

# James

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Effective Prayer - Restoring

May 27, 2012

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## I. Introduction

A. **James 5:16b-20** . . . The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. [17] Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. [18] Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit. [19] My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, [20] let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

## B. Prayer

## II. Effective Prayer

A. **James 5:16b-18** . . . The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. [17] Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. [18] Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit.

## B. An examination of effective prayer

1. As you may recall from last Sunday's study on healing, I pointed out that the scriptures speak of several methods that can be used in seeking healing from God. I also pointed out that there is more than one cause for sickness. Here in James, the healing spoken of was for those sicknesses that are brought on by sin. And James linked their healing to the Elders' prayer, anointing with oil, and the confession and renouncement of the sin that caused the sickness.
2. In this same way, the scriptures teach more than one principle for effective praying – that is, the kind of praying that receives what you are praying for. For example:
  - a. One of the principles taught by Jesus is that we ought to be persistent in prayer, praying until we have received from God what we are asking for (**Matthew 7:7-8** – *keep on asking, seeking, knocking*; **Luke 18:1-8** – *widow seeking justice from the unjust judge*).
  - b. Another principle taught by Jesus is the principle of praying in faith – fully expecting, with confident conviction, that God will hear and answer (**Matthew 17:20, 21:20-22**).

- c. Then there is the principle of group prayer. Jesus said, “I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst” (**Matthew 18:19-20**).
  - d. Jesus also taught that if we pray in [Jesus] name, God will hear and answer according to our request (**John 14:13-14, 16:23-24**).
  - e. In **John 15:7**, Jesus said: “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” This is essentially the same principle as stated here in James. In other words, a godly life brings answers to prayer.
  - f. And my last example from Jesus’ teaching is that God hears and answers the humble of heart (**Luke 18:9-14** – *Pharisee and tax collector praying in the Temple*).
3. The point here is that there is more than one principle taught in the scriptures for asking God to hear and answer our prayers. The idea is not that we should pick a particular principle over the others, but rather that we should keep them all in mind, using them wisely and as needed, for whatever it is we are currently praying.
- C. Returning to this portion of James, we see the principle of a godly life having great influence with God when praying. In other words, the more sincere, devoted, and zealous we are about putting away ungodliness and putting on Christ-likeness so as to live a godly life, the more we receive from God what we are asking for. As the scriptures say in more than one place, God hears and answers the prayers of the righteous. In other words, being righteous yourself or having a righteous person pray for you is a significant plus when asking God for something. Some supporting scriptures from the O.T. are:
1. **Proverbs 15:29** . . . The LORD is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous.
  2. **Proverbs 28:9** . . . He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, even his prayer is an abomination.
  3. **Psalms 34:15-18** . . . The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and His ears are open to their cry. [16] The face of the LORD is against evildoers, to cut off the memory of them from the earth. [17] The righteous cry, and the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. [18] The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are (contrite) crushed in spirit.

4. **Psalm 37:4-5** . . . Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart. [5] Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it.
  5. **Psalm 66:18-19** . . . If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear; [19] but certainly God has heard; He has given heed to the voice of my prayer.
- D. Things to consider in **James 5:16b**: God says “the **effective** prayer of a **righteous man** can accomplish much.”
1. This word “**effective**” speaks to the results of the prayer. It means that the one praying received what he was praying for.
  2. Now the qualifier for effective praying is being a **righteous person**. And when I speak of being a righteous person, I am speaking of being righteous according to God’s standard, not some wished for standard or the indiscriminately inclusive standard currently popular in many Churches today.
    - a. Now let me make this clear: God is not saying that He requires Christian perfection for hearing and answering prayer. There has been and only will be one human who lived a perfect life, and that is Jesus. The rest of us will have our imperfections, our failures, and our foolishness in relation to sin.
    - b. But I also want to make it clear that living a righteous life requires making a sincere effort at doing the best we can to live up to what we know. And living up to what we know means putting away sin and putting on Christ, and persevering in doing this – in area after area – for as long as it takes to become Christ-like, or until we die and leave this world.
  3. Let me give you an example of what I mean. Using Israel’s taking the Promised Land as our example of growing in godliness, we see that God did not expect them to clear the Promised Land in a day or a week or even a year. But He did expect them to persevere in driving out the evil inhabitants until all were driven out.
  4. In this same way, God does not expect us to rid our lives of all wrongdoing and become a spiritually mature, righteous person in a day or a week or a year or even a number of years.
    - a. However, just as God expected Israel to persistently work at clearing the land until the job was done, so God expects us to persevere in driving sin out of our lives and replacing what is driven out with Christ-likeness until we no longer, willingly, deliberately, or in any self-excusing way practice any known sin.

