

EFFECTUAL FERVENT PRAYER

James 5:16-18

In the first part of this verse James refers to healing again. He brings in two things, the confession of faults to one another and praying for one another. Confession of faults or sins is necessary if there is to be healing. Even if there is no sickness, sin should be confessed. This verse speaks of confession of sin to one another, but they must also be confessed to the Lord. The prayer of faith cannot operate as long as sin is locked in the bosom. Sin confessed will grow less, but not confessed, it will grow worse and worse. "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but who so confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Proverbs 28:13). "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9). Confession must be made to those against whom we have sinned. It is easy to see the faults of others, and some certainly delight to point them out. But the ones who enjoy pointing out the failures of others cannot bear to have theirs mentioned. They will make all kinds of excuses for their own failures, but will not allow for those of others. Such need not expect healing from the Lord.

If one sins against an individual, confession should be made to that person. When confession is made, let it be definite. Do not say in a general way, "I have sinned," but let the definite sin be mentioned. After confession, fault should not be found with the confessor, but prayer should be made for him.

No subject which has to do with the Christian life and Christian service is more important than the subject of prayer. The first sign of the life of faith is prayer, and all advancement in the Christian life, and all success in Christian service are conditioned on the prayer habit. Christian life begins with prayer, is made strong by prayer, and is consummated by prayer. Most of us know more about prayer than we are practicing.

I. What Is Prayer?

1. "It is the turning of the soul Godward."
2. "The human spirit seeking contact with the Divine Spirit."
3. "The deepest impulse of the human soul."
4. "The reaching out of the heart of man toward the heart of God."
5. "The heart talking with God."
6. Prayer is communion with God, committal to God, and cooperation with God. Prayer implies two things, namely, that man is dependent, and that man is capable of fellowship with God. Prayer is an expression of man's sense of helplessness and dependence. It also implies that God is interested in him and his welfare. The primary thing in prayer is God's will rather than man's.

II. What Are Some Elements Of Prayer?

1. Adoration.

This is the act of approaching God with a becoming sense of His goodness, greatness majesty, and glory. Adoration includes reverence, esteem, and love.

2. Confession.

This is both public and private.

3. Thanksgiving.

We should be more thankful for what God gives us.

4. Intercession.

Prayer reaches its highest in intercession, which is the act of one pleading for another. This is both a privilege and an obligation, the neglect of which is sin.

5. Petition.

This means definite requests for definite objects.

III. Why Pray?

We need a new conviction of the indispensable values of prayer. We will never pray as we should until we see prayer as a necessity, indispensable to the life we have undertaken to live.

1. It is a duty.

(1) One we owe to God.

(2) One we owe to others. It brings so many blessings to them.

(3) One we owe to ourselves.

Prayer is to the soul what breathing is to the body, what steam is to the engine, what gasoline is to the car, and what water is to the garden. It is as necessary to the soul as food is to the body. Through it we get renewed strength, heavenly wisdom, greater love, and a closer walk with God. However, we should never forget that prayer is costly.

a. It costs time.

Time is needed to prepare our hearts, to banish our worldly thoughts, and to compose our wayward hearts. Time spent in prayer is always profitable. We must take time to pray.

b. It costs thought.

c. It costs toil.

It really costs us physical energy to pray aright. While it takes something out of us physically, prayer always contributes to us spiritually. Satan will use every means possible to keep us from praying.

2. It is a precious privilege.

Man only is permitted to ask of God. "Call on me in the day of trouble, and I will answer thee." "If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally." "Ask and ye shall receive." Prayer is the greatest resource of any life. The mightiest thing any Christian can do is to pray. One trembles to think what would happen if God's people should really give themselves to prayer.

3. It pleases God.

It brings joy to His heart when His children pray.

4. It accomplishes so much.

"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." By prayer we harness God's omnipotence to our impotence. Nothing lies beyond the reach of prayer except that which lies outside the will of God.

When a Christian prays, something happens. This is not an imagination, but a glowing reality. When Moses prayed in that great day of Israel's need, the Divine hand was very soon manifest, and something happened. When Daniel prayed with his window opened toward Jerusalem, something happened. When Hezekiah laid Sennacherib's insulting letter before God, 185,000 corpses became the eloquent demonstration that something had indeed happened. When the saints of the early church cried unto God for Peter's deliverance from prison, it was but a very few minutes until the knock of the liberated prisoner on the door without became the astonishing revelation that something had happened. When a Christian gets on his knees, the angels and the demons know that something is going to happen. "And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us: and if we know that He hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him" (I John 5:14-15).

Tennyson said, "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of." Mary, Queen of Scots, declared that "she was more afraid of the prayers of John Knox than she was of all the armies of England." Surely then there is a power in prayer to be reckoned with that most of us have not yet realized. It is the power of the Holy Spirit pulsating in the life of the individual who is in tune with God. In Exodus 17 we read that Israel fought with the Amalekites, and as long as Moses' hands were held up before God, Israel prevailed. Elijah prevailed with God on Mount Carmel because of God's willingness to hear and answer prayer. George Mueller of Bristol, England, asked God to help him provide for thousands of homeless children. God heard his prayer and year after year supplied the need of that great orphanage.

"Prayer changes things." Prayer can change your life. Prayer changes circumstances. We accomplish more by praying about our circumstances than by complaining about them. Prayer will conquer adverse circumstances for us.

