We Pray for One Another
James 5:13-18
SS Lesson for 01/25/2015

Devotional Scripture: Acts 4:23-35

OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW AND KEY VERSE OF THE LESSON
Key Verse: James 5:16
Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

LESSON INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND
From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

OCCASIONS FOR PRAYER (JAMES 5:13-14)

Responding to circumstances (13)
- Respond by praying so that we will not fall into temptation (Matt 26:41)
- Respond by praying in the Spirit on all occasions (Eph 6:18)
- Respond by praying continually (1 Thess 5:17)
- Respond by praying with a mind that is clear and self-controlled (1 Peter 4:7)
- Respond by praying in the Holy Spirit (Jude 1:20)
- Respond by praying so not to be anxious about anything (Phil 4:6)
- Respond by praying and give thanksgiving for others (1 Tim 2:1)
- Respond by praying for the spiritual health of others (1 John 5:16)

Physical illness (14)
- Pray about illness, but know that some suffering is because of sin (2 Sam 12:15-17)
- Pray about illness, but accept God's will (Matt 26:36-41)
- Pray about illness, but know that some sicknesses teaches that God's grace is sufficient (2 Cor 12:7-10)
- Pray about illness because sometimes sickness is used so that God might be glorified (John 11:4)
- Pray about illness because it is God who sustains and restores (Ps 41:3)

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF PRAYER (JAMES 5:15-16)

Healing (15)
- God's power is manifested through healing (Matt 9:2-6)
- Healing because it is one of the signs of those who believe (Mark 16:17-18)
- Healing through the Name of Jesus because it is the only power that heals (Acts 4:7-10)
- Healing through God's compassion (Matt 14:14)
- God heals spiritually (Isa 53:5)
- Healing through humble repentance and prayer (2 Chron 7:14)

Forgiveness (15)
- Pray for forgiveness because Jesus taught it (Matt 6:12)
- Pray for forgiveness as we repent of our wickedness (Acts 8:22)
- Pray for forgiveness because God is faithful (1 John 1:9)
- Pray for forgiveness of others also (Acts 7:59-60)
- One must believe in God before he can pray for forgiveness (Heb 11:6)

Things changed (16)
- Things change from death to life (2 Kings 20:1-6)
- Things change because God hears our prayers (Luke 1:13-14)
- Things change because angels are on our side (Job 33:22-26)
- Things change because of asking in Jesus' Name (John 14:12-14)
- Things change because of intercessory prayer (Acts 12:5-7)

PREREQUISITE FOR PRAYER (JAMES 5:17-18)

Earnestness (17)
- Earnestness in faith (1 Tim 1:5)
- Earnestness to draw near to God (Heb 10:22)
- Earnestness in the wisdom of God (James 3:17)
- Earnestness to seek and please God (Heb 11:5-6)
Earnestness in zealously and prayer (Rom 12:11-12)
Earnestness because we have been given a trust (1 Cor 4:2)

**Faith (18)**
- Steadfast faith is relying on God regardless of the circumstances (2 Cor 1:8-9)
- Steadfast faith is keeping the faith to the finish (2 Tim 4:7)
- Steadfast faith is faith and actions working together to make faith complete (James 2:22)
- Steadfast faith is throwing off everything that hinders (Heb 12:1)
- Steadfast faith is confirming and proving God's trust (1 Cor 4:2)
- Steadfast faith is contending for the faith (Jude 1:3)
- Steadfast faith is refined genuine faith (1 Peter 1:7)

**CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS**

**COMMENTARY**

**THOUGHTS FROM BOB DEFFINBAUGH**

*The Proper Use of the Tongue (James 5:13-20)*

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE NIV STANDARD LESSON COMMENTARY**

**HEART OF THE LESSON FROM THE BIBLE EXPOSITOR AND ILLUMINATOR**

*Situations and suggestions (James 5:13-15)*

*Power and prayer (James 5:16-18)*

**PRACTICAL POINTS FROM THE BIBLE EXPOSITOR AND ILLUMINATOR**
Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson teaches us one of our main functions and what we should be known for as Christians is that **We Pray for One Another.** The **study's aim** is to recognize the powerful impact prayer has on a person's life. The **study’s application** is to pray regularly for others, especially believers. (Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary).

