

September 16, 2007

James 5:16

Alright good morning, grab your Bibles with me. Last week we began looking at James 5:13-18 together. And although we saw that there are some parts of this text that can be difficult to understand, the main point really isn't. **James is pleading with us to PRAY.** In fact, he's showing us that we are commanded to pray in any and every circumstance we find ourselves in. And yet one of the convicting realities we dealt with last week is being honest about what role prayer really plays in our every day lives.

How many of you use T mobile for your cell phone company? You have that whole "my 5" deal going on – where you get free calls to the 5 people you talk to the most. Well for just a minute, let's all pretend we're T mobile customers and if you had to list the names in your "my 5" – who would it be? Who do you talk with the most?

You know why you have those people in your 5? Because you want to. You want to talk to them. You enjoy their conversation. You appreciate their input into your life. Now you might have 1 or maybe even 2 who are on there because you need to talk to them – a boss or co-worker – but even then they made your 5 because you do so much of your life with them.

What James is trying to get us to see is that no matter who you have in your number 1 spot in your 5, he or she needs to be demoted to number 2. And Jesus needs to take their place. Put away the cell phone. Take a break from the text messages. Unhook that little earpiece that makes you look like a fool walking through the grocery store talking to yourself. And establish a connection with Jesus instead.

James wants you to understand that **prayer isn't something good Christians are SUPPOSED to do, prayer is CRUCIAL for your life and the lives of those around you.** And probably the main reason we're convicted when we ask what role does prayer play in our lives is because we don't really get that. We're not convinced of the power or effectiveness of prayer. So instead of just giving us the command, James gives us the why. Take a look at it with me once again – in verses 16-18.

16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

17 Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.

18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

The key in there is in verse 16 – "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." The word for **prayer** James uses here isn't just the generic word for prayer in Greek; it is a specific kind of prayer. It means **petition, supplication, REQUEST.** He's not just motivating us to pray, but to make requests of God in prayer – to go before Him and to cast our cares on Him.

Now notice he doesn't just say "Prayer can accomplish much." He says the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. This statement – this promise applies to prayers made by a specific person.

On one hand, **when James says the prayers of a righteous man he is talking specifically about a BELIEVER** – a Christian. In **Philippians 3:9** Paul says that we have a righteousness that is not by works but that comes from God by faith in Christ. In **1 Corinthians 1:30**, he explains that in salvation, Christ becomes our righteousness. So as believers there is a sense in which we are all righteous because we are clothed with Christ.

But this phrase implies more than that. If you'll think back to when we were studying though Philippians we understood the word **righteous to basically mean to be not only a right standing**

BEFORE God but also a right relationship WITH God. And in the context of verse 16, James is speaking of person who is both living rightly before God but also dealing with sin a biblical manner to maintain that right relationship with Him. Right before this phrase he says, “Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed.” So he isn’t talking about the perfect person, but the person who although he has sinned and does still sin, seeks to deal with that sin in a godly manner.

See the Bible teaches that even if you are a believer, if you are continuing in unrepentant sin, that sin will affect your prayers. I’ll give you one example of that principle. In **1 Peter 3:7**, the Bible says, “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” The point being that failure to obey that command – to live with your wife how God desires – will hinder the effectiveness of your prayers.

So before we get the promise that James gives here, we need to catch that he isn’t just talking about any and every kind of prayer. He is **talking about requests made to God by a person who is a believer, who is seeking to OBEY God, and who although he isn’t perfect, is dealing with his sin by REPENTANCE and confession on a regular basis.**

But then he promises that the prayers of this righteous man are powerful and effective. Different versions of the Bible use different words or phrases to express those ideas but they all boil down to the power and the results.

First the power. Why are the prayers of a righteous man powerful? Does being a righteous person mean you are really good at praying? That you are very articulate and grandiose in your prayers? Are there certain phrases that you learn to use the work almost like magic words?

No – none of that. In fact I think it is easy to get confused here because so often we make the prayers the goal – the end unto themselves. But just like your fav 5 on your cell phone only has value because it is a link to your friends themselves, **prayer is powerful because it connects us with GOD. Prayer has this power because God promises to HEAR and answer prayer.** In Psalms God is called the prayer-hearing God. In Proverbs it says that the prayers of the upright are a delight to God. Jesus encourages us to pray by comparing God to a human father and says that if a human father who is a sinner loves to take care of his children, how much more will a God who is perfect love to listen to, take care of, and answer His children’s prayers. Prayer is powerful not because there is any sort of magic in prayer itself, but because God has promised to hear and answer. Which means when we pray we are accessing the power and might of God, the Ruler of the Universe. That’s the power of prayer.

As Charles Spurgeon puts it: “my own soul’s conviction is that prayer is the grandest of power in the entire universe; that it has a more omnipotent force than electricity, attraction, gravitation, or any of those other secret forces which men have called by names but which they do not understand...When a righteous man really prays, it is not a question of whether or not God will hear him...God has promised to hear prayer and he will perform his promise. Oh to think that you a puny man may stand here and speak to God and through God move all the worlds.”

Prayer is powerful because of to whom we pray, but James also says it is **effective** – or as other versions say – it accomplishes much. Basically that phrase refers to the **ability to GET THINGS DONE.**

James is saying and it’s important that we get this – that prayer is not just wishing. It’s not fantasy. It’s not an exercise in futility. It’s not sitting in a corner in a little orange robe chanting all day. It is reality. It is a means of power. It is mighty in what it is able to do.

