

James 5:16-18 - The Purpose of Confession — Liberation from Sin

Today we continue in James chapter 5, continuing our study of verses 16-18.

Memory Verses:

James 1:2-4 NKJV

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Let's start today by reading:

James 5:16-18 NKJV

Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. ¹⁸ And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

Effective Prayer Life — Praying According to Scripture

Last week we read how Elijah was a man with a nature just like ours, who, when he was walking with the Lord (practically righteous), had a very powerful or strong prayer life because his prayers were effective and fervent (energised and made operational by God).

This week, I would like to point out another very important reason as to why Elijah's prayers were so effective — **Elijah read the bible prayerfully and prayed according to scripture.** When we read the bible prayerfully, we have soft hearts and we are transformed by the renewing power of the word of God. When we humble ourselves like this the effects of our Bible reading go far beyond mere head knowledge. Listen to what Jesus said in:

John 4:23-24 NKJV

But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. ²⁴ God is Spirit, and **those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.**"

To worship **in spirit** means that, like the effective and fervent prayer life, true worship must be made operational or capable or energised by God the Holy Spirit.

"To worship **in truth** means you worship according to the whole counsel of God's word, especially in light of the New Testament revelation." (David Guzik)

What this means is that we aren't praying or worshiping according to the will of God unless we are *both* praying according to Scripture *and* we are open to the Spirit's leading in our lives.

The Scriptures are so important because they reveal what is right and *true*. The Bible is the final authority on truth because God cannot lie, and every word in the Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16). Also, the bible is God's love letter to us — it reveals the heart of God to us, and therefore shows to us the right motive by which to pray.

The role of the Holy Spirit is explained by Jesus in:

John 14:26-27 NLT

But when the Father sends the Advocate [Helper] as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you.

²⁷ “I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid.

I love this. The Holy Spirit teaches us and reminds us of the words of God as recorded in the Scriptures. The result, a gift that the world cannot take away — the peace of God.

As Romans 8:26 teaches us, the Holy Spirit leads us as to what we should pray. The bottom line is that (in addition to becoming practically righteous with God after having confessed our sins), the more we know the word of God the more effective our prayers will be, because we will be better able to pray according to Scripture; that is, according to God's will. We will have a better understanding of what is right and what is wrong. Another way of saying this is that the Holy Spirit can't bring to remembrance the parts of the bible that we have never read or studied. The more we know the Bible, the more specific and directed our prayers can become.

The example James gives us in James 5:17-18 is Elijah telling king Ahab that it would not rain for the next few years. How could Elijah be so convinced or sure that this would happen? Because this is exactly what God said He would do to the nation when they were rebelling against Him. Elijah was simply telling Ahab what the bible said in:

Deuteronomy 11:16-17 NLT

“But be careful. Don't let your heart be deceived so that you turn away from the Lord and serve and worship other gods. ¹⁷ If you do, the Lord's anger will burn against you. **He will shut up the sky and hold back the rain, and the ground will fail to produce its harvests.** Then you will quickly die in that good land the Lord is giving you.

Again, we see that Elijah knew the Scriptures, and could therefore confidently tell Ahab that it would not rain, because that's exactly what God had previously said would happen when the nation was worshipping false gods. All Elijah needed was the prompting from the Holy Spirit that then was the right time and place to proclaim this message to Ahab, and also pray that it would happen. Maybe Elijah was reading this section of the Scriptures when He was prompted by God to pray and talk to Ahab?

More on Prayer: Pray as you read... read as you pray.

Reading the bible is a conversation. It's not read and then pray, but pray as you read. Imagine if I said to my wife, “Okay Merissa, I'm going to talk for 10 minutes, and then it's your turn to talk for 10 min, and then we are done communicating.” It doesn't work

like that. We talk back and forth. And so it is with God. Until very recently, I used to feel guilty and wonder why I struggled so much to have a separate time of prayer following my bible reading, but also wondered why my relationship with God seemed to be going well, despite me not having a regular time of dedicated prayer during my morning devotions — I just couldn't help but want to keep on reading my Bible until the very last minute.

