

One Another, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 12: Confess to and Pray for One Another

James 5:13–16

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson handles a passage that has been heavily misused, so your doctrinal care here matters as much as your warmth. James 5:13–16 has been pressed into service to support sacramental confession to a priest, present-day miraculous healing rituals, and a magical view of anointing oil. Your first aim is to recover what the text actually teaches: a community of believers who pray in every season, who call the church's own shepherds to the bedside of the sick, who confess their sins to one another in mutual honesty, and who trust that the prayer of a righteous person carries great power. Keep the weight of the lesson exactly where James puts it, on mutual confession, intercession, and the power of prayer within the body, not on ritual or on claims of present sign gifts.

Several doctrinal points deserve your firm but gentle hand. First, the confession James commands is mutual and reciprocal, "to one another," brother to brother and sister to sister. It is never confession to a special priestly class as a means of absolution, for the New Testament knows no such class. All Christians are priests (1 Peter 2:5, 9), and we confess our sins to one another and to God, who forgives through the blood of Christ (1 John 1:7–9). Second, the "elders of the church" in verse 14 are the congregation's appointed shepherds and overseers, not sacramental priests; calling for them is pastoral prayer, not a sacrament. Third, treat the anointing with oil soberly, as a customary act that accompanied prayer in that culture, not as the foundation for a healing ritual or a claim that miraculous sign gifts continue today. The miraculous sign gifts served to confirm the word in the apostolic age and have ceased, and the complete New Testament is now our authority (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

At the same time, do not let your defending crowd out the heart of the passage. James is calling cautious, image-conscious people into a fellowship of honesty and intercession. So aim past doctrinal precision toward transformation. Your students do not merely need to refute a wrong view of confession. They need to actually open their lives to a trusted brother or sister, to call the church to their bedside instead of suffering alone, and to believe again that their prayers matter. Hold the truth and the heart together: a church that prays for and confesses to one another, under the lordship of Christ, is one of the sweetest gifts of the new covenant.

Question 1

Student Question:

James writes, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise." What does it teach us about God, and about the Christian life, that James meets every season, the painful and the joyful, with a turn toward the Lord rather than a turn inward?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by noticing the sheer scope of James's counsel. He covers the whole range of human experience in a breath: suffering and cheerfulness, the valley and the mountaintop. And his answer to both is the same in direction, a turning toward God. The suffering one prays; the cheerful one sings praise, which is itself a form of prayer set to music. James leaves no season of the soul outside the reach of fellowship with God.

This teaches us something about the God we serve. He is not a deity for emergencies only, summoned in the crisis and dismissed in the calm. He is the Lord of all our days, equally present in our tears and in our laughter. The Christian life is therefore not a self-contained project we manage alone, reporting to God only when we are stuck. It is a life lived continually toward him, in dependence when we hurt and in gratitude when we rejoice.

Press the contrast James implies. Our natural instinct in suffering is often to turn inward, to brood, to grind through it on our own strength. Our natural instinct in cheerfulness is often to forget God altogether and simply enjoy the good. James cuts across both instincts. Suffering is not a reason to withdraw from God but a summons to pray. Joy is not a reason to forget God but a summons to sing. Both seasons drive us toward him.

Help students see that this sets the frame for the whole passage. Before James says a word about elders, oil, or confession, he establishes that prayer is the native air of the Christian. The honest, praying life he will describe in verses 14 through 16 grows out of this basic posture: in every season, we turn toward the Lord. A church that has lost this instinct will never recover the rest of the passage.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God as the Lord of every season, present in suffering and in joy alike (Psalm 34:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18)
- Prayer as the continual, native posture of the Christian life rather than a last resort
- Praise and song as a form of prayer offered to God in gladness (Ephesians 5:19–20; Colossians 3:16)
- Dependence on God in trouble and gratitude to God in blessing as two sides of one faith
- The danger of turning inward in pain or forgetting God in pleasure

Discussion Prompts

- Why do we so often treat God as an emergency contact rather than the Lord of every day?
- How might your suffering change if your first move were prayer rather than private brooding?

- When good things come, how can you turn your joy into praise instead of forgetting the Giver?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think honestly about your own pattern when life turns hard. Do you instinctively turn to prayer, or do you reach for prayer only after you have exhausted every other option? What would change if prayer were your first response rather than your last?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first self-examining question, and the goal is honest self-awareness, not shame. Many sincere Christians treat prayer as the last item on a long list. We worry, we strategize, we call friends, we lose sleep, we research, and only when every other lever has failed do we finally pray. James assumes the opposite order: “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.” Prayer first.

Help students name their actual pattern without flinching. The way to test it is simple: when the hard news comes, what does your hand reach for first? For some it is the phone, for some the to-do list, for some the worry that runs in circles. Prayer that comes only after exhaustion reveals a quiet, often unexamined belief that prayer is weaker than our own efforts.

Move the conversation toward hope and change. The point is not to pile guilt on people who already feel stretched thin, but to invite them into a better instinct. Encourage students to picture one recent hard moment and to imagine how it might have gone differently if they had stopped and prayed first, casting the burden on the Lord before lifting a finger to fix it themselves (1 Peter 5:7).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Prayer as the believer’s first resort, not last, in trouble (Philippians 4:6–7)
- Casting our anxieties on God because he cares for us (1 Peter 5:6–7)
- Self-examination as a healthy part of growth in the Christian walk (2 Corinthians 13:5)
- The quiet unbelief revealed when we trust our own efforts above prayer

Discussion Prompts

- When trouble comes, what do you actually reach for first, and what does that reveal?
- Why do we so easily treat prayer as the last option rather than the first?
- What is one recent situation you could have begun with prayer, and how might it have changed you?

Question 3

Student Question:

James says, "Let him call the elders of the church, and let them pray over him." Who are these "elders of the church," and what does this verse teach us about their God-given role as shepherds of a local congregation? Why does it matter that James points the sick to the church's own elders rather than to a special priestly class?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Start with the plain identity of these men. The "elders of the church" are the appointed shepherds and overseers of a local congregation, the same office described elsewhere in the New Testament with the interchangeable terms elder, overseer, and shepherd or pastor (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Titus 1:5-9). They are qualified, mature men appointed in each congregation to lead, guard, and care for the flock of God among them. James assumes every healthy church will have such men in place.

Now notice carefully what James does and does not say. He sends the sick believer to his own congregation's elders, the men who already know him, love him, and shepherd him. He does not send him to a distant holy man, a sacramental priest, or a class of clergy who possess powers ordinary Christians lack. The picture is pastoral, not sacramental. The elders come to the bedside as shepherds who pray, not as priests who dispense a sacrament. This matters enormously, because the verse has often been twisted into a foundation for sacramental ministry to the sick.

Draw out the shape of the elders' work here. They "pray over him," interceding for him before the Lord. The anointing with oil that accompanies their prayer was a customary act in that culture, often associated with care, comfort, and refreshment, and we should not build a healing ritual on it. The weight of the action falls on the prayer, offered "in the name of the Lord," that is, in submission to and dependence on the Lord Jesus. It is the Lord who heals; the elders simply pray.

Bring this home to congregational life. James paints a beautiful picture of a church where the sick are not abandoned to suffer alone but are surrounded by their own shepherds in prayer. The high view of the local congregation runs all through this, a real church with real elders caring for real members. Encourage students to value the elders God has given their congregation and to actually call on them, which is precisely what James commands the sick believer to do.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Elders as the appointed shepherds and overseers of each local congregation (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4)
- The interchangeable New Testament terms elder, overseer, and shepherd for the same office

- The pastoral, intercessory nature of the elders' visit, not a sacramental rite
- The rejection of any special priestly class distinct from the rest of the church (1 Peter 2:5, 9)
- Anointing with oil as a customary accompanying act, not a magical or sacramental cure
- The Lord himself, called upon "in the name of the Lord," as the true healer

Discussion Prompts

- How does it change the scene to picture your own congregation's shepherds, not a distant priest, at the bedside?
- Why is it important that the elders come as shepherds who pray rather than as priests who perform a rite?
- When did you last call on the elders of your congregation, and what keeps you from doing so?

Question 4

Student Question:

When you are sick, weak, or overwhelmed, are you willing to call on the leaders and members of your church for prayer, or do you tend to suffer in private silence? What holds you back from asking the body to pray over you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses verse 14 into the student's habits. Notice that James puts the initiative on the sick believer: "Let him call the elders." The body is ready to come, but the suffering one must be willing to ask. Many of us are not. We have an unspoken rule that we will help others but never burden anyone with our own need, and so we suffer in a silence God never asked of us.

Help students name what holds them back. Often it is pride, the desire to appear strong and self-sufficient. Sometimes it is fear of being seen as weak or needy. Sometimes it is a quiet belief that our troubles are not important enough to bother anyone. James cuts through all of it with a simple command: call for them. Asking for prayer is not weakness; it is faith, and it is obedience.

Lead the conversation toward a concrete willingness. The point is not merely to admire the idea of being prayed over but to actually do it next time. Encourage students to decide, before the next hard season comes, that they will pick up the phone and call. Remind them that to refuse to ask is, in its own way, to rob the body of the joy of carrying one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The believer's responsibility to call on the body for prayer in time of need (James 5:14)
- Bearing one another's burdens as the fulfillment of the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2)

- Pride and self-sufficiency as obstacles to receiving the body's care
- Asking for prayer as an act of faith and humility rather than weakness

Discussion Prompts

- What is the real reason you hesitate to ask others to pray over you in your need?
- How does refusing to ask rob your brothers and sisters of the joy of carrying your burden?
- Who in your congregation could you call the next time you are overwhelmed, and will you?

Question 5

Student Question:

James commands, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another." Notice the phrase "to one another." What does this mutual, brotherly confession look like in the New Testament church, and how is it different from the idea that we must confess to a priest to receive forgiveness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Anchor everything in those two small but decisive words: "to one another." The confession James commands is mutual and reciprocal. It runs both directions, brother to brother and sister to sister. It is not the confession of a layperson to a priest who then pronounces absolution. It is the open honesty of fellow members of one body who trust each other enough to say, "Here is where I am struggling," and humble enough to hear it and to pray.

Set this against the wrong view directly but graciously. Over the centuries, this verse has been pressed into service to support a sacramental confession in which a person confesses to an ordained priest, who absolves the sin by virtue of a special priestly power. But the New Testament knows no such special priestly class within the church. Every Christian is a priest (1 Peter 2:5, 9), with direct access to God through the one mediator, Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 4:14–16). We confess to God, who forgives through the blood of his Son (1 John 1:7–9), and we confess to one another for the sake of honesty, accountability, and intercession.

Clarify what mutual confession is actually for. It is not a transaction that earns forgiveness; God grants forgiveness through Christ to the penitent believer. Rather, confessing to one another brings our sin into the healing light, breaks its secret power over us, invites the prayers of others, and knits the body together in honest love. "That you may be healed," James says. Hidden sin festers; confessed sin, brought into the light and prayed over, finds healing.

Be pastorally wise about the practice. Mutual confession does not mean broadcasting every fault to the whole congregation, nor does it mean a morbid airing of details. It means real, honest openness with trusted brothers and sisters, the kind of friendship in which we can admit our struggles and ask for prayer. Encourage students to build such relationships, and to remember that the goal is healing and growth in Christ, not humiliation.

Finally, lift their eyes to the gospel underneath. We can afford to be this honest precisely because our forgiveness rests not on our performance but on the blood of Christ, applied to us when we obeyed the gospel and continually as we walk in the light (1 John 1:7). Confession among Christians flows out of a forgiveness already secured in Christ, not as a means of earning it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Confession as mutual and reciprocal, “to one another,” not to a special priestly class (James 5:16)
- The priesthood of all Christians with direct access to God through Christ (1 Peter 2:5, 9; 1 Timothy 2:5)
- Forgiveness granted by God through the blood of Christ to the penitent, not earned by a confessional rite (1 John 1:7–9)
- Walking in the light and honest fellowship as the path to spiritual healing (1 John 1:7)
- The error of sacramental confession that places forgiveness in the hands of a priestly class
- Confession as a means of accountability, intercession, and the breaking of sin’s secret power

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the phrase “to one another” rule out the idea that we must confess to a priest to be forgiven?
- How does bringing a hidden sin into the light begin to break its power over us?
- What kind of friendship in the body makes honest, mutual confession possible?

Question 6

Student Question:

Is there a sin or a burden you have been carrying entirely alone, never spoken aloud to another believer? What fear keeps it hidden, and what might the Lord do through the honest light of confession and the prayers of a trusted brother or sister?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the command of verse 16 into a mirror, and it must be handled with great tenderness. Almost everyone carries something hidden, a recurring sin, a private shame, a quiet despair, that has never been spoken aloud to another soul. James knows the power of secret sin to grow in the dark, and he calls us into the light not to expose us but to heal us.

Help students name, at least to themselves, the fear that keeps the secret hidden. Usually it is the fear of being truly known and then rejected, the dread that if a brother or sister saw the worst of us, they would turn away. But this fear underestimates the gospel and the body. We are loved not because we are impressive but because Christ died for us while we were still

sinner (Romans 5:8), and a healthy church receives the confessing brother the way Christ received us.

Be careful not to push for public disclosure or to manufacture a confession on the spot. The aim is to gently open the possibility, to help a student see that the secret has more power over them in the dark than it would in the light, and to imagine the relief and healing that honest confession and faithful prayer could bring. Encourage them to identify one trusted, mature believer with whom such honesty would be safe.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The destructive power of secret, unconfessed sin (Psalm 32:3–5)
- The healing that comes through bringing sin into the light and into prayer (James 5:16; 1 John 1:7)
- The gospel security that lets us be honest, since Christ loved us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8)
- The body of Christ as a safe place to be known and restored (Galatians 6:1)

Discussion Prompts

- What is the fear, named honestly, that keeps your struggle hidden from everyone?
- How does the gospel free you to be known without fear of being cast off?
- Who is one trusted, mature believer with whom you could begin to walk in the light?

Question 7

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.” How does this verse hold together physical care and the forgiveness of sins, and what does it teach us about the Lord as the one who both heals and forgives?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice how naturally James moves between body and soul. The prayer of faith “will save the one who is sick,” the Lord “will raise him up,” and then, almost in the same breath, “if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.” James does not split the person into separate compartments. The same Lord who cares about a sick body cares about a guilty conscience, and the same prayer that lifts the one reaches toward the other.

Teach students that this reflects the Lord’s whole-person care. In the Gospels, Jesus often healed and forgave together, showing that his authority extends over both sickness and sin (Mark 2:1–12). He is not merely a physician of bodies or merely a forgiver of souls; he is Lord of

the whole person. When the church prays for the sick, it is right to pray for the body and also to be alert to the soul, for sometimes spiritual burdens and physical suffering are intertwined.

Handle the phrase “the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick” with care, since the next question will probe it more deeply. James is not issuing a blank check guaranteeing that every faithful prayer produces a cure. He is teaching the church to pray with real faith and confidence, trusting the Lord to act for the good of his child, whether by physical healing now or by sustaining grace and ultimate restoration. The “raising up” is the Lord’s gracious work, always in submission to his wisdom.