Key Verse: James 5:16

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.

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

In verses James 5:14-15, James asked a third question and then answered it fully. Is any one of you sick? A great deal of misunderstanding has resulted from these verses. Some seem to teach from this passage that full physical health is always just a prayer away. Others have found in this passage justification for “extreme unction” (a practice begun in the eighth century). Still others have tried to relate the process outlined by James to the modern practice of invoking God (“pray over him”) and using medicine (“anoint him with oil”)—prayer plus a physician. The heart of the problem lies in just what James meant when he referred to the “sick.” Actually there is no reason to consider “sick” as referring exclusively to physical illness. The word *asthenei* literally means “to be weak.” Though it is used in the Gospels for physical maladies, it is generally used in Acts and the Epistles to refer to a weak faith or a weak conscience (cf. Acts 20:35; Rom. 6:19; 14:1; 1 Cor. 8:9-12). That it should be considered “weak” in this verse is clear in that another Greek word (*kamnonta*) in James 5:15, translated sick person, literally means “to be weary.” The only other use in the New Testament (Heb. 12:3) of that word clearly emphasizes this same meaning. James was not referring to the bedfast, the diseased, or the ill. Instead he wrote to those who had grown weary, who had become weak both morally and spiritually in the midst of suffering. These are the ones who should call for the help of the elders of the church. The early church leaders were instructed (1 Thes. 5:14) to “encourage the timid” and “help the weak.” James said that the elders should **pray over him and anoint him with oil.** It is significant that the word “anoint” is *aleipsantes* (“rub with oil”) not *chriō* (“ceremonially anoint”). The former is the “mundane” word and the latter is “the sacred and religious word” (Richard Chenevix Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament, ninth ed. Reprint. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950, pp. 136-7). “Therefore James is not suggesting a ceremonial or ritual anointing as a means of divine healing; instead, he is referring to the common practice of using oil as a means of bestowing honor, refreshment, and grooming” (Daniel R. Hayden, “Calling the Elders to Pray,” Bibliotheca Sacra 138, July-September 1981:264). The woman “poured” (*aleipho*) perfume on Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:38). A host “put oil” (*aleipho*) on the head of his guest (Luke 7:46). A person who is fasting should not be sad and ungroomed, but should “put oil” (*aleipho*) on his head, and wash his face (Matt. 6:17). Thus James’ point is that the “weak” (*asthenei*) and “weary” (*kamnonta*) would be refreshed, encouraged, and uplifted by the elders who rubbed oil on the deponents’ heads and prayed for them. For the fallen, discouraged, distressed weary believer, restoration is assured and the elders’ prayer offered in faith will make the sick person (lit., “weary one”) well (i.e., will restore him from discouragement and spiritual defeat), and the Lord will raise him up. That the restoration is spiritual, not physical, is further clarified by the assurance, **if he has sinned, he will be forgiven.** Many physically ill Christians have called on elders to pray for them and to anoint them with oil, but a sizable percentage of them have remained sick. This fact suggests that the passage may have been mistakenly understood as physical restoration rather than spiritual restoration. The conclusion is clear: therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other. A mutual concern for one another is the way to combat discouragement and downfall. The cure is in personal confession and prayerful concern. The healing (**that you may be healed**) is not bodily healing but healing of the soul (iathete; cf. Matt. 13:15; Heb. 12:13; 1 Peter 2:24). It is the powerful and effective... **prayer of a righteous person** that brings the needed cure from God. This of course relates to the closing two verses of James’ letter. If James 5:14-16 refer to physical healing, then those verses seem disjointed with the verses before and after them. James again gave an example well known to his Jewish audience. First, it was the prophets (v. 10), then Job (v. 11), and now Elijah. James identified Elijah as a fellow sufferer. A man just like us could be translated “a man of like feeling” or “of
similar suffering” (vv. 10, 13). Elijah knew all the frailties of human nature but “in prayer he prayed” (proseuchē prosēyxato), that is, he prayed earnestly, and rain was withheld and later restored (1 Kings 17:1; 18:41-46). Earnest and persistent prayer, of course, is essential, whereas halfhearted prayer is self-defeating (cf. James 1:6-8).

