

James 5:16-18

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[0 : 00] Prayer changes things.

That's the claim. That's the slogan. That's the tagline. Prayer changes things. But does it? Does it really change things? Does it make that big a difference?

And I'm not posing those questions or asking those questions as a skeptic or a cynic, but as a believer, a concerned believer as to this matter, this question.

Does prayer really change things? We are, I'm sure, persuaded that it's good to pray. It's good to talk to God.

It's good for the soul. Praying for and with others can be encouraging and strengthening in times of difficulty and discouragement.

[1 : 06] We've experienced that. We know that to be true. But does it change things? Does it really make a difference out there in the real world as opposed to just in here, in my ability to confront circumstances, in my spiritual well-being?

What about out there in the real world? Does prayer really change things? You may have heard, I think I've made mention of this a while back.

It's only in the last few months that this has been a news item. But you may have heard about a drought that has been affecting southern Africa, and particularly Cape Town, the city of Cape Town.

So this goes back a few months. So I think the problem is an ongoing one, though not as severe as it was a while back. So it wasn't that long ago that the local authorities there in Cape Town were predicting what they were calling Day Zero.

Very dramatic kind of way of describing it. And Day Zero was a day where the water would run out. The reservoir would run dry, and there would be no water in the city.

[2 : 17] And it was a big deal. It was predicted to be the very first time that a major world city would literally run out of water. But then finally, and this was maybe a few weeks ago, the rains came.

Or at least some rain came that significantly improved the situation. And on the arrival of the rain, one of the local preachers there in Cape Town was quick to take the credit.

He claimed, and did so, so that all could hear, he claimed that his prayers had brought the rain. That he had prayed that there would be rain, and God had heard his prayer, and as a result, it had rained.

And he seemed really quite pleased with himself at the outcome. Now when you hear that, maybe you read that on the news, or you see the video clip of this preacher making this bold claim, and I don't know how you respond, if I'm honest.

My response was just a little skeptical. It was, yeah, right. And I think we are, I think, quite sensibly skeptical of such claims. But the question remains, does or can prayer change things?

[3 : 36] Really big things, like the weather. Well, James says yes. He makes, in these verses, a bold claim in that direction, that prayer does change things, that prayer is powerful and effective.

He makes a bold claim, but then he also follows that up, or backs it up, or accompanies this bold claim with what we could call an encouraging example, which, as it happens, involves weather-changing prayer.

And what I want to do this evening is spend a little bit of time considering the bold claim that James makes, and the encouraging example that accompanies it. So the bold claim is there in verse 16.

In the second half of verse 16, we read, The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. We want to examine this claim.

The language of the claim allows us to examine it and to identify three elements of the claim that is being made by James. And the first element that I want us to look at is what we could call the earnestness, or the sincerity of the prayer that is offered and that is described as powerful and effective, the earnestness of the prayer.

[4 : 54] The word that James uses that is translated prayer, there in that statement, in verse 16, the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. The word that James uses is not the usual word that he employs in his letter when he speaks about prayer, and he has done so on two or three occasions already.

The word that he uses seems to carry the idea of urgency or fervency in the prayer that is being offered. And just to give you a sense of that, we can notice how the same word is used in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 20.

Now, it's the verbal form of the noun that we have in our text, but it's the same root word. So, in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 20, we can read as follows.

And it's a familiar text. We read there, Paul is writing to the believers in Corinth, and he says this, We are there for Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.

And then notice what Paul says, We implore you on Christ's behalf, Be reconciled to God. And the verb that's translated there, implore, is the same word that we find James using here when he speaks about the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

[6 : 20] And so it has that sense of imploring. There is this sense of an earnest appeal. And what James seems to be saying is that if a prayer is to be powerful and effective, this is one of the characteristics that ought to mark it, that it be sincere.

I don't know if it's necessary to stress so much the idea of fervency, because that can be quite subjective, what's fervent, and we're all different in our personalities and how fervency is expressed.

But even if we limit it to, and I think we probably do well to limit it to, the idea of sincerity. Sincerity is necessary for prayer, according to James, to be powerful and effective.

