

James 5:13-20

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 May 2010

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] This morning we met Elijah on Mount Carmel, and he stood before us as a heroic figure, a giant of the faith, a lone and courageous voice for the Lord in days of crisis and apostasy.

This evening we will meet him again on that same occasion on Mount Carmel, but presented to us in a different or rather complementary light.

In the passage that we read in the New Testament in the epistle of James, we read in verse 16, in the second part of the verse, the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

And this affirmation on the part of James is illustrated or backed up by an example of just one such righteous man, namely Elijah, and Elijah on one particular occasion.

The occasion or certainly events surrounding the occasion that we were considering this morning.

So in these verses, in James chapter 5, from verse 16 and from the second half of that verse, the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective, through the following two verses, we have before us a challenging truth concerning prayer, followed by a comforting example for us.

[1 : 53] And that's the manner in which I want to consider these verses this evening. First of all, a challenging truth. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

But this challenging truth, backed up by this example that I'm describing as a comforting example, and in due course I'll explain why I describe it in such a manner.

First of all, then, a challenging truth. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. And as we consider this statement by James, I want us to notice three elements that we find within it.

And I'll notice what they are, and then we can consider them in turn. First of all, the earnestness of the prayer described. The prayer that James is speaking of and describing as effective is an earnest prayer.

And we'll notice why we make this claim. But secondly, the integrity of the one who prays. What James says is that the one who prays is important.

[3 : 17] He is to be a righteous man. She is to be a righteous woman. So there is the earnestness of the prayer, the sincerity, the fervency of the prayer, but also the integrity of the one who prays.

But then thirdly, James' statement speaks of an answer received to the prayer that is made. Well, let's think of these three elements under this first heading of a challenging truth.

Firstly, then, the earnestness of the prayer. Here in the verse that we have before us, the prayer of a righteous man, the word translated prayer, is not the usual word used in the New Testament for a prayer.

It is a word that literally means a request or entreaty and derives, the noun derives from a verb that means to request, but that carries the idea of fervency or urgency or earnestness.

To illustrate that, we can notice how the noun, rather the verb, is used by Paul in 2 Corinthians chapter 5. If you would just turn with me quickly to 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 20.

[4 : 45] There we find how the verb from which the noun is derived is used by Paul. And I think it is helpful and instructive there in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 20, a very familiar verse, we read as follows.

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors. As though God were making His appeal through us, we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

That verb, implore. We implore you on Christ's behalf. This is the verb from which the noun found in our text is derived or is connected to.

This verb, to implore. So, what Paul is saying is not simply that he requests that men and women be reconciled to God. This is not a matter-of-fact invitation, but rather he implores them to be reconciled to God.

There is that fervency, there is that urgency, very much evident in the language of the apostle. And so, with the word that James uses here, the prayer of a righteous man, this request, this entreaty of a righteous man, it is a sincere and earnest entreaty that is being described.

[6 : 15] Such a prayer, we are assured, is powerful and effective. And as we ponder on that, and just pause for a moment to consider that, and as we would be honest with ourselves, is it not so often true that as Christians, we are prone to lose such fervency or earnestness in prayer?

Maybe in your own Christian life and Christian walk, you can think back to times when you prayed earnestly and fervently to the Lord, where your communion with the Lord was a close one.

And yet, as you are honest with yourself, as you must be, you recognize that that is not so today, that that is not your condition today.

There is no longer that earnestness, that sincerity that there once was. That may not be your condition. It may be in your situation that you are enjoying great closeness and communion with God and praise God, if that is so.

But perhaps for many of us, if we are honest with ourselves, we have to recognize that we are prone to lose such fervency.

[7 : 51] As it has been eloquently described by one writer, the words are glowing, but the heart is cold.

Is that true of us in a measure? The words are glowing. We say the right words. We know what to say. We are well trained in the language of prayer.

And if occasion demands that we pray in public, we can do so. We can do so in a way that others can listen in and speak highly of the content of our prayer.

The words are glowing, but the heart is cold. That is so often our situation. And if that is so, we ought not to be surprised if such prayer, mechanical and lacking sincerity, to use the language of the King James Bible, availeth little.

This challenging truth that James presents to us, the prayer of a righteous man, is powerful and effective, highlights the importance of earnest and sincere prayer.

[9 : 11] And let us be very clear, just to ensure no misunderstanding, the fervency of the prayer is not something to be measured by the volume or by the seeming emotion of it.

It is a matter of the heart. Fervency in prayer will find expression in different ways, often as a function of who we are and what we are like and the personality we have.

It is a matter of the heart, but it is important, and James highlights that. But also we notice in the words of James here, the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

the truth that it is important that the one who prays be righteous. The integrity of the one who prays is highlighted.

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. It is not sufficient that the prayer or entreaty be fervent or earnest or sincere, important though that is.

[10 : 16] But it is necessary that the one who prays be righteous. Now this requirement, if we can call it that, is no novelty.