**Lesson Introduction and Background**

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) wrote, “Anyone who wishes to pray must choose not only the right place but also the right time.” Bernard was an abbot of a medieval monastic community, and part of his responsibility was teaching the brothers of his house to pray. Daily routine was the rule in his environment, and prayers were offered multiple times, at specific hours. Bernard’s rigid schedule for prayers may not be suitable for us, but his advice about the timing of prayer still rings true. The noise of the world seems to drown out opportunities for prayer. We are too busy, too stressed, or too tired to take time to pray. Peter Marshall, who served as the U.S. Senate Chaplain from 1947 until his untimely death in 1949, once offered this prayer for that body: “Forgive us for thinking that prayer is a waste of time and help us to see that without prayer, our work is a waste of time.” The advice within that prayer applies to a group far larger than just elected officials. It applies to us. The Christian should be a person of prayer. The church should be a community of prayer. Yet too often we have allowed prayer to be crowded from our worship services and our lives. James wraps up his letter by discussing the necessity of timely prayer. He has lessons for us on both the purpose of prayer and the power of prayer. This is the focus of this week’s lesson.

The book of James is unlike any other book of the Bible in certain respects. Although it begins like a letter, it reads more like a sermon, speaking with firm authority. It is loosely organized, jumping from topic to topic with little connecting material. It is also intensely practical, showing relatively little interest in doctrinal principles or formulations. The author is interested in conduct; he teaches his readers how they should live as Christian believers in a world that is often hostile to Christian values. There are several men named James in the New Testament, but most scholars believe the author of this book is the James who was the half brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). According to church tradition, this James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem a few years after the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 2:9), serving in this role until his death sometime in the AD 60s. He was given the moniker James the Just because of his constant pleas for justice for his people. Although he was a Jewish Christian in the predominantly non-Christian, Jewish city of Jerusalem, he was respected by all the people for his integrity. A second-century church historian records that James went to the temple daily to pray and spent so much time on his knees that they “became [calloused] like that of a camel’s.” A word from James, then, seems a fitting end to this month’s lessons on prayer. In his little letter that we divide into five chapters, prayer is the final subject of his teaching, a position of importance and urgency that we should not ignore.

**Major Theme Analysis**

*Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV*

**Occasions for Prayer (James 5:13-14)**

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.

**Responding to circumstances (13)**

*Respond by praying so that we will not fall into temptation (Matt 26:41)*

41 "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

*Respond by praying in the Spirit on all occasions (Eph 6:18)*

18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.
Respond by praying continually (1 Thess 5:17)
17 pray continually;

Respond by praying with a mind that is clear and self-controlled (1 Peter 4:7)
7 The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.

Respond by praying in the Holy Spirit (Jude 1:20)
20 But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.

Respond by praying so not to be anxious about anything (Phil 4:6)
6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Respond by praying and give thanksgiving for others (1 Tim 2:1)
2 I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone

Respond by praying for the spiritual health of others (1 John 5:16)
16 If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that.

Physical illness (14)

Pray about illness, but know that some suffering is because of sin (2 Sam 12:15-17)
15 After Nathan had gone home, the Lord struck the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he became ill. 16 David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground. 17 The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them.

Pray about illness, but accept God's will (Matt 26:36-41)
36 Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." 37 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. 38 Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." 39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." 40 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. 41 "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

Pray about illness, but know that some sicknesses teaches that God's grace is sufficient (2 Cor 12:7-10)
7 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Pray about illness because sometimes sickness is used so that God might be glorified (John 11:4)
4 When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

Pray about illness because it is God who sustains and restores (Ps 41:3)
3 The Lord will sustain him upon his sickbed; In his illness, You restore him to health.
Accomplishments of Prayer (James 5:15-16)

15 And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.
16 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.

Healing (15)

God's power is manifested through healing (Matt 9:2-6)

2 Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." 3 At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!" 4 Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? 5 Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? 6 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . ." Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home."

Healing because it is one of the signs of those who believe (Mark 16:17-18)

17 And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; 18 they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.

