

James: The Practical Christian

Powerful and Effective Prayer

James 5:16b-18

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Scripture

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In the January/February 2003 issue of *Pray!* magazine, Elmer Towns wrote the following about prayer:

My wife and I went through college by faith. If we had not prayed together daily through all our difficulties, I don't know how we would have made it. I earned \$1 an hour for driving a school bus, which was just enough to pay for our necessities, but there wasn't even a dime left over for a Coca-Cola.

One evening the only thing in the kitchen cabinet was a can of tuna, so my wife served a tuna casserole. As we clasped hands to thank God for the food, I prayed, "God, you know we are broke. You know it's two days until payday. You know we are willing to fast until we get money, but we ask you to please take care of our needs."

As we finished praying, the laundry man came to the door. Ruth met him to say, "No laundry today; we can't afford to have anything cleaned." But he had not come to pick up our cleaning. The laundry man explained, "A few months ago your landlord asked me to pass along \$20 to you to pay for having thawed the pipes for him. I had forgotten about it until today."

Some might say this was a coincidence, but Ruth and I say that our prayer together reminded the laundry man that he had \$20 for us. He had been sent by God.¹

Throughout history God's people have prayed and received answers to their prayers. In fact, we see an example of that in our

¹ Elmer L. Towns, "Praying in Tune," *Pray!* (January/February 2003), 17.

text for today. In James 5:16b-18 we learn that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. So, with that in mind, let us read James 5:16b-18:

¹⁶ **The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.**

¹⁷ **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.** (James 5:16b-18)

Introduction

Tradition tells us that James, the author of this letter and the brother of Jesus, was given a very unusual nickname by the Christians in the early church. They called him “Old Camel Knees.”

The Early Church historian, Eusebius, wrote the following account of James: “James was often in the habit of entering the temple alone and was often found on bent knees interceding for the people, so much so that his knees became as hard as a camel’s knees in consequence of his habitual kneeling before God.”

And so as “Old Camel Knees” begins to draw this letter to a close we should not be surprised to find that the topic of *prayer* closes his concluding paragraph. From verses 13-18 *prayer* is mentioned no less than seven times. Within six verses there are seven reminders to pray.

In verse 13 James refers to the importance of prayer during times of trouble as well as during times of happiness. In verses 14-15 James refers to the importance of prayer during times of physical sickness. In verse 16 James calls us to pray for each other when we have sinned. And then in verses 17-18 James uses the example of Elijah to remind us of the power and effectiveness of prayer.

In these verses James deals with other topics such as the responsibility of elders, the relationship between sickness and sin, and God’s will concerning the physical healing of sick Christians.

But today I want to focus your attention on James' major subject in these verses, and that is the power and effectiveness of prayer.

William Cowper, one of the great English hymn writers and a close friend of John Newton, once wrote, "And Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees."²

Prayer is, without question, the highest activity of the human spirit. Men and women are at their highest when they are on their knees, face to face with God. It's been said, "What a man is alone on his knees before God, that he is and no more."

Lesson

Just as the true test of a marriage can be found in the words spoken in private, so the true test of your relationship with God is to be found in your private communion with him in prayer.

Prayer is the measure of the person. It is also the making of the person. Therefore it is one of our greatest needs individually and corporately as a church. In James 5:16b-18, James sets before us a description of powerful and effective prayer.

I. The Example of Elijah (5:17-18)

First, notice the example of Elijah.

After stating in verse 16b that "the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective," James goes on in verses 17-18 to illustrate that truth by reminding us of the prayers of the prophet Elijah.

James begins by reminding us that "**Elijah was a man just like us**" (5:17a). The reason James makes such a statement is because he knows that when you and I read about **Elijah** in the Scriptures we are likely to think he is not at all like us. Admittedly, **Elijah** doesn't seem at first glance to be anything close to being your typical kind of guy. He doesn't seem to be anything like a normal, every day Joe.

² Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 More Hymn Stories* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1985), 258.

The Scriptures tell us that **Elijah** was the man who stood unwavering before the wicked and powerful leaders Ahab and Jezebel with unbelievable courage (cf. 1 Kings 17-18). It was **Elijah** who, against the odds of 450 to 1, challenged the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel to a contest to see who was the true God (cf. 1 Kings 18). It was **Elijah** who appeared with Moses at the time of Jesus' transfiguration (cf. Luke 9:30-31). It was **Elijah** whom the people thought Jesus was calling when he was dying on the cross (cf. Matthew 27:47). And aside from Enoch, it was only **Elijah** who went to heaven without having to undergo physical death (cf. 2 Kings 2:11).

It goes without saying that God used **Elijah** like few others in all of history. So the natural tendency is for us to see **Elijah** as a very special case, as a super saint, not like one of us. Surely he did not doubt God like we do. Surely he did not struggle like we do.