We are reminded of the words of the Scripture in the book of Proverbs, in chapter 15, and verse 29, The Lord is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous.

But what does that mean? Who is being described? Who is a righteous man? Who can consider themselves in such a manner?

In order to answer that question, what does this mean? Who is a righteous man? Who is a righteous woman? We have to be aware that the Bible uses the word righteous or just in two ways. We might distinguish these two ways as follows, in a spiritual and in a moral sense. Perhaps not the most adequate means of distinguishing them, but I think helpful for our purposes.

[11 : 29] So the word is used in these two senses, in a spiritual sense and in what we might call a moral sense. Just to illustrate that, if we look to Romans, chapter 3 and verse 10, we find the word righteous being used in that spiritual sense.

In Romans, chapter 3 and verse 10, again, words that we're familiar with, where Paul reminds his readers that there is no one righteous, not even one.

In a spiritual sense, no one is righteous. No one is able to say, well, I am a righteous man. We are all sinners. And so Paul, quite rightly, makes this claim, there is no one righteous.

But the word righteous is also used in what we might call that moral sense. If we just turn a couple of pages from where we are in James to 1 John, chapter 3 and verse 7.

And what do we read there? 1 John, chapter 3 and verse 7, we read, Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

[12:44] Here John makes it clear that there are those who can be described as righteous. There are Christians who can rightly and accurately be described as righteous men or righteous women in a moral sense.

Not perfect, not without sin, not perfect in all that they do, but who can legitimately and reasonably be described as righteous in that moral sense.

And James here is not speaking of every Christian. Not every Christian could be described as righteous in this way. In fact, there is a sense that in the spiritual meaning of the word, we are all righteous in Christ.

In and of ourselves, there is no one righteous, but in Christ, we are all righteous. But in the moral sense, not all Christians could accurately be described as righteous.

Rather, here James is speaking of the Christian, of the believer who strives after holiness, of the believer whose faith is revealed, the vitality of his faith is revealed by sustaining and cultivating a godly life.

[14:02] And we have to recognize that if we consider all who are Christians, and genuinely so, there is a wide spectrum.

There are those who seek seriously and with perseverance to live holy lives, and there are those who are careless in their walk.

They are believers, they are Christians, but they are careless. They could not reasonably be described as holy men and women. And there are those who can be so described.

Now, it is something we have to be careful not to claim to be able to always make that distinction as we would look around us, but we have to recognize that that is the reality.

And what James is seeing here is that this righteous man, this holy Christian, this pious Christian, is a Christian whose prayer is powerful and effective.

[15:08] And again, this is no novelty. We discover that in the Scriptures this truth is often affirmed. We can give a negative example of how we are told that one who is not holy will not be heard.

For example, in Psalm 66 and verse 18, what do we read there in that psalm that would highlight or would rather illustrate what we are saying concerning what James says?

Psalm 66 and verse 18. What does the psalmist say? This is a godly man. This is a believing man. This is a child of God.

And what does he say? If I cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. My prayer would not have been powerful and effective. But then, on a more positive note, at the other side of the coin, as it were, in 1 John chapter 3 and verses 21 and 22, what do we read?

Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from Him anything we ask. And then what do we read? Because we obey His commands and do what pleases Him.

[16:29] We receive from Him anything we ask because we obey His commands and do what pleases Him. And so, what James is saying is that it is important that if we are to aspire to our prayers being effective and powerful, if it is our desire that God would hear and answer us when we pray, it is important that we be holy, men and women, that we be pious in our walk and in our conversation.

It is a foolish thing to think that we can be careless in our walk, we can flirt with sin, we can live as we please, and then imagine that we can nonchalantly come before the throne of grace and expect that God will answer at the very click of our fingers when we approach Him.

No, it is important that we be righteous. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. But there is also here in this challenging truth, thirdly, the reference to the answer that will be received.

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. It is effective. It receives an answer from God. Indeed, this word translated, effective, is a word that used, or is used, of the work of God.

The prayer is effective because God answers and does His work. And if we are living holy and pious lives, still sinners, still falling short in so many ways, but if we are seeking sincerely and with God's help to live holy lives, and we pray sincerely and earnestly to our God, we should expect God to answer powerfully.

[18 : 34] And He will indeed answer powerfully. For the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. We have, then, this challenging truth, but we have also, secondly, this comforting example.

James wants to illustrate what He is saying with a real-life example. And He chooses Elijah as the example of a righteous man whose prayer was powerful and effective.

And we read what He says concerning Elijah there in verse 17 and 18. 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. Again He prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crop. So we're given this example of Elijah to illustrate the truth that is being presented.

And we can notice in this example two points that we want to make. First of all, the weakness of Elijah is highlighted. And this is really where we're coming from in speaking of this as a comforting example.

[19 : 51] First of all, the weakness of Elijah, but also in these words of James, we have very clearly presented to us the purposes of God. First of all, the weakness of Elijah.