Healing through the Name of Jesus because it is the only power that heals (Acts 4:7-10)

7 They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?" 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! 9 If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, 10 then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

Healing through God's compassion (Matt 14:14)

14 When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

God heals spiritually (Isa 53:5)

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Healing through humble repentance and prayer (2 Chron 7:14)

14 if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

Forgiveness (15)

Pray for forgiveness because Jesus taught it (Matt 6:12)

12 Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Pray for forgiveness as we repent of our wickedness (Acts 8:22)

22 Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart.
Pray for forgiveness because God is faithful (1 John 1:9)
9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Pray for forgiveness of others also (Acts 7:59-60)
59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

One must believe in God before he can pray for forgiveness (Heb 11:6)
6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Things changed (16)

Things change from death to life (2 Kings 20:1-6)
20 In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, "This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover." 2 Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord. 3 "Remember, O Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. 4 Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him: 5 "Go back and tell Hezekiah, the leader of my people, 'This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the Lord. 6 I will add fifteen years to your life.

Things change because God hears our prayers (Luke 1:13-14)
13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth.

Things change because angels are on our side (Job 33:22-26)
22 His soul draws near to the pit, and his life to the messengers of death. 23 "Yet if there is an angel on his side as a mediator, one out of a thousand, to tell a man what is right for him, 24 to be gracious to him and say, 'Spare him from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom for him’— 25 then his flesh is renewed like a child's; it is restored as in the days of his youth. 26 He prays to God and finds favor with him, he sees God's face and shouts for joy; he is restored by God to his righteous state.

Things change because of asking in Jesus' Name (John 14:12-14)
13 And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. 14 You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

Things change because of intercessory prayer (Acts 12:5-7)
5 So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. 6 The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. 7 Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

Prerequisite for Prayer (James 5:17-18)
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.
Earnestness (17)

Earnestness in faith (1 Tim 1:5)
5 The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

Earnestness to draw near to God (Heb 10:22)
22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

Earnestness in the wisdom of God (James 3:17)
17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Earnestness to seek and please God (Heb 11:5-6)
5 By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. 6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Earnestness in zealoussness and prayer (Rom 12:11-12)
11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

Earnestness because we have been given a trust (1 Cor 4:2)
2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

Faith (18)

Steadfast faith is relying on God regardless of the circumstances (2 Cor 1:8-9)
8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. 9 Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

Steadfast faith is keeping the faith to the finish (2 Tim 4:7)
7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Steadfast faith is faith and actions working together to make faith complete (James 2:22)
22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

Steadfast faith is throwing off everything that hinders (Heb 12:1)
12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Steadfast faith is confirming and proving God's trust (1 Cor 4:2)
2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

Steadfast faith is contending for the faith (Jude 1:3)
3 Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.
Steadfast faith is refined genuine faith (1 Peter 1:7)

7 These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

The Proper Use of the Tongue (James 5:13-20)

In the preceding verses, James has given two negative commands regarding the use of the tongue – they should not grumble, and they should not take oaths designed to be broken. Now, James turns to the positive use of the tongue. In verse 13, the tongue should be employed in prayer and praises to God. In verses 14-15, the one who is weak and without strength should call for the elders, who will pray for him. In verses 16-18, James gives a more general exhortation to confess our sins to one another and to pray for one another (using Elijah as an example of the power of prayer). In verses 19 and 20, James concludes his epistle with the finest use of the tongue – restoring one who has strayed from the truth. The first positive use of the tongue is found in the context of adversity. The “suffering” James refers to is a general term for affliction. This term is found only two other times in the New Testament, and their occurrence is highlighted below:

8 Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David; such is my gospel, 9 for which I suffer hardship to the point of imprisonment as a criminal, but God’s message is not imprisoned! (2 Timothy 2:8-9, emphasis mine).

You, however, be self-controlled in all things, endure hardship, do an evangelist’s work, fulfill your ministry (2 Timothy 4:5, emphasis mine).

This same term is used one time in the Greek translation (the Septuagint) of the Old Testament:

The LORD said, “You have compassion for the plant, something that you have not worked over nor made to grow, a thing that lasted a night and perished after a night (Jonah 4:10, emphasis mine).

The natural response to adversity is often expressed in inappropriate speech, but this is contrary to the example set by our Lord:

18 Slaves, be subject to your masters with all reverence, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the perverse. 19 For this finds God’s favor, if because of conscience toward God someone endures hardships in suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is it if you sin and are mistreated and endure it? But if you do good and suffer and so endure, this finds favor with God. 21 For to this you were called, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving an example for you to follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin nor was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was mankind, he did not answer back; when he suffered, he threatened no retaliation, but committed himself to God who judges justly. 24 He Himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we may leave sin behind and live for righteousness. 25 For you were going astray like sheep but now you have turned back to the shepherd and guardian of your souls (1 Peter 2:18-25; see also Romans 12:17-21). When adversity comes our way, we need divine wisdom (see James 3:13-18), and we are to pray to God, knowing He will give it to us without reprimanding us (James 1:5-8). Adversity should draw us toward God, and prayer should be our first response to our trials. In response to our prayers, He will give wisdom, strength, and peace of heart and mind (see Philippians 4:6-78). If one is in good spirits, then he should “sing praises.” James has said that, “All generous giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, . . .” (James 1:17a). This being the case, praise is the appropriate response. Here, James sees our praise being expressed in song. Surely this can be seen in the Book of Psalms. In fact, the Book of Psalms is a pattern for our response to adversity, or to prosperity. We have psalms of lament and petition, and we also have psalms of praise. It is evident that James sees music as contributing greatly to our communication with God. Music somehow engages and expresses what is in the soul. In the Old Testament, it would seem that men composed songs which they sang in private, but it would also seem that there was the expectation that these would be sung publicly in worship as well.
Verses 14 and 15 seem to refer to a special circumstance. As I currently understand these verses, they refer to a situation in which a person is very sick and in a weakened condition. They have little strength to do anything; perhaps they have only enough strength to verbalize their desire for a visit by the elders of the church. When summoned, the elders come to the bedside of that person to pray for them. The possibility that sin has been committed and is a contributing factor in the illness is raised, with the assurance that if confession is made, those sins will be forgiven. James mentions anointing with oil, and there are different opinions as to what role this oil plays. In ancient times, oil was actually employed as a healing agent (see Luke 10:34). I think that many would simply look upon the oil as symbolic, whether of the Holy Spirit, or of the healing process for which they are praying. In our church, the elders have prayed for a number of people over the years. At times we have used oil, and at times we have not. It is our feeling that it is not necessarily required, but it is still my personal preference to use it, unless circumstances would prevent it. We have always raised the question as to whether or not the ailing person is aware of some unconfessed sin, that might be related to the illness. We then pray that if it is God’s will, the sick person might be healed. We believe that God may heal the person physically, but we do not dare to presume that He must. (James has just cautioned us about presuming upon the future – James 4:13-17.) We believe that affliction can be a test of one’s faith, and even a means to our growth (see Psalm 73; James 1:2-4). We need to be careful not to assume that healing is a thing of the past, but we must also be careful not to presume that God must heal because we ask. It is our conviction that God has never been obliged to heal, but that in His grace He does sometimes grant physical healing. In my experience of over 30 years of ministry I have seen several miraculous interventions of God. And, I have seen other instances where God did not heal, but He did give great peace and a wonderful testimony. I should add that this is the text Roman Catholicism uses to justify the practice of the ritual of extreme unction, an act whereby one is supposedly prepared for death. This most certainly does not fit our text, which looks for the sick person’s recovery, not his demise. William Barclay has a good comment regarding the practice of extreme unction:

“For many centuries the Church consistently used anointing as a means of healing the sick. In fact it is important to note that the sacrament of union, or anointing, was in the early centuries always designed as a means of cure, and not as a preparation for death as it now is in the Roman Catholic Church. It was not until A.D. 852 that this sacrament did, in fact, become the Sacrament of Extreme Uction, administered to prepare for death.”

Verses 16-18 expand upon the instruction of verses 14-15 in a more general way. In verses 14 and 15, James was speaking of a more specialized case, where someone weakened by their illness would need to call upon the elders for prayer and recovery, and possibly for confession of sins. James now makes this a more general instruction. He calls upon the saints to “confess your sins one to another and pray for one another so that you may be healed” (verse 16). This verse has been greatly abused. It is the basis, for example, of the Roman Catholic doctrine of auricular confession to a priest. Martin Luther is said to have very quickly brushed this away with the words,

“A strange confessor! His name is “One another.”