Let's just think about that, that aspect. Let's examine ourselves for a moment on this matter of the sincerity with which we pray. What about us? What about you? How have you prayed in the past?

As you maybe look back on your Christian life, and how do you pray today? One writer speaking about this matter of prayer describes his own prayers in an honest and also quite a solemn way, using these words.

[7 : 33] The words are glowing, but the heart is cold. That's a kind of self-critique that this believer engages in. The words are glowing, but the heart is cold.

I wonder if you can relate to that. You know the words. You've learned the words. You've prayed the prayers. And you may be able to pray a prayer that sounds right. And the content is entirely in accordance with Scripture.

It can even be quite passionate in terms of the words used. The words are glowing, but the heart is cold. Prayer has become mechanical.

It's become simply the pronouncing of words that have been learned over the years and has become, and we think of Jesus' great concern with some of the religious folk of his day, where their prayers have become vain repetitions.

And what James is saying, what James is implying in the language he uses is that such prayer, to use the old-fashioned language of the authorized version, such prayer availeth little.

[8 : 44] So the earnestness, the sincerity of the prayer, is an element that we need to be aware of. But there's another element that is stated explicitly by James, because he says here in this claim, the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

You know, we've heard this claim, we've read it, we've heard people mention it or quote it maybe many times, and we hear that bit, and we think, oh, well, maybe that's not me. Yeah, I'm sure that's true, but this is the prayer of a righteous man.

We need to think a little bit about what James means by that. Who is he describing when he says the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective? And that leads me on to the second aspect of this bold claim.

Moving on from the earnestness or the sincerity of the prayer to the integrity of the one who prays or the status of the one who prays. So the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

What James is saying seems to echo what we read in Proverbs and chapter 15 and verse 29. Let me just read what the writer to the Proverbs says.

[9 : 54] It's in chapter 15 and verse 29. We read, The Lord is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous. He hears the prayer of the righteous. What's implicit is that he doesn't hear the prayer of the wicked.

The prayer of the righteous he hears. The prayer of the wicked he does not hear. Well, that seems to be the sense of what James is saying here. But the question remains and the one we need to grapple with is who are the righteous?

When I was just thinking about it in my own mind, the first words that came to my mind were the words of Paul in Romans chapter 3 where he's quoting from Psalm 14 and he declares rather solemnly, there is no one righteous, no, not one.

Well, that's not too promising. If no one is righteous, then well, the claim is maybe true, but it's kind of irrelevant because none of us fit the bill. But that really isn't to do justice to what James is saying.

We need to think about this adjective, righteous, and notice how the word can be employed in two senses, two complementary senses in the Bible.

[11 : 03] First of all, with reference to our status as believers. So it's used on occasion with that sense of our status as believers. And I'll explain that in a moment.

But it's also used with reference to our conduct as believers. Well, let's speak of it as our Christ-likeness. Our conduct, the measure in which our conduct approximates to the conduct of Christ.

So the word righteous used with reference to our status, but also to our conduct. We are all righteous in Christ. Thinking about that aspect of our status.

We're all righteous in Christ. If we are believers, if we have put our trust in Jesus, then that is our status before God. God sees us as righteous in His Son.

This is how God's people are often described in the Bible. We are described as the righteous. So the whole of God's people, made up of all kinds of Christians, very committed Christians, Christians who are just struggling along.

[12 : 08] All of us are described as collectively the righteous. Why? Because that is our status in God's sight. And this is important to grasp in reference to prayer.

Prayer is one of God's gifts to His own people. It is a privilege that comes with our citizenship. It's because of who we are, sons and daughters of God, that we can pray and God hears and God answers.

Because of who we are. And that hasn't to do with how good we are, how righteous we are in terms of our conduct, but simply because of who we are, because of our status as members of God's family.

So that word righteous is used in that sense. But it's also used with respect to our conduct. So listen to what John says in his first letter.

In 1 John 3 and verse 7, he says, he who does what is right is righteous. He who does what is right is righteous. So he's using the same word, but he's using it in a different sense.

[13 : 08] He's talking about our conduct. That our conduct ought to be conduct that is right. And those who behave in that way can be described as righteous.

Now we don't all, and we don't always, do what is right. I think that much is clear. And when we understand the word in that sense, which I think we can in the context of what James is saying, then we conclude that this does impact on the effectiveness of our prayers.

Because of our status as the righteous, we can pray. But the measure in which our life is Christ-like, that will impact on, that will have an influence on the effectiveness of our prayers.

That is what James, I would contend, is saying. Remember the words of the psalmist in Psalm 66 and verse 18. And we'll sing those verses to close our service.

But if we just remind ourselves just before we do that, or at this point, what the psalmist says. In Psalm 66 and verse 18, we read as follows.

[14 : 23] And the psalmist here is baring his soul, as it were. He's being honest about his own experience and his own life. And he says this, If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

So he's speaking about his spiritual condition. He's speaking about the life that he's living. And he says, If my life is a life that is careless, where I am flirting with sin, where I am not taking seriously the call to live a holy life, then God will not listen to my prayer.

Now God hears everything we say. So it's not that he doesn't hear what we say, but he doesn't give attention to our prayer in the manner that he does when, with his help and by his grace, we are living righteous lives, lives that are ever more like Jesus.

So these words of Psalm 66 can be seen, I suppose, from a negative perspective that sin acts as a kind of barrier to God hearing or attending to our prayer.

But on the positive side, the more righteous or Christ-like we become, the more we will be in sync with God and his will and so our prayers as a result, as a consequence, will be more effective and more powerful.

[15 : 46] So the earnestness of the one who prays, the integrity, status and integrity of the one who prays, but then the claim also makes reference to the effectiveness of such prayer.

Such prayer is, says James, powerful and effective or powerful in its effect or to use the language that I used at the very beginning, what James is saying is such prayer changes things.

It's powerful in its effect. It changes things. What we ask for is granted. What we pray, God responds and delivers. Such prayer is powerful and effective.

So that's the bold claim, but let's move on and think about, briefly, the encouraging example. And the example given is of Elijah. And two prayers, in fact, of Elijah. A prayer that it would not rain and a prayer that it would rain.

And I want to think about the weakness of Elijah that is stressed in what James says, but also the purposes of God. And both of these things are encouraging for us. But let's think of each of them in turn.

[16 : 54] First of all, the weakness of Elijah. What does James say there in verse 17? As he introduces his example, he begins by saying this, Elijah was a man just like us. The old language is quite memorable.

A man of like passions with us. He was a man just like us. And the stress there is on his humanity, on his normality, if you wish.

He is just like you and me. Now, in the providence of God, Elijah was used to do great things. He performed great miracles. He was one of the great prophets. We're none of these things.

But in the matter of prayer, he was a man just like us. He had no special gift. That enabled him to pray. No special anointing that placed him in some kind of elite category when it came to being able to pray powerfully and effectively.

He enjoyed no double measure of the spirit that ensured that his prayers reached where our prayers couldn't possibly reach. No, he was a man just like us.

[18 : 02] But for all his weakness, he was a man who prayed and God answered. And we know, of course, from what we read of Elijah in the Old Testament, we know that he was a weak man.

He was vulnerable. He was fragile. He was prone to discouragement and despair and fear. You remember him after the great victory on Mount Carmel, his most glorious moment, you might wish, or you might say.

And yet, within a few moments, he was trembling in fear of Queen Jezebel. He was feared of Alassie, this great prophet of God.

Just a man, just like us. He was afraid. He was afraid of what would happen to him. But for all his weakness, he prayed and God answered. And so, I think James is wanting to stress that he's saying, when I give you the example of Elijah, I don't want you to think, oh yeah, Elijah, wow, well of course Elijah prayed and it was powerful and effective, but that's Elijah.

I'm not Elijah. You say, no, don't think like that. See, Elijah was a man just like you. There was nothing special about Elijah in this matter of prayer. So the weakness of Elijah, the normality of Elijah, if you wish.

[19 : 17] But then also, we can just think briefly about the purposes of God and this helps us to understand, I think, what's going on here. We're told there in verse 17 that Elijah prayed earnestly that it would not rain and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.

That's clear enough what James is saying, but here's the thing. There is no reference in the Old Testament, in the chapters in Kings where this whole account is described in some detail.

