of our body. When we make confession, God forgives, and the dam breaks. Guilt is gone. Shame ceases. Our conscience is clean. God's peace floods over us. The symptoms we suffered from our sin tend to disappear over time.

Some of you have suffered mysterious symptoms the doctor's have failed to diagnose. You've tried drugs, and herbs, and homeopathic cures. But here's what you haven't tried... you've never taken a ruthless inventory of your sins. You've never asked God to help you see yourself as you truly are – warts and all. Rather than lie, excuse, and cover up... have you ever come clean? It's time to asked God to help you see the depths of your sin, and make amends... **You'll never be healed until you confess.**

Recently, I watched a movie starring Robert Duvall, called **“Get Low.”** It's about an Tennessee hermit in the 30s who punished himself over 40 years for a sin he'd committed as a young man. He's about to die, and he wants to host his own funeral while he's alive. He invites folks to tell stories they've heard about him. But what he really wants is to tell his own story... He committed adultery. The husband killed the woman, and Duvall killed the husband. All his life he blamed the woman's death on his own sin. At his funeral, in a heart-rending moment, he confesses his sin to the townsfolk who'd been effected by his crime. He asks for their forgiveness. Then he makes the statement, **“People always tell me to ask Jesus for forgiveness, but I didn't do anything to Jesus. I need forgiveness from you.”**

Obviously, the Bible disagrees. When David commits adultery, and murders the husband, he prays to God in Psalm 51, **“Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done *this* evil in Your sight...”** Sin has multiple victims. Sin breaks the heart of God, while it also does damage to others. In the movie, Duvall's character mistakenly goes to an extreme. He seeks man's forgiveness, while ignoring God – but too many of us take the opposite extreme. We ask God to forgive us, but we refuse to confess our sins to anybody else. **As a result we're *fully forgiven*, but *not totally healed*.**

It reminds me of the teenager in his first year of college. For weeks he filled a mesh bag full with dirty clothes. On his first trip to the laundry mat he just tossed his bag of dirties in the washing machine and turned it on. When the boy retrieved and folded his clothes he was disappointed. His clothes were still dingy and dirty. An older lady had watched his methods... She explained if he wanted his clothes thoroughly clean he needed to unbundle them and separate them before putting them in the washer.

And this is also how I need to treat my sin. I'll never be able to confess every single sin, but a serious confession will get as specific as possible. Some people make a veiled, ambiguous, general admission of sin, but such a confession is incomplete. I need to see my sin through God's eyes.

In Roman Catholicism you enter a dark booth and confess your sins to the priest... In therapeutic counseling you lie down on a couch and confess your sins to a professional psychologist... Today people go on television shows and confess their sins to Oprah, or Dr. Phil, or Jerry Springer... But God tells us to go to church, and confess our sins to one another.

True confession is about living an open, transparent life. It's about emptying my closet of all its skeletons - being honest with my weaknesses. Pride causes hypocrisy. Humility allows us be real with our struggles. God wants Church to be a grace-filled, judgment-free zone. A place where we can be honest, and confess faults, and live in real forgiveness.

In verse 16 James sums up his thoughts on prayer, "**The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.**" What an incentive to pray! It's been said, "**Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscle of omnipotence.**" God answers persistent, God-glorifying, heart-felt prayer.

It reminds me of Big Ed. He went to the tent revival on the outskirts of town to see the traveling evangelist. After the preaching, Ed got in line for prayer. When it came his turn, the evangelist asked, "*Big Ed, what do you want me to pray about?*" Ed said, "*Please, pray for my hearing...*" The Evangelist zeroed in. He stuck a finger in Ed's ear, and slapped his other hand down on his forehead. Then he started *hollering at heaven*. After a few minutes, the evangelist stepped back and asked him, "*Big Ed, how's your hearing now?*" Ed replied, "*I don't know preacher. My hearing ain't until Wednesday at the Muskogee County courthouse...*"