Now I want us to understand this. It is so crucial that we give prayer its proper place in our lives, but the truth is often like a narrow path with cliffs on both sides. It's easy to fall off into error on one side or the other.

There are some who might hear this today that prayer is powerful and effective and think that prayer is like magic – that by prayer I can control God – I can change the mind of God – after all effective means it accomplishes much, right?

But listen. If that was the kind of power that James was talking about, if he was saying that by prayer you could somehow force God to do what you want Him to do, you can be sure – I wouldn't be pleading with you to pray. If that were true, prayer wouldn't be a privilege, it would be dangerous. It'd be like giving a loaded gun to a little kid. And if you really think about it, you'll be glad about that. I mean do you really want to be able to convince God to do something that He as God – as the one who created everything – as the one who not only can see the future but is in control of it – do you really want to be able to make Him do something that He knows is not best for you? Wouldn't it be better just to trust Him?

See there is comfort for the child of God in being assured that our prayers will not change God's mind – we aren't in danger of causing some disaster because we thought we knew better than God. He is not our little genie in a bottle.

But the problem is that on the other hand, people hear that and go to the other extreme. They think – then why pray? What's the point of praying if prayer doesn't change things?

See that's the other side of the cliff. Prayer doesn't change the mind of God, but prayer does change things. Here's why – because **God has established in His Word that prayer is one of the MEANS He uses to accomplish His will here on earth.**

That may sound kind of churchy so let me explain with a really weak demonstration.

Everyone take your Bible and hold it up in the air like this. Good. Now we know that God is God – he is sovereign – he is over all things. So we could say that God has ordained that our Bibles should be in the particular places that they are right now. He must have ordained it because that is where my Bible is. But here's the key. God didn't ordain for my Bible or your Bible to just mystically and magically rise in the air by itself. He ordained that our Bibles would rise into the air because we lifted them there.

God ordained that it would happen and He also ordained how it would happen.

Ok – you can relax now.

That's the way God works. No one really who is a thinking person is going to say why lift your Bible in the air? If God wants it to rise in the air, he'll do it without your hand. No – we all understand that God uses certain means – like us lifting our Bibles – to cause things to happen.

So this is one of the things we need to understand about prayer – God has ordained that prayer is one of the means He uses to cause things to happen. So you can't say, why pray if it is going to happen anyway? That'd be like saying – why lift your Bible? If you don't lift it, it'll happen anyway. No it won't.

We saw that even last week in James in **verses 13-15**. We had a guy who was sick and James doesn't say God is just going to heal this guy. He says the elders need to come and pray over him and anoint him with oil and God will raise Him up. If this guy gets healed, he can't say – look I would have been healed anyway. No – because he doesn't know that. And God makes it clear that there is

a mean that he is going to use to heal this guy and that means is prayer – verse 15, the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.

Now I really understand that there is a mystery in all this. We can't fully understand how it all works. But **just because we can't fully understand HOW it all works doesn't mean we should start denying that that is how God says it DOES work.** When I turn on a light switch I have no idea all that is happening there to make the room light up. When I use my cell phone I really have no idea how all that is working through thin air. But that doesn't stop me from turning on light or making phone calls.

I've got no problem saying that I don't fully understand how prayer works but I know that God says it does and so I have faith in that and keep turning the light switch – I keep picking up the phone – I keep praying because I know that God knows more than I do. And God has said that prayer is one of the primary means he uses to accomplish his will. It is all over the Bible.

Why did God bring the Israelites out of Egypt? Because they prayed. Why did God get Jonah out of the big fish? Because he prayed.

Why did Peter go see Cornelius & tell him about Jesus? Because he prayed.

Why does Paul in every one of his letters talk about how he is praying for them and ask them to pray for him? Because he knows that God moves in response to the prayers of His people.

Never minimize the importance of prayer. When we pray our voices are heard in heaven. Still James knows we might be tempted to blow this off. Roll our eyes. Shrug our shoulders and move on. So he gives us a striking illustration. Verses 17-18:

17 *Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.*

18 *Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.*

When you feel like prayer doesn't do anything. Remember Elijah.

Elijah prayed. God heard. And it stopped raining. For three and a half years. Then he prayed again. And it started raining.

But you say – hey – he was a prophet – I'm not Elijah. I'm not all important like that.

Verse 17 – Elijah was a man just like us. Know what that means? He dealt with the same stuff we do. Maybe not in the same form. But the same stuff. Stress. Distraction. Fear. Doubt. Wonder. Anger. Hopelessness. Busy-ness. He dealt with everything we use as reasons we don't pray. But he prayed – and so can we. And even more important – Elijah was just like us in that it wasn't about him. It was about the God he prayed to. We serve the same God Elijah did. And He is just as powerful today. And we have the same weapon – the same privilege Elijah did. Prayer.

EM Bounds was a chaplain in the civil war and a minister afterwards. He wrote extensively on the subject of prayer. And I want to close with some of his more famous words:

The trend of the day has a tendency to lose sight of man or sink the man in the plan or the organization. God's plan is to make much of the man – far more of him than of anything else. Men are God's method. The church is looking for better methods, God is looking for better men. What the church needs today is not more machinery or better or more novel methods, but men whom the Holy Spirit can use – men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Spirit does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men – men and women of prayer.

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

James pleads with us to pray not because we're supposed to but because the privilege of doing so unleashes the POWER and the WILL of God through us.

So I ask you again, what role does prayer play in your everyday life?

What might God be wanting to do in and through you that He is just waiting for you to pray for?

How long will He have to wait?

Will you be righteous?

Will you pray?