

Powerful Prayer

Part 5 of Sermon Series: *A Faith That Works*

a sermon based on

James 5:13-20

(with reference to Mark 9:38-50)

and delivered on

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Today, I'm going to wrap up this sermons series *A Faith That Works*. For the past five weeks we've looked at the book of James and his practical wisdom for living as a Christian. So, today, let's talk about prayer. As James says, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." (Jas. 5:16a. [emphasis added])

Prayer is powerful! And... prayer is effective. Do you believe that? I do.

But why? What makes the prayer effective? Do you ever wonder that? What is it that I need to add to my prayers (or maybe take out of them) for them to be effective? I keep praying but nothing happens; and if something does happen it's not what I wanted or expected. What do **I** need to do to experience powerful and effective prayer?

But if we go back to that verse we might be able to see the problem, the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective. That leaves me out of luck. On that note all of us our out of luck. When the man ran to Jesus and said, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life. Jesus said, "Why do you call me good? No one is good (No one is righteous) except for God. (Mk 10:17-18, Lk 18:18-19)

Maybe that's the problem. Maybe that problem starts with that question, "What must I need to impart power and effectiveness into my prayers?" It's the wrong question? Instead of *what* the question should be "Who do I need?" We all know the answer to that question. Right? It's Jesus! Because he was God incarnate – the eternal Son – who willingly took upon himself the penalty for sin (the penalty of death) on the cross even though he himself as St. Paul said, "He became sin even though he knew no sin," (2 Cor. 5:21) he has the power to make prayer work.

It's Jesus who says in John 14, "I will do whatever you ask in my name." (Jn 14:13a) It's not the only time that he promised to make his disciples' prayers effective. In fact, there is so much power in the name of Jesus that someone who wasn't his disciple was able to cast out demons in his name. As the Gospel says, the disciples admitted that they told him to stop "because he was following us." Why should he get the credit? Maybe that's why Jesus says to let him be, that "(w)hoever is not against us is for us."

Every now and again, Scripture tells us that Jesus scolds the disciples – "Get behind me Satan" (Mt 16:23, Mk 8:33), or when (I just hear it in my head when I read the passages) so many times he explains something and then they ask again "You still don't get it?" and then looking to heaven, "Father, what a bunch of knuckleheads." And then back to the disciples, "You did notice – I know you did because you told me – you did notice that he was casting out demons in my name?"

{pause} I want to be careful, here. When I was young, I was taught that for prayer to count that it had to be in Jesus' name – specifically, that it had to end with "in Jesus name," to be effective. Prayers through Jesus Christ and his holy name are powerful and effective. Yet we need to be careful that we don't corrupt the name of Jesus by thinking that "in Jesus name" at the end of the prayer works like an "abracadabra" that forces God to answer them. If we go back to that verse in John where Jesus says, "I will do whatever you ask in my name," we see that the sentence continues, "so that the Father may be glorified in the Son." (Jn 14:13)

The prayers of the righteous work, because they are the prayers of Jesus Christ. The prayers of the righteous work because they are divine. Even the example that James uses in the passage today about Elijah praying for the rain to stop (which it did for three and a half years) until he prayed again and it returned – needs to be heard in that context.

Ahab – the king of Israel – the guy who married Jezebel - led God's people into idolatry. Just like now – when things are going good, kings and politicians take credit – whether they

deserve credit or not. But when things turn bad, the people blame them whether they had anything to do with it or not. Elijah knew that. He was a prophet. God had instructed him to call the people back; and to do that, he needed the king to be on board with destroying the idols. When Elijah prayed, his prayer was righteous not because of who he was or what he did. His prayer was righteous because it was God's work.

Listen again to what James said in that passage we heard, today. "Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord." (Jas 5:13-14)

Did you catch it?

I didn't either, until I was reading the church fathers this week. They all seem to agree. Whether it be St. Bede or St. Augustine – they agree that the prayers of the righteous take place in the assembly. The church is the body of Christ.

When you're sick, what does James say to do, "Call on the elders of the church." This is all predicated on the assumption that the church – the congregation – believes in the power of prayer.

I'm reminded of the story about a church that was aghast that a seedy nightclub had opened up next door. The music was loud and raunchy. They could even hear it inside the church. It disturbed their Bible studies and even worship. So they prayed, "God get rid of that night club."

Then one night, it happened. The nightclub burned to the ground. The church people were pleased; the nightclub owner – not so much. So, he took them to court, demanding that they pay for his damages. After all that they had been praying for end of his business. The church countered that they couldn't be held responsible. They had done nothing but pray.

The judge observed, "I have a seedy nightclub owner who believes that prayer works, and a church that doesn't."

What would it take for us to claim the power and effectiveness of the prayers of the righteous, here? Or anywhere? Why don't we bring our biggest prayers to the church?

James clues us in, when he instructs us to "confess (our) sins to one another, and to pray for one another, so that (we) may be healed." (Jas 5:16) Protestants are really bad at this. We don't like to confess our sins to one another. Maybe we'll read a broad – general – prayer of confession together in church (We may even be sincere.), but will we confess our actual sins to one another? Ask yourself, "Why?" Is it maybe because we don't always feel safe? How might this be used against me? And not just our sins, but our needs? How can I ask prayers for my emphysema or lung cancer when I was or am a smoker? I don't deserve healing? The people in church will probably tell me it's my own fault.

It's not new. "(The) disciples asked (Jesus), '(W)ho sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'" (Jn 9:2) It must be his fault.

And no matter what your opinion on the current nominee to the Supreme Court – each of us should be appalled at the stories of so many women who are being debased on-line for sharing stories of being assaulted. Not just the accusers in that case but the other women who've spoken out. Women who were too afraid to share their pain and need for healing with the friends or parents or husbands... or pastors or churches because they were afraid that they would be shamed for coming forward to seek the healing that Jesus Christ offers.

When we come together as the body of Christ – imperfect as we are – but when we come together as the body of Christ – his righteousness gives power and effectiveness to our prayers. We don't even have to be perfectly righteous ourselves. But for those power of those prayers to happen – for those prayers to be effective – they have to happen. How can they unless we as the body of Christ establish a sense of safety not just for “them” whoever “they” are, but for us. Jesus wants each one of you to be healed. In his righteousness, our prayers together can and will work wonders, if we would but give ourselves to him.

Whether it's a physical ailment – an emotional scar from your childhood or another time – whether it's the stain of sin in your life and your inability to resist it on your own – whether it's the torment of an attack that you were blamed for (either by someone else – or just blaming yourself) – Jesus wants you to be healed. He wants you to be whole.

I don't do this often, but I am going to invite you to claim the power of the prayers of the righteous – I'm inviting you to claim Jesus Christ's love, right now. If you have a need right now that needs Jesus' power, come up. Come up, for the laying on of hands and anointing with oil amidst the prayers of the righteous. So you know that you're safe. I'm going to take off this microphone (and they're going to shut it off in the back) so that you can speak your need, as we trust together that we're going to agree on those prayers because when two or three of us agree – he promises.

Maybe the healing you need is that restoration to be the person that God made you to be – and you want to claim Jesus as your Lord and Savior today. Come up for that. Claim that good saltiness that sustains.