

Prayer Works

James 5:16-18

“The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” Such a great encouragement, isn’t it? That prayer works. Prayer changes things. Prayer accomplishes things. Your prayers really do make a difference.

But that brings up at least two potential problems or areas of confusion. The first is simply the inappropriate sense to think that the power of prayer depends upon you. Or even worse, that the power of prayer is within you. That would mean that the effectiveness of your prayers depends upon how much fervency you can stimulate, how “hard” you can pray as if by praying “hard” you can actually do more. The question becomes, How do you pray “hard?” It is not like doing pushups or jogging. Physical exertion is not the key, nor, necessarily, the amount of time involved or the actual words that are spoken. The power of prayer is not related to your ability to put words together into eloquent sentences, nor is it increased if you just keep on praying. Power in prayer isn’t a function of verbal repetition, praying over and over again, repeating words over and over. The power of prayer certainly isn’t related to any emotional frenzy that you manage to stir up. But still, there is power, and that will be our focus this morning.

The second problem is more theological. If prayer actually avails much, if it actually accomplishes much, then how can that be consistent with the doctrine of God’s sovereignty. If God brings all things to pass according to the counsel of his will, which he has determined from before the foundation of the world, then how can our prayers make any difference at all. That, too, will be our focus tonight.

All too often, the consequence of these problems is to be very

negligent or careless in our praying. And that is the very thing I want to help you avoid, in stimulating you to be very diligent in prayer. We’ll pick up from last week, when my focus in prayer was to call upon the Elders of the church to pray for you, and to anoint, invoking the name of the Lord as Elders. With great encouragement,

v.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.”

Now, the answer to that prayer might not come exactly as you request, or it might not come when you request. But the sovereignty of God isn’t what is in focus in that promise. The encouragement to pray with a reminder of the efficacy of prayer is! The effective power of prayer to bring about restoration. And forgiveness. Which brings us to our text this morning,

v.16 “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”

That’s an interesting verse. “Confess your sins to one another.” So we begin with,

I. PRAYER AND CONFESSION OF SIN.

Typically, we find that difficult to do. We find it difficult to be so willingly connected to one another that we are willing to confess our sins. The barrier is typically pride, with its step-child called perhaps embarrassment. You see, most people think that they need to come to church with their best appearance, pretending that nothing is wrong. And pretending that there is no struggle with sin. Some people won’t even recognize that sin in their own heart, let alone speak it to others.

And that is a prohibitive barrier to sin.

Ps. 66:8 “If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord

would not have listened. 19 But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer. 20 Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me!”

That’s a great encouragement, but with a very profound warning. Sin that is cherished in your heart, as opposed to sin that is under attack, sin that is tolerated and not fought against will be a cause for God to reject your prayers! There is clearly a warning to unbelievers in that,

John 9:31 “We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him.”

But there is also a warning in the context of his fatherly discipline. For the Christian, God’s loving discipline might well be to reject your prayers if you fail to express and demonstrate your repentance for sin! So when there is sin, we cover it up. We put on our best clothes. Our best smile. We try to get in the best mood possible and we take our place within the body. And if you are struggling with sin and willing to acknowledge that within your own mind, you assume that nobody else is.

And, knowing about your own sin, you would be horrified, horribly embarrassed, if anyone else found out about it. So what does James say? He stresses the need for,

A. Interpersonal confession.

Confess your sins to one another. I doubt that means that you are required to let everyone know every one of your sins. It certainly does not mean that you go into graphic detail about all the particulars. And it certainly doesn’t mean that you glorify the sin, as if there would be some competition for who can come up with the greatest story.

But it does mean, first and foremost, the willingness to related to one another as co-sinners. Look around you. Look up here. Everyone that you see is battling with sin. Everyone that you see struggles with sin in one way or another, and everyone you see loses some of those battles. As we read in our shorter catechism, “No mere man, since the fall, is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed.”

So let’s start out by admitting that those words are true, and they accurately describe everyone of us. And let’s admit that everyone of us needs to come before the Lord with confession of sin. Please don’t be fooled into thinking that anything else could ever possibly be true. It should be of a matter of great communion and fellowship when we confess our sins together, and don’t ever take that lightly. That is a crucial aspect of our corporate worship, just as in the Old Covenant the priest worshipper was required to wash his hands at the laver as soon as he entered the temple.

Further, within the normal realm of Christian fellowship, there ought to an open willingness to be more specific with some within the body. There ought to be the willingness to let other people into your life such that they can pray for your sins, and be of help and encouragement to them!

And when the occasion calls for it, be sure that you confess your sins to those against whom you have sinned!

Mat.5:23 “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. [And then Jesus gives a penetrating illustration.] 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser

hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison.”

So settle the matter. And quickly. Even with priority before you come to worship. Confession precedes prayer. But prayer does follow. “Pray for one another.” Again, with that promise and encouragement, “That you may be healed.”

