

## Prayer is Powerful and Effective

James 5:13-20 (NIV)

<sup>13</sup> Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup> Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup> And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup> Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. <sup>17</sup> Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. <sup>18</sup> Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. <sup>19</sup> My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, <sup>20</sup> remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

This is our fourth and final week look at the book of James. The overall theme has been that true Christian faith expresses itself through actions. Be quick to listen; slow to speak; slow to become angry. Do not show favoritism, but rather love your neighbor as yourself. Include God in your plans – Deo Volente, God-willing. James writes command after command to lead his readers back to proper Christian living.

Now James is wrapping up his letter. He has just instructed his readers not to swear by heaven or earth or by anything else. Instead, he says let your “Yes” be yes, and your “No,” no, or you will be condemned. (verse 12) You don’t need to use God’s name to make your statements true.

Instead of leaving you with a prohibition, James leads us again to faith expressing itself through actions properly. Here is how to use God’s name: “Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.” (verses 13-14) Pray when you are in trouble. Sing praises when you are happy. Call elders to pray over you when you are sick. Pray even after you have sinned against someone that you may be healed from your sin. You use God’s name correctly by praying.

Prayer is a staple of Christian living, but do we use it in the ways James lists? I know that some of you are quick to pray, quick to give thanks. Thinking of how some of you are so quick to pray in all circumstances, I end up feeling a bit like a pray-er failure. Yes, I do pray. Yes, I pray when you ask me to pray for you or when you ask me to keep someone in my prayers. But then I hear about people who spend an hour or two a night in prayer. If I tried doing that, I would probably start nodding off in about 5 minutes. So, during a normal day, I try to stop and pray frequently, but then there are so many more moments when I do not.

Do I neglect my prayers because I have never made a habit of it? Do I neglect them because I didn’t grow up doing it that way? Maybe. Do I neglect praying to God because I’ve prayed to him before, but he didn’t answer? Therefore, I don’t know that I buy into the whole prayer thing. Maybe I’ve been “burned” in the past and haven’t seen my prayers answered in the way that I thought they should be. Maybe there is another reason why I neglect making use of prayer. Maybe it’s because the first place I turn for solutions is to myself. Maybe when things go right, I give myself some satisfaction knowing that I did something to accomplish this. It went according to my plan. Good job. When I’m sick, is my first thought to pray, or is my first thought, “Did I take my medication today? Do I need to take the day off and rest in order to get better faster? Is it severe enough that I have to schedule a doctor’s appointment? What can I do to make myself better?” I go to me solutions instead of God solutions.

Neglecting prayer is like having a good, benevolent multi-millionaire graciously hand you their card and tell you that if you need anything at any time to call him, and then you never call. You put the card in your wallet, and save it for what you think will be an emergency. You struggle through moment after moment but never call the person who can help you because either you don’t want to bother them or because you don’t want to use up his good will or simply because you forget that it’s an option. When you and I neglect prayer, we are giving a “meh” attitude to a God who said that he will help us and listen to us at any time and at any place. Neglecting prayer is despising God’s offer to hear and help us.

This is not a new problem or concern for Christians. This is what was going on in the lives of James’ hearers. He had to remind them why prayer is so good for Christians and to make regular and frequent use of it. “And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” (verses 15-16)

Prayer actually does something. When you are sick, if you pray in faith, trusting God to heal you, the Lord will raise you up. He will actually lift your health back up when you pray or he will raise you up completely restored on the Last Day when no sickness will ever come to your body again. If you have sinned and you have prayed to God asking for forgiveness, trusting him to give that to you, he does. You are forgiven. There is no doubt. God answers prayer. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

To encourage his people to make frequent use of this wonderful gift of prayer, James reminds them and us of a story from Elijah's time. Elijah was a prophet to the nation of Israel around about the 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C. He ministered to King Ahab. You may not remember Ahab, but you probably remember his wife: Jezebel. Yes, wicked Queen Jezebel, who put a bounty on Elijah's head for being a prophet of the true God. Ahab and Jezebel had promoted the false gods of Baal and Asherah. Elijah came and proclaimed judgment to the nation of Israel because they were following these false gods. It was through prayer that Elijah enacted judgment upon them. "He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops." (verses 17-18)

Just by prayer Elijah caused a three and a half year drought on the land. By prayer he ended the drought. Why was Elijah's prayer heard and answered? What's the difference? Did Elijah have more faith than us? Did he have a better prayer formula than we do?

"Elijah was a human being, even as we are." (verse 17) He was not greater than we are. He was the same as us. He was a sinner. He experienced temptation. He did not always make use of prayer as he should. Even great Elijah was guilty of despising God's gift of prayer as he despaired over the bounty placed on his head. Instead of turning to God for help, he turned to God to complain over his lot in life. Elijah's prayer was not answered because he was great or because he knew some secret or because he had a better prayer formula, but his prayer was answered because he was made righteous, even as we are.

Although being made righteous by God has not been James' emphasis, James assumed this of his audience, even of us. He knew that he was writing to Christians, people who had already heard the good news of what Jesus had done for them. They had already come to believe that Jesus is their Savior from sin, that Jesus had substituted his life for them. They were already made righteous. James wrote his letter to steer his hearers back to living as God intended them. "My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins." (verses 19-20) James writes to us so that we would correct and lead Christians to right behavior in line with their faith, in line with believing that Jesus is our Savior from sins, the one who suffered and died, the Righteous One for the unrighteous ones in order to bring us to God. Because of this, we have been made righteous by God, just like the Christians that James first wrote to.

Since we have been made righteous, we know that our prayers are powerful and effective. They are not powerful and effective because I have figured out a special formula or because I developed such a great faith. It is for Christ's sake that God hears and answers our prayers. It is based on Christ's perfectly lived life that he acts upon our prayers. Because God's response to our prayers is based on what Jesus has done for us, our prayers are powerful and effective.

James concludes his letter giving us a most excellent way to live our faith. Pray. Pray because we have been made righteous. Pray because the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Pray because God will hear and answer our prayers, whether it be something big like what Elijah prayed for, or something small for our everyday living. Pray when we are in trouble, and God will come to our rescue. Pray when you are happy to give thanks to God for rescuing you from your trouble. Pray when you are sick, and God will heal you. Pray when you have sinned against someone because God will forgive your sins. Since he has made us right before him, our prayers are powerful and effective. Amen.