But now I understand or realise that most of my prayer happens as I'm reading. As I'm reading the Bible I'm asking God to help me to understand it, and I often find myself mentally repeating back to God what I think He is trying to teach me (active listening). As I read through my chapters, I find myself reading a particular verse or verses again and again as the Holy Spirit continues to reveal God's truth to me. Then, when I feel that God has given me understanding or has spoken to me, I move on. Some days I only get through half a chapter. Also, as I am reading, God often puts people on my mind. I then stop and pray for them, and then keep reading. Then of course there is God revealing my sin to me; I must stop and confess that sin right there and then. The other thing that God often reveals to me as I am reading the Bible is what ministry opportunities He may have for me in the near future — the people I can bless or encourage with the truth I have just learned or been reminded of.

What's happening here? Reading the word is focusing me on God, and directing my prayers. If I'm reading the word prayerfully, I'm putting into practice:

Jude 20-21 NLT

But you, dear friends, must build each other up in your most holy faith, pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, ²¹ and await the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will bring you eternal life. In this way, you will keep yourselves safe in God's love.

What builds our faith? The Word of God (*So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God* — Romans 10:17). We encourage each other in our most holy faith by sharing with each other day by day what God has been showing us in the word of God. Then we pray *in the power of the Spirit*; that is, the Holy Spirit uses the word of God to help us pray according to the will of God.

Disclaimer: This doesn't mean that there shouldn't be dedicated times of prayer. Our family has dedicated times of prayer most mornings separate to our bible reading. At church on Sunday morning at 9:30 am we have a dedicated time of prayer before the service. We finish bible study with a dedicated time of prayer. In the car as I'm driving I will often have a dedicated time of prayer. If the Lord leads or if there is a specific prayer request I will stop and pray. I love going for prayer walks, which is a dedicated time of prayer. My point here is that when we read the bible, it should be a conversation, and not just us seeking to gain more knowledge of the Bible. In addition, the Holy Spirit uses the word of God to guide our prayers.

Here's a excerpt from Jon Courson's commentary on James 5:16-18:

Elijah knew the Word, was submitted to the Word, and prayed according to the Word. So, too, we must understand that to pray effectively is to combine prayer with reading the Word. You will never again snooze through a service or doze off during devotions if you are praying while you're listening. That is, when a point comes to you that you know is convicting you, talk to the Lord about it right then.

For years, I didn't know this. I thought the right way to fellowship with God was to read a chapter or two in the Word and then pray. But that is as silly as if I called Tammy and said, "We've got to talk," and then I proceeded to talk for ten minutes straight—talk, talk, talk, talk, talk—before saying, "Now you talk"—at which point she'd talk, talk, talk, talk to me.

That's the way I thought I was supposed to communicate with the Lord. "Okay, Father, I know You speak to me through Your Word, so I'll listen, listen, listen, listen. Done. Now it's my turn. Pray, pray, pray, pray, pray."

I'm not saying you can't do it that way, but there's a much better way. That is, as you are reading the Word, a phrase or two will strike you, and you pause right then to talk it over with the Father. You pray about it right then. Then you read a verse or two or three more until something else stirs your thinking or strikes your heart. You pause, then talk to the Lord again. With tens of thousands of precepts, principles, and promises in this book, I guarantee you'll never have a boring devotional time if you pause, then talk to the Lord again. With tens of thousands of precepts, principles, and promises in this book, I guarantee you'll never have a boring devotional time if you pray with open Bible and talk to the Father about what you read.

So, too, if you go to church on a Sunday morning or Wednesday evening and say, "Every time a point hits me, confuses me, or stirs me, I am going to pray about it right then." Bible studies will never, ever again be drowsy for you because it's just impossible to talk to the Father as you're taking in the Word and find yourself bored and slumbering.

"If you abide in Me—stay close to Me—and My words abide in you," Jesus declared, "you shall ask whatever you will and it shall be done" (see John 15:7). "If My Word is stirring in you and you're staying close to Me, you'll be able to ask whatever you want as you pray biblically, and it will happen. You'll see."

To pray effectually is to pray biblically.

May the Lord bless your morning, lunchtime, and evening devotions this week and forever more.

Psalm 55:16-17 NKJV

As for me, I will call upon God,

And the Lord shall save me.

¹⁷ Evening and morning and at noon

I will pray, and cry aloud,

And He shall hear my voice.

The Purpose of Confession — Liberation From Sin

My goal here is to remind us of the purpose of confession so we have the correct understanding of why we need to confess our sins, and also try to explain how the confession of a sin to the church liberates or frees us from that sin.

It's important to remember that our sin doesn't affect our positional right standing with God; as born again Christians, we are and will always be forgiven. We will always have open access to the throne room of God where we will receive all the help we need when we ask.