There is no reference to Elijah praying in the manner that James described. It simply isn't present. You can read the whole account and at no point will you find Elijah praying that it would not rain.

Now I'm not saying he didn't because clearly he did because James tells us that he did. But we're not told that he did. Now what we do have, and it's the verse that we read in chapter 17 of 1 Kings, what we do have is an announcement by Elijah that it would not rain.

So the verse that we read isn't Elijah praying, it's Elijah announcing to Ahab it's not going to rain. God has told me it's not going to rain. Now the implication I think is clear about what happened, the order of events if you wish.

[20 : 33] God revealed his purposes to Elijah, namely that it would not rain as an act of judgment with a view to bringing a sinful people back to God. Elijah receives this message from God.

Having received the message, having discovered what God's will is in the matter, Elijah then prays. You say, well what was the need to pray? God already said this is what's going to happen.

But Elijah knew that it was necessary for him to pray in accordance with God's will in this matter. And so he prays. We don't know the words that he used but perhaps along these lines, along these lines, Lord do what you have said that you will do.

You've told me it's not going to rain as an act of judgment that will draw a rebellious people back to yourself. I want my people to come back to you. I want them to repent. That's what I want more than anything else.

And if this act of judgment will bring them back then Lord do what you've said you're going to do. And he prayed. Stop the rain. And God answered.

[21 : 33] As he had announced that it was going to happen he answered the prayer of Elijah and the rain stopped. It no longer rained. And we see a similar pattern in the second prayer that rain would be restored in the first verse of chapter 18 of 1 Kings.

Again, it's an announcement. Elijah goes to Ahab and said, I've got a message for you from God. The rain is coming. And then we read of him.

There we are told of him praying that it would rain. But the pattern is the same. And this pattern I think ties in with what we've said about the significance of being righteous or Christ-like or in tune with God's will.

You see, the more Christ-like we are, the more sensitive we are to God's will, the more we understand God's purposes, the more we're in tune with God's desires. And so when we pray, we will pray in a manner that is ever more in sync with God's desires and purposes and will.

And so consequently, our prayer will be powerful and effective. But if we are far from God, if we have little notion of what interests God and of God's desires, then clearly what we pray will so often be at odds with God's purposes.

[22 : 53] And so God will not answer. Our prayer will not be powerful and effective. So this is the pattern. God reveals His will in and through the Bible.

We listen and we pray and God answers. Now if we're unsure of God's will, as sometimes we can be unsure of God's will in a given circumstance, we can still pray. We can still pray, but we will pray wisely and humbly with Jesus if it be your will.

And we will leave it to God's prerogative to determine if what we're asking for, if indeed it is a request, is to be granted or not or the manner in which it will be granted.

So the purposes of God. The weakness of Elijah an encouragement to us. The purposes of God also an encouragement to us that God will answer our prayers in accordance with His good and perfect will.

Well, let me finish with three challenges for us all in the light of what we've been looking at this evening. The first challenge directed to each of you, each of you who is a believer, who is trusting in Jesus, who enjoys that status of being a son or daughter of God.

[24 : 05] The challenge to you is this. You can be, you can be that man or woman whose prayers are powerful and effective. You see, you don't need to be some kind of elite Christian.

You don't need to have some special spiritual status to allow you to pray in this way. No, what James is making very clear is that this is the privilege and indeed the call to every believer.

You can be that man or woman. That's the first thing. But the second challenge in the light of what we've seen is that you need to become more and more righteous.

You are righteous in terms of your status before God, but you need to become more and more righteous in your behavior, in your attitudes, in your thinking, in your conduct. You need to become more and more like Jesus, the altogether righteous one.

And the more like Jesus as you are, then necessarily as you pray, your prayers will be more and more in line with God's will and they will be as a consequence powerful and effective.

[25 : 09] But let me suggest one further challenge and encouragement to you is that you can pray big. You don't need to be tentative and timorous when you pray.

You can pray big. Elijah prayed that the rain would stop. Elijah prayed that the rain would come again. These were big prayers. And he prayed them because he was aware that they were in line with God's will.

