



“. . . The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much,”
James 5:16b.

Effective Prayer

Lesson Aim: To direct Christians to more powerful prayer.

L278. Date: July 1971. **Text:** James 4:1-3, 8-10; 5:15-18. **Topic:** Prayer.

INTRODUCTION - “The Lord is nigh to all them that call upon him; to all that call upon him in truth,” Psalm 145:18.

How blessed is the privilege of prayer. It has been defined thus by John Bunyan, “Prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the soul to God, through Christ in the strength and assistance of the Spirit, for such things as God has promised.”

Adoniram Judson, pioneer missionary to Africa, has testified. “I was never deeply interested in any object, I never prayed sincerely and earnestly for anything but that it came at some time. No matter how distant the day, somehow, in some shape, probably the last I should have advised, it came.”

Many people consider prayer a mere begging God to do for us what He does not wish to do. Archbishop Trench states the matter more correctly in saying, “Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance; it is laying hold of His highest willingness.”

More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore,
let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those who call them friends?
For so the whole round earth is every way

Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.
—Alfred Tennyson

Prayer is essential to true Christian living. It is the way we commune with God. It is most important that believers know how to pray and resort often to the place of communion with the Heavenly Father. Hence, today's study is titled, "Effective Prayer," and aims "to direct Christians to more powerful prayer."

EXPOSITION

I. PETITION AND PRAYER, 4:1-2.

Prayer takes many forms. It can be praise, worship, fellowship, etc. But the oft-emphasized aspect of prayer in the New Testament is the prayer of petition. That is to say, a valid form of prayer is asking God for specific things and expecting Him to give what is requested.

The Apostle James described a most pitiful condition among believers to whom he wrote. They were marked by conflicts, feuds, wrangles, and quarrelling between fellow Christians. These conditions arose, he said, because of base lusts which were permitted to exercise themselves in these believers. By their own efforts and strength of will they sought to get their own way and possess what they wanted. But they failed.

What a tragic way for believers in Christ to live. What is the answer to such a situation? James answers simply, "Prayer." Neglect of prayer caused lusts and contentions. With their most zealous efforts they were not able to obtain what they needed. But James says they could have had every need if they would have only prayed: **"Ye have not because ye ask not."**

Does this mean God will give satisfaction to lustful desires if we pray about them? No! To bring our desires to God is to ensure that they will be purified. The dross of selfishness and fleshly ambition is purged in His presence. To pray would not bring all that men lust after. But it would get them all they need and their lust would be brought under control also. Desire is changed in the presence of God. Contention and strife will never bring the supply and satisfaction men desire. But prayer to God can and will for—"I know not by what methods rare, but this I know: God answers prayer!"

And a large part of prayer is petition asking for specific things. Examine these promises to answer prayer. **"He shall call upon me, and I will answer him. . ."** Psalm 91:15. **"Then shalt thou call, and the Lord**

shall answer. . .” Isaiah 58:9. **“And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear,”** Isaiah 65:24. **“And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you,”** Luke 11:9. **“If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it,”** John 14:14. Oh, let us pray more! And remember that prayer is petition. Ask God and He will give.

II. MOTIVE AND PRAYER, 4:3.

Perhaps someone objects, “I know God promises to answer prayer. But I have prayed and there has been no answer.” In this instance, James advises, “Check your motive in asking.”

It is somewhat strange, but true, that even wicked men sometimes pray. They pray for success in worldly enterprises which are based on covetousness and selfish pride. They seek God's blessings that they may the more fully satisfy their lusts and promote their sinful ambitions. Would God answer petitions from such as these?

If someone does not receive what he asks for, if his plans do not prosper as he desires, he should not set it down as evidence that God does not hear and answer prayer. Rather, he should check to see what is improper about his praying. Motive is extremely important in prayer **“Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts,”** 4:3. Here is a clear case where God refuses to answer a prayer offered for the wrong motive. Who would dare to ask God for the satisfaction of selfish passions? Doubtlessly, many dare to do so! God always replies “No” to such petitions. “Christianity is not the provision of a safe conduct to heaven while leaving us at liberty to indulge lusts and passions. . .” —Herbert Stevenson. Motive must be pure for prayer to be answered.

