

THE PRAYER OF A RIGHTEOUS ONE – JAMES 5:13-18

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¹³ Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him 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 him up. If he has sinned, he 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 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.



This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

Once upon a time, in a kingdom far away there lived a beggar. His clothes were tattered and torn. His back was sore from sleeping countless nights on the hard ground. The only morsels of food he got were from the bakery as they tossed out their day old bread. Each day was the same as the last, there was no hope of his life getting better. Sometimes he wondered if life was even worth living, did anyone care? But then one day, a herald of the king arrived in the town square and invited anyone who wished to go to the palace and make a request before the king.

The beggar knew he had nothing to lose, in fact, even if the king didn't hear his request, he might get thrown into the king's dungeon, at least there he would have a roof over his head and a regular allowance of food. This was how bad things were for the beggar. And so the beggar journeyed across the kingdom to the king's palace. After three days he arrived at the king's gate. He waited until sunrise when the gate would open and as it did he scurried ahead and hesitantly asked a guard about people making requests. The guard directed him to the great hall and said "yes indeed" the king is taking requests from his subjects.

The beggar pushed timidly against the large doors leading into the great hall and cautiously approached the king. He was so taken aback by the grandeur and the beauty that he almost forgot why he had come. "Well," a voice said, "come forward, make your request of the king." His mind raced, "What should I ask for? Should I ask for a house? Should I ask for money? Maybe what I ask for will be too much." In the end, the beggar opened his mouth and said, "I'd like a bowl of soup."

What do you think of that beggar? He's before his king, invited, and all he asks for is a bowl of soup, nothing more. What if I were to tell you that you are that beggar; that God is the king; and many of the prayers we pray are little more valuable than a bowl of soup? I'm sure there are a variety of reasons for the state of our prayer life. Maybe we don't know much about what to pray for and for that reason we don't pray much. Maybe we feel like we don't have time to pray. Maybe we mouth the words of prayer, but our heart isn't behind them. These can all be reasons for our prayers being little more than "bowl of soup" prayers. But whether you're a novice pray-er, or a seasoned veteran pray-er we can take the words

of James to heart about the purpose and the reason for prayer. THE PRAYER OF A RIGHTEOUS ONE IS POWERFUL AND EFFECTIVE. In it:

1. We see who God is
2. We see who we are

(1)

The book of James, as you may recall, is positioned toward the end of the New Testament. It was one of the later books recorded for us in Holy Scripture. As such, James, took that opportunity to correct some misunderstandings about the Christian faith, and it primarily centered on the matter of grace. As you know, what makes Biblical Christianity different than every other religion on the planet is the idea of grace. We don't have to do anything to get heaven – no God to try and please, no certain way of living. The idea of grace unfortunately jives with our sinful nature – because we always want to believe that there's something I have to do.

And so James took the time to clarify these two contrasting views. Yes – God's grace is all sufficient to get to heaven. Unfortunately, what this led some to believe is they didn't have to do anything in this life, or worse, they could do whatever they want and still get to heaven, because it doesn't matter what they do. One of the side-effects to this idea was believing there was no need to pray, because God knows what's going to happen anyway. So James had to defend the idea of grace against the license to sin or a license to not do anything.

In this section of James' letter, he speaks to the importance of prayer in both good and bad times, **"Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise."** But it's not only in the book of James that God calls for us to pray. In the Old Testament book of Psalms he records, **"Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver you."** When we pray, as believers, our prayer is POWERFUL AND EFFECTIVE. It's not that we do anything special in prayer, but it is who our prayer is offered up to. It is offered up to a powerful God. And so in prayer, we see who God is, he is a God who is powerful.

If we believe God's Word to be true, which we do, then we must believe in the raw power of prayer and we see the God behind it. James specifically calls for us to pray when someone is sick, pray that that person might get better, and by God's power that person could get better. Does that mean if a sick person doesn't recover in the way that we desire somehow our prayer didn't work or God didn't exercise his power? No. That is because every prayer that a believer prays will have the acknowledgement of "God's will be done." And God's will is done in any circumstance.

