

Offering Prayer
James 5:13-18
May 28, 2023

Opening Prayer

In July of 1961, the 38 members of the Green Bay Packers football team assembled for the first day of training camp. They expected their coach, Vince Lombardi, to begin building on their experience by showing them new plays and new ways to win. When the meeting began, Lombardi held up a football and said, "Gentlemen, this is a football." And with that he started talking the basics of the game.

I know I am not anything like Lombardi and we are not a football team, but as I began working on this message on prayer, I sensed the Spirit leading me to go back to the fundamentals and start at the beginning. So, before we talk about the playbook and the impact of prayer, let's talk about prayer.

The first and most important part of prayer has to do with the first and most important part of our spiritual growth. In fact, what I am about to tell you is so important that it determines how healthy your spiritual growth and life in Christ will be. I am talking about the picture you and I carry of God.

Who is God to you? Do you picture God as a dictator requiring burdensome standards that you try to get around? Is He a doting grandfather figure who, with the right words and actions, can be motivated to give you the gifts you are asking for? Maybe He is the distant judge dressed in robes and seated behind an elevated desk with gavel in hand just waiting to pronounce a verdict. I don't know what your primary picture of God is, but I know we all have one and it impacts the way we relate to Him.

Let me ask it this way. When God thinks about you, what expression is on His face? What goes through His mind? What emotion does He feel? Your answers to these questions point to the picture you have of God.

The single most important discovery we can make is that God loves us unconditionally. This is a *discovery* we make and not a lesson we learn. It can be taught and taught and taught but until it is caught, we really don't get it.ⁱ

A good picture of God is the image of the prodigal son's father. Even though you have offended, turned your back and walked away from Him, the moment He sees you taking steps toward Him, He starts running to you to embrace you and welcome you home. Remember what James said in 4:8? "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." That is an amazing promise that helps us clarify our picture of God.

The experience of God's love and goodness is woven into our prayers. We can read the classics and memorize all the relevant Bible passages, but until we regularly engage in conversation with our loving Father who is eager to hear of everything that is on our hearts

no matter how mundane and trivial it may seem, until prayer becomes a regular part of our lives it remains a task we do more than a relationship we enjoy.

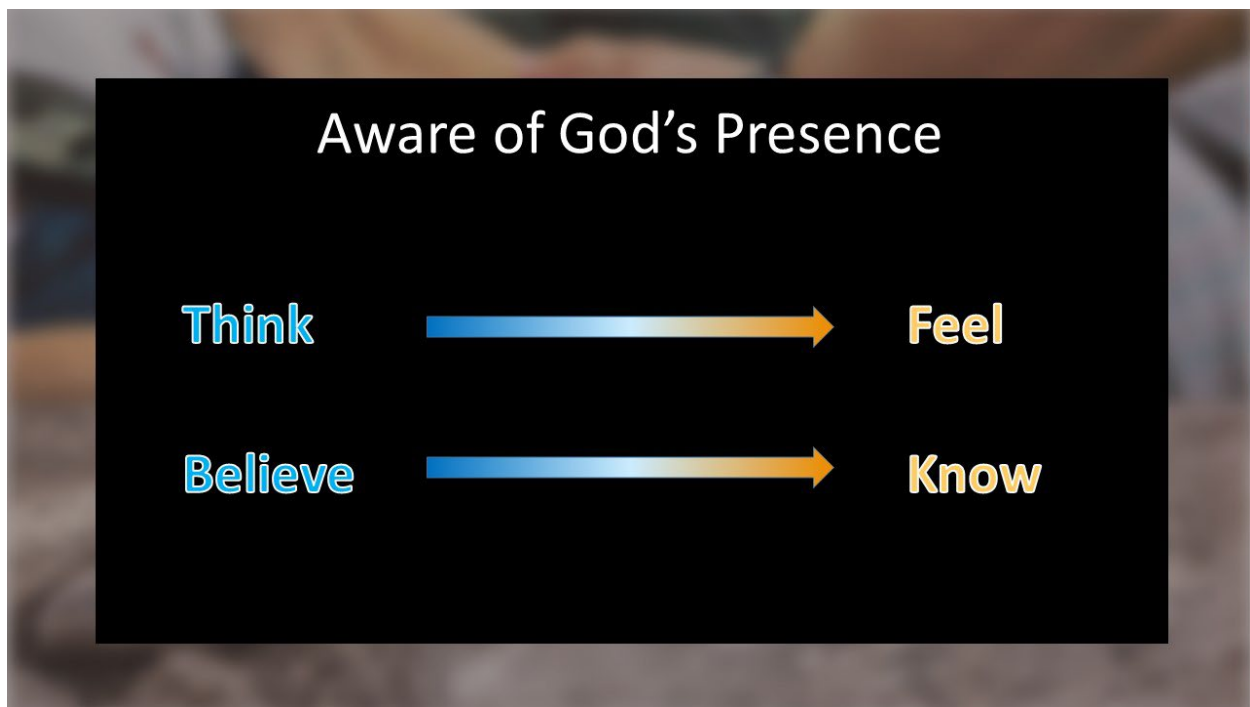
Think of the best friend you have and the conversations you have with this person. You know who I mean. This is the kind of friend you can call and, even after years of not being together, you can pick up the conversation right where you left off. It is as if no time has passed. This friendship and depth requires three things to exist.