This kind of prayer is “asking amiss.” Jesus uses the term “amiss” in very strong language. His word **“kakos”** in Greek actually means “basely” or “in a mean way.” This means that even an action as seemingly holy as prayer is perverted and made base when performed with an evil motive.

What evil motive most commonly hinders God's answering our prayers? It is a spirit of selfishness: **“. . . that ye may consume it upon your lusts.”** Two men might pray for similar business enterprises to prosper. One may pray aright and one may pray evilly, depending on their motive. One may use his prosperity for the glory of God and the good of men. The other may intend his increased resources for mere sensual gratifications. God

may answer one and refuse the other. Motive is the difference. In effective prayer, therefore, keep your heart open to God to reveal any base motive in you. Let His Spirit guide you into purity of motive as well as conduct and He will answer your prayers as He has promised.

III. HUMILITY AND PRAYER, 4:8-10.

Another prerequisite to answered prayer is the spirit of humility. This is reflected in the phrase “thy will be done” as seen in the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane. Such a spirit is expressed by James in 4:6-10. The following six truths are evident in the Apostle's teaching on this subject.

1. Humility brings increasing grace: **“But he giveth more grace. . .”** verse 6. **“ . . . Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble,”** I Peter 5:5.

2. Humility is expressed in submission to God, verse 7a. “Submit” is a military term which means “be subject to your commanding officer.”

3. Humility is expressed in resistance to the devil, verse 7b. It is not a spineless cowardice but manly courage that is out-and-out for God.

4. Humility brings the believer near to God, verse 8a. **“ . . . I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit. . .”** Isaiah 57:15.

5. Humility brings cleansing by leading us to repentance, verses 8-9. Purity in heart (motive) and hand (conduct) is essential to peace with God and answered prayer.

6. Humility results in exaltation, verse 10. God does not desire to oppress us nor to see us abased. **“Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time,”** I Peter 5:6.

These principles of humility are vitally related to our relationship with God. They are especially appropriate in a discussion of prayer. It will be as impossible to receive what we ask from God apart from humility as it would be apart from faith.

No man comes in prayer to make demands of God. We present petitions and requests. But no man, not even the God-Man, presents demands of God.

Prayer should be accompanied by an acknowledgement of our deep need. It should be offered with an awareness that the very privilege is undeserved and is provided in grace. It should be presented as a petition by a supplicant who has no claim but love to God. It should be stated with a willingness that what is given will be used in the will of God and for His glory. That is humility in prayer.

IV. FAITH AND PRAYER, 5:15.

In the midst of a discussion of prayer for the healing of the sick, the Apostle James is moved by the Holy Spirit to write, **“And the prayer of faith shall save the sick. . .”** 5:15.

It is not our purpose to discuss the healing power of God. It is enough to know that: (1) All healing is of God. (2) God commonly works through means to effect healing. (3) God sometimes heals through means beyond our understanding. (4) By no means all those who claim to be “divine healers” effect healing by divine power. (5) It is proper to pray for the healing of the sick. (6) Whether a patient is healed or not does not depend on the amount of faith of the patient or person who prays for him.

But even so, there is a definite relationship between prayer and faith. “The prayer of faith” is prayer offered in faith. It suggests prayer offered with an “unwavering confidence in God, a belief that he will do what is best, and a cheerful committing of the cause into His hands. We express our earnest wish, and leave the case with Him.”—Albert Barnes.

Everywhere the Bible places stress on the importance of faith when one prays. James earlier warned that we must “ask in faith, nothing wavering.” Some are like a man trying to face both ways—trusting God one minute and not trusting the next. **“For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord,”** James 1:7. Even the Lord Jesus testified, **“Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them,”** Mark 11:24. The call to faith is, **“... If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth,”** Mark 9:23. Prayer offered in doubt is worth nothing because it is nothing.

