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## THE POWER OF PRAYER

James 5:16b-18

By

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James Lesson 24

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I want to repeat the disclaimer that I gave last week, namely, that I feel woefully inadequate in the area of prayer. I do not want this message to convey that I've got it all together. I am a fellow struggler with you!

But having said that, I also can say that God changed my spiritual life in the summer of 1970, when I read for the first time, *George Muller of Bristol* [Revell], by A. T. Pierson. As most of you know, Muller (1805-1897) was a rebellious Prussian young man whom God saved in his twenties. Muller later founded an orphanage in Bristol, England. He was concerned about the needs of the many orphans whom he saw on the streets, of course. But his primary reason for founding the orphanage was to demonstrate that God is still a prayer-hearing God and that it is not in vain to trust in Him.

Muller and his new bride literally sold or gave away everything that they owned and gave the money to the Lord's work. Then they set about praying for God to provide for their own needs and the needs of the orphans. Muller's theme verse was Psalm 81:10, "Open your mouth wide and I will fill it." For over 60 years, he saw God faithfully provide for as many as 2,000 orphans at a time, all in response to secret prayer.

Muller never disclosed any needs to potential donors, even if they asked. He and his staff would pray and often see God provide the exact amount that they needed on the day they needed it. Muller gave God the glory by writing an annual narrative of how the Lord had provided, once the needs had already been met.

Reading that book showed me that I could look to the same Lord in prayer and that He faithfully would meet my needs. Although I am nowhere near Muller in faith or prayer (even to mention myself in the same sentence is presumptuous!), God has used Muller's example over the years to encourage me to pray.

James' aim here is to motivate us, wherever we're at with the Lord, to pray more. This assumes that you have trusted in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. You must be reconciled to God through faith in Christ before you can rightly pray. Jesus must be your personal High Priest, whose blood has covered all your sin. Then the invitation of Hebrews 4:16 applies to you: "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

If you have trusted in Christ as Savior, then you need to pray more. (We *all* do!) As with everything in life, motivation is the key. To motivate you to pray, James asserts the power of prayer and then illustrates it with the life of Elijah:

Since the prayer of the righteous is powerfully effective, we should be motivated to pray.

1. The theme stated: The prayer of the righteous is very powerful in its working (5:16b).

The sentence has been variously translated, but I think that the best translation is as I just stated: "The prayer of the righteous is very powerful in its working (or, operation)." James has just exhorted us to "pray for one another, so that you may be healed." This may refer to healing from illness, especially illness that may be the result of unconfessed sin. Or, it may refer also to spiritual healing, since James has instructed us to confess our sins to one another. But his point is that whether your need is physical or spiritual, prayer is very powerful. But, he qualifies it:

- A. The qualification for prayer is a righteous life.

Maybe you're thinking, "Well, so much for me becoming a prayer warrior!" While the word *righteous* sounds daunting, it should not threaten us if we think about it properly.

In the first place, if we have been justified by faith, we stand before God with a righteousness that is not our own. If you think that you can approach God through your righteousness, you do not understand the gospel. The gospel shuts us all up under sin, showing that our own righteousness will never satisfy God's holy justice. As Paul states (Rom. 3:23-24), "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." To be justified is

to be declared righteous. God does not do that on the basis of any merit in us, but only by grace (undeserved favor). It is His gift to forgive all your sins and clothe you with Christ's perfect righteousness. That is the standing of everyone who has trusted in Christ. So *righteous* refers to our standing in Christ.

But it also refers to our walk. But it does not imply perfection, or no one could qualify. Elijah was not a perfect man. He feared the wicked Jezebel and fled from her. He was despondent in thinking that he was the only godly person left in Israel. Rather, to be righteous means to walk uprightly before God, judging and confessing all known sin, and seeking to obey God in every area of life. Our prayers are not heard because of our own worthiness or sinless track record. But if we are aware of unconfessed sin in our hearts, we will not feel confident in drawing near to the holy God. The psalmist says (Ps. 66:18), "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear."

Thus we should always draw near to God in prayer on the basis of the worthiness and merit of Jesus Christ. Yet at the same time, we should examine our hearts to make sure that we are not harboring any known sin. We do not need to be perfect, but we do need to walk in the light, turning from all known sin.

B. The prayer of the righteous is as powerful as the God to whom we pray.

There is no inherent power in prayer itself, but rather that prayer links us to God who is all-powerful. James begins the sentence (in Greek) with "much" to emphasize how much prayer can accomplish. The point is that prayer is not just wishful thinking. When we pray, we communicate with the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth, who loves us and invites us into His presence to receive grace. And so, as E. M. Bounds puts it, "Prayer can do anything that God can do" (*Purpose in Prayer* [Moody Press], p. 96, plus the title of Chapter 11, pp. 97-114).

That is a wonderfully true statement! But, to be honest, I struggle at this point because I have experienced so many unanswered prayers. I have prayed for healing for many sick people that have died. I have prayed for repentance for many sinning Christians, and yet they have gone on in their sin. I have prayed for sal-

vation for some for many years, and yet they have not come to faith in Christ. I am not aware of any unconfessed sin in my heart or lack of faith in God.

