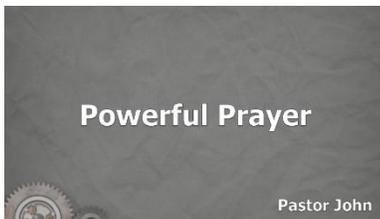


Powerful Prayer

September 30, 2018

James 5: 13-20

¹³ Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. ¹⁷ Elijah was a human being, even as we are. 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. ¹⁹ My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.



Let us pray... *One night I had worked hard to help a mother in the labor ward; but in spite of all we could do she died, leaving us with a tiny premature baby and a crying two-year-old daughter. We would have difficulty keeping the baby alive, as we had no incubator (we had no electricity to run an incubator) and no special feeding facilities. Although we lived on the equator, nights were often chilly with treacherous drafts. One student midwife went for the box we had for such babies and the cotton wool the baby would be wrapped in. Another went to*

stoke up the fire and fill a hot water bottle. She came back shortly in distress to tell me that in filling the bottle, it had burst. Rubber perishes easily in tropical climates. "And it is our last hot water bottle!" she exclaimed.

As in the West it is no good crying over spilled milk, so in Central Africa it might be considered no good crying over burst water bottles. They do not grow on trees, and there are no drugstores down forest pathways. "All right," I said, "Put the baby as near the fire as you safely can; sleep between the baby and the door to keep it free from drafts. Your job is to keep the baby warm."

The following noon, as I did most days, I went to have prayers with any of the orphanage children who chose to gather with me. I gave the youngsters various suggestions of things to pray about and told them about the tiny baby. I explained our problem about keeping the baby warm enough, mentioning the hot water bottle. The baby could so easily die if it got chills. I also told them of the two-year-old sister, crying because her mother had died.

During the prayer time, one ten-year-old girl, Ruth, prayed with the usual blunt conciseness of our African children. "Please, God," she prayed, "send us a water bottle. It'll be no good tomorrow, God, as the baby will be dead, so please send it this afternoon." While I gasped inwardly at the audacity of the prayer, she added by way of corollary, "And while You are about it, would You please send a dolly for the little girl, so she'll know You really love her?"

As often with children's prayers, I was put on the spot. Could I honestly say, "Amen"? I just did not believe that God could do this. Oh, yes, I know that He can do everything. The Bible says so. But there are limits, aren't there? The only way God could answer this particular prayer would be by sending me a

parcel from the homeland. I had been in Africa for almost four years at that time, and I had never, ever, received a parcel from home; anyway, if anyone did send me a parcel, who would put in a hot water bottle? I lived on the equator!

Halfway through the afternoon, while I was teaching in the nurses' training school, a message was sent that there was a car at my front door. By the time I reached home, the car had gone, but there, on the veranda, was a large twenty-two-pound parcel. I felt tears pricking my eyes. I could not open the parcel alone, so I sent for the orphanage children. Together we pulled off the string, carefully undoing each knot. We folded the paper, taking care not to tear it unduly. Excitement was mounting. Some thirty or forty pairs of eyes were focused on the large cardboard box.

From the top, I lifted out brightly colored, knitted jerseys; eyes sparkled as I pulled them out. Then there were the knitted bandages for the leprosy patients, and the children looked a little bored. Then came a box of mixed raisins and sultanas --- that would make a nice batch of buns for the weekend. Then, as I put my hand in again, I felt the... could it really be? I grasped it and pulled it out --- yes, a brand-new, rubber hot water bottle! I cried. I had not asked God to send it; I had not truly believed that He could.

Ruth was in the front row of the children. She rushed forward, crying out, "If God has sent the bottle, He must have sent the dolly, too!" Rummaging down to the bottom of the box, she pulled out the small, beautifully dressed dolly. Her eyes shone! She had never doubted. Looking up at me, she asked: "Can I go over with you, Mummy, and give this dolly to that little girl, so she'll know that Jesus really loves her?"

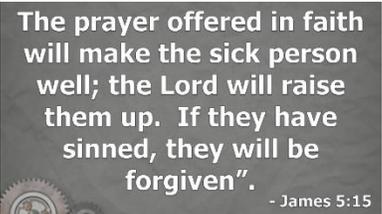
That parcel had been on the way for five whole months. Packed up by my former Sunday school class, whose leader had heard and obeyed God's prompting to send a hot water bottle, even to the equator. And one of the girls had put in a dolly for an African child --- five months before --- in answer to the believing prayer of a ten-year old to bring it "that afternoon".

Prayer is powerful. In our passage today, James' advice goes right along with this true story that I began with today. In verse 13, James writes, *"Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray"*. He continues in a similar vein, writing, *"Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise"*. And then, *"Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord"*. Our faith calls us to just such prayers and responses. When we or someone we know is ill or in trouble, prayer should be our first option. James was writing in a time when prayer was often the only option.