And what is faith? “Faith is response to the revealed will of God; it is child-like trust in the heavenly Father.”—Herbert Stevenson. Do you have faith in Him? Remember, **“But without faith it is impossible to please him. . .”** Hebrews 11:6.

V. FERVENCY AND PRAYER, 5:16.

“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much,” 5:16. Look how various modern-language versions translate this statement. “When a just man prays fervently there is great virtue in his prayer.”—Knox. “Tremendous power is made available through a good man's earnest prayer.” — Phillips. “Powerful is the heartfelt supplication of a righteous man.”—Weymouth.

Look at the recurring phrases: “effectual fervent; fervently; earnest; heartfelt supplication.” These indicate the place of earnestness and fervency in prayer. There is no place for a listless, lifeless, cold and indifferent prayer. There is no vitality or power there. The only prayer that is worth praying is one moving in spirit so that it is earnest, sincere, hearty, and persevering. God deliver us from cold hearts and formal prayers!

VI. PERSISTENCE AND PRAYER, 5:17-18.

The Prophet Elijah is the classic example of persistence in prayer. He appeared quite suddenly on the scene during the ninth century before Christ. His nation, the northern kingdom called Israel, had gone after the Baalim under the influence of Ahab and Jezebel. Elijah suddenly came to the king and announced a drought upon the land.

This was no sudden thing with Elijah. Doubtlessly he had long sought God for the return of his nation to true worship. He must have often prayed, as he later besought God, to “turn their heart back again” I Kings 18:37. But there was no revival. God revealed to His prophet that the threatened judgment of withholding rain must be executed. So, out of long seasons of prayer the prophet appeared to announce God's discipline upon the wayward nation.

For three and one-half years the drought continued. God spoke to the prophet once again and he called Elijah and the people to Mount Cannel for a contest between Jehovah and Baal. The familiar story of God sending fire from heaven is recorded in I Kings 18. What a marvelous manifestation of revival. It was time for the rain to come once more.

And Elijah prayed. He cast himself down upon the earth, put his face between his knees, and besought God to send rain. After he had prayed a while, Elijah sent his servant to a peak of Mount Carmel to look toward the Mediterranean Sea for signs of rain. There was none. Elijah prayed again. The servant went a second time. The report was the same, “Nothing!” The heavens were like brass. Rain seemed impossible. He prayed and the servant looked again, and again, and again. Six times the same report was given, “Nothing.” But Elijah's faith did not waver. God had promised it was simply a matter of waiting His time. The seventh time there was “a little cloud out of the Sea, like a man's hand,” But that was enough.

This is an illustration of the “fervent effectual prayer of a righteous man.” It is quite important to remember that Elijah was “a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly,” verse 17.

How many times can you pray and faith not falter? How long can you

persist and not fall by the way to the neglect of prayer? How long will you persist when it appears the heavens are permanently closed?

Jesus teaches us by precept and example that we should persist in prayer. Read Luke 18:1-8 and 11:5-13. Behold the power of persistence in prayer. Learn this lesson well, **“Men ought always to pray, and not to faint,”** Luke 18:1. Persistence is an important part of a victorious prayer life.

CONCLUSION—The preceding discussion of prayer has been bound to six truths. (1) Petition is a valid part of prayer. (2) One's motive in asking will determine whether or not God answers. (3) Only a humble person can approach God in prayer. (4) Faith must undergird every prayer. (5) Fervency adds strength and meaning to our prayers. (6) Persistence is required to have an answer to prayer.

How do these principles apply to your prayer life? Is petition a part (or is it too much) of your prayer life? Do you pray with right motives? Are you humble? Do you pray with absolute confidence in God? Do you pray fervently and persist in petitions until God speaks? Perhaps one or more of these principles has spoken to a need in your personal life. If so, praise God and benefit from it.