Quite obviously there is a substantial difference between “one another” and “a priest,” or even “the preacher.”

James is not requiring every believer to publicly confess his sins to the entire church. There may be specific instances where this may be required, as in the case of church discipline. But we know from texts like Matthew 18:15-20 that sin is best dealt with privately. I believe that James is urging those who have sinned against a brother to privately confess their sin to the one they have offended and to seek their forgiveness and reconciliation, just as our Lord taught:

21 ‘You have heard that it was said to an older generation, ‘Do not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders will be subjected to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that anyone who is angry with a brother will be subjected to judgment. And whoever insults a brother will be brought before the council, and whoever says ‘Fool’ will be sent to fiery hell. 23 So then, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your gift. 25 Reach agreement quickly with your accuser while on the way to court, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the warden, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 I tell you the truth, you will not at all get out until you have paid the last penny’ (Matthew 5:21-26).

The inference of James 5:16 is that there will be some sickness that is the result of unconfessed sin related to relationships – sin against a brother or sister in the body of Christ. The first step to healing is confession and reconciliation. This may be the reason that Jesus first forgave the paralytic of his sins, and then healed him (Matthew 9:1-8). Those who were healed were instructed to sin no more (John 5:14; 8:11). If I understand James correctly, he is
not saying that confession heals us, but that prayer does. He uses the example of Elijah to emphasize the fact that the prayer of a righteous man has great effectiveness. Elijah was a man of like passions, a man like us. He was not perfect, as a study of his life makes clear. His prayer to resign from his ministry and from life itself was rejected by God, who told him to go back to work (1 Kings 19). But his prayers to stop the rains and to start them were acts of obedience on his part, and God answered them. Note the fact that the word “prayer” is singular, not plural, and so is the word “man.” Here, James is not emphasizing the need for persistence in prayer, though our Lord did so (Luke 18:1-8), along with His apostles (Ephesians 6:18; Philippians 1:4; Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; 1 Timothy 5:5; 2 Timothy 1:3). We should surely be persistent in prayer, but that is not the point here. James is saying that one prayer, prayed by one person, can be exceedingly powerful. It is not confession that accomplishes great things, so that the more we confess, the more miracles God will perform on our behalf. It is not even the number of prayers that we pray, as though the quantity of our prayers moves God. It is the heathen who vainly repeat their prayers (Matthew 6:7).

I believe two things are in view here. First, unreconciled relationships hinder prayer:

Husbands, in the same way, treat your wives with consideration as the weaker partners and show them honor as fellow heirs of the grace of life. In this way nothing will hinder your prayers (1 Peter 3:7).

Second, I believe that James is stressing righteousness. James is not saying that many saints should be praying, or that one man is praying many prayers; he is stressing the fact that the one man who is praying his one prayer is righteous. Confession of sin is important, then, because it heals relationships and because it is essential for righteousness. I need to pause to be sure that I am not misunderstood. I do believe that we should persevere in prayer, until God has made His answer clear to us (see 2 Corinthians 12:8-10). I do believe that it is good for many saints to join in prayer over important matters. But I am strongly opposed to the current trend of thought that states or implies that the number of prayers offered or the number of those praying is what moves God. God delights in the prayers of His people, but prayer is not a work of man that moves God to action due to the volume or intensity of our efforts. We do not need a “moral majority” to move God. We do not need to amass sufficient “prayer power” to see God’s hand. One elderly widow, praying privately in her closet, may effectively bring about great intervention from God. Let us have concerts of prayer, but let us not think that God is moved by mere numbers. The last two verses of chapter 5 serve as the conclusion to this epistle. Some feel that it is a rather abrupt ending. I would prefer to believe that in many ways it captures the spirit of the entire epistle. From chapter 1 on to the end of the epistle James has spoken about our use of the tongue. Allow me to briefly review:

Chapter 1: In verse 13, some were inclined to say that the source of their temptation (and sin) was God. James forbids this. In verse 19, James tells us to be “slow to speak.” In verse 26, he writes that if one thinks he is religious but fails to control his tongue, he is deceiving his heart and his religion is futile.

