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The Power of Prayer

James 5:13-20

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As we conclude our series from the Letter of James, we're going to talk about prayer. *"On the one hand, prayer is a gift. It is something we receive, and we are to wait in silent expectation for the gift. On the other hand, we can learn how to pray and we are to give ourselves to the discipline of learning how to pray."*¹

Listen to James 5:13-20,

13 Are any among you suffering? They should **pray**. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 14 Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them **pray** over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 **The prayer of faith** will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 16 Therefore **confess your sins to one another**, and **pray for one another**, so that you may be healed. The **prayer** of the righteous is powerful and effective. 17 **Elijah** was a human being like us, and he **prayed** fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he **prayed** again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest. 19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, 20 you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

Perhaps some of our earliest memories of prayer may be simple prayers taught to us by a parent, Sunday school teacher, or a grandparent. Prayers like, *"Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep..."*

A little boy and his brother went to visit their grandma.

As the little boy said his evening prayers, he was shouting at the top of his voice,

"Please God send me a bicycle, send me an iPod," and all that.

His brother said, *"Not so loud. For crying out loud, God isn't deaf."*

The little boy replied, *"I know, but Grandma is."*

Prayer is something we can learn if we are willing to be taught.

Prayer is something we grow in over time; we should not pray the same way as an adult as when we were children.

It is important not to rush through words in praying, but to truly hear what we are saying.

We do not need to fear our lack of knowledge or experience in prayer, because truly we will always be beginners.

¹ Norman Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer*, Upper Room, Nashville, 1983, 12.

The God we pray to is not deaf, although there are times when it can seem that way when our most earnest prayers are not answered for reasons we do not know or understand. But we also have seen prayer change people perhaps by seeing them healed or come to faith or strengthened to face adversity.

In a sense, all that increases our awareness of God is prayer. There are various ways to pray. Christians of the 2nd and 3rd centuries spoke of three methods of prayer; **verbal, silent thought, and contemplation**, a type of prayer in which we focus our attention on a brief prayer or word. To nurture prayer in our life we will need to create space or pauses in our days for solitude and silence. In Matthew 6 Jesus speaks of going into our closet to pray in secret. Well I don't know if I could get in my closet, much less pray in it, but most of us over the age of 18 have access to a prayer closet in which we spend many hours a week that could be used for prayer. It is called an automobile. We could even start a movement called Driven to Pray, which encourages people to use their time in their car to pray instead of listening to talk radio which doesn't do you any good except for making you mad and raising your blood pressure. We can pray to God in the car, but keep your eyes open. We can listen in the silence. We can play songs and express our praise to God. Our prayers may include time to express adoration of God, confession of our sins, praying for others, and praying for our self. O. Hallesby describes prayer this way: "To pray is to let Jesus into our hearts. It is not our prayer which moves the Lord Jesus. It is Jesus who moves us to pray. From time immemorial prayer has been spoken of as the breath of the soul. The air which our body requires envelopes us on every hand. The air of itself seeks to enter our bodies and, for this reason, exerts pressure upon us. It is well known that it is more difficult to hold one's breath than it is to breathe. We need but exercise our organs of respiration and air will enter into our lungs and perform its life-giving function to the entire body.

The air which our souls need envelopes all of us at all times and on all sides. God is round about us in Christ on every hand, with his many-sided and all-sufficient grace. All we need to do is open our hearts.

Prayer is the breath of the soul, the organ by which we receive Christ into our parched and withered hearts. Jesus says (Revelation 3:20), "*If any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.*" It is not our prayer which draws Jesus into our hearts. Nor is it our prayer which moves Jesus to come in to us. All he needs is access. He enters of his own accord because he desires to come in. And he enters in wherever

he is not denied admittance. God has designed prayer as a means of intimate and joyous fellowship between God and ourselves.”²

Prayer can be defined in many ways but a simple definition is, “*Prayer is a believer’s communication with God.*” Prayer involves three major components: God, two-way communication, and a person, usually a believer. However, God also can hear the prayers of those who do not yet possess faith, such as the pagan sailors we meet in the story of Jonah (see Jonah chapter 1).

Prayer involves God because if we don’t believe there is a God who hears and answers prayer, we won’t pray. Our conception of who God is and what God is like will have a tremendous impact on our desire to pray and the nature of our prayers. If we conceive of God as a tyrannical, powerful being who enjoys catching people in sin and punishing them, our approach to prayer will be quite different than someone else who conceives of God as powerful, mysterious, awesome and yet tender, merciful, gracious, and abounding in steadfast love.

Prayer involves two-way communication we both speak and listen in silence when we pray. Frank Laubach wrote in his excellent book *Prayer: The Mightiest Force in the World*, “***The trouble with nearly everybody who prays is that he says ‘Amen’ and runs away before God has a chance to reply. Listening to God is far more important than giving Him your ideas.***”

Prayer was a regular experience for Jesus, he prayed at the decisive moments in his life. His prayers are brief and appear to be spontaneous. He spoke to his Father and he listened to God’s voice. In Luke 13 Jesus suggests when communicating with God in prayer – **keep it short, keep it simple, and keep it up.**

If we have an appointment with someone else, we do our best to keep it because we would not want to be disrespectful or waste another person’s time. In the same way, we can make appointments for ourselves with God that we keep with regularity. Henri Nouwen observed, “*We do not take the spiritual life seriously if we do not set aside some time to be with God and listen to him...The amount of time will vary for each person according to temperament, age, job, lifestyle, and maturity...The more we train ourselves to spend time with God and him alone, the more we will discover that God is with us at all times and in all places. Then we will be able to recognize him even in the midst of a busy and active life.*”³ It is very important that we not project our style or

² O. Hallesby in *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants*, 17-18.

³ Henri Nouwen, *Making All Things New* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1981) 71.

commitment to prayer onto others, as Nouwen said, but we will need some time to be alone with God in prayer.

The example of Elijah in James 5:13-16 is meant as an encouragement to us in our praying. Elijah is persistent in prayer – seven times he prays and tells his servant to go back and look to see if there is any sign of rain. Six times the answer he gets is, *“There is nothing there,”* that is how we often feel about prayer. We pray and look and there is nothing there. Sometimes we may give up too soon. Elijah perseveres in praