

Prayer That is Powerful James 5:16-18

George Mueller was a man of tremendous faith and persistent prayer. He once said that he had joyfully dedicated his “whole life to the object of exemplifying how much may be accomplished by prayer and faith.”

One time he was traveling to Quebec by steamship for a speaking engagement and spoke to the captain about the need to arrive on time. The captain was a very devoted Christian and told Mueller that it would be impossible. Mueller told the captain that if the ship could not take him, God would find some other way and stated that he had never missed an engagement in 57 years. He then invited the captain to go below to the chartroom to pray.

Admitting that he had never met a man like Mueller, he wondered if this man was a lunatic escaped from the asylum. The captain then asked if Mueller was aware that there was a dense fog making progress slow, to which Mueller responded that his eye was not on the fog but on the living God who controlled every circumstance of his life. Mueller then knelt and prayed a very simple prayer. When he finished the captain started to pray, but Mueller put his hand on him and told him to stop. He said first, the captain didn't believe God would answer, and second, he believed God already had answered, so there was no need for the captain to pray about it. He then looked at the captain and said that he had known the Lord for 57 years and that there had never been a single day he had failed to get an audience with the King. He then told the captain to get up and open the door and he would see that the fog was gone. The captain rose as instructed, opened the door and the fog had lifted. George Mueller arrived in Quebec on time.

We continue this morning with James' instructions on prayer found in **5:16-18**. For prayer to be answered, faith must be the hallmark of the believer who would pray. For faith to be strong, righteousness must be evident in how that person lives his life.

The believers to whom James wrote had been suffering under any number of hardships, some at the hands of the wicked rich who had exploited them for their own personal gain. Others, as noted in **James 1:2**, were experiencing trials of all sorts. We considered last week that in the context of the passage James invites those who were sick to call the elders, who in faith, would pray for that person to be made well. We also considered that the word sick in this context means to be weary, weary from the suffering they had endured and not necessarily sickness in itself.

James ended **verse 15** by stating that if anyone had sinned, and possibly the reason they may have also been suffering, that person would be forgiven. It implies that the reason for calling the elders was because they couldn't go and confess their sin, so needed the elders to come to him or her for the purpose of repentance. Being made well implies that this is spiritual restoration.

As we come to **verse 16**, we notice first our sincerity with others.

I. OUR SINCERITY WITH OTHERS – v. 16a

James begins the verse with a **“therefore”** and of course anytime there is a therefore, you go back to see what it is there for. It is a link back to the previous passage including it in the context of the discussion on praying in faith and forgiveness. And then James follows the **“therefore”** with this command – **“Confess your sins to one another”**.

James provides us with something we already know but not necessarily want to admit – we still sin. It's a battle, whether in what we think, what we say or in what we do. Try as we may, we can't avoid it, because that is part of remaining in this earthly body. Sometimes the sin is against another believer. The word confess means to agree or to speak the same thing. When we confess our sin to God, we are saying the same thing God says about sin. It's an admission that we did not meet His standard. **If we are watching the Lions play football and we are both Lions fans and they happen to win, I might**

say that was a really good game, to which you agree – that is confessing the same thing about the game.

If I take Robyn out for dinner after which she tells me that it was a wonderful evening and I agree with her (and as her husband I always agree with her), then I am confessing the same thing about the evening with her.

Confession involves identifying and admitting that what I did was wrong, admitting with God and to God that we offended Him. In David's psalm of confession regarding his adultery with Bathsheba and calling for the murder of her husband Uriah to cover up his adultery, he states in **Psalm 51:4** that He had sinned against God having done what was evil in His sight. He broke the commandment not to murder. He broke the commandment not to commit adultery. He broke the commandment not to covet his neighbor's wife. He had sinned against God and admitted it.

But he also sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba and really the whole nation of Israel. So when the prophet Nathan confronted him, he confessed his sin to Nathan as well. He couldn't confess to Uriah, but I have to believe he confessed his sin to Bathsheba at some point.

Now the word James uses here for confess is a compound word intensifying the meaning of saying the same thing about something. While confession means to speak or agree the same thing and in this case it's agreeing about sin, James adds a word which gives it the meaning to speak out about the same thing or to confess openly. In other words, confess it to others. That's what James means when he says we should confess our sins to one another.

Obviously, we understand that we need to confess our sin to God because we have violated His command, but James also says we need to confess to one another as well. I think confession here has two audiences. Who is the "each other" James is referring to here?

