



TEST NO.10: THE SPIRITUALITY TEST

We've reached the end of our series on the Letter of James. And to cap things off, James ends with the spirituality test. Not hugging a tree or sitting in the lotus position or trying to contact a deceased relative or aliens – he's talking prayer. And he gives us one of the strongest encouragements to pray in the whole Bible:

James 5:13-20

In the movie *Meet The Parents*, there's a scene where Greg (played by Ben Stiller) is invited to dinner with his girlfriend Pam's parents. And Pam's dad (played by Robert De Niro) asks him to say grace. And the prayer that follows is a rambling mix of spiritual jargon, lines taken from prayers that have nothing to do with giving thanks for food, and the word 'smorgasbord.' It's a great scene!

What it illustrates is that prayer is something we might understand in theory, but don't really get in practice. Even as Christians. E.g. if you want to make sure people don't turn up to Church, just tell 'em it's a prayer meeting – that'll do it! So, what's the problem here?

- It might be we don't have the confidence.
- It might be we don't have the ability.
- It might be we don't have the time.

- It might be we don't have the passion.
- It might be we simply don't have the faith.

Whatever, there's a disconnect between our words and our actions.

So, why pray? James gives us 5 reasons:

1) We Need It – When We're Bruised. "Is any of you in trouble? He should pray," is the first thing James says (vs13). Now trouble can come in various forms – think marriage, family, friends, neighbours, work, church, faith – and no-one's immune, not even Christians. The consolation is: the great heroes of the Bible knew those troubles, too – Abraham, Moses, David, Jeremiah – and they let God know about it (David even sung about it!). And James here is telling us that we can do the same – that we can tell God how we feel, even when we're angry. Because God loves us, He understands (in Jesus He's been there), and He's big enough to take it. So talk to Him!

2) We Need It – When We're Blessed. Next James says, "Is anyone happy? He should sing songs of praise!" It can be instinctive to talk to God when things are going badly, but it's just as important to talk when things are going well. But – and this is important, too – God isn't on some kind of ego-trip here, as if He needs this. No, God wants us to praise Him because *we* need it! In what way? Well, it encourages us to appreciate the people around us, to appreciate what we have, to appreciate life – to appreciate God! And that will make us happier, more thankful people. So what have you got to be thankful for today? Take a breath – that's one thing at least!

3) We Need It – When We're Bound (vs14-16). Let me make something clear: James is not saying there's anything sacred about olive oil (it's merely a symbol, of the Spirit); nor is he saying that God is going to heal us of every sickness we might suffer – no matter how strong our faith is. No, James isn't talking about healing as such: he's talking deliverance from sinful habits. The clue is in the original Greek, where it reads, "And the prayer offered in faith will save the sick person" (rather than 'heal' them). That doesn't mean we shouldn't pray for someone who's ill, but the emphasis here is on deliverance (which is why James refers to forgiveness and confession, too).

4) We Need It – When We're Beat. In vs17-18 James is referring to events recorded in 1 Kings 17-18, the war between King Ahab and the prophet Elijah – part of which involved Elijah praying for drought and then for rain. And just like Elijah, we are engaged in a war, too – a spiritual war, with the devil. Now you're might be thinking, "But I'm no Elijah." And neither am I. And neither was James, which is why he says, "Elijah was a man *just like us.*" I.e. Elijah was weak, afraid, imperfect, discouraged, isolated, depressed, and even ready to quit sometimes. But Elijah prayed – passionately, persistently, and purposefully – and he saw a breakthrough. And so can we.

5) We Need It – When We're Bailing. James ends with these words: "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth ..." (vs19). It's a sad fact that some Christians can spiritually drift. The good news is: God can use others to restore them – but how we do it is important. Because sometimes

we can be so desperate to see things happen we push the person the other way! So what do we do? According to Galatians 6:1-2, we need to be gentle (think 'Fragile – handle with care'). But we also need to be prayerful, because prayer has the power to change things on a level that we can't. To change the people involved. To change the situation. And to change us.

The Score

Now James didn't just tell people to pray or explain why it matters – he did it himself. James (or Jacob as he should be called) had a nickname – 'Jacob the Just' – and even his enemies regarded him as devout (there's a tradition that says he would go to the temple every day, and he prayed so much he had the knees of a camel). James died a hero in 62AD, 20 years after writing this letter, when a mob threw him from a window of the temple and stoned him to death. But James' letter lived on, and God has used it to challenge and encourage millions of Christians ever since. And part of the reason is that he? Prayed.

How can we pass the spirituality test? Well, it would be easy to go through a list of practical opportunities – church services, homegroups, prayer-triplets, prayer-walking – and say "just do it", *Nike*-style. Or to make the point that unless we pray, we won't see God act. But if our hearts aren't in it, that may not be the best place to start – because, like most of James' letter, it starts with the heart. So be honest with God, ask Him to change you, and to give you a passion for Him. If I've got my theology right, spiritual transformation is from the inside-out, and it's more to do with God than us anyway. So, best to start there.

All of which brings us to this final set of questions:

- Is prayer an easy or difficult thing for you? Why?
- What can you do to make prayer more a part of you?
- Who or what do you feel the need to pray for now?