James blows away that assumption in verse 17b by writing, "**Elijah was a man just like us.**" James is saying, "I realize that Elijah was a man of great accomplishment, a man greatly used by God like very few others. But I want to assure you that this Elijah was no superman. He was weak just like we are. He had a human nature just like us. He had his struggles. He was just like us."

In order to understand more fully James' point here, you must first remember the historical context of **Elijah's** experience by going back to 1 Kings 17ff. That is where we find the account of **Elijah** standing before king Ahab and announcing that God said that there would be no rain except at his word.

For this to make any sense you must realize that the primary evil being committed by king Ahab in **Elijah's** day was that they had incorporated into the life of Israel the worship of the idol god Baal. The idol Baal was considered to be the god of fertility and the god of rain. The people believed Baal controlled the rain. When it rained, the people believed it was Baal, in effect, impregnating the soil which would later yield its fruit or crop. So when it didn't rain the people thought they had offended Baal. And when it rained Baal was pleased with them.

It was into this belief system that **Elijah** boldly stepped and announced to king Ahab, most likely at the end of the dry season, that “there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word” (1 Kings 17:1). This was more than just a declaration. It was a polemic. It was a direct challenge to Baal in the name of the Lord. **Elijah** was beginning here what would be consummated on Mount Carmel as he took on all 450 prophets of Baal at once.

But as you study 1 Kings carefully, you will find that even in the midst of such great activities, Elijah was a man who suffered from frustration, fear, disappointment, depression, and anxiety. That’s James’ point! **“Elijah was a man just like us.”**

For example, after God’s crushing victory over Baal, in which the 450 prophets of Baal were routed and killed, Ahab told his wicked wife Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.”

Amazingly, the Scripture says that “Elijah was afraid and ran for his life” (1 Kings 19:3). The mighty, fearless Elijah on Mount Carmel was now afraid of Jezebel!

Eventually, Elijah found himself in the desert, and again the Scripture says that Elijah was so depressed that he prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors” (1 Kings 19:4).

Do you see that **“Elijah was a man just like us”**? He struggled with the same kinds of fears and anxieties and disappointments and so on that you and I have.

The question you might be asking is this, “If he is a man just like us, then why was it that God used him so mightily? How did someone just like us become one through whom the very forces of nature were controlled?”

The answer is given to us by James in the next clause of verse 17. It was simply because he learned something that very few people learned in that generation or in any generation since: That is

the power of prayer! James tells us in verse 17 that Elijah was a man who **“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 crops.”**

The words translated **“prayed earnestly”** may also be translated “prayed fervently, prayed diligently, or prayed with perseverance.” In spite of Elijah’s weaknesses and sin, the one thing he continued to do was to pray earnestly. And as a result, God literally did not allow rain to fall for three and a half years.

It’s an old lesson. But one I believe most of us have never really taken to heart like we should. It is rediscovering the truth that God has ordained the prayers of his people as the primary means through which he has chosen to do his mighty acts in the world today. God, in his all-encompassing foreknowledge and in his infinite wisdom, has decreed to make the prayers of his people the cause of his triumph in the many battles of life.

James’ point in our text is to illustrate how powerful and effective the prayer of a righteous man just like us can be! **Elijah** prayed and as a result God actually caused the rain to stop for three and a half years!

But this is not the only account in Scripture of God responding to the prayers of his people.

II. The Example of Hezekiah (Isaiah 37:14-38)

Second, notice the example of Hezekiah.

When Hezekiah’s life and kingdom were threatened by the very powerful king Sennacherib’s army, the Bible tells us that he prayed to God. That brief prayer is even recorded for us (in Isaiah 37:15-20). It couldn’t have been more than a 25 second prayer. But as a result of that prayer God killed 185,000 of his enemies. Later, God told Hezekiah the reason why he killed the 185,000 enemies in one blow. In Isaiah 37:21 God said to Hezekiah it was “because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria.”

Think about that! The most powerful king on the face of the earth was suddenly gone. Gone, not only from Hezekiah's doorstep, but gone from the very stage of world history. Why? God told Hezekiah that it was "because you have prayed"!

Do you see the point here? God, in answer to one man's 25 second prayer killed 185,000 people! God, in answer to another man's prayer held back rain for three and a half years!

These are just two accounts of many in the Bible that graphically illustrate this apparently lost truth that God in his wisdom has ordained the prayers of his people to be the occasion of unbelievable triumph.

III. The Challenge to Pray

Finally, notice the challenge to pray.

The hard truth is that most of us don't really believe that God has ordained our prayers to be the means of performing his great triumphs in the world. Otherwise we would take prayer more seriously than we do. So we settle in to a mundane form of spirituality, never praying for God to do anything for us or through us beyond what we ourselves could do in our own strength.