First, whether it is by text, phone or in person, you need to be aware of your friend's presence. If he or she is not there, then you are just talking to yourself. Second, there needs to be a heart connection. While you will exchange information, those mundane things of life are communicated within a spirit-to-spirit connection that mutually blesses and encourages your souls. You are not just ordering lunch at Wendy's. There is something far deeper going on here.

And third, you need to share a deepening trust. You know you can trust that person with anything you share and that they will respond to that information in a way that is for your good.

You know what this kind of relationship is like and so you know the basics of prayer. Prayer requires the same three things.

It begins with an **awareness of God's presence** (Slide 1)



That awareness does not have to be deep. It usually starts with belief. I believe God is present because He said He is. I think He is here because it makes logical and theological sense. While that is where we may begin, that is not where we end.

Notice how the color gradient moves from cooler to warmer hues. Cooler—to believe or think is like a text message without emojis. It is good but there is a lot missing (tone, non verbals, etc). Warmer—to feel and know is like a face-to-face conversation with a safe person in a private room. Anything can be shared with trusting confidence.

Prayer requires that, at some level, we are aware of God's presence. But it does not stop there. We also need to be **connected with His Spirit** (slide 2).



At its root, prayer is not about me getting what I want from a hesitant deity, it is about the intimate connection of two beings. While a human-to-human relationship involves mutuality—where we bless each other in similar ways—the human-to-God relationship involves abiding and receiving.

Our heart, spirit and will all describe the same part of our lives. Our heart is the executive control center; it is where decisions are made. Our will is the decision switch that decides how and when something will be done, and our spirit is the power source that puts things in motion to act on the decision.

All three of these—the executive control center, the decision switch and the animating power source—need a guide. They are not supposed to be autonomous. They need a guide that aligns them with what is true so that the decisions made and actions taken serve to honor God more than self.

This is part of the process of our becoming conformed to the likeness of Jesus. Our spirit is transformed by God's Spirit when our heart and will progressively become more closely aligned with God's heart and will.