Not too long ago, in our fairly recent past, prayer was more essential, especially in the lives of our parents or grandparents. In a recent conversation, a young man marveled at the depth of an older man's prayers. The young man wondered aloud about how the older gentleman had developed such a strong prayer life. The older man's response was that when he was growing up, prayer was about the only option. He shared that the hospital or doctor was 35 miles away and that when someone was hurt or sick, you had better pray earnestly because it took time to get to the medical professionals. He said they relied on God to get them there with the sick or injured person still alive. This led to a depth of prayer that years later amazed the younger man. Sadly, this depth of prayer seemed a little foreign to him. In many ways, though, I think this

scenario is typical of a lot of people today. The hospital or clinic is just down the street. The internet provides some answers for us as well. Medical technology has advanced greatly so we have much better care than we used to. In general, the need for prayer just does not seem as great.

James exhibits a strong belief that God is faithful. In verse 15 he writes, "*The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven*". James uses the word "will" and not the word "may". My question is this: when we pray, do



The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven". - James 5:15

we pray with the belief that God will answer our prayer, like the older gentleman, or do we pray with the understanding that God may answer or that God could answer our prayer. Of course, perspective has a lot to do with this. When we read "*the Lord will raise them up*" there is an eternal angle to this verse. Yes, we say, God might not heal them of cancer or whatever the illness is in this life, but ultimately God will bring complete healing when that person dies and is raised to eternal life. We also believe in the forgiving power of the blood of Christ. Today we will remember what Jesus did on the cross, establishing the new covenant in grace. We know that God will not count or hold our sin against us – that we will be forgiven.

James goes on to encourage us to confess our sins and to pray for one another. In verse 16, James writes, "*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective*". Note that James says the prayer of a "righteous person". Here we find another example of where James is channeling his inner Jesus. In Matthew 5 Jesus says, "*Therefore if you are presenting your offering upon the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your*

offering there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering". In other words, don't come before God when you have something to settle with someone else. Don't come to God unless you are right with your neighbor. James continues in our passage today to give us the example of Elijah, whose prayers withheld rain for three and a half years. It was his prayers that again brought rain to the land. This is a great example of the powerful prayer of a righteous man. Again, we know that prayer can be powerful, but do we really believe that it will be?

When I was beginning in ministry as an associate pastor in Rapid City back in 2012, the church had been eyeing the next building down on the block. For years, the former car dealership had been the laundry facility for the hospital. But the hospital had recently built a laundry building on the hospital grounds. There was speculation as to what would happen to the now vacant building. Just as was the case when the house just south of the parking lot was coming up for sale, when folks here at the church dreamed of the possibilities, so too did the folks at Rapid City First United Methodist dream up possibilities for how to use that vacant building. Pretty soon the church began covering these dreams in prayer. Groups would take a few minutes out of their team or committee meetings and would walk go around the building, praying for God to act. Frequently, the church staff would do the same each week before or after staff meetings. That building was circled over and over and covered in prayer.

One day Doug, the lead pastor, and I walked through the inside of the building. On the way back from a meeting, I noticed some workers in the building and I asked if we could walk through. They said 'yes' so I got Doug and we dreamed our way through the building. An alternative worship space could go here, and a

coffee shop could go there. The whole basement was a giant parking garage - our parking issues would be solved. It was then that I started walking around the building every day. I would walk along with my hand on the building, praying for God to intercede on our behalf. Whenever I walked by the building on the way to or from a meeting or on the way into or out of church, I would do the same thing. Over and over I prayed. I prayed for the building, having a vision for the ministry that could be done in that space. Representatives of the church had discussions with officials from the hospital, but the building was not up for sale yet. And then suddenly, one day, we heard that a group had bought the building and that they were going to open a microbrewery in the space. My initial reaction was, "Nnnooooooo"!

How could so many people be praying for a space to expand our ministry to have a greater impact upon the community and then this happens? How could this be God's answer to so many prayers? How could this be the answer to day after day of circling that building in prayer? How could this be the answer to all of my prayers? I ask you: have you been there? Of course, you have been there. We have all been there many times over. God's answer at the time is not the answer we want. In time I would come to know that God's plans for that building were not my plans for that building – at that time. Maybe one day the



space will be a part of the church in Rapid City. The gold arrow in the larger picture points to the church – you can see a corner of it in the background. Maybe God wanted someone else to put in the event space that

can one day be used for worship and to do all of the other improvements that brought the building up to code. Who knows, maybe one day the brewery will

become a home to a new church plant and ministry will flourish in that place. Ultimately, all of the prayers that I and others lifted up were for God to impact a community through that space. One day God's answer may be our answer too. It is through faith that we pray. In reality, we pray not for our will to be done, but for God's plan to be done.

