

The Book of James, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 12: The Prayer of Faith

James 5:13–18

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is one of the doctrinally and pastorally sensitive lessons of the study, so handle it with care and clarity. The doctrinal core is the church's ministry of prayer, particularly for the sick, exercised in dependence on God's power and according to His will. James calls for prayer in every season, for the sick to call the elders, for anointing and prayer in the name of the Lord, and for the prayer of faith that saves the sick. The aim is to present prayer for the sick, the calling of elders, anointing with oil, and the prayer of faith as the genuine ministry of the church and a real means by which God works healing according to His will. Take care to avoid two errors the prompt specifically flags: do not teach guaranteed healing or a prosperity-style claim that faith obligates God to heal on demand, and do not turn this into a sacramental rite that works automatically by the oil or ritual itself.

The key to teaching the promise of verse 15 rightly is to read it within the whole of Scripture's teaching on prayer. We pray boldly, trusting God's real power to heal, and we pray humbly, submitting to His wise and good will, exactly as Jesus did in Gethsemane and as John teaches in 1 John 5:14. James himself taught us in chapter four to say, if the Lord wills. So present healing as something God genuinely does and invites us to ask for, while making clear that God is a wise Father who sometimes answers differently and always answers well, and that unanswered requests are not evidence of insufficient faith. The anointing with oil is best explained as a physical accompaniment to prayer, an act of consecration and care in the name of the Lord, not a magic rite; the power is God's, accessed through prayer, not the oil. Note that the elders here are the New Testament shepherds of the local congregation, consistent with the pattern of qualified men serving as elders.

Formationally, this lesson aims to recover prayer as the rhythm of the whole Christian life, to restore the church's ministry of surrounding the suffering, and to commend the healing power of confession and mutual prayer among believers. Your aim is to move students from a thin, emergency-only prayer life toward praying in every season, from suffering alone toward calling on the body of Christ, and from hiding sin toward honest confession that heals. The Elijah example should encourage ordinary believers that their prayers, offered in faith, truly participate in God's power. Keep the tone one of marveling at a God who hears and works through the prayers of plain people, while honoring the mystery of His sovereign will.

Question 1

Student Question:

James writes, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise" (v. 13). What does it teach that James prescribes prayer and praise for the full range of life's seasons, and what does this reveal about the place prayer is meant to have in the Christian life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

James opens this final section by prescribing prayer and praise for the full range of life: the suffering should pray, the cheerful should sing praise. Help students see the comprehensiveness. There is no season of life that falls outside the reach of prayer; both sorrow and joy are to be brought to God.

Teach the implication for the place of prayer in the Christian life. Prayer is not merely a tool for crises or a religious duty performed occasionally. It is the natural response of the believing heart to every circumstance, the running conversation of a life lived with God. Suffering turns us to prayer; joy turns us to praise; nothing is lived apart from God.

Note the balance of lament and praise. James legitimizes both. The suffering are not told to pretend they are fine; they are told to pray, which can include honest lament. The cheerful are told to sing praise, directing their joy back to its Giver. Both halves of life become worship.

Apply it to the thinness of much modern prayer, which tends to appear only in emergencies. James calls for a life soaked in prayer and praise, where every season drives us Godward. Invite students to imagine prayer as the native air of their lives rather than an occasional gasp.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Prayer and praise as the response to every season of life.
- Prayer as the native air of the believing life, not an emergency tool.
- Lament and praise both legitimate before God.
- Joy directed back to God as praise.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that there is a prayer for every season?
- How does James legitimize both lament and praise?
- How does this challenge a prayer life that appears only in crises?

Question 2

Student Question:

Honestly consider your own habits. In which seasons, suffering or cheerful, are you most likely to neglect prayer, and what would it look like to make prayer your reflex in that season?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to examine which season tempts them to neglect prayer. Interestingly, both suffering and cheerfulness can crowd out prayer, and different people are vulnerable in different seasons.

Help the sufferers see their temptation. In hard seasons, some withdraw from God in discouragement, despair, or anger, ceasing to pray when they most need to. James says, let him pray; the suffering season is precisely the time to turn toward God, not away.

Help the cheerful see their temptation. In good seasons, many drift from God because they feel no pressing need; prosperity and ease quietly erode prayer and praise. James says, let him sing praise; the cheerful season is the time to direct joy back to its Giver, lest comfort breed forgetfulness.