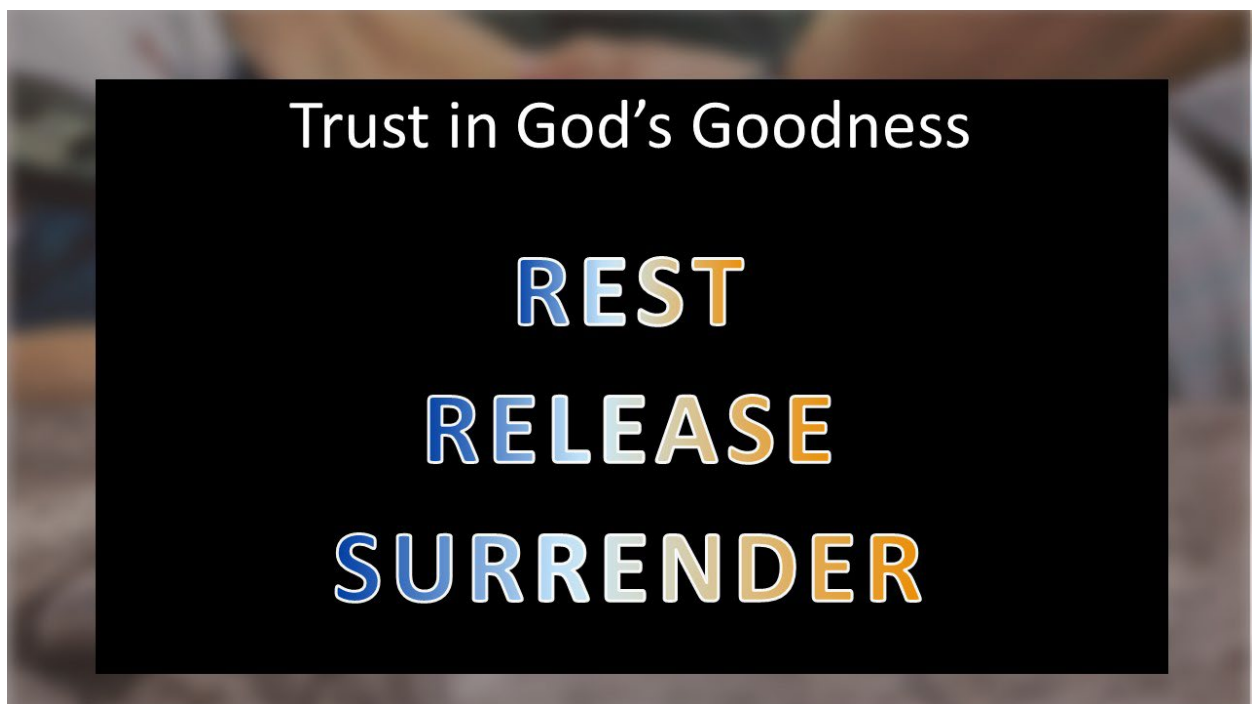
Connecting with His Spirit is about receiving from His Spirit what we actually need and not just what we think we need. A branch on its own may want to bear fruit and pursues the things it thinks it needs to get that fruit but it is not able to bear fruit on its own. However, when it is grafted into the vine it receives its life from the vine and because of the vine's life flowing into it, the branch is empowered to bear fruit.

We need a guide and a power source that is beyond us. So, let His Spirit fill you. Let His heart overrun yours. Let His will direct yours.

The color gradient within the letters communicates how this can begin at a distance with cool steps that may feel a little wooden, but it can grow to a place of warmth where we sincerely desire and eagerly seek this alignment. This is the place where we bring to the Father everything that is on our hearts, no matter how trivial it may seem. We bring our desires, requests and concerns to Him and ask what He thinks about it.

It is here that we move to the final element needed for prayer—the element of trust. Trust in God's goodness allows us to pray, "This is what I desire Lord, but if this is not what you want for me then please change my desire. I want to want what you want and so I trust you with the outcome."

Prayer includes an awareness of God's presence, a connection to His Spirit and a **deepening trust in His goodness** (Slide 3).



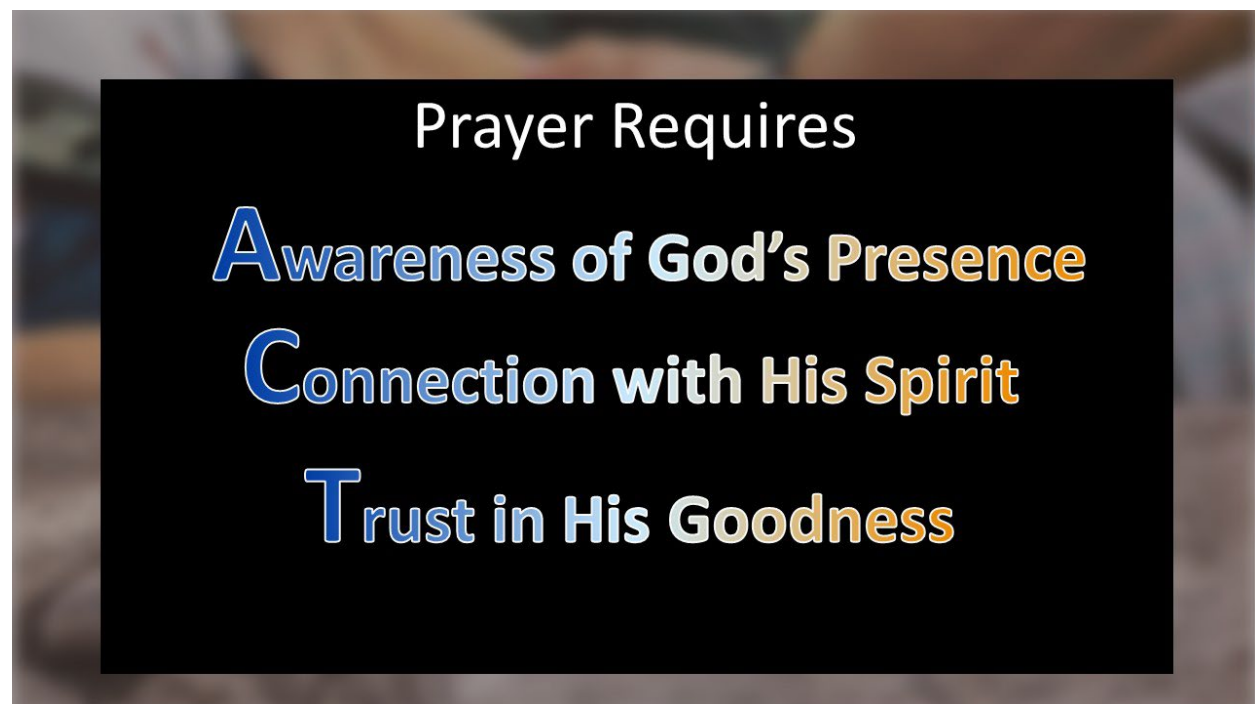
We share our hearts and bring our needs to a good God who loves us more than we can know. Out of love for us He will not always do what we ask Him to do. Trust allows us to say, "I don't understand what God is doing right now, but I know He is good and that His love for me means He will always work for my good and His glory."