While we do try and pray according to God's will and ways, there will be times when you feel as I felt. There will be times when I feel that way again. We have all experienced times when we have prayed and prayed, and it feels as if God were not present and it feels as if our prayers were falling on deaf ears. This week in my devotions, I spent a couple of mornings with Psalm 124. It was a good reminder to me of God's love and presence that is always with us, even in those times when we question and doubt. Perhaps you are in one of those times right now. Perhaps it feels as if the world or life are against you. You go to God in prayer but do not feel any relief, and sense of God being at work in your situation. If you are there now, hear these words from Psalm 124 as a reminder of the promise of God's love and presence. If you are not there right now, tuck these words away, because one day you will need to remember them. Hear the promise of God in Psalm 124:

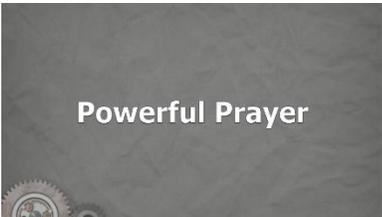
"If the Lord had not been on our side... when people attacked us... when their anger flared against us... the flood would have engulfed us, the torrent would have swept over us... swept us away".

- Psalm 124: 1-5

If the LORD had not been on our side... when people attacked us... when their anger flared against us... the flood would have engulfed us, the torrent would have swept over us... swept us away.

In this Psalm, Israel is remembering that God was present in the trial. During the attack, during the moment when it felt as if the flood would sweep them

away, I would hazard a guess that as they prayed, they too wondered where God was. After the threat was past, looking back, they could see how God was at work even then. In that remembrance, they gained a confidence that God would be there again, each and every time. Last Sunday we prayed for some of our young people who were in an accident. As I reflected on this Psalm and on that event in our community, my thoughts dwelt on the opening line: *"If the LORD had not been on our side..."*. All three young people walked away from that rollover safe. As I overheard one of the mothers sharing about the incident at the volleyball game on Tuesday night, once again I prayed, *"If the LORD had not been on our side..."*. Over and over again, God is present, watching over and caring for us. This is the story of faith that we find throughout the scriptures. Over and over God is there in the trial, in the battle, in the storm, in the pain, in all that life brings. This is a communal Psalm, but the promise of God's presence is to each of us as well. As individuals, we too can pray this as a prayer: *"If the LORD had not been on our side..."*. I encourage you to offer this small beginning to a prayer the next time you feel alone or put to the test or are questioning God's presence or love or care. Remembering when God was there helps us to trust that He will be there again.



Powerful Prayer

In the Psalm, there is a definite sense of community. God is present to His people in their time of need. In our passage from James, there is also a focus on community. In verse 16, he encourages us to pray for one another for healing and for the forgiveness of sins. In verses 19 and 20, James encourages us to help one another to be accountable in our faith. In the passage, we see how James views sin as a form of sickness. In James' day, sickness would separate

people from society. We remember how, for example, the lepers were forced to live in colonies, away from society. Sin within the body prevents unity with God and with one another.

In our passage today, in verses 17 and 18, James references a time when this was the case in Israel's history. It was sin within the community that led Elijah to ask God to withhold the rain. The stubborn people would not repent of their sin and evil ways, so Elijah offered a prayer that would get their attention. No rain, no crops. No crops, no life. Elijah prayed a prayer that eventually led the people back to God. They repented of their evil ways and Elijah asked God to bring the rains. God was faithful. The rain brought healing to the land, just as God's mercy brought healing to the broken people. A single prayer brought God's redeeming love to the people.

Taken as a whole, our passage covers a lot of ground. Prayer can bring healing. Prayer can unite a community. Prayer can bring forgiveness of sins. Prayer can lead to the restoration of the soul. Prayer is powerful. The true power of prayer, however, is not found in God answering our prayers just as we would like. Sometimes He will and that is good. As we have found each Sunday as we have worked through the book of James, the real power of prayer is in how praying develops and deepens our relationship with God. When we pray, we are connected to God. When we pray, our will and understanding is better aligned with God's. Prayer is most effective and is most powerful not when it is fully understood or even when it is answered, but it is most effective when it is practiced often. Prayer is our connection to God. That is why prayer is powerful. This week, may we come often to God in prayer, practicing intimacy and trust, experiencing the power of God in our lives. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) When and where have you experienced growth in your prayer life? What is the next growing edge that you want to experience?
- 2) What big prayer could you lift to God this week? Spend time each day lifting this to God and take time to notice how God works in your life.
- 3) How could your prayer(s) serve another's faith this week? Just do it!