However, sin affects our practical relationship with God and others. John Stott said something similar to, “At any moment, we are as close to God as we choose to be.” There are four main principles that will sum up what we have learned over the last few weeks about confession of sin:

1. *Confession Promotes Prayer*
2. *Confession Provides Protection*
3. *Confession Prevents Pride*
4. *Confession Produces Praise*

1. Confession Promotes Prayer

James 5:16 NKJV

Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

What is James teaching us here? If I don’t confess my weaknesses, struggles and/or my sins, then the rest of the body of Christ won’t know that I am struggling in that area, and therefore they won’t be praying for me as effectively as they could. In the body of Christ, when one hurts, we all hurt (1 Corinthians 12:26). This is talking about compassion. Compassion is more than just feelings — that’s sympathy. Compassion has hands and feet which are motivated by empathy. If the body doesn’t know that I am struggling with something or have been hurt by something, then they are not able to demonstrate compassion; they are not able to help me by praying for me and helping me in other ways. As a result, I continue struggling and remain weak in that area of my life.

Never underestimate the power of prayer. By failing to admit our weakness, confess our sins, or ask for help, we are robbing the body of Christ of the opportunity and privilege of interceding for us before the throne of God; and we therefore fail to receive all the help that God desires to give us.

2. Confession Provides Protection from Condemnation and Shame

Jon Courson explains this well.

Confession provides protection from potential hostility. The Enemy seeks to cause whatever I’m struggling with, whatever you’re wrestling with to be exposed. That’s his method of operation. He sucks us into sin, then publicises our sin to bring consternation, embarrassment, and division [this is what shame is; fear of our sin being exposed — what will people think of me!].

As Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, Luke records that the other eleven disciples stood with him (Acts 2:14). Keep in mind, it had only been a month or so since Peter had denied even knowing Jesus. Thus, by standing with him, the other disciples were in effect saying, “We know Peter’s history. Yet we continue to stand by him. So pipe down, you who would be hostile and critical of him.”

That’s what confession does. It disarms the Enemy.

Basically, satan can't shame and condemn us when we have already shared with others our weakness or sin. He can't use the, "*what will the others think about you if they found out*" shame and condemnation trick if the others already know and are already supporting, encouraging, and praying for you.

3. Confession Prevents Pride

The fear of man is a snare. The fear of man will keep us in sin. Pride in our reputation can and will keep us in perpetual slavery to sin. Why? Because it will keep us from confessing our sin? Why? Because **confessing our sin to others will destroy the fake reputation or image that we take so much pride in and are so careful to protect.**

Our reputation is what others think about us, their opinion of us. We can easily create a false reputation by deliberately acting a certain way around people — by hiding what we would really like to do, and instead doing something that we don't really want to do. I may want people to think that I'm a better basket ball player, or smarter, or tougher than I really am. But for the Christian, the great temptation is to make people think that I'm even more spiritual than I really am — a better person than I really am — that I'm closer to God than I really am.

However, if my reputation does not accurately reflect who I really am, then I am a hypocrite. I am literally an actor, pretending to be someone whom I am not. In Bible times the actors would hold a mask in front of their face and act and talk in a way that would represent the person in the story or play. We can think of a false reputation as us creating a mask and walking around behind it, acting in the character of the person we want to be, the imaginary person we would like others to think that we are.

Why would I want to create a false impression about myself? Our pride causes us to want people to think well about us. We want people to think that we are good people. The natural or built in desire of our sinful human nature wants or desires people to admire and praise us, to affirm us. Therefore, we go about seeking the approval or praise of people. When this happens we become man pleasers and not God pleasers despite our best intentions. The only way to escape this prideful satanic trap is to willingly destroy our fake reputation — we do this by confessing our sin. We must be real with people, and not be an actor or a hypocrite. The opposite of hypocrite is genuine. This is especially important with our church family, our biological family, and our close friends. Like it or not, they can always see straight through us. They know if we are being fake.

An example: If I am struggling with stealing, but no one knows it and I am concerned about what they might think of me, then I will keep it to myself and just hope that nobody finds out that I'm a thief. In the mean time, I feel guilty, and while I may try to stop stealing, I will inevitably keep on stealing because I am weak.

Let's see what the Scriptures say about the fear of man being a snare, something that will trip us up if we are walking according to our old man or sinful human nature.

