The Church on Its Knees

# Scripture: James 5:13-20; 1 Kings 17:1-6; 18:25-46

# Key thought: The prayers of the righteous are powerful!

# Intro:

Excerpts from “Everyday Problems” p. 77 in Adventures of a Clay Pot by Richard N. Ryley

For the next three weeks, the messages will remind us of God’s invitation to us to pray and of what is to be accomplished by prayer.

Martin Luther, father of the Protestant Reformation warned us:

“None can believe how powerful prayer is, and what it is able to effect, but those who have learned it by experience.” (Prayer PowerPoints p. 38)

Just as the apostles in the NT frequently encouraged those to whom they wrote to pray, so we need to be encouraged to pray today.

# Who can pray?

Three groups are discussed here.

## The prayer of the elders (v. 14)

First we need to ask, “Who were the elders?”

In the New Testament period, the "elders" became the official religious leadership in the early church. Though the specific origins of eldership in the early church are uncertain, it seems clear that the office was based on the Old Testament and early Jewish custom of bestowing honor and respect to members of the community of advanced age. As the fledgling church began to grow, elders were appointed or ordained as overseers for each local congregation (Acts 14:23). (from Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology. Copyright © 1996 by Baker Books. All rights reserved. Used by permission.)

So every one of the early church had leaders called elders appointed by the apostles when they founded the church. The situation is a little confused today. Technically in the Methodist church, the word “elder” refers to ordained pastors like myself. So each small church like ours usually only has one of them. But what were the functions of the elders in the early church? They made important decisions about the church as in Acts 15. They oversaw the charity of the church through the deacons whom they appointed. And they devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word as in Acts 6:4. Many of these functions in our churches today are performed by other local church leaders. I always encourage council members to consider themselves spiritual leaders, not just administrative people.

One of the functions of local church leaders is prayer. We need to be able to pray for others as this verse asks us to do. The pastor is not the only one who is called to pray for others.

Beyond the group of people themselves, I believe the elders here stand for the church at prayer. The church as a group must make it their business to be at prayer for one another.

## Prayer for each other

Notice in verse 16 James specifically encourages people in the churches to pray for each other. And in those verses the subjects under discussion are not just physical needs, they are also spiritual needs. He speaks of confiding in one another about our “sins” our shortcomings, and then praying for one another about them. I think this reference includes all Christians. So all of us as Christians should find praying for one another a very natural part of our spiritual walk with God and with each other.

This agrees with what Paul taught in our theme verse for this series:

Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. Eph. 6:18

## The prayer of the righteous

Lastly James mentions another group of people—the righteous. First, one housekeeping matter of translation:

### First, let’s be clear that “Righteous” includes both men and women

If you remember the KJV version you may have wondered whether the verse refers to both men and women. The old translation read:

*The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. James 5:16 KJV*

Even my dear Mom asked me once. “Is it only men for whom this promise is written?” Of course it is not just to men, but how do I know?

(1) The word “man” is not in the Gk. text. What is present is simply the masculine form of the adjective “righteous” being used as a noun.

(2) Greek experts Dana and Mantey (p. 118) say that the masculine form is used when the noun reference is concrete, the feminine form when a feminine object is understood and the neuter form when it is an abstract quality that is in mind.

(3) Therefore, the masculine form here does not refer to the masculine sex but simply to any specific righteous person.

(4) We can conclude then that modern versions that leave out the gender reference actually translate the idea more correctly.

For example the NRSV

*"The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."*

### Second, what is meant by righteous?

Remember that the word righteous can emphasize either right-standing or right-living depending on the purposes of the context. So one could argue that this verse about the prayers of the righteous refers to all Christians as all of us stand in Christ’s righteousness, not our own, and are by his grace accounted righteous in Christ. That is certainly true of us, but the question is, is that the way James is using the word?

Here, I believe right-living in emphasized because of the reference to the elders and to Elijah. James is giving a promise of special power in the prayers of those who are living righteously. This agrees with the stories of Scripture that men like Moses and Elijah and Elisha and Daniel and Hezekiah were heard partly because of their good lives. We can’t carry this too far as answered prayer is always according to the will and grace of God. We can never think that if we step through a certain amount of hoops we can earn a certain answer to prayer. It doesn’t work that way. Rather the power is in our relationship. Those who walk closely with God, who also live lives pleasing to God, God greatly desires to hear. Think of the promise of God in 2 Chronicles 7:14,15 with its direct relationship between returning to righteous living and God hearing prayer.

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place. 2 Chron 7:14-15 NRSV

# What can we pray about?

## Pray for your own needs.

You can pray for yourself – Jesus prayed about his own situation in the Garden of Gethsemane. Here those in trouble are urged to pray presumably for themselves. That is also what we do every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer. “Give us this day our daily bread.”

### Who are those who are in trouble – affliction?

* The word is a broad one including calamity of any sort
* those oppressed, economically threatened
* those going through hardships

However, if you find you are only praying about yourself, your horizons need to be expanded.

## Pray for others

Next week we will focus on how we help others through our prayers. Here James includes both the physical and the spiritual needs of others. We are quick to pray for the physical needs of others but not so quick to pray for the spiritual needs of others. Pray about the sins of others that they will confess them and turn from them. Now this is probably not something we pray about in a public meeting but in a prayer cell of two good friends who are interceding together before God for family members, it is absolutely appropriate. It is proper business, not as gossip for each other, but as a groan of concern lifting up their names before God for spiritual healing.