The first group we need to confess to are those we have wronged. When we sin against someone, we

need to confess to that person or group.

About 25 years ago I had offended my parents and not honored them with some actions on my part and I had to confess my sin with them.

About 10 years ago, I had gone to a local store where I thought we had established a tax-exempt status with the company. Apparently, some other paperwork hadn't been filed so they denied the tax exemption. I got very upset with the customer service person and walked out mad. After being convicted by the Holy Spirit, I went back the next and confessed my wrong to him and asked his forgiveness.

Matthew 5:23-24

How can we worship God when sin isn't confessed? Jesus says we are to leave our worship and go make it right with that person. Then return in worship. We aren't just to confess our sin to God and call it good. We might think that it's not necessary to confess to the person we wronged. We might think that it happened a while ago and they have probably forgotten about it. Maybe we think that person doesn't ever want to see us again. Maybe we will never see that person again. There are so many reasons we might consider as to why we avoid going to that person. But Scripture is clear – confess your sins to one another.

When we have committed a sin against someone else, or when someone has sinned against us, the right thing to do is seek restoration so that broken fellowship can be renewed.

The second group to whom I think James is referring to he mentions in **verse 14** and that's the elders of the church or lets make it more broadly, someone who is spiritually mature, someone you consider to be walking closely with the Lord. Confession has a way of creating accountability. It's saying to the person that you are serious about taking care of sin in your life and that you want to grow in your faith. It's also an invitation for that person to pray for you regarding an area where we are struggling with sin. Again, this isn't just someone or anyone. James refers to the elders,

which implies that after we have confessed our sin to God, after we have confessed our sin to the person we have sinned against, we should seek out someone who is spiritual from whom you are seeking godly help and support.

Now let's be clear about one thing. This verse is not advocating for a public confess of all sin. I have heard of churches where a regular part of every service is dedicated for the public confession of sin. People get up and air their dirty laundry to everyone present. That is neither good for the individual nor good for the church. This verse isn't teaching that, but clearly there is a case where public confession is necessary. For example, Zacchaeus made a public confession of his sin of cheating people with their taxes because his sin was public.

Acts 19:18, 20 “Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds...In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.”

Roger Ellsworth sums this verse up nicely when he writes: “Confession should always be as wide as the sin. If we have sinned secretly, we should confess it to God. If we have sinned against someone else, we should confess it to God and to the person whom we have wronged. And if we have sinned publicly, we should confess it to God and the public.”

Confession restores fellowship with God, fellowship with the person to whom we have wronged and fellowship with the body of Christ.

But obviously, if it is someone you will never see again because you don't know their name or they have passed away, you can't confess to them. But where possible, confess to the person.

What if the person won't see you or won't accept your confession and offer forgiveness? You have done your part and should have a clear conscience in the matter if you have confessed to God.

When you confess understand that it's more than just saying you're sorry. Our confession needs to be sincere, genuine, and honest. There is much truth in the old adage “confession is good for the soul.”

David said that when he kept sin bottled up inside him when he didn't confess it, it was like a weariness to his bones, a draining to his soul.

Psalm 32:1-5

We need to be sincere and honest with ourselves, and with the person to whom we are confessing whether it's the person we wronged or the godly person we are inviting to help us grow in our faith.

They can instruct us where necessary and encourage us as we desire to mature in our walk with Christ. How important it is for us to have a trusted friend we can count on to be there for us to confess our sin, someone who won't judge us or belittle us but who will pick us up and help us finish our race well.

Galatians 6:1-2

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

Confession of our sins to God cleanses us and restores our fellowship with Him. Confession also restores our fellowship with others we have sinned against by being sincere about our wrongdoing in order to be reconciled.

John MacArthur writes “Such relationships help give the spiritual strength that provides victory over sin. And they also provide godly pressure to confess and forsake sins before they become overwhelming to the point of total spiritual defeat.”

Rather than condemnation, confession becomes a witness to the community of how the church forgives its own and restores fellowship. So yes, confession is good for the soul and the body of Christ. Confession of sin to one another encourages honesty, purity and unity in the fellowship as we live by Paul's admonition to **“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”** (Ephesians 4:32)

This is an area where the church can improve. It's a way to help purify the body of Christ as we pray for one another.

James encourages believers to be sincere with one another by confessing sins.

We then notice our supplication for others.

