

Fervent Prayer, Session 1: Hearty Praying

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

-James 5:16–18 (ESV)

The apostle James encourages us not just to pray, but to pray fervently. Apparently, there is a difference between regular prayer and fervent prayer as practiced by the prophet Elijah. What is it? Verse 17 literally says that he *prayed in prayer*. Elijah pray-prayed, really prayed, prayed fervently, prayed earnestly. Matthew Henry comments, “It is not enough to say a prayer, but we must pray in prayer. Our thoughts must be fixed, our desires firm and ardent, and our graces in exercise.”¹ It is possible to pray without really praying – saying words without intentionally directing them to God, reciting requests without expecting God to grant them, using prayerful phrases without even understanding their meaning. Thomas Brooks suggests that the most important quality of prayer is its sincerity. He says:

God looks not at the elegance of your prayers, to see how neat they are; nor yet at the geometry of your prayers to see how long they are; nor yet at the arithmetic of your prayers, to see how many they are; nor yet at the music of your prayers, nor yet at the sweetness of your voice, nor yet at the logic of your prayers; but at the sincerity of your prayers, how hearty they are. There is no prayer acknowledged, approved, accepted, recorded, or rewarded by God, but that wherein the heart is sincerely and wholly.²

The Bible gives us many great examples of fervent prayer besides Elijah’s weather-altering prayers that James points us to. We can think of Hannah’s tearful pleading for a child in 1 Samuel 1 or the believers’ earth-shaking request for boldness in Acts 4. When we examine our prayers, do they resemble those of Elijah, Hannah, or the early church? Are they hearty and sincere? Are they focused? Are they expectant? Are we pouring our hearts to God? Are we praying in our praying?

¹ Matthew Henry’s *Commentary on the Whole Bible* <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/james/5.html>

² Quoted in *Taking Hold of God*, edited by Joel R. Beeke and Brian G. Najapfour (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 232

Perhaps, we can more easily identify with the confessions of Thomas Adam. He writes:

I pray faintly, and with reserve, merely to quiet conscience, for present ease, almost wishing not to be heard.... Prayer and other spiritual exercises are often a weariness to me; a task, and a force upon nature. I am too well pleased with pretenses for omitting them; and when they are over, I feel myself at ease, as it were, like after the removal of a heavy weight....³

Before we can learn to pray fervently, we must acknowledge that we have failed in our praying. But maybe there is nothing to acknowledge. Maybe this kind of fervent prayer is only available to spiritual superheroes like Elijah, Hannah, and other exemplary believers whose stories were deemed worthy to be included in the Bible. James anticipates this objection: *Elijah was a man with a nature like us*. While Elijah is an example to us, he is a regular person like us. And so, we too must learn to pray fervently. Fervent prayer is to be practiced by all believers, for we all share the same nature. It is not reserved for the spiritual aristocracy.

However, there is an additional qualification. Elijah was a regular person like us. But he was a righteous person. It is a regular righteous person (if we may put these two words together) that should be able to pray fervently. What does it mean to be righteous? First, to be righteous is to be in right relationship with God. And it happens through faith in Christ. No real prayer, let alone fervent prayer, can reach God unless we are welcome in his presence on behalf of Christ. John Bunyan says:

The man then that comes to God through Christ must have faith, by which he puts on Christ, and in him appears before God. Now he that has faith is born of God, and so becomes one of the sons of God; by virtue of which he is joined to Christ, and made a member of Christ. And, therefore, he, as a member of Christ, comes to God; I say, as a member of Christ, so that God looks on that man as part of Christ, part of his body, flesh, and bones, united to him by election, conversion, enlightenment, the Spirit being conveyed into the heart of that man by God. So that now he comes to God in Christ's merits, in his blood, righteousness, victory, intercession, and so stands before him, being 'accepted in the Beloved'. And because this poor creature is thus a member of the Lord Jesus, and under this consideration has admittance to God, therefore, by virtue of this union also is the Holy Spirit conveyed into him, whereby he is able to pour out his soul before God.⁴

³ Ibid., 228. Joel Beeke's chapter "Prayerful Praying Today" in which this and previous quotes are found is very helpful in addressing the modern reality of "prayerless praying."

⁴ John Bunyan, *Prayer* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2005), 19

So the first question we must ask ourselves as we learn to pray fervently is whether we are in Christ and are accepted by God in him. Second, to be righteous is to be pursuing practical holiness. The psalmist says: *If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened* (Psalm 66:18). The second question then is whether there are particular sins that dull our desire and hinder our ability to pray fervently. If we harbor sin, how can our prayers be whole-hearted and earnest?

Finally, what should a regular righteous person expect from fervent prayer? James says: *The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working*. Or, the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. We should expect identifiable, discernable, noticeable changes to happen based on our fervent prayers. Elijah saw God answer his fervent prayers by first sending a famine and then three and a half years later sending rain. By commanding us to pray fervently, God commits to engage with us and respond to our prayers.

ACTION POINTS

- Consider your relationship with God. Are you accepted by God based on Christ's accomplishments in his life, on the cross, and in the empty tomb?
- Confess the sin of prayerless praying.
- Examine your life and confess any sin you may be harboring.
- Begin using a prayer journal to write down your fervent prayer requests and God's answers to them.