Proverbs 29:25 NKJV

The fear of man brings a snare,

But whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe [literally secure, set on high].

Proverbs 29:25 NLT

Fearing people is a dangerous trap,
but trusting the Lord means safety.

Here are various quotes explaining and applying **the fear of man** in Proverbs 29:25:

“Many people of good heart but not enough courage live in bondage to **the fear of man**. They worry far too much about what people think, instead of first being concerned about what God and wisdom say, and what integrity would lead them to do. This is a **snare** that traps many people.” (David Guzik)

“The ‘fear of man’ describes any situation in which one is anxious about not offending another person. For example, someone might be afraid to oppose the unethical actions of a superior out of fear of losing a job. This verse tells the reader to do what is right and trust the outcome to Yahweh.” (Garrett)

“And therefore they do not ask, ‘What should I do?’ but ‘What will my friends think of me?’ They cannot brave the finger of scorn ... Oh, for deliverance from this principle of bondage.” (Bridges)

“How often has this led weak men, though *sincere* in their general character, to deny their God, and [renounce or reject] his people!” (Clarke) Examples of weak men include Saul, Aaron, and Peter.

“It was the fear of man that caused Pilate’s name to become infamous in the history of the world and of the Church of God, and it will be infamous to all eternity. The fear of man led him to slay the Savior; take care that it does not lead you to do something of the same kind.” (Spurgeon)

“Why, I have known some who were afraid even to give away a tract; they were as much alarmed as though they had to put their hand into a tiger’s mouth.” (Spurgeon)

How many times have we been worried about what people will think about us? This is the fear of man. It’s a sin because we should be more concerned about what God thinks of us. Consider what Paul says in Romans:

Romans 14:10-13 NLT

¹⁰ **So why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.** ¹¹ For the Scriptures say,

“*‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will declare allegiance praise to God.’*”

¹² **Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God.** ¹³ So let’s stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall.

We must all remember that when we get to heaven, we won't be giving an account of ourselves to each other, to our work colleagues, to our family members, to our friends, to the basket ball or football team, rather only to God — **“Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God... Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God”** (Romans 14:10, 12). Therefore, the reality of the situation is that it really doesn't matter what people think about us down here, because what they think or believe about us will have no effect up there at the Bema Seat when we stand before Jesus and receive our reward.

Also consider that there will be times when nobody else will fully understand our true motives for doing certain things, at least not right away. There are times when walking in obedience to the will of God will cause us to appear to others as being crazy, sinful, selfish, illogical, or impulsive. Example of family's response when telling them we would be living in America for two years to study at bible college — “God can't be telling you that...”

Jesus is a great example for us of what it means to be a God pleaser and not a man pleaser — and of the great cost and sacrifice that we will often have pay as we give up our reputation before men in order to have a good reputation before God. While it is true that as Jesus grew up, He grew in favour with God and men as He was growing up (Luke 2:52), as soon as He began His ministry, began convicting people of their sin, and made the claim to be God, things changed radically.

Mark 3:21 NLT (see also Psalm 69:8, Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3, John 2:12, 7:5, 10:20) One time Jesus entered a house, and the crowds began to gather again. Soon He and His disciples couldn't even find time to eat. ²¹ When His family heard what was happening, they tried to take Him away. “He's out of his mind [deranged],” they said. Just imagine what would have happened if Jesus was more concerned about what His family thought about Him instead of what the Father thought about Him — He would never have been able to be obedient to what the Father was calling Him to do. You see, *who we fear or want to impress the most are the ones who we will ultimately try to please or impress.* If I fear man, then I am not fearing God. If I am not fearing God, then I will not be able to please or obey God. Again, I will only end up pleasing or obeying the one who I fear the most.

What did it cost Jesus to follow the will of the Father? His reputation with His family. On a human level that would have hurt. But why was Jesus willing to suffer the ridicule and shame? Because He decided beforehand that He would only do those things that please the Father. But Jesus' family weren't the only ones to misunderstand Him.

John 8:28-29 NLT ²⁸ So Jesus said, **“When you have lifted up the Son of Man on the cross, then you will understand that I Am [God]. I do nothing on my own but say only what the Father taught me. ²⁹ And the one who sent me is with me—he has not deserted me. For I always do what pleases him.”**

Jesus lived almost His whole life being misunderstood, misrepresented, ridiculed, mocked, and slandered by basically everyone around Him, including His enemies, His disciples, and even His family. But to Him it was like water off a ducks back because He cared more about His reputation before the Father (whether or not He had the approval of the Father), than He did about His reputation before other people (whether or not He had their approval).