II. OUR SUPPLICATION FOR OTHERS – vs. 16b-18

Both the need to confess sin to one another and to pray for one another are written in a tense that means to keep on doing it, don't stop. In this case, praying for one another is for healing. It's my belief that the healing is not physical in nature, although we can and must certainly pray for the physical healing of others.

One time I had a conversation with the pastor of a patient I was visiting in my capacity as hospice chaplain. He told me that his church was praying for her physical healing. I encouraged him to pray that way, because yes, God is still in the business of performing miracles by healing the physically sick.

It's my understanding from the passage that prayer here is for spiritual healing caused by the sin that had been committed. Confession and prayer will bring healing to the soul that has been broken by sin. The previous verse says that person will be forgiven.

Chuck Swindoll writes "When you have released the burdens of guilt and bitterness through confession and prayer, the garbage that has contaminated and diseased your inner life will be cleansed away."

A couple of verses help us to see that the word used here is speaking about spiritual healing, rather than physical healing.

Matthew 13:15 "For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them."

I Peter 2:24 "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed."

James uses a word that refers to the repentant believer who has sinned who has been made spiritually whole through forgiveness. The person

may still suffer the physical malady that has occurred because of their sin, but spiritually they will be healed or restored.

James' word for prayer is the most commonly used word and is always used of prayer to God. The most basic definition of prayer is talking to God, to be in conversation with Him where we both talk to Him and listen to Him. It is not passive reflection or meditation. Prayer is not communing with nature. It is a direct conversation with Him. Talking with God assumes that we believe He exists, that He hears us, that He wants to have a conversation with us and that He can answer the requests we bring to Him.

When David talks with either me or his mother and asks something of us, he is communicating a desire with us because he knows we exist, He knows we care about him, and believes we have the ability to grant what he is asking if it's according to our will.

Through prayer we share with God our emotions and our requests. In prayer we worship Him. In prayer we express our thanksgiving to Him for who He is and what He has done and, as we have seen in our passage, we offer our confession. In prayer we also pray for others for both their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. We can pray about anything, anytime, anywhere. We can pray privately or publicly.

There is a well-known acrostic for prayer – ACTS
ADORATION
CONFESSION
THANKSGIVING
SUPPLICATION

James 1:6 says our prayer should be offered in faith and not with doubt.

Romans 8:26 says our prayer should be offered in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Luke 11:1 says it should be the natural inclination of the believer to want to pray, while **Psalms 10:4** says that the wicked have no desire to pray.

We are told in **Philippians 4:6-7** that when we pray with thanksgiving, God's peace will guard our heart and mind.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia says “Christian prayer in its full New Testament meaning is prayer addressed to God as Father, in the name of Christ as Mediator, and through the enabling grace and indwelling Spirit.”

Through prayer we seek God’s favor –
Exodus 32:11

Through prayer we pour out our soul to God –
I Samuel 1:15

Through prayer we cry out to heaven –
II Chronicles 32:20

Through prayer we draw near to God –
Psalms 73:28

Through prayer we kneel in worship and adoration before the Lord – **Ephesians 3:14**

And as we see in our passage it is through prayer that we petition God on behalf of one another.

Now James doesn’t say that the prayer of a man is powerful and effective. He says that it is the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

The Bible teaches us that in Christ, the person who by faith has become saved has become the righteousness of Christ. Because of Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross, the person who by faith trusts in Christ and the finished work of atonement for sin stands clothed in Christ’s righteousness. God sees us without sin because the blood of Christ covers us and cleanses us from our sin. We are seen as righteous or holy.

But James isn’t referring to every believer who has a right position with God, but rather someone who has a right practice with God. The righteous person he is speaking about is the person who endeavors to be godly in his character, in his practice. He is the person who first takes care of the beam in his own eye before he tries to take care of the speck that is in someone else’s eye. He takes care of his sin first. The person who is maturing in their faith, who seeks to live godly is the person praying here. Consider **Psalm 34:15, 17**, which is repeated in **I Peter 3:12** “**The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears attentive to their cry...The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; He delivers them from all their troubles.**”

The prayer of this righteous person is powerful and effective. Let me give some reasons why the Lord may not answer prayer. They would be things that would make the person not righteous in practice. **SIN** – Unconfessed sin hinders our communion and communication with the Lord.