There seem to be two answers to this problem of unanswered prayer, which I'm sure is not unique to me. First, sometimes God delays the answers we seek to keep us in humble dependence on Him. That was the situation with Paul's thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-10). When Elijah prayed for God to send rain, even though God had promised to send rain, He did not answer instantly. It took seven attempts on Elijah's part before the first cloud was seen in the sky. So sometimes, God waits to answer to keep us seeking Him or for other reasons that we may not understand.

Second, sometimes God answers "no" for His own inscrutable reasons. This is where we have to trust Him and His omniscient ways. He knows all the factors, which I never know. As I said last week, I would have prayed for a long and fruitful ministry for John the Baptist, but that was not God's plan. I would have prayed for Jesus to avoid the cross, but that wasn't God's plan, either. I pray many things that seem to me to be for God's glory and in accordance with His will, but He overrules my prayers with His own sovereign purpose.

But the danger is that when we encounter God's delays or denials of our requests, we will lose heart and give up praying. We need to remember that prayer links us with the omnipotent God, who spoke the universe into existence. He can interrupt the normal laws of His creation if He chooses, to accomplish His will. And, He has chosen that normally He accomplishes His will through the prayers of His people. And so we should pray big prayers and expect God to accomplish much through them, according to His purpose and glory.

- C. Prayer is available to every righteous believer at every time and place.

The power of prayer is not limited to prayers offered in church buildings on Sunday mornings, or to prayers offered by ordained ministers, or to prayers given in eloquent language. If you know Christ, then wherever you are, in whatever need you find

yourself, call out to God and He will hear and answer according to His will. You may only have time for a quick, silent prayer.

But God doesn't weigh the value of the prayers by their length or by how many people get together to pray the same thing or by how much you agonize in your prayers. Although Jesus sometimes spent the entire night in prayer, most of the prayers recorded in the Bible are short. The Lord's prayer is *really* short! Even if you've only got a few minutes, you can still devote the time to prayer.

Sometimes we think, "If we can just get a lot of people praying, it will be more effective." But our text says, "a righteous man," not "a really big group of righteous men." The more who pray, the more get blessed when God answers. So it is good to enlist as many in prayer as possible. But if it's just you and God, the prayer may be as powerfully effective as if a whole group prays.

Also, it doesn't say that the righteous man has to agonize for it to be effective. Yes, Elijah's prayer was earnest, and ours should be in earnest, too. We should pour out our hearts before God (Ps. 62:8). The more serious the situation and the more we are burdened by it, the more intensely we will pray (Heb. 5:7). But God answers our prayers on the basis of His grace through Jesus Christ, not on the basis of our working up certain feelings.

So James' theme is: the prayer of the righteous is very powerful in its working. Then he illustrates the theme:

2. The theme illustrated: Elijah was a righteous man whose prayers accomplished much (5:17-18).

Elijah had taken on almost legendary status among the Jews in James' day. By all accounts, he was an impressive man! He marched in before the wicked, powerful King Ahab and announced that it would only rain by his word, and his word came true! He was miraculously fed by the ravens during the drought. He miraculously enabled the widow of Zarephath's flour to be replenished throughout the drought. He raised her son from the dead. He called down fire from heaven to consume his waterlogged sacrifice in front of the 400 prophets of Baal. Then he ordered the execution of them all. Later, he called down fire to consume two groups of soldiers sent to arrest him. He parted the Jordan river to walk across. His

final act was to be taken to heaven without dying in a chariot of fire. That's the stuff legends are made of!

A man like Elijah could be more of a hindrance to my prayer life than an encouragement, because I could think that he's in a totally different league than I am. That's why James says...

A. Although righteous, Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.

As you read the story of Elijah, you find that in spite of seeing God work in miraculous ways, he became fearful and depressed. James' point is that while Elijah was a great man, he was after all just a man. He did not have some privileged status before God that we lack. He had his ups and downs, but he prayed and God answered. So even though you have your ups and downs, pray! The power of prayer is not with the man, but with our God.

B. Elijah was a man who lived in ungodly times, but his prayers affected the entire nation.

King Ahab set a new spiritual low in Israel! He married the wicked Jezebel, who established Baal worship as the religion of the land. She exterminated the prophets of the Lord, except for 100 who were in hiding. Baal was regarded as the god who controlled the rain and fertility. The worship of Baal was not only idolatrous, but immoral, with temple prostitutes. Even though there were some bad kings before Ahab, 1 Kings 16:33 states, "Thus Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him."

Thus Elijah's prayer for drought and his later prayer for rain were a direct challenge to the worshipers of Baal. Everyone in the nation felt the effects of three years of drought. It pushed them to ask, "Why isn't Baal answering our prayers?" Elijah's showdown with the prophets of Baal pointedly drew the line (1 Kings 18:21): "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." When God answered Elijah's prayer to bring down fire on the sacrifice, the people "fell on their faces; and they said, 'The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God'" (1 Kings 18:39). One righteous man's prayer affected the entire nation. It can be the same today.

- C. Elijah could pray as he did because he knew the living God.