Bring it home pastorally. This verse invites the church to pray boldly for the sick and at the same time to care for the soul, never forgetting that the deepest healing any of us needs is the forgiveness of sins through Christ. A church that prays this way refuses to treat people as bodies only or souls only, but loves the whole person the way the Lord does.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Lord’s authority over both sickness and sin, healing and forgiving the whole person (Mark 2:1–12)
- Forgiveness of sins granted by the Lord to the penitent through Christ (Acts 2:38; 1 John 1:9)
- The intertwining of spiritual and physical well-being without reducing one to the other
- The prayer of faith as confident trust in the Lord’s good will, not a guaranteed formula for cure
- The Lord himself as the one who saves, raises up, and forgives

Discussion Prompts

- Why does James move so easily from the sick body to the forgiveness of sins?
- How does Jesus’ authority to both heal and forgive shape the way the church should pray?
- What does it look like to pray boldly for the sick while trusting the Lord’s wisdom about the outcome?

Question 8

Student Question:

When you pray for someone who is sick or suffering, do you pray with real expectation that God hears and acts, or do you pray as a kind of comforting ritual you no longer believe changes anything? Where has your praying grown faint or formal?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the realism of James’s promises into the student’s actual prayer life. James plainly expects prayer to do something: it saves, it raises up, it heals, it carries great power. Yet

many of us pray for the sick with a quiet resignation, going through the motions of a custom we no longer truly believe accomplishes anything. James would gently confront that drift.

Help students locate where their praying has gone faint. Sometimes it is years of unanswered prayers that have worn faith thin. Sometimes it is a creeping practical unbelief, a sense that prayer is a comforting habit rather than a real conversation with a God who acts. Naming this honestly is not a failure of faith but the beginning of its recovery. James points us to Elijah, an ordinary man whose prayers moved heaven, precisely to rekindle our confidence.

Guide the conversation toward renewed, humble expectation. Praying with faith does not mean demanding a particular outcome or treating God as a vending machine. It means truly believing that God hears, that he loves, that he acts for our good, and that our prayers genuinely matter in his purposes. Encourage students to bring their faint praying honestly to the Lord and to ask him to teach them to pray again with expectancy and trust.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Prayer as a real means by which God works, not an empty ritual (James 5:16–18)
- The danger of practical unbelief that prays without expecting God to act
- Faith that trusts God to hear and act for our good while submitting to his wisdom (1 John 5:14–15)
- Elijah, a man like us, as encouragement that ordinary prayers carry real power

Discussion Prompts

- Be honest: when you pray for the sick, do you really expect God to act?
- Where has your praying become a comforting habit rather than a living conversation?
- What would it look like to pray again with humble, trusting expectation?

Question 9

Student Question:

James grounds the whole passage in a stunning claim: “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” He then points to Elijah, “a man with a nature like ours.” In a day when some claim present miraculous sign gifts, how do we rightly understand the great power of prayer without turning these verses into a healing ritual or a promise that every faithful prayer guarantees a cure?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point of the lesson, so give it room and care. Two errors press in from opposite sides, and your task is to steer between them. On one side is the error that drains these verses of all power, treating prayer as a nice gesture that changes nothing. On the other side is the error that inflates them into a guaranteed, formula-driven cure, a healing ritual in

which enough faith, or the right oil, or the right words, obligates God to heal every time. James teaches neither.

Establish first that the power James claims is real. “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” He proves it with Elijah, deliberately calling him “a man with a nature like ours” so that we will not excuse ourselves as too ordinary. Elijah prayed, and it did not rain; he prayed again, and the heavens gave rain (James 5:17–18; 1 Kings 17–18). The point is breathtaking: the earnest prayer of an ordinary, righteous believer genuinely moves the hand of God in his providence. We must not shrink this promise.