Psalms 66:18

If I love my sin, if I cherish my sin, if I embrace my sin, hold onto it, don’t want to give it up, God won’t hear my prayer. **James 4:1-2** indicates that the unconfessed sin of fighting and quarreling among themselves may have been a reason the believers to whom James is writing didn’t get what they asked. **Proverbs 28:9** “**If anyone turns a deaf ear to My instruction, even their prayers are detestable.**”

A righteous man has a faith that seeks to obey God and His Word. This isn’t saying the person needs to be sinless, because we all fall short of that, but a righteous person desires to live for and obey God and keep short accounts of sin taking to heart **I John 1:9** that “**if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.**”

WRONG MOTIVES – **James 4:3** says we don’t get our prayers answered when we ask with the wrong motive. A righteous person prays in a way that is not self-centered.

Psalms 37:4 “**Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.**”

In other words, when we delight in the Lord, our desire will be His will, what He desires.

WORLDLY DESIRES – **James 4:4** says that friendship with the world is to be an enemy of God. Loving the world more than God is like committing adultery. He’s not saying that we can’t enjoy a baseball game or a trip to the amusement park or fishing on the lake. But when we enjoy things more than God, those worldly desires pull our affection away from God. The world presents a belief that is often contrary to how God would want us to live and which pulls our affection away from Him. When we find greater pleasure in the world and what it offers more than the Lord and things that will last for eternity, we can easily be pulled away.

Let me offer one more reason your prayers may not be answered, and this is specifically to husbands. That said, wives keep your arms and legs inside your chair at all times. No elbows or glaring looks.

LACK OF RESPECT FOR YOUR WIFE – I Peter 3:7

Prayers may be hindered when the husband-wife relationship isn't what it should be, when we don't love and respect our wife.

Do you love your wife? Telling her you loved her the day you got married doesn't count.

Does she know it by your words, your actions, your attitudes?

Do you cherish her?

Are there any unresolved arguments?

Would you rather spend time at the office or doing your hobby than with your wife? It's not to say that you can't work hard or enjoy some leisure activity, but if those things are more important, then you are not cherishing or showing her respect.

I'll end there before husbands start walking out.

These are just some reasons prayer may not be answered and some of the things the righteous person will confess so that prayer will be answered. Confession is a prerequisite for the Lord to hear our prayer. Only then will prayer have the power to be effective.

Prayers that are powerful and effective come from righteous people who have confessed their sin and so have the ear of God. They are the ones who desire to live in obedience in the presence of God.

Your Bible may have the word fervent. It simply means impassioned, forceful, heartfelt, powerful (NIV), or wholehearted. As it translated in the KJV, it seems to denote that a passionate, wholehearted prayer will accomplish much, implying that the half-hearted prayer is ineffective. Other versions translate it differently so that the fervency applies to the outcome of the prayer not the earnestness of the prayer. The NIV and NASB say that prayer is powerful without differentiating between prayer that is fervent and some other kind of prayer.

Gotquestions helps to clarify. "The difference in translation seems to center on the proper placement of the term translated "fervent" or "powerful" or "effective." The KJV translated the verse so that the term applies to the kind of prayer – a fervent, forceful, powerful prayer can accomplish much. The other versions apply the modifier not to the prayer but to the outcome of the prayer – it will have a forceful or powerful result. So the KJV encourages one to pray fervently so that the prayer will be answered (something other passages encourage us to do), and the other versions simply encourage one to pray because the results can be powerful."

The context of the passage and the example of Elijah point to the powerful result that comes from prayer when offered by a righteous man. Elijah prayed and the power of his prayer kept it from raining for 3 ½ years. He prayed again and it rained. We can assume Elijah prayed fervently, but the answer came not from his earnestness, but from his being righteous. But James offers an additional point that Elijah was not some great spiritual hero, he was just like us. He suffered from times of doubt and discouragement just as we do. So don't think that we can't offer prayer in the same way. The call is for us to be righteous, maturing in our faith. That affects the outcome of prayer, not the fervency. So the point James makes in this passage is that prayer is important and that God answers prayer when it is according to His will. But also keep in mind that an answer to prayer can be hindered by sin, so the emphasis or importance of confession. It is not the fervency of our prayer that avails much, but the character of the person that is praying that produces powerful results.

Prayer that is powerful doesn't come from fervency, but from a righteous character.

Someone has said we have weak prayers because we have weak Christians.

How will this passage reshape your prayers?

How do you need to change in character so that your prayers can be answered?

Does it need to begin with confession?