Chapter 2: The prejudice of the “usher” is shown by what he says to the rich man, in contrast to his words to the poor man (verses 2-3). Then, in verses 14-19, deals with hypocrisy, which is often a discrepancy between our words and our works. A man who merely speaks words of blessing is a hypocrite. It does the man who is hungry and in need of clothing no good to merely pronounce a blessing on him about food and clothing.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3 is almost all about one’s words. James specifically addresses those who wish to be teachers, warning them of the power of the tongue for evil, and of the stricter judgment teachers will consequently receive. The last verses of chapter 3 (13-18) contrast the way godly wisdom works, as opposed to the empty talk of worldly wisdom.

Chapter 4: In chapter 4, we find much more about words. Conflicts and quarrels (verse 1) usually begin with verbal warfare. If the lips reveal what is true of the heart, then the grief, mourning and weeping of verse 9 reveal a truly repentant heart, while laughter would be inappropriate. The arrogance that is the opposite of true Christian humility is reflected in our words, first in speaking against one another (verses 11-12), and also in speaking arrogantly about future success (verses 13-17).

Chapter 5: Up to verse 19, James has said a good deal about the tongue. In verse 1, James refers to the weeping and wailing of hell. The unused, hoarded wealth of the rich testifies against them, as do the cries of their unpaid (or underpaid) workers (verses 2-4). The righteous exhibit their righteousness by their words – by what they don’t speak, as well as by what they say. The righteous do not grumble (verse 9), nor do they take oaths that are not according to truth (verse 12). The tongue of the righteous should call out to God in prayer in
The seeking and practice of wisdom is evident by our words and our works. True religion reflects the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to “seek and to save those who are lost” (Luke 19:10). True religion does not turn against a wayward brother (unless required, after the full process of discipline has been carried out – see Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5); true religion seeks to restore a wayward brother (see also 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; Galatians 6:1-22; Thessalonians 3:14-15; 2 Timothy 2:23-26; 1 John 5:16-17; Jude 22-23). The words of James 5:20 might be misinterpreted. It is apparent that the one whose soul is saved from death is the wayward one. But whose “multitude of sins” are covered? It is surely not the sins of the one seeking to restore the wayward one; it is the sins of the wayward one that is in view. And just who is this one who has “wandered from the truth”? I am inclined to think that the words of James are general enough that he may be speaking of both the saved who have departed from the truth, as well as the lost. We know from James 2:19 that one could believe the truth in an academic way and yet not really be saved.

1 So get rid of all evil and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. 2 And yearn like newborn infants for pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up to salvation, 3 if you have experienced the Lord’s kindness (1 Peter 2:1-3).

7 For the ground that has soaked up the rain that frequently falls on it and yields useful vegetation for those who tend it receives a blessing from God. 8 But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is useless and about to be cursed; its fate is to be burned. 9 But in your case, dear friends, even though we speak like this, we are convinced of better things relating to salvation. 10 For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love you have demonstrated for his name, in having served and continuing to serve the saints. 11 But we passionately want each of you to demonstrate the same eagerness for the fulfillment of your hope until the end, 12 so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and perseverance inherit the promises (Hebrews 6:7-12; see also 1 John 2:19; 2 John 9). What greater words can be spoken than those that seek to turn a sinner to Christ? What greater work is there on earth than the saving of men’s souls? If we have been left here to carry out the work of our Lord, then surely seeking to save sinners is the highest work of all. Notice how James has changed the focus from the beginning verses of chapter 1 to the closing verses of chapter 5. In the midst of our adversities, our focus initially tends to be on ourselves. James exhorts us to joyfully endure our afflictions and to pray for wisdom. He calls upon us to act in a way that is consistent with true religion. In the closing verses of chapter 1, James says that true religion seeks to assist the helpless and needy, the orphans and widows. In the closing verses of chapter 5, the focus is on others and their need for repentance. The greatest need of all is for the sinner to turn to Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of eternal life. The greatest need for the saint is to be walking in the Spirit and waiting for the return of the Savior, standing apart from the corruption of the world. The fruit of the righteous is like a tree producing life, and the one who wins souls is wise (Proverbs 11:30).