The account in 1 Kings 17:1 does not state directly that Elijah prayed that it would not rain. Rather, he appeared before Ahab and announced, "As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."

But we can easily infer that James was correct in stating that Elijah "prayed earnestly that it would not rain." For one thing, when he later prays for God to bring down fire on the sacrifice, he states (1 Kings 18:36), "O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and I have done all these things at Your word." The "all these things" included praying for drought.

Also, the Old Testament repeatedly states that if Israel fell into idolatry, God would withhold rain from the land (Deut. 11:16-17; 28:23-24; 2 Chron. 7:13-14). It's reasonable to assume that Elijah knew these Scriptures and that he had prayed for God to keep His word. But the point is, Elijah knew the living God, and he knew that he stood before Him. That's why he could boldly declare to the godless Ahab that there would be no rain. In the same way, the effectiveness of our prayer lives will be in direct proportion to how well we know the living God and consciously stand in His holy presence.

- D. Elijah prayed earnestly because he recognized his own inadequacy in the face of powerful enemies.

James' words, "prayed earnestly," are literally, "prayed with prayer." It is a Hebraism that signifies intensity. Elijah's intensity in prayer was because he was one man up against a powerful godless king and queen, 400 of her idolatrous prophets, and an entire nation that had turned its back on the Lord. So Elijah, being a man with a nature like ours, recognized his own inadequacy in the face of these powerful enemies. That led him to pray earnestly.

The reason we often do not pray earnestly is that we do not properly see how weak and inadequate we are and how powerful the enemy of our souls really is. If we see that salvation is not a matter of a person "deciding for Christ," but rather of God open-

ing his eyes, convicting him of sin, righteousness, and judgment, and raising him from spiritual death to life, we would pray more earnestly for lost souls. If we see that apart from Christ, we can do nothing (John 15:5), we would pray more earnestly about every aspect of our lives. Earnest prayer stems from a sense of personal inadequacy, but also from the knowledge of God's total adequacy.

3. The theme applied: We should be motivated to pray.

I want to ask three questions that should motivate us to pray:

- Do we live in overwhelmingly ungodly times? Pray!

Often the daily news is enough to get you depressed! You hear about the atrocities of the Islamic terrorists, you read about the degradation of morals in our country, you hear about the horrible decisions of our courts that legitimize all manner of corruption, and you despair. What should we do? Pray!

With Elijah, sometimes we may need to pray for drought, recognizing that the drought we pray for will dry up the brook that we drink from! Sometimes although we think that our nation has hit bottom, it hasn't. If people do not sense their need for God, there will not be genuine repentance. But when God hits our nation with overwhelming catastrophes, or withholds His blessings, people eventually begin to see their need and become open to turning back to God.

Also with Elijah, at the appropriate time, we need to pray for rain. It's instructive that God told Elijah that He would send rain (1 Kings 18:1), but Elijah had to pray that promise into reality. When our nation or when an individual you know is parched from a spiritual drought, we should pray that God would graciously send the rain of His Spirit to bring genuine repentance and revival.

- Do we face circumstances that are far beyond our ability to change? Pray!

A loved one's heart is hardened against the Lord. Only God can break that hard heart. Pray! You or someone you know has a degenerative disease. The doctors have done everything they can do. Pray! God may heal or He may give extra grace to endure. But He has shut you up from every human source of help to drive you

to Himself. I could go on naming overwhelming problems. Whatever yours is, let it drive you to the Lord in prayer.

- Do we sense personal inadequacy? Pray!

Prayer acknowledges that our need is not for just a little boost from God, and then we can handle it on our own. Prayer admits, my need is total! In seminary, Dr. Howard Hendricks used to challenge us with the question, “What is there in your life that you cannot explain apart from God?” Our problem is not that we are inadequate to live the Christian life, but rather that we think we are at least partially adequate in ourselves. So God sends some overwhelming circumstances into our lives to teach us what Paul learned (2 Cor. 1:9), “Indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.”

### Conclusion

Pastors today are under a lot of pressure to build their churches through “proven” church growth methods. Thousands of pastors flock to seminars to learn how to attract seekers and build a “successful” church. I met a woman in town who introduced herself to me as the minister of marketing at a certain church. Imagine that—a minister of *marketing*! Why didn’t I think of that?

A model for my ministry has been the words of the apostles when they asked that the early church find other men to help the needy widows. Then they added (Acts 6:4), “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” In that regard, a century ago E. M. Bounds wrote,

What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Ghost can use—men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Ghost 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 of prayer. (*Power Through Prayer* [Zondervan], p. 12.)

Pray for your pastors. Pray for this church. Pray for your own needs. Since the prayer of the righteous is powerfully effective, pray!

## Application Questions

1. How would you advise a Christian who said that he/she didn't feel worthy to pray?
2. How can we pray in faith (Mark 11:22-24) when we don't know God's sovereign will in advance?
3. How long should we continue praying if God doesn't seem to be answering? Is there a point at which we should give up?
4. Where is the proper balance between prayer and proper methods? Does dependence on God in prayer mean that we should neglect effective methods?

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