God is not a God we can fully understand (His ways are not our ways), but He is one we can fully trust. This path of trust leads us to be indifferent toward those things that don't help us love God or love others while we stay engaged with the things that do.

This is what led Ignatius of Loyola to conclude that everything in life—whether I view it as positive or negative, desirable or undesirable—everything in life holds the potential of calling forth in us a greater response to our life in God. Therefore, I want and I choose that which better leads to God deepening His life in me, even if it is something I wouldn't choose.

To trust God is to rest in God, to release our concerns and needs into His hands and to surrender to His goodness.

The picture of growing trust can be described by a swimmer on the beach. If God's grace is an ocean and gentle ocean waves symbolize the fullness of God's never-ending grace, then a growing trust is learning to leave the beach and step into the surf. Ankle deep. Knee deep. Waist deep. Over time we keep moving away from the control we once had on the shore until we can no longer reach the bottom. At that point we are buoyed by God's love and grace as we trust Him to provide what we truly need.



Three key elements of prayer. Awareness of God's Presence. Connection with His Spirit and trust in His goodness. So we pour out our hearts with full trust that God will respond to our prayers in ways that are good and best for us. And the only way to learn to pray is to pray, to act on what we know and do it.ⁱⁱ

In Matthew 6:6 Jesus said, "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then the Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." These three things create the prayer room for us and the more we practice this the more we carry this prayer room wherever we go.

In one of his last recordings, Tim Keller said "prayer is to the soul what blood is to the body." If we want our soul to have what it needs to flourish, we need to engage time in prayer, both the quiet moments alone with God and those frenetic moments as we practice His presence even in the busyness of life.

There are many different ways to express prayer and many different results of prayer, but both the expression and result begin with even the tiniest degree of these three elements.

With this basic prayer foundation in mind, let's now turn to the text and consider what happens when we pray. James 5:13-18 (NLT)

¹³ Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. ¹⁴ Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.

¹⁶ Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. ¹⁷ Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years! ¹⁸ Then, when he prayed again, the sky sent down rain and the earth began to yield its crops.

We won't be able to cover everything here today so I think it might be helpful if we worked backwards through this text. Let's begin with verses 16-17.

The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. ¹⁷ Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly...

When James wrote this letter, the miracle of securing rain through prayer was the same as raising the dead through prayer. If your prayers could bring rain, then you were seen as someone who was set apart by God.

Elijah's prayers did both so he holds a place of honor right up there next to Moses. But notice what James says about this bigger-than-life figure. "Elijah was as human as we are." The NIV says "Elijah was a man *just like us*." James is telling his readers that those with faith in Jesus as the Christ have the same connection to the same power source Elijah had. He is like us; we are like him.

The angel told Zechariah that John the Baptist would come "in the spirit and power of Elijah." In Matthew 11:11 Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Even those who are least in the kingdom of heaven are greater than Elijah.ⁱⁱⁱ He is talking about you and me!

The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power. I'll leave you to think through what earnest prayer looks like. Let's take a minute and ask, who is a righteous person?