(Adapted from URL: https://bible.org/seriespage/real-religion-requires-endurance-james-57-20)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

It seems to me that a wrong way of thinking about prayer is that prayer works. This treats prayer as if it were some type of energy we can tap, a power we can wield and control. Imagine prayer working like that: every time we ask God for anything and end the prayer “in Jesus’ name,” we immediately receive what we ask for. In that case, prayer would be like rubbing Aladdin’s lamp, and God would be no more than a powerful genie. Consider a different way of thinking about prayer: not as a power we tap, but as a privilege we exercise. It is not that prayer works, but that God works through prayer. God actively listens to the prayers of his people to bring needed healing of the body, of the soul, and of the community. Prayer requires an active role from us. We pray about our own needs and those of others. Prayers are not magical words that activate a cosmic force for our benefit. Rather, they are personal entreaties to God, our Lord and Master who hears and answers in accordance with his will.
Heart of the Lesson from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

To some extent, all of the world's problems come from failing to follow godly advice. This week's verses are applicable to believers in every walk of life and encourage good spiritual health.

Situations and suggestions (James 5:13-15)

In a way, the book of James is similar to the book of Proverbs, where godly wisdom is applied to diverse aspects of life. Notice that in these three verses, James dealt with two negative situations, affliction and sickness, but considered happy times as well. There is a godly way to behave in all kinds of situations, whether bad or good. The affliction being spoken of in James 5:13 refers to suffering due mainly to one's faith in Christ. The Greek word used here is also used in verse 10 in reference to the persecution and hostility the prophets of old endured. In our sanctified perspective, we could say that James's advice—pray—is only too obvious. Nevertheless, how many of us get discouraged when we encounter affliction and think only about how wrong other people are? Instead of telling our problem to God, we often wallow in self-pity and wonder why we are so unlucky. While the exhortation to pray seems to be a simplistic instruction, obviously it is really needed. The next bit of advice regarding happiness and merriment is important today because it may actually present one of the worst pitfalls for many believers in America. The problem is not happiness itself but rather the natural tendency to indulge ourselves when we feel good and thus forget God. Everything we enjoy in life comes from the hand of God. When we come to pleasant times in life, we should keep ourselves on track spiritually by directing our thoughts to the Lord and thanking Him for His goodness to us. What better way to do this than to sing and make "melody in your heart to the Lord" (Eph. 5:19)? Anyone in the church who became physically sick was encouraged not to view it solely as a matter for medicine and doctors. Certainly they have their place and should not be rejected, but James's godly wisdom advises believers to consider illness a spiritual matter that should involve the spiritual leaders of the church. If the church elders anointed the infirm with oil (commonly used medicinally) and prayed over them, the focus would naturally be turned to the Lord, the One who ultimately holds all healing power. This might also help the sick examine their lives and repent of any sin.

Power and prayer (James 5:16-18)

In connection with the previous situation of a sick person confessing sin, James went on to encourage all believers to be willing to confess their sins to each other and pray for their brothers and sisters in Christ. This promotes spiritual healing in the body of Christ. Having believers in the church who are spiritually healthy is very important because they have the spiritual strength to accomplish a great deal through prayer. A significant example of this is the Prophet Elijah. Through prayer he brought desperate times on apostate Israel. For three and a half years, God withheld the rain because of Elijah's request. Not only that, but God also heeded the prayer of Elijah when he asked for the rains to return. God is not obligated to do everything His children ask, but we know that He is pleased to fulfill those requests that are in line with His will. Let us work to keep each other spiritually healthy. Then our prayers, like Elijah's, will be powerful and effective.

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

1. We should go to the church and seek prayer for our sicknesses and hardships (Jas. 5:13-14)
2. Sometimes God uses suffering to draw attention to sin in our lives (vs. 15)
3. God will forgive you if you confess your sin to Him
4. A loving community grows in holiness together and prays for each other (vs. 16)
5. We should seek prayer first because it is very powerful
6. Powerful prayer can come from any righteous person (vss. 17-18). You do not have to be a special hero of the faith