And let's just think about that example, how the ultimate purpose of the rain stopping and then the rain coming was to bring people back to God. And surely that should be the heart of our prayers.

We can pray for many things, but surely this is one that should be an ever-present, praying that God would bring sinners to himself. bring sinners to repentance. And we know that that is in line with God's will and so we can pray big.

We can pray big. Let me just kind of illustrate that with a wee story I read about just over the weekend. And it goes back to five years ago.

[26 : 11] And it's about a promotion that a Canadian airline had. We have Canadian friends with us today. So there's a wee story from Canada. You may be more familiar with this.

But WestJet Airlines in Canada, about five years ago, they arranged a peculiar Christmas marketing promotion. And passengers who were boarding a flight from Toronto to Calgary, and it was in the days leading up to Christmas, they were invited to scan their boarding pass.

And if they did so, there was a screen came up with a virtual Santa. Santa. And the passengers were invited to make a request for a Christmas gift from Santa.

And this was all filmed, of course, because it was part of the promotion. And people were intrigued and what's all this about? But, you know, some people thought, oh, well, I'll go along with this. And so some of the children asked for a train set or a doll.

You would have thought they'd be a bit more bold in their request. But genuinely, some of them did ask for those very traditional gifts. Some of the grown-ups, they wanted a smartphone. One guy thought, well, we'll go big.

[27 : 15] And he asked for a large screen TV. And there were any number of requests. One guy asked for a pair of socks. That was his request. Well, they got onto their plane. They got onto their plane.

They were traveling to Calgary. And while they were on the plane, I don't know, I guess that's a few hours. Canada's a big country, so I guess it's a few hours. And the staff of WestJet Airlines were busy buying these gifts that had been requested.

So they bought all these gifts, they wrapped them up, they tagged them, and when the passengers arrived in Calgary, what was the first thing that came out of the carousel wasn't their luggage, but these wrapped-up gifts tagged for each of the passengers who had made a request.

So again, of course, all of this was filmed. Wow! And they were opening up their presents, and wow, amazing, you know, I got my camera, I got my whatever it was that you had asked for. So it was a very clever kind of Christmas promotion.

Well, why did I tell you all this story? Because I can't help but wonder what the guy who asked for socks was thinking. You know, he was looking around, this guy with his white-screen TV, and the other guy got his smartphone, a pair of socks.

[28 : 23] I wonder if he was thinking, oh, I wish I'd asked for something a bit bigger than a pair of socks. Of course, it was too late, you see. The opportunity had passed, he just had to make do with his socks. I would imagine there were some passengers who didn't ask for anything.

Oh, this is a piece of nonsense. I'm not going to take part in this. And they, you know, they didn't get a present. Now, why do I tell this wee story?

I'm not encouraging, let this be very clear, I'm not encouraging self-serving or selfish prayer. Nor am I suggesting that God is some kind of heavenly Santa Claus that we can put in our gift requests to.

But I do wonder, and be clear that this is the focus of the illustration, I do wonder if we, as believers, miss out on all manner of God-pleasing blessings, of seeing men and women being brought to faith, of seeing God blessing our endeavors as we seek to serve Him, and all manner of big and legitimate blessings.

I wonder if we miss out because we are slow to ask or lack the faith to pray big prayers. As James has already said in this letter, you do not have because you do not ask.

[29 : 41] The prayer of a righteous man, the prayer of a righteous woman, is powerful and effective. You can be that man or woman. You need to become more and more like Jesus, and you can pray big.

And God will answer big in perfect harmony with His good and perfect will. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for prayer.

We thank You for this wonderful gift that You give to Your own people, a gift to the righteous, a gift to sons and daughters of God.

We thank You for the promises that are associated with prayer. We thank You for the confidence that we can have that when we come and pray to You, we can leave it all in Your hands and rest in Your perfect wisdom.

But we do pray that You would help us to pray evermore in a manner that is in sync with Your will, that is evermore reflective of Your will as it is revealed in the Bible to us.

[30 : 44] And as we pray in such a manner, as we pray with minds and hearts that reflect Your heart and Your desires and Your priorities, so we would see and be thrilled to see the manner in which You wonderfully answer.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.