Sometimes a complaint against prayer is that it doesn't change anything since God knows what's going to happen anyway. This is where we must set aside our logic and read what Scripture says. Our first lesson is a great example of that. Abraham engaged in a long prayer with God concerning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Each time coming back with a new request – spare the city if there's 50, 45, 40 righteous ones. And each time God said, **"because you asked this, I will not destroy the city if I find 'x' number of righteous people."**

But when have we treated prayer with such power? I'd venture to say most of the time we don't. Most of the time instead of starting our day with prayer, we start by checking our smartphones for the latest e-mails or Facebook updates. Or how often has it happened that we don't even consider the words to the prayers we say – before/after meals, before bed, in church. It has become so repetitious that we don't think about what we're saying. But most of all, how often have we not seen who God is in our prayers or trusted in his power? Instead we offer "bowl of soup" prayers that are selfish minded requests.

When we do not pray, or when we neglect prayer, we forget who God is. We forget because we do not consider the wonders of God, we do not thank him for all the undeserved blessings he has given us. We forget that not only wants, but he instructs us to call upon him. And we forget that our God is powerful. He is powerful enough not only to answer our prayers, he is powerful enough to give us life – not just physical life, but spiritual life.

In our prayers, we can recall the love of God the Father in sending his Son, the love of God the Son in suffering for our sins, and the love of God the Holy Spirit as he brought God's love to you. And a God who loves you that much wants you to pray to him – not out of some obligation or duty, but in love. There's a reason the Lord's Prayer begins with "Our Father." To those who were blessed with good fathers, you know how easy it was to go up to dad and ask for something.

And just as we trusted our parents to be looking out for our best interests, how much more can we trust our heavenly father to provide what is best for us. Just like our parents will not give us a venomous scorpion to play with if we ask, God may not always answer our prayers with an affirmative "yes." He certainly can and does answer our prayers with "yes's" but he also answers our prayers with "no's" and "not yet's." Sometimes he even answers our prayers with more than we can imagine.

A fine example of that in my life is when I was called to serve here at Grace. On call day, I had just prayed that there might be a congregation whom I could serve and present God's Word to. What I ended up with was a congregation that not only is excited to hear God's Word, but is also excited to spread God's Word and a mature congregation which takes care of their pastors well. Coming out of the Seminary I would never have imagined God answering my prayer in this way. In THE PRAYER OF A RIGHTEOUS ONE we see who God is.

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Another reason to pray, is so that we see who we are. For if we just relied on God to take care of us and not even consider praying, how well would we know ourselves? As it is there are things that we need even though we don't know that we need them. In our prayers, we discover who we are. We have an opportunity to ponder on our life, an opportunity to consider our own sin and weaknesses, we have an opportunity to seek forgiveness for those sins and find the comfort in God's promise of forgiveness. In our prayers, we are even invited to ask God for whatever we want. And yet the reason THE PRAYER OF THE RIGHTEOUS ONE IS POWERFUL AND EFFECTIVE is because it is offered in faith. A person in faith will not pray a purely selfish prayer.

Instead a person made righteous by Christ's blood will see who they are and ask for things that will not just benefit them in this world. Instead a believer ought to pray for wisdom in understanding

God's Word, strength in fighting the temptations of the evil one, and a growth of faith through the Word. A believer will pray that God's Word is taught in truth and purity that many more might come to know themselves as sinners and forgiven in Christ. We pray that those who have been blinded by their sin might come to a knowledge of the truth and repent. But a believer will also pray for material things.

In the example from the Lord's Prayer, Jesus instructs his disciples to pray, "give us today our daily bread." Give us everything we need for this day – food and clothing, house and home, friends and family. So there is nothing wrong for asking for these things. Just like there's nothing wrong for praying for our leaders and our enemies. In all of this we begin to see who we are. We see what kind of people we are based on what we pray about. We begin to see the differences between our wants and our needs. We also see what kind of people we are based on how God answers our prayers. And sometimes we see better who we are when God says "no" to our prayers.

There has been studies done on the effectiveness of prayer. Will hospital patients recover at a higher rate with people praying for them or not? The only problem with these scientific studies in prayer is they're trying to measure something that cannot be measured. Just because a patient doesn't recover from a procedure or a disease, doesn't mean God didn't answer their prayer. Because God could choose to use that "no" answer to give that person an opportunity to demonstrate their faith.

God has called upon us to pray. When we pray we give praise and glory to his name. When we pray we see who we are. May God give us strength to pray the powerful and effective prayer of a righteous one – seeing who God is, and seeing who we are. Amen.