Encourage a concrete reflex for their vulnerable season. The sufferer might commit to turning to God first in distress rather than withdrawing; the cheerful might commit to deliberate praise and thanksgiving in good times. The goal is to make prayer the reflex of every season.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to withdraw from God in suffering.
- The temptation to drift from God in ease and prosperity.
- Turning to God as the reflex of both hard and happy seasons.
- Praise and thanksgiving as guards against forgetfulness in comfort.

Discussion Prompts

- In which season are you most likely to neglect prayer?
- What drives that neglect, discouragement or self-sufficiency?
- What reflex of prayer or praise do you want to build in that season?

Question 3

Student Question:

James instructs, "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" (v. 14). What does this teach about the role of the elders, the place of the local church in caring for the suffering, and the meaning of praying in the name of the Lord?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 14 describes the church's ministry to the sick: the sick believer calls for the elders, who pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. Walk students through each element, since this is doctrinally and pastorally significant.

Teach the role of the elders. They are the shepherds of the local congregation, qualified men charged with caring for the flock (consistent with the New Testament pattern of elders). The sick believer calls on them not because they have magical powers but because they are the spiritual leaders entrusted with the care of souls, and they come to pray and minister on behalf of the whole church.

Teach the meaning of anointing with oil. Be careful here to avoid both errors. The oil is not a magic substance that heals automatically, nor a sacrament that works by itself; the power belongs to God, accessed through prayer. The anointing is best understood as a physical act accompanying prayer, an act of consecration, care, and setting the sick person before God in the name of the Lord. It expresses the prayer tangibly and ministers comfort.

Stress the phrase “in the name of the Lord.” The whole act is done in Jesus's name and authority, not the elders' own. The church gathers around the weak, but it is the Lord who is invoked and on whom they depend. Apply it as a beautiful picture of the church being the church: the suffering do not suffer alone, but are surrounded, prayed over, and lifted to God by the family of faith.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Elders as the shepherds of the local congregation who care for the flock (1 Peter 5:1–3; Acts 20:28).
- The church's communal ministry to the suffering, who need not suffer alone.
- Anointing with oil as a physical accompaniment to prayer, not a magic substance or automatic sacrament.
- Prayer and ministry done in the name and authority of the Lord, depending on God's power.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the role of the elders in caring for the sick?
- How should we understand the anointing with oil, and how not?
- What does praying in the name of the Lord emphasize?

Question 4

Student Question:

When you are weak or sick, how willing are you to call on your fellow believers and the leaders of the church for prayer, rather than suffering alone? What makes it hard, and why does God call us to lean on the body of Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the church's ministry to the student's willingness to call on others when weak. Many believers, out of pride, fear, or rugged individualism, suffer alone rather than calling on the body of Christ.

Help students name what holds them back. It may be pride that does not want to appear weak, fear of being a burden, embarrassment about the need, or a cultural individualism that prizes self-sufficiency. Naming the barrier is the first step to overcoming it.

Teach why God calls us to lean on the body. We are designed for interdependence; the New Testament knows nothing of solo Christianity. Calling for prayer is not weakness but faith, an act of humility that opens us to the grace God ministers through His people. To refuse it is to cut ourselves off from a means of grace.

Encourage a concrete openness. Invite students to consider what it would look like, the next time they are weak or sick, to actually call on fellow believers or the elders rather than enduring alone. The body of Christ is meant to bear one another's burdens.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The call to interdependence in the body of Christ, against solo Christianity.
- Calling for prayer as an act of faith and humility, not weakness.
- Pride, fear, and individualism as barriers to receiving the church's ministry.
- Bearing one another's burdens as the design of the church (Galatians 6:2).

Discussion Prompts

- How willing are you to call on others when you are weak?
- What holds you back from leaning on the body of Christ?
- What would it look like to actually call for prayer next time?

Question 5

Student Question:

James promises, "the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (v. 15). How should we understand this promise of healing in light of the rest of Scripture, which teaches us to pray according to God's will rather than to claim healing as guaranteed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 15 contains the promise that requires the most careful teaching in the lesson, so give it full attention and clarity: "the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." Teach this promise within the whole of Scripture, holding together God's power to heal and the submission of all prayer to His will.

Affirm first, with confidence, that God really does heal. James means what he says: God is powerful, He hears the prayer of faith, and He genuinely raises up the sick. We should pray boldly for healing, expecting God to act, never treating prayer as an empty gesture. Do not let caution rob students of confidence in God's power.

Then guard carefully against the prosperity error of guaranteed healing. Scripture everywhere teaches that we pray according to God's will (1 John 5:14), and that God, as a wise Father, sometimes answers differently and always answers well. Jesus Himself prayed, not my will but yours be done, and Paul's thorn was not removed though he asked three times; instead God gave grace. James taught us in chapter four to say, if the Lord wills. So the prayer of faith is faith in God, trusting His power and submitting to His wisdom, not a formula that obligates God to heal on demand. Make clear that when healing does not come, it is not proof of insufficient faith; God's no or not yet can be as loving as His yes.