James makes a connection between sin and sickness, and that is a relationship that is right to consider. There may be no connection at all, but it is worth considering the question honestly. As with all troubles. But regardless of whether or not sin is the cause, prayer is called for. Prayers of,

B. Interpersonal dependence.

Praying for one another. There is simply no substitute for this.

Jesus teaches us to go into our closet to pray, and that teaching is to correct the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who loved to be seen as they prayed. To gain the approval and praise of people. Jesus rebukes them rather harshly. But that doesn’t do away with the whole concept of praying together.

Let me emphasize how profitable that is within your personal relationships, learning to pray with one another personally as an expression of your friendship and Christian fellowship. Let me encourage that to be a normal and natural part of a good friendship. And let this also be an encouragement to pray together as a church body. This is certainly an indispensable element of our services of public worship, morning and evening on the Lord’s Day. And let me take the opportunity to remind you that you are not merely listening while someone else prays. You are praying with their words. We are praying together, with one voice expressing the prayers of the whole body. So don’t let your

mind drift away. Don’t listen to prayers as an audience, but concentrate so diligently that when you say AMEN at the end you will rightly express that you were a participant in the praying.

God calls us to corporate prayer as well as private prayer, praying with and for one another. With great encouragement regarding,

II. THE POWER OF PRAYER.

v.16b “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”

What is emphasized there is,

A. The necessity of righteousness.

It is the prayer of a righteous man that avails much. It is the righteous man whose prayer have great power. Not the eloquent man! Not the extroverted man. Not the person who likes to talk or finds it easy to do. The power of your prayers is not dependent upon any mechanical ability. The power is not dependent upon the time, or the intensity of your voice, or the way in which you put words together. The power is not dependent upon finding the right words, or the right method. Instead, the power of your prayers is directly related to the practice and exercise of righteousness in your life.

It is the godliness of your life that renders your prayers more effective, and let me encourage you with that not to feel ill equipped or unqualified to pray in public meetings if you struggle with those mechanical things. If your conscience is clear, then you are qualified to pray!

The same encouragement goes for your occasions of personal prayer. Don’t feel discouraged if you struggle to form

words. Rather, consider the emphasis of this verse. It is the prayers of a righteous person that has great power.

I should note that the ESV translates, “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” The plain sense of the words in the original is, I believe, what prayer is able to do. It has great power as it is working. The importance of this is that it takes the great burden off of you to someone figure out how to pray with effective fervor! It is not your fervency, externally expressed, that makes prayer powerful and effective. Prayer itself is powerful as it is working! I want to take away from you that great subjective obstacle of thinking that somehow the power of prayer is produced by your effective fervor. Instead, I want to challenge and encourage you to pray with the confidence that your prayers do have great power as they are at work. And the power comes from God!

So your prayers avail much, because God makes it effectual. It is powerful in its effect. And believing that, you ought to expect such demonstration of God’s power as he answers your prayer. But the question is still appropriate, how can prayer have such power if God is sovereign. If God has already decreed and determined everything that shall come to pass, then how can prayer be powerful? My answer is very clear to me, and I wish it to be just as clear to you. God accomplishes his eternal decree through means. God brings to pass his eternal purpose through the means of our prayers. And since we don’t know what his eternal purpose is, and we aren’t to know, the plain reality from our perspective is that God will accomplish his own eternal purpose as he answers our prayers. And he has determined his own purpose from before the foundation of the world such that he will show forth his power in direct response to our prayers.

God demonstrates his power in responding to our prayers,

and in that response he brings forth exactly what he has determined beforehand in his own secret will. So don’t get turned around into circles trying to figure out that secret will. That’s not what you and I are called to do. We are called to pray! And our prayers, offered up with the consistency of a life of righteousness, avail much! They have great power, because God is working!

So pray for that demonstration of power. Pray for great things of God and expect great things of God. Always keep your humility and submission, that you pray for his will to be done not yours. But don’t let that take away the boldness and confidence with which you pray for things that really do require God’s power to accomplish. If you think you don’t need God’s help, and just pray very routinely for all the routine matters of life, then you will never see that power at work. So pray with a sense of desperation. Pray with a sense of urgency and absolute and total dependence. Pray in such a way that if God doesn’t help you, you are doomed!

Heb. 4:16 “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

James gives us an example for our encouragement. Elijah.
v.17-18

III. AN EXAMPLE OF PRAYER.

He prayed that it wouldn’t rain, and for 3-1/2 years it didn’t. Then he prayed again, and the rains fell. The fascinating aspect of this example is that the drought was actually God’s judgment upon the land, which he brought about according to his own purpose. But, as I just said, God did it in response to Elijah’s prayer.