Scripture teaches that a righteous person is one who does what is right in God's eyes from the heart. They are not a pharisee who is doing "right" things from a list. They are those who have received the new heart of the new Covenant spoken of in Ezekiel and Jeremiah (Ez 36:26-27; Jer 31:33). God's law is now written on their hearts and His Spirit dwells in them so they do what is right from an inner desire. In other words, this is a person who has aligned his or her life with God's pattern for living and not the world's. (Romans 12:1-2). Said another way, this is a person who has faith in Jesus.

The word faith is interesting. It comes from the Greek word, *pistis* and it means confidence in or reliance upon someone or something. Synonyms would be words like believe, trust or fidelity. When it is used in connection with a king or kingdom the word's meaning shifts a bit from faith to faithfulness or allegiance.

So my *pistis* (confidence in) in the king is not that I believe he has authority while I go out and do my own thing. My *pistis* is a faith/belief that impacts my actions so that I live under his authority. I surrender my heart, will and spirit to his. I am faithful to the king by aligning my life to his commands and my plans to the purposes of his kingdom.

New Testament writers understood Jesus to be king and that His kingdom is real. Having faith in Jesus, then, is to give full allegiance to this king.

A righteous person is one whose *pistis* (faith, faithfulness and allegiance) is moving from cooler to warmer hues. Moving from thinking to feeling, from believing to knowing. A righteous person is one who is learning how to more fully abide and receive, rest, release and surrender. In some ways, a righteous person is one who is learning how to pray more effectively.

I started out saying that our spiritual growth depends on our picture of God, but it also depends on the picture we have of ourselves and who God redeemed us to be. Elijah was as human as you and me. It was God's power in him that made the difference. The same is true for us.

And so James exhorts us to pray with the fervency of Elijah knowing that God can accomplish great things through our prayers. He can bring healing from disease. He can bring healing from sin. He can bring a unity of spirit that allows us to confess our sins to one another and then accept and support each other in prayer, even though we know our secret fears and worries.

I had to make some hard choices in preparing this message. There is a lot I've left out. We didn't cover how cheerful people who are singing praise are under the same suffering trial as those who are told to pray (consider it all joy when...James 1:2-4). As those cheerful sufferers express their prayer in song they can encourage and strengthen others who are struggling to find God's joy in their moment. We didn't talk about the power of that.

We didn't talk about why God does not always answer prayer in the way we hope. We didn't talk about how God does not always heal. He didn't heal Paul or Epaphroditus, but these two had great faith. God had other blessings in mind for them.

And speaking of faith, it would have been good to talk about the faith behind the prayer of faith because it is not about how much faith we have but who our faith is in. We didn't touch on anointing oil, elders in the church and the two commands in verse 16 to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another.

But I hope that what I've shared is what we need for this day. A reminder of the basics of prayer, that it is not about receiving requests; it is about connecting with, abiding in and surrendering to the God who loves us more than we can know. With these things in mind, go back and work through verses 13 to 16 and the Lord will give you insight into all this.

Communion Meal

Healthy prayer and spiritual growth both begin with an accurate picture of who God is and what He has redeemed us to be. This meal that we share together is a tangible reminder of God's love and our redemption to new life.

In Romans 5:7-8 Paul said, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." The Message translation says the Jesus sacrificed His life for us "while we were of no use whatever to him."

That's who He is. God loves you.

In Ephesians 1 and 2 Pauls tells us that even though we were dead, God made us alive with Christ, gave us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms (Eph 1:3; 2:5-6).

This is what He has redeemed us to be, and this is just the start of who you are and what awaits you when Jesus returns.

The bread speaks of the price Jesus paid to rescue you. The cup speaks of the Covenant He made to forgive you and open the way for your full redemption.

Sharing the Supper.

Prayer

Help us abide and receive your life flowing into us, like a branch receiving from the vine. Teach us to grow in the intimacy of prayer by turning our attention to you and discovering who you really are. Help us discover the love you offer so that we might become indifferent to the things of this world and more fully engaged with the realities of your presence and your kingdom.

We are yours, Lord Jesus. Amen.

ⁱ You can study a restaurant's menu and read reviews but you won't *know* the food is good until you go and taste the food for yourself. You can memorize Bible verses and talk about the nuances of John 3:16 but until you experience the love of God you cannot really *know* how wide and long and high and deep is the love of God for you (Eph 3:18-19).

ⁱⁱ It is interesting to note that when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, His answer was to have them pray.

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul said that even though we were dead, God made us alive with Christ, gave us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms (Eph 1:3; 2:5-6).