Now guard the promise from misuse on the side of ritual and sign gifts. The anointing with oil was a customary act accompanying prayer, not a magic rite, and we must not construct a healing ceremony out of it. More importantly, this passage does not establish that miraculous sign gifts continue today. Those sign gifts, such as the gift of healings exercised by the apostles, served to confirm the word in the founding age of the church and have ceased now that the complete New Testament has been given as our authority (2 Timothy 3:16–17; compare 1 Corinthians 13:8–10). James is describing ordinary, believing prayer in the body, not the miraculous sign gifts, and not a guaranteed cure every time.

Then hold the tension the text itself holds. “The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick” is a confident promise, but it is not a blank check that obligates God to heal every illness on demand. Faithful believers still grow sick and still die; Paul left Trophimus ill (2 Timothy 4:20), and Paul’s own thorn was not removed though he prayed three times (2 Corinthians 12:7–9). The prayer of faith trusts God to act for the good of his child, whether by healing now, by sustaining grace, or by the ultimate raising up at the resurrection. Faith submits to God’s wisdom even as it asks boldly (1 John 5:14–15).

Bring the two halves together for your students. We pray with great boldness, believing that the earnest prayer of righteous, ordinary Christians carries real power and genuinely matters to God. And we pray with deep humility, refusing to reduce God to a formula or to claim powers the New Testament reserves to the founding age. The result is a church that prays expectantly and trustingly, leaning hard on the Lord and resting in his wisdom, neither faithless nor presumptuous.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The genuine, great power of the earnest prayer of a righteous person (James 5:16–18)
- Elijah, a man like us, as proof that ordinary believers’ prayers move God’s providential hand (1 Kings 17–18)
- The cessation of miraculous sign gifts, which confirmed the word in the founding age (1 Corinthians 13:8–10; compare 2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- The complete New Testament as our authority now that the confirming sign gifts have served their purpose (2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- Anointing with oil as a customary accompanying act, not a healing ritual or magic rite

- The prayer of faith as bold trust in God's good will, not a guaranteed formula for cure (2 Corinthians 12:7–9; 2 Timothy 4:20)
- Faith that asks boldly yet submits to the wisdom of God (1 John 5:14–15)

Discussion Prompts

- How do we avoid both draining prayer of power and inflating it into a guaranteed cure?
- Why is it significant that James calls Elijah “a man with a nature like ours”?
- How does trusting God's wisdom keep bold prayer from becoming presumption?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across James 5:13–16 as a whole: prayer in every season, the elders called to the bedside, sins confessed to one another, and the powerful prayer of the righteous. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through this passage toward an honest, praying life in the body, and what you will do about it.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the whole lesson into a single, concrete commitment. Resist letting it stay vague. “I want to pray more” is a wish, not a step. Help students name a specific person, a specific practice, and a specific next action that the text has pressed upon them.

Encourage them to connect the commitment to whatever struck them most. For one student it may be the call to make prayer a first response rather than a last resort. For another it may be the courage to confess a hidden struggle to a trusted brother or sister. For another it may be the willingness, at last, to call the elders instead of suffering in silence. For another it may be the recovery of bold, expectant prayer for the sick. Let the text drive the application.

Close by lifting their eyes to Christ. The aim of this study is not merely better religious habits but becoming like Jesus, who poured out his life in prayer and welcomed the broken into the light. Remind students that the Lord who calls them to this honest, praying life also supplies the grace to live it, and that a church which prays for and confesses to one another is one of his richest gifts. Send them out with one clear step and a confident hope that Christ is forming them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The goal of the Christian life as growing conformity to Christ, including a life of prayer (Romans 8:29)
- The local body as the God-given context for honest confession and mutual intercession
- Personal, specific obedience as the proper response to the word (James 1:22)
- Christ as both the pattern and the supply of the praying, honest life he calls us to

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of this passage pressed on your heart most, and why?
- What is the one specific step toward an honest, praying life that you will take, and when?
- How will you lean on Christ's grace, rather than your own resolve, as you take it?