Earlier in this book James wrote, "You do not have because you do not ask" (4:2). I wonder how many Christians would have to confess that truth today. To say, "Frankly, I do not have because I do not ask."

Jack Miller wrote in his book, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, that there are two types of prayer: *maintenance* prayer and *front-line* prayer.

Maintenance prayers merely maintain the status quo. Such prayers serve only to preserve the status quo of the inward-looking church. You pray for Aunt Helen's kidneys and Uncle Joe's toe surgery. Now, let me say that there is nothing wrong with praying about these things. In fact, in the previous few verses James has just finished urging God's people to call for the elders to pray for

them when they are sick. We are most definitely called to pray for health concerns.

Nevertheless, *front-line* prayer is quite different. Front-line prayer has a revolutionary purpose. Rather than being self-centered, it is radically kingdom-centered. Such prayer is summarized by Jesus' words, "Your kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10). The underlying passion of front-line prayer is to see the kingdom of God and the glory of God mightily manifested in the world today. There is a willingness to ask God for such great things that they could only be accomplished by his hand and they could only result in his glory.

There are two necessary elements that must be present if you are going to offer to God front-line prayers.

The first is what I'll call *knowledge*. You will begin to pray front-line prayers only when your eyes have been opened by God to see the direct correlation of your prayers to the work of God in the world today. Unless you are truly convinced of the necessity and efficacy of prayer, you will never make prayer the essential ministry God intended. We do not just pray for the work of God in the world today; prayer is the work! Prayer lifts our activities from the realm of human effort to the divine.

It's been said, "When man works, man works; but when man prays, God works." Through prayer you are able to move from time into eternity, sharing in the eternal plan of God for the ages.

But there is a second element necessary if you are going to be someone who offers to God front-line prayers. And that is what I will call *vision*. People will pray front-line prayers only when they are filled with a vision of God's inevitable triumph.

You see, God cannot be defeated! His purposes cannot be thwarted. Since God has revealed to us in Scripture that the evangelization of the world is his purpose, you can be absolutely sure it is going to happen! And that is going to happen with your involvement or without your involvement! The Bible makes it very clear that one day "all the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:4).

Do you hear the logic of inevitability in that text? There are no ifs, ands, or buts in that text. You don't find here, "If you'll get serious and give your money and work hard, God will finish the Great Commission." The truth is that God is going to fulfill the Great Commission with you or without you. You can have the privilege of participating or simply watching from the sidelines.

Conclusion

I am setting before you today one of the greatest privileges available to Christians today. That is the privilege of participating in God's eternal plan for the ages through prayer. In God's plan, others have already prayed and given of themselves sacrificially so that you would come to know Christ. Now you are called by God to do the same so that he will touch the lives of others through you.

Whatever it is we may be facing as a church and whatever obstacle you may now be facing personally, I want you to know that our God reigns. No matter what you may now be facing, I want to remind you that our God is able to do beyond all that you could ever ask or think. And that he has chosen to do mighty works through the simple prayers of his people.

I want to leave you today with the words of John Newton on prayer. He wrote a hymn titled "Come, My Soul, Thy Suit Prepare," and these are the first two stanzas:

Come, my soul, thy suit prepare,
Jesus loves to answer prayer;
He Himself has bid thee pray,
Therefore will not say thee nay.

Thou art coming to a King,
Large petitions with thee bring;
For His grace and power are such,
None can ever ask too much.

Do you believe that? I hope you do. I hope you will see that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our gracious God, grant us grace that we might dare to join with men like Elijah and Hezekiah and pray for great things! Forgive us for being conformed to this world and its way of thinking and living. Lift up our eyes as you have never done before. Cause every one of us to rethink our commitment to seek your power and provision for our lives through prayer. Use this message, God, to call us back into deeper communion with you through prayer. Give to us a new vision, not of the possibilities, but of the inevitability of your triumph over all.

Our loving Father, we face many obstacles today. We need victory over our fears, discouragements, failures, and weariness. We bring them before you along with everything that would hinder our being used to advance your kingdom and glorify your Son. Let there flow out of this church a great wave of triumphant front-line prayer. Thank you for choosing to respond to the pleading of your people and you have decreed to make our prayers the cause of your triumph in many battles.

CHARGE:

The prayer of a righteous man or woman is powerful and effective. If God will use a man like Elijah, who is just like us, believe me—he will use you! But only if you will follow the example of Elijah and pray earnestly. (The victory is assured! You can be a part of it through prayer or you can be left in the dust. God's program is going to move on with you or without you. I plead with you, get on board. Life is too short to spend your life on that which is temporal). Resolve today by God's grace to become a man or a woman of prayer. Now, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.