## Pray for the nation

James gives the example of Elijah. What was the object of Elijah’s prayers? It was the whole nation of Israel and their spiritual need. Elijah’s concern was that the nation was following the false god, Baal, rather than the true God. So one of the objects’ of our prayers should be our nation. This agrees with what Paul wrote:

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— for kings and all those in authority. 1 Tim 2:1-2 NIV

## Pray for Christian workers

This is an area of prayer that we often neglect. Jesus encouraged us to pray that God would call people into the “harvest fields.”

"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Luke 10:2 NRSV

Paul asked people to pray for him, especially as it regarded the preaching of the gospel. For example.

Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. Eph 6:19-20 NIV

# What is the effect of our prayers?

## What does it mean that their prayers are powerful and effective?

### Repeated words in the verse speak of the power in our prayers

*"God does nothing but in answer to prayer." - John Wesley*

Consider the key verse in James 5.

*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. James 5:16 NIV*

I very much like the ESV translation.

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. James 5:16 ESV

There is a triple emphasis in James 5:16 on the strength of our prayers. English translators struggle to sufficiently express the strength of James’ expression about the power of prayer. The ESV version helps us see the triple emphasis by using the three words; great, power and effective.

### Our prayers set in motion the plans of God.

Note that in 1Kings 18:36, Elijah is very conscious that he is working in partnership with God. He says, “I have done these things at your command.”

Look at another example:

*This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.” Jer 29:10-14 NIV 2011*

Daniel read this promise and started praying. He didn’t just wait, he prayed for the fulfillment of the promise (Daniel 9:2, 3).

*In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed: Dan 9:2-4 NIV 2011*

Quote Cymbala Breakthrough Prayers p. 79

*“Many of us fail to call on God because we don’t understand the need to pray about something God has already promised to do. Though we acknowledge that God has plans for us and that his promises reflect his grace and mercy, we don’t realize that he wants us to petition him for the very things he has promised. It’s in response to our prayer that God accomplishes his purpose, demonstrating once again that he is a “Hearer of Prayer””*

*p. 80 Breakthrough Prayers “Over and over again as God deals with his people, we see the same cycle: Purpose, Promise, Prayer”*

***God has his overall purpose in mind. Then he gives his people promises relating to that purpose, promises which tend toward the fulfillment of that purpose. God has chosen then to wait for interceding prayer before unleashing that fulfillment.***

## Our prayers participate in God’s work of salvation and healing

It helps to do a little digging in this passage. We need to note that the Greek verb in verse 15 is sometimes translated “to save” and sometimes “to heal.” It is the Greek word “sodzo” which means to save or deliver and which in contexts relating to health is often translated “to heal” (Ex. Matt. 9:22). It is in the context of praying for the sick that James uses the word. But then James talks about confessing sin to one another, a context where we might expect a word relating more specifically to salvation, but he uses a Greek word more specifically related to curing or healing. Then in verse 19, when he is discussing helping a person who has strayed from the best path, James returns to the word “sodzo” meaning “to save.”

What do we conclude? While it is absolutely certain that all the potential for our healing and salvation are found in Christ, one has to conclude that God uses our prayer, our testimonies, our words of encouragement to others to participate in his great works of salvation and healing in the lives of others.

Is not Jesus interceding for us and for others at the right hand of God right now?

Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Rom 8:34 NIV

So when we pray, we simply join with Jesus in the work of intercession.

## Our prayers have power to defeat the enemy.

### Elijah’s powerful prayer

I’m sure that James chose the example of Elijah because of the obvious power demonstrated in answer to his prayer.

“Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD-he is God! The LORD-he is God!" 1 Ki 18:38-39 NIV

“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.” Jas 5:17-18 NIV

### There are three defeats for the enemy here

1. The first is actually the lesser one but it is the one that gets our attention. God answered by fire, fire that consumed the sacrifice. God won the challenge after Elijah’s prayer! That is the victory we celebrate in Sunday School when we are children. It’s the one that gets our attention. And it got Israel’s attention too.
2. The second victory is more subtle to us but would have been obvious to the people of Israel in Elijah’s day. God showed complete control over nature through Elijah’s prayers. This got the attention of Ahab and it is the victory that James mentions. You see, Baal was the God of agriculture and fertility and one thing he was supposed to control was the rain. When Elijah prays and achieves total control over the rain, it was a great victory for God over Baal. Ahab know it was due to Elijah that it had not rained for three years. Baal’s supposed relationship to the rain is also why it was very important for Elijah to pray for rain after the fire fell on Mt. Carmel. And it was very important that rain arrive because of the prayers to Almighty God rather than to Baal. So Elijah prays for rain and the rain comes even as the king is returning to his palace.
3. The third victory – the greatest one, is that the people declared Yahweh to be their God. They had a change of heart and they started once again on the way of following the God of Israel, rather than the gods of the nations around them. ***God’s greatest victories are the changed hearts of people.***

We tend to think that our prayers can’t make a difference. We think we could never pray a powerful prayer like Elijah. That is just plain wrong.

James, our Lord’s brother, knew we would think that way so he specifically encouraged us by saying. “Elijah, a man just like us.” He made a difference through prayer. So can you!

*"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” Mt 7:7 NIV*

Often we give lip service to the idea of powerful prayers but our actions betray us. If we really believed that our prayers were powerful would prayer services be almost empty? If we really believed that prayers were powerful would we skip grace before meals and prayers with our spouse or bed time prayers with our children? If we really believed that our prayers were powerful wouldn’t we intercede more for loved ones who are far from God? Would we pray more for the work of God in our church and in our world?

***Please say those words with me once more! “My prayers are very powerful.”***

# Conclusion

The Hidden Hand of God – Remarkable Answered Prayers p. 114 Letters to a Stranger