- b. This does not mean that we will never sin again, but it does mean that we will no longer engage in any particular sin on a regular, willful, self-justified basis.
  - 5. The point here is simply this: God hears and answers the righteous, and the level of righteousness that makes prayers effective is a level set by God – not by us. It is the level revealed in God’s Holy Scriptures, and is attainable by any who take God and the pursuit of godliness seriously, and persist in that pursuit until death.
- E. I want to conclude this section on effective prayer by making two more points.
- 1. **First**, it is not beautiful, heavenly sounding prayers that God pays attention to. Nor is it loud praying or long prayers that get God’s attention. He is not impressed by our theology or religious education, or our position in the church. The fact that God points to Elders as those we ought to ask to pray for us has nothing to do with their position, but rather their spiritual condition. Though this is not always the case, the Body of Christ ought to be able to assume that anyone in the position of Elder is of such godly character that they fit the description of a righteous man – that is, the kind of person God hears and answers.
  - 2. **Second**, we cannot control God or tell Him what to do. No principle of prayer has power over God, so please do not see this principle of a righteous life, or any principle of prayer, as giving you power to make God do what you want. The best we can do is to humbly and earnestly ask for God’s favor, grace, and blessings. Yet at the very least, we ought to ask, for God gives us that privilege and even urges us to use it! So, treat prayer with respect, bearing in mind that God is always God regardless of the method used in asking for His favor. Yet at the same time, take full advantage of the wonderful privilege of prayer.

### III. Restoring The Straying Christian

- A. **James 5:19-20** . . . My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, [20] let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.
- 1. The goal of this exhortation is to call every Christian to the responsibility of protecting against any Christian from straying from the truth of God and His word and following after some false teaching,

or falling into worldliness, or returning to some sinful pattern of thinking or behaving. As a group, we are to promote spiritual growth as the normal, ongoing activity of the Christian life, we are to protect the spiritual health of the Church, and we are to protect the honor of God's name in the community.

2. Simply stated, God's goal, as stated here, is to mobilize the church to look out for one another in relation to spiritual growth, godly living, and falling back into old, sinful patterns of living.
- B. This is not the only scripture encouraging us to help each other walk the narrow path of the Christian life and to remain faithful to God until death parts us from our fleshly body and this world. For example:
  1. **Galatians 6:1-2** . . . Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. [2] Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.
    - a. God encourages us to be aware of the spiritual condition of our brothers and sisters in Christ – which requires relationships that go much deeper than the average shallow relationship.
    - b. It also requires every one's participation, whether it is inviting others to look deep into my life, or honestly exposing the truth about myself – be it good or bad, or taking the time to be actively involved in the lives of those Christians with whom I associate.
    - c. Notice: God also warns those giving the help to be wary of pride, double-standards, and refusing to receive help in return.
  2. **Hebrews 10:23-25** . . . Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; [24] and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, [25] not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.
    - a. First, God exhorts us to remain faithful and steadfast in living up to the truth we know.
    - b. Second, He also exhorts us to do what we can to encourage our fellow Christians to live godly, God-pleasing lives.
    - c. Finally, God says gathering together as a group or in groups or at least in twos, is essential to accomplishing this goal.
  3. **Hebrews 3:12-15** . . . Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. [13] But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is

still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. [14] For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, [15] while it is said, "Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me."

- a. First, God exhorts us to be wary of letting evil or unbelief back into our hearts and mind, because it will only lead to falling away or at least moving some distance away from God and His truth.
  - b. Second, God exhorts us to observe our fellow Christians so as to be aware of their spiritual condition. We are especially to watch out for unbelief and slides back into worldliness and sin.
  - c. Next, God says our best defense against back-sliding is to regularly encourage each other to live up to what we know and to continue pursuing further growth in godliness. This kind of regular encouragement toward godliness requires being together in some form or way on a regular basis.
  - d. And finally, God says we need to do this until death parts us from this life.
4. **Matthew 18:15-17** . . . If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. [16] But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. [17] If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.
- a. In this teaching, God gives us a method of calling each other back to our senses that incrementally increases the pressure on the willfully sinning Christian in hopes of bringing him to repentance, to putting an end to his willful sinning, and restoring him to godly living.
  - b. Therefore, the goal of this portion of scripture is the same as stated in **James 5:20** . . . turning Christian sinners from the error of their ways so as to **save their soul from death and cover a multitude of sins**.

C. What does it mean to save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins?

1. This is a good question, and if you check the numerous Bible study helps available on James, you will get several different answers.

2. My observation from checking a number of study helps is that each answer depends on the vantage point from which the author looks at these words. I suspect the same will be true for us.
  - a. If we look at this scripture from the vantage point of the theology popular in the Church today, we will come up with an answer that fits within our theology, be it Reformed Theology, Arminian Theology, Covenant Theology, Dispensationalism, or the theology of the Eternal Security teaching.
  - b. If we look at these words through the lens of the Greek NT, we will end up with a bit of confusion because the Greek is of no help in determining who is being referred to in each phrase of the verse.
3. Which leaves us with using current popular theology, or using our own thoughts given the context. Or we could look at these words through the lens of the teaching of the first fifteen hundred years of the church – which is what I have chosen to do. Therefore,
  - a. Turning a sinner from the error of his way and saving his soul from death is to rescue a Christian from falling away from the faith and potentially losing his salvation (**II Peter 2:20-22**).
  - b. And covering a multitude of sins is to turn the wandering Christian back to the truth so as to prevent him from continuing on in his foolishness. When you prevent someone from continuing further into sin, you prevent him from committing any additional sins which are the natural result of following something other than God's truth and someone other than Christ (**II Timothy 3:1-9**).

#### IV. Conclusion

##### A. We looked at two themes today:

1. Either be righteous yourself so you can effectively pray for yourself, or seek out those who are righteous to pray for you, for God hears and answers the righteous.
2. See yourself as part of a community of believers who have the responsibility to look out for each others spiritual well-being and the task of turning or at least urging wayward brothers and sisters in Christ back to the narrow path.