We read that in,

1 Kings 17:1 And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word.” 2 Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 3 “Get away from here and turn eastward, and hide by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. 4 And it will be that you shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.” 5 So he went and did according to the word of the LORD, for he went and stayed by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. 6 The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the brook. 7 And it happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there had been no rain in the land. 8 Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 9 “Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. See, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you.” 10 So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, indeed a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, “Please bring me a little water in a cup, that I may drink.” 11 And as she was going to get it, he called to her and said, “Please bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” 12 So she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I do not have bread, only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar; and see, I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” 13 And Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go and do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me; and afterward make some for yourself and your son. 14 For thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day the LORD sends rain on the earth.’” 15 So she went away and did according to the word of Elijah; and she and he and her household ate for many days. 16 The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke by Elijah.”

Then another miracle to show forth the power of God in prayer.

1 Kings 17:17 “Now it happened after these things that the son of the woman who owned the house became sick. And his sickness was so serious that there was no breath left in him. 18 So she said to Elijah, “What have I to do with you, O man of God? Have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to kill my son?” 19 And he said to her, “Give me your son.” So he took him out of her arms and carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his own bed. 20 Then he cried out to the LORD and said, “O LORD my God, have You also brought tragedy on the widow with whom I lodge, by killing her son?” 21 And he stretched himself out on the child three times, and cried out to the LORD and said, “O LORD my God, I pray, let this child’s soul come back to him.” 22 Then the LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back to him, and he revived. 23 And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room into the house, and gave him to his mother. And Elijah said, “See, your son lives!” 24 Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now by this I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is the truth.”

“The LORD heard the voice of Elijah.” The Lord listened. Beloved, there is no greater blessing that you could imagine! And yet notice what James stresses here. These were,

A. The prayers of a mere mortal.

This was not St. Elijah, as if he were superhuman or even super-spiritual. This was a mere man, “a man with a nature like ours.” James goes out of his way to say that you and I are just like Elijah. We are finite, mortal creatures. Fallible and limited by our humanity. But this mortal man prayed for drought and drought there was!

v.18 “And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the

earth produced its fruit.”

This rain was that for which he called at Mt. Carmel, and the purpose for it was for God to demonstrate his own power as infinitely superior to the false claims of power by Baal.

1 Kings 18:38 “Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench. 39 Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!” 40 And Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal! Do not let one of them escape!” So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Brook Kishon and executed them there. 41 Then Elijah said to Ahab, “Go up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of abundance of rain.” 42 So Ahab went up to eat and drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; then he bowed down on the ground, and put his face between his knees, 43 and said to his servant, “Go up now, look toward the sea.” So he went up and looked, and said, “There is nothing.” And seven times he said, “Go again.” 44 Then it came to pass the seventh time, that he said, “There is a cloud, as small as a man’s hand, rising out of the sea!” So he said, “Go up, say to Ahab, ‘Prepare your chariot, and go down before the rain stops you.’ ” 45 Now it happened in the meantime that the sky became black with clouds and wind, and there was a heavy rain. So Ahab rode away and went to Jezreel.”

There was a great rain. I propose to you that that is exactly how we ought to pray. And we should pray like Joshua prayed when he needed more time to defeat the Gibeonites,

Joshua 10:12 “Then Joshua spoke to the LORD in the day when the LORD delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel: “Sun, stand still over Gibeon; And Moon, in the Valley of Aijalon.” 13 So the sun stood still, And the moon stopped, Till the people had revenge Upon

their enemies. Is this not written in the Book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and did not hasten to go down for about a whole day. 14 And there has been no day like that, before it or after it, that the LORD heeded the voice of a man; for the LORD fought for Israel.”

That is the great power of prayer in its working. The prayer of a mere mortal like you and like me. A mortal who shows us,

B. Fervency in prayer.

The NKJV has “prayed earnestly” in verse 17. That word “fervently” is used in the ESV. Literally it says he “prayed with prayer.” The same root word is repeated twice, which is actually a Hebrew form of emphasis, utilized by James writing in Greek. The idea is emphasis and intensity. He prayed with emphasis!

As I’ve mentioned, the idea is not some form of emotional self-stimulation, but rather of a total, desperate and trusting dependence upon God for something that was well beyond his own capability and human power. And that is the example for us in our praying.

Jesus uses a similar example of supernatural power, when he declares to his disciples who were questioning why they were unable to heal a little boy,

Mat.17:20 “Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”

Don’t get wrapped up in the image, as if you were literally to move that mountain. But rather take the illustration for what it is, and when you pray, pray with prayer for God to do something absolutely impossible for you to accomplish with your own

strength. Pray earnestly for God to show forth his power, and wait for him to answer. And apply this to all the situations of your life. Apply this to the circumstances of our church. Apply this to those things which seem beyond your reach. And remember this, whenever you pray, whatever you pray, that God...

Eph. 3:20 "... is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us."

That power is at work within us. It is the power of God. So pray boldly with great encouragement, for nothing is impossible with God.