We need to pray for the salvation of souls. "Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession." Paul said, "My heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved." John Knox cried, "Give me Scotland or I die." Hudson Taylor said, "The nearest way to a man's heart is by God's teaching, our visits, and our entreaties, but the Spirit of God in answer to our prayers will bring them to their knees in conviction and conversion. The ages have proved that intercession is the mightiest weapon God has put into the hands of His children. Mueller prayed every day for sixty years for the souls of two men. As he lay on his deathbed one of them was saved, and the other was saved after Mueller passed away. God was richly honored by such persistent faith.

God's child can conquer everything by prayer, but he has no power without it. Dr. William Evans related an experience in a hotel in Great Britain. He said that he was unable to get the gas to light in a grate on a cold day. It was the law of the gas company that a shilling had to be placed in a certain slot before the gas would come on and heat could be produced. It was either a shilling or no heat. With us, it is prayer or no power.

The prayer that God can answer must come from the heart and lips of one who knows Jesus Christ as a personal Saviour, it must be made in faith, it must be made to God in the name of Christ, it must be made in an unselfish spirit, it must be for something that is needed, it must be coming from a life that is being lived in obedience to God's commands and will, and it must be prayed by one who is willing to help God answer his own prayer. Show me someone who really knows how to pray, and I will show you someone who is successful in the Lord's service. Our success in the Lord's work depends entirely upon our prayers. No praying means no results, little praying means few results, and much praying of the right sort means great results.

There are many cases in the Old Testament of righteous men supplicating God's throne for vital reasons. Of all these, James uses the prophet Elijah as an example.

Sometimes we think of the great men of the Bible as almost superhuman. We think we cannot rise to their level, that we cannot be like Abraham, or Moses, or Daniel, or Peter, or John, or Paul or James. Many of these were raised up to do a special work for their time, but for all that they also were men. Cornelius fell down before Peter, but Peter said, "Stand up; I myself also am a man" (Acts 10:26). Paul had been used of the Lord in the healing of the lame man at Lystra. The priest of Jupiter brought garlands and oxen and would have sacrificed to Paul and Barnabas, but they stopped him saying, "We also are men of like passions with you" (Acts 14:15).

Elijah was a man, but a righteous one. We can be righteous, too. Elijah was a man, but he was one who could pray. What hinders us from being the same? He was not a special brand of man, but he had a successful prayer life. He failed at times, too; in fear he fled from Jezebel, and was so discouraged that he asked the Lord that he might die. In this he evidenced the same frail human nature that we find in ourselves. However, we do not wish to belittle the great work Elijah did. He was a great prophet of the Lord, who could lay hold of God as few have been able to. He was as highly venerated by the Jews of James' time as any of the prophets.

The practice of prayer comes out in the life of Elijah. He was a remarkable figure when we consider the times in which he lived. The land was apostate. The little

believing remnant that did exist was so paralyzed with fear that they could not muster enough courage to come out of hiding when the prophet needed their support. What could he do? Where could he turn? He was not inherently strong. The text reminds us that Elijah was a man with feelings, fears, and failures just like us. He was a child of the desert without any special training for the tough assignment which confronted him. In a weak moment he asked to die rather than live. In every sense of the word, he was a man of like passions with us. What could he do? James tells us he could pray, and pray he did.

"He prayed earnestly." He did not merely say prayers, he really prayed. He prayed for the ears of God and not for the ears of man. A Boston newspaper reporter wrote that the prayer of a certain preacher was the best ever prayed to a Boston audience. Let us make sure that our prayers are not for an earthly audience but for a heavenly one. Elijah prayed in his prayer that it might not rain, and his prayer was answered. It did not rain for three years and six months.

It is not wrong to pray for judgment against sin if healing is in our minds as it was in the case of Elijah. The Lord sometimes permits calamities to come so that a few more hearts may turn to Him. This verse assures us that it is not wrong to pray about natural things. While God regulates the weather to fit the needs of the world, yet he does listen to the prayers of His own concerning it.

In verse 18 we have Elijah praying for rain, and the Lord answered him again in a remarkable way. Elijah prayed humbly. In I Kings 18:42 we see him casting himself down upon the ground and putting his head between his knees. That fact that he threw himself down on the ground tells of his humility. He was very bold before man, but very humble before God. How important humility is! The Lord will not hear us without it. Elijah surely prayed with great earnestness. His prayers were always definite. Here he does not pray for a variety of things but simply for rain. His prayer is pointed and sincere. He expected God to hear and to answer. If we expect our prayers to be answered, we should make them definite, too.

Elijah prayed perseveringly. Elijah prayed once and then sent his servant to see if he could see anything, but nothing was evident. Then he prayed again. In all, he prayed and sent his servant seven times before a small cloud was seen. We, too, should pray again and again until the answer comes. The Lord Jesus taught perseverance in prayer in the story of the widow and the unjust judge.

Elijah's prayer caused the Lord to send the rain and the earth again brought forth her fruit. True prayer will produce spiritual fruit as well as natural. If your life is fruitless, pray about it. Lack of prayer makes for barrenness.

After his great victory on Mount Carmel, Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done and how all the prophets of Baal had been slain. This angered Jezebel, and she threatened to kill Elijah. He fled for his life, and under a juniper tree thoroughly disheartened "he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers" (I Kings 19:4).

The Lord did not grant the request, but replied as it were, "I have more work for you to do." This man, who asked the Lord to let him die, has not died to this day. The Lord took him home without dying.

While Elijah was praying for others the Lord was willing to do the miraculous for him, but as soon as he selfishly asked for that which is natural for all he was

refused. Let us not be selfish in our prayers but ask for the salvation and blessings for others. As we pray, so will we live. If we are always praying for self, we will live for self; but if we are praying for others we will live for others, too.