Note the connection to forgiveness: if the sick person has committed sins, he will be forgiven. James gently links physical and spiritual restoration without teaching that all sickness is caused by personal sin (Scripture elsewhere denies that simple equation). Sometimes sickness and sin are connected, often they are not, but in either case the God who heals bodies also forgives sins, and the ministry of prayer attends to the whole person. Help students hold confidence and surrender together, praying boldly and trusting wholly.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's real power to heal in answer to the prayer of faith.
- Praying according to God's will, not claiming guaranteed healing (1 John 5:14; Mark 14:36).
- The prayer of faith as trust in God, submitting to His wisdom, not a formula that obligates Him.
- Unanswered requests as not proof of insufficient faith (2 Corinthians 12:7–9).
- God's care for the whole person, body and soul, including forgiveness, without teaching that all sickness is caused by personal sin (John 9:1–3).
- Rejection of prosperity teaching and of any sacramental automatism.

Discussion Prompts

- How do we hold together God's power to heal and praying according to His will?
- Why is unanswered prayer not proof of weak faith?
- How does this passage care for the whole person, body and soul?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where do you need to pray more boldly, trusting God's power to heal and restore, and at the same time more humbly, submitting to His wise and good will? How do you hold confidence and surrender together in your prayers?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the balance of confidence and surrender to the student's own prayers. Many lean too far one way, either timid prayers that expect little of God, or demanding prayers that try to dictate outcomes.

Help the timid pray more boldly. Some students, perhaps wary of disappointment, scarcely ask God for anything significant. James calls for the prayer of faith, bold asking that trusts God's power. Encourage them to bring real, specific requests, expecting God to act.

Help the demanding pray more humbly. Others, perhaps shaped by prosperity teaching or by anxiety, try to claim outcomes and treat faith as leverage over God. Encourage them to surrender outcomes to God's wise and good will, finding peace in His character rather than control over His decisions.

Teach the both-and as the mature posture. Faithful prayer is bold and submitted at once: Lord, I ask boldly for this, and I trust You wholly with the outcome. This is how Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. Invite students to bring a real request this week in exactly that spirit, confident in God's power and resting in His will.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Bold asking that trusts God's power (Hebrews 4:16).
- Humble submission of outcomes to God's wise and good will.
- The mature posture of prayer: bold and surrendered at once (Mark 14:36).
- Peace found in God's character rather than control over outcomes (Philippians 4:6–7).

Discussion Prompts

- Do you need to pray more boldly or more surrendered right now?
- What real request will you bring to God this week?
- How can you hold confidence and surrender together in that prayer?

Question 7

Student Question:

James urges, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working" (v. 16). Why does James connect confession, prayer, and healing, and what does this teach about the role of honesty and the prayers of fellow believers in our spiritual and relational health?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 16 broadens the ministry from the elders to the whole church: “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” James connects confession, mutual prayer, and healing, opening a rich vein of teaching on honesty in the body of Christ.

Teach the meaning of confessing to one another. This is not a priestly confessional or a requirement to broadcast every sin publicly, but the healthy practice of honest, trusted disclosure among believers, bringing our sins and struggles into the light with brothers and sisters who will pray for us. Hidden sin festers; confessed sin can be healed.

Draw out the healing James promises. The healing here is broader than physical; it includes the spiritual and relational restoration that comes when sin is brought into the light and covered by prayer and grace. Concealment isolates and corrodes; confession reconnects us to God and to the body and opens the way to freedom.

Affirm the power of the prayer of a righteous person, which “has great power as it is working.” The prayers of ordinary faithful believers for one another are genuinely powerful before God. This dignifies mutual intercession: when we pray for one another, real power is at work. Apply it by commending the practice of honest, praying friendship as a means of grace and healing in the church.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Confession to one another as honest, trusted disclosure, not a priestly rite or public broadcast.
- The healing power of bringing sin into the light versus the corrosion of concealment.
- Spiritual and relational restoration through confession and mutual prayer.
- The great power of the prayers of ordinary righteous believers (the effective prayer of the faithful).

Discussion Prompts

- Why does James connect confession, prayer, and healing?
- What does healthy confession among believers look like, and not look like?
- What does it mean that the prayer of a righteous person has great power?