Elijah, we are told by James, was a man just like us. And I say this is a comforting example because James is at pains to remind us that the superhero Elijah, the heroic figure, the giant of the faith, who we were considering this morning.

He was just an ordinary man, a man of like passions with you and me, just like you and me. We've read earlier in the service what happened after his great victory on Mount Carmel, God's great victory in which Elijah was involved.

We've read how he was terrified at the threatenings of Jezebel, this man who had stood before Ahab and all the gathered hosts of the prophets of Baal and Asherah, and yet this woman sends a messenger to threaten him, and he is trembling.

He is terrified, and he runs away. He flees from his impending fate. And before God, he moans concerning his situation.

[21 : 18] Here we find him, an ordinary man, prone to the temptations and the weaknesses and the doubts that we all experience.

And so, when he is presented to us as a righteous man whose prayer is powerful and effective, we are not to see him as some figure who is beyond our reach.

We are not to see him as one who it would be so difficult for us to ever reach such an elevated place. No. He was a man just like us.

What James is saying is, if Elijah, the Elijah who fled from Jezebel, the Elijah who wished God would simply end his life, the Elijah who had thrown in the towel, if this Elijah could pray in this manner, then so can you.

So can the likes of us. So, the weakness of Elijah, but also in what James presents to us, there is a presentation of the purposes of God and how they work together in the prayer that we offer to God.

[22 : 39] James tells us in these verses that Elijah prayed that it might not rain. He states that very clearly and explicitly.

He prayed earnestly that it would not rain. Now, this produces a, I wouldn't call it a difficulty, but a curiosity, we might call it, in that if we go through the record in the Old Testament, the passages that we have read, we find no reference to Elijah praying in this way.

Throughout the life of Elijah, as it is recorded for us in the Scriptures, on no occasion do we find him praying that it would not rain.

James tells us that he prayed in that manner, but we find no record of it in the Old Testament. What we do have is an announcement by Elijah that it would not rain.

Not a prayer, but an announcement in 1 Kings 17. In verse 1, we read now, Elijah the Tishbite from Tishpah and Gilead said to Ahab, said to the king, As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.

[24 : 03] So, there is this announcement by Elijah. Now, I think the implication is clear. God revealed his purposes to his prophet.

God revealed to Elijah that it would not rain as an act of judgment on Israel for its idolatry and apostasy.

This purpose of God is made known to the prophet Elijah. And what does Elijah do? Well, having received this revelation from God, he prays that God's will be done.

God has said, It will not rain. And so, Elijah prays to his God, Lord, do your will. Do what you have said that you will do.

And similarly, at the end of the draft, James tells us that he prayed that the heavens would open once again and give rain. Again he prayed and the heavens gave rain.

[25 : 06] And we find that there is a similar pattern. He is praying in accordance with the revealed will of God. In chapter 18, in verse 1, we read after a long time, I'm back in 1 Kings, chapter 18, after a long time, in the third year, the drought has been going on for three years.

James actually gives us greater detail. He speaks of three and a half years. The word of the Lord came to Elijah, Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.

God says to Elijah, I will send rain. The time has come. The drought is about to end. Go and tell Ahab that it is so.

Elijah knows this to be God's will. And then what do we read later on in the chapter? In verse 42 of chapter 18, Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground, and put his face between his knees.

And a few moments later, we find the heavens open. Now, we're not told there explicitly what he was doing, but it seems reasonable to conclude that there he was praying that God would do that which he had promised he would do.

[26 : 24] God has already told Elijah, I'm going to send rain. And Elijah prays to his God that God would do that which he had promised.

I think that is helpful for us as we consider how we ought to pray. God reveals his purposes to believers sensitive to his voice.

He does so largely through the Scriptures, certainly always governed by the Scriptures. And he reveals his purposes to those who are willing to hear.

And such, pray to God that he would fulfill his purposes. And it is so. He does so. So we have then this comforting example.

We're told that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. And we maybe look at that and say, well, yes, that's true. It's in the Word of God. It must be true. But that doesn't describe me.

[27 : 29] I'm not a righteous man. I'm not a holy man. And maybe you're right in that assessment. And there is a challenge that you would indeed become holy if you are not holy.

But there is, in the example of Elijah, Elijah who was a man just like us, an encouragement, a comfort, that what has been presented to us is not outwith our reach.

If we would but carefully and faithfully make use of the means of grace that God has provided for us, we can be such men and women.

We can be of those who, as we pray, our prayer that we raise to God, prayer in accordance with His will, will prove to be prayer that is powerful and effective.

Well, we all stand in great need of God's help. The very passage here in James within which we find this teaching is a passage that recognizes the many difficult circumstances that we can face as Christians, trouble and illness and sin.

[28 : 46] we need to pray for ourselves, we need to pray for one another, we need to pray for the congregation that we are part of, we need to pray for our city and for our nation.

But will our prayer, will your prayer be powerful and effective like the prayer of Elijah?

In answering that question, we can do no better than simply to repeat what James instructs us in this passage.

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Let us pray.