Apparently, it's not just "*prayer*" that avails, but "*effective*" prayer... Its not just *effective prayer*, but "*fervent*" or passionate prayer... And its not just anybody's fervent heart-felt prayer that avails much - it's "***the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man that avails much.***"

Let's say I got techno savvy, and tried to talk to you on Facebook. First I'd have to request to be your "*friend...*" Then you'd have to "*friend*" me... Well, this is the how it works with prayer... The only people who communicate with God face to face are those He's "*friend-ed*" - and God's only "*friends*" are folks who've been made right with Him through Jesus. Thus, God hears "***the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man.***"

And James gives us an interesting example. "**Elijah was a man with a nature like ours...**" Elijah wasn't a *superman*. He was just an *ordinary man*. Yes, Elijah stood-up to the prophets of Baal and called fire down from heaven. But no sooner had the flames fizzled that Elijah tucked tailed and ran from a wicked old lady named "*Jezebel.*" At times, Elijah was strong and bold - at other times, he was fearful and wanted to toss in the towel. Sound familiar? Elijah was a *regular guy* who sought a *righteous life*. Here's Elijah's two line resume... *He desired to please God and he knew how to pray.* Yet if you want to work miracles this is all that's needed. Armed with the same qualifications you too can do great things for God!

Here's what God accomplished through Elijah's prayer. "And he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit." Elijah prayed, and then he prayed again. Elijah prayed effectively and passionately, but that didn't mean God answered the prophet the first time he prayed. He persevered in prayer. Elijah prayed six times for rain, and not a single droplet formed. On his seventh try his servant reported a small cloud, the size of a fist. Elijah told him to get home, a frog-strangling, gully-washer was on the way.

We need to pray **effectively** – according to God's will. We need to pray **passionately** – with all our heart. We need to pray **persistently** – not just once and stop. And we need to pray **righteously** – to please God, not just ourselves. Remember, "*the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much!*"

James makes it clear we need to pray, but not *by ourselves* and *for ourselves*. God gives us the privilege to talk to Him, to get us to open up and talk to each other. Real faith *speaks to God*, and *shares with others*. When we pray with and for each other it's a sweet sound in *God's ears*. But when we reach out to a straying brother this excites *God's heart*. Verse 19, "**Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.**"

These last verses assume it's possible to walk away from the faith. Real faith perseveres. It leaves tracks because it's alive. But faith is like a seed. If it's not watered, and fed, and cultivated it can wither and die. Yet understand a faith that walks away isn't dead... It can't be, not yet. If a faith were dead it wouldn't be able to walk or wander. There's still a little life left. And blessed is the brother or sister who follows those tracks – no matter how faint – and finds the wanderer and woos him or her back.

I've heard it said, "**The Christian army is the only army that shoots its wounded.**" What kind of an army fails to rescue it's own fallen soldiers? Imagine, breaking an arm, then telling the doctor to cut it off rather than reset the break. "**Doc, it's fractured. It's too much trouble to rehabilitate a broken arm. Just cut it off. Who needs two arms anyway!**" Yet that's what we do when we abandon a member of the body of Christ who's broken.

Life is hard. People don't just break arms. They bruise souls, shatter dreams, and break hearts. But healing is still possible, if we don't give up. Who's the person you're thinking about right now? You've given up on them, but God hasn't. He's now calling you to go and try to turn them back. We need to reach out not only to a *lost world*, but to *fallen Christians*.

Here's a final thought... Last week I read of a New York woman who came home to a yard covered with trash. Something was in her garbage. She went to investigate when two giant paws landed square in the middle of her back. A black bear knocked her down and held her on the ground while he finished scouring through the goodies. She was petrified. And you'll never believe the woman's name – no joke – it's *Joy Bayer*. How's that for leaving tracks! *Joy Bayer* will never doubt that black bears exist... And though I would never want to knock a person over with my faith, I want everyone to know that my faith is real! *How about you?* True faith leaves tracks!