For us, the temptation is to seek first the approval of our family, friends, work colleges, church family, and others, instead of God. But what we need to learn to say is what Jesus said to those following Him, “then you will understand.” In other words, Jesus was saying that they would not understand now, but later it would all be made clear. For Jesus it was when He was crucified and then resurrected. For us it will be when we stand before the Bema Seat and receive our rewards from God.

Paul was another one who people accused of being crazy or out of His mind.

2 Corinthians 5:13-15 NLT

If it seems we are crazy [because we are doing the will of God], it is to bring glory to God. And if we are in our right minds, it is for your benefit. ¹⁴ **Either way, Christ’s love controls us.** Since we believe that Christ died for all, we also believe that we have all died to our old life. ¹⁵ He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. **Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them.**

“**Living for Christ**” includes doing what pleases Him, and not what pleases other people or ourselves; in particular creating and maintaining a fake reputation that we hide behind. What Paul said is so important. Listen carefully, “**Either way, Christ’s love controls us.**” He was saying in a polite way, “I don’t care what you think of us, crazy or sane, what matters to me is to please God — the love of Christ motivates and controls me and not the fear of man.”

Jon Courson says, “Although we’re so careful to cultivate a certain image, the Lord has ways of making sure it never lasts because pride leads to destruction and a haughty spirit to a fall (Proverbs 16:18)... Confession prevents pride and therefore prevents an otherwise tragic and painful fall.”

Summary so far concerning the purpose of confession:

1. *Confession Promotes Prayer*
2. *Confession Provides Protection*
3. *Confession Prevents Pride*

4. Confession Produces Praise

“The church of Jesus Christ is the only place I know where people come together and admit they’re a bunch of losers who have problems. Go to the ... Rotary club [or the golf club], or the [political] fundraisers, and you’re not going to see a group of people saying, “We’re idiots. We failed again. We dropped the ball.” It just doesn’t happen that way! In every other organisation, people get together to say, “**Aren’t we great?**” But we, the church, come together to say, “**Isn’t God gracious? That He would use people like us with all our faults and failings is nothing short of amazing!**”

Sin will lose its grip if you take seriously this command, this invitation to confess and pray for one another. Whatever you do, know this: You are forgiven and you can experience liberation if you confess your faults one to another.

I love the Lord. I love the theology of being forgiven. I love the practicality of confession. I’m so glad I’m saved. And I’m glad you are too.” (Jon Courson)

So why does confession produce praise? Because once we confess our sins we then naturally begin to praise God for His mercy, His grace, His patience, His love, His Goodness, and especially the amazing gift of Jesus being the substitute for us sinners and dying in our place. We also praise God for the freedom from sin that He grants us, and for the beautiful and sincere relationships that we enjoy with God and others when we are real.

Confession is short term pain for long term gain. Consider the two choices we have:

1. We can be living according to or submitted to or dominated by our sinful human nature and be saying, “**Aren’t we great?**”, or
2. We can be living submitted to the Spirit, and say, “**Isn’t God gracious?**”

Summary

How does confession liberate us from sin:

- 1. Confession Promotes Prayer** — we receive the benefit of our church family praying and interceding for us.
- 2. Confession Provides Protection** — we escape the shame and condemnation of the devil.
- 3. Confession Prevents Pride** — we stop pretending to be someone we are not and are content just to be ourselves, freely admitting our weaknesses, and understanding that we live our lives to please God and God alone, being motivated by the love of God and not our reputation among people.

4. Confession Produces Praise — “**Aren’t we great**” or “**Isn’t God gracious**” are the two opposing mindsets or attitudes we can have. We will either be focused on making ourselves look good or focusing on God’s goodness, love, and mercy.

Also remember that to pray effectively, there are two main things to consider:

1. We must confess to on another so we are practically righteous (keep short accounts with God by maintaining good relationships with both God and man).
2. Our potential to be guided by the Holy Spirit to pray in accordance with God’s will is directly proportional to how much of the Bible we have read and studied. He can’t teach us or bring to our remembrance what we haven’t read.

And finally we should **read the bible prayerfully and pray according to Scripture**. Reading the Bible is a conversation, not a monologue. It’s only when we are humble that God can teach us.

Pray as you read and read as you pray