Question 8

Student Question:

Is there a sin you need to confess, or a burden you need to bring into the light with a trusted brother or sister in Christ? What might God do through that honesty that hiding can never accomplish?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the call to confession into the student's life. Most carry some hidden sin or burden they have never brought into the light, and the hiding itself does damage.

Help students feel the cost of concealment. As Psalm 32 vividly describes, unconfessed sin wastes us from within; hiding produces isolation, shame, and a low-grade spiritual sickness. The enemy thrives in darkness and secrecy.

Commend the freedom of confession without minimizing its difficulty. Bringing a sin or burden to a trusted brother or sister in Christ is humbling and frightening, but it breaks the power of secrecy, invites prayer and grace, and opens the way to healing that hiding can never accomplish. What is confessed can be forgiven and healed; what is hidden festers.

Encourage a concrete, wise step. This is not a call to indiscriminate public disclosure but to honest confession with a trusted, mature believer who will pray and keep confidence. Invite students to identify one sin or burden to bring into the light and one safe person to share it with. Be sensitive: do not pressure public confession in the group, but commend the practice and let students act in appropriate settings.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The corrosive cost of concealed sin (Psalm 32:3–5).
- The freedom and healing that confession opens.
- Wise confession to a trusted, mature believer, not indiscriminate disclosure.
- Prayer and grace breaking the power of secrecy.

Discussion Prompts

- What sin or burden have you been keeping hidden?
- What does concealment cost you spiritually and relationally?
- Who is a trusted person you could bring it to in confidence?

Question 9

Student Question:

James points to Elijah, “a man with a nature like ours,” whose prayers stopped and started the rain (vv. 17–18). Why is it significant that James chooses an ordinary person rather than a unique hero as his example of powerful prayer, and what does this teach about the access and power that ordinary believers have in prayer?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

James closes with Elijah as his example of powerful prayer, and his choice is deliberate and encouraging: Elijah was “a man with a nature like ours.” James could have pointed to a unique, larger-than-life hero, but he insists Elijah was an ordinary person with the same weaknesses we have, who simply prayed in faith.

Correct the stray word if it appears; the point stands: Elijah was an ordinary person, subject to fear and discouragement, as the narrative of his flight from Jezebel shows. Yet his prayers held back the rain for three and a half years and called it down again. The power was not in Elijah's superiority but in the God who heard his believing prayer.

Teach the encouragement for ordinary believers. If God worked through the prayers of a man just like us, then our prayers, offered in faith, also participate in God's power. We are not spectators to a power reserved for spiritual elites; the access and effectiveness of prayer belong to every faithful believer. This should embolden the timid.

Hold this together with the lesson's earlier balance. The point is not that we can command nature or guarantee outcomes by prayer, but that ordinary people praying in faith truly move the hand of God according to His will. Apply it by inviting students to take their own prayers seriously, to believe that when they pray, real power is at work, and to marvel that God chooses to act through plain people like them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Elijah as an ordinary person, not a unique hero, with a nature like ours.
- The power of prayer residing in God who hears, not in the one who prays.
- The access and effectiveness of prayer belonging to every faithful believer.
- Ordinary believers truly participating in God's power through faithful prayer, according to His will.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does James choose an ordinary person as his example?
- What does Elijah teach about where the power of prayer comes from?
- How does this embolden you to take your own prayers seriously?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole passage. James calls us to a life soaked in prayer, a church that surrounds the suffering, and an honesty that heals. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to grow in prayer or in praying with others this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone asks for one concrete way to grow in prayer or in praying with others this week. The passage has called for a life soaked in prayer, a church that surrounds the suffering, and an honesty that heals.

Help students integrate the threads: praying in every season, calling on the church when weak, praying boldly and surrendered for healing, confessing sin to one another, and believing that their ordinary prayers carry real power. Where is Jesus calling them to grow?

Encourage a single, ownable commitment, such as building prayer into a neglected season, calling on others in a current weakness, confessing a hidden sin to a trusted believer, or committing to pray regularly for someone in need.

Close by lifting their eyes to the God who hears. The whole passage marvels that God listens to and works through the prayers of plain people. Students are invited not into a formula or a ritual but into living conversation with a powerful, wise, and good Father, through Jesus their Lord. Let them leave eager to pray and to pray with others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Prayer as the rhythm of the whole Christian life.
- The church's ministry of prayer for one another.
- Confidence in a God who hears and works through ordinary prayer, according to His will.
- Sanctification through a deepening life of prayer and honest fellowship.

Discussion Prompts

- In one sentence, how is Jesus calling you to grow in prayer this week?
- Will you call on others, confess to someone, or commit to intercede?
- How does the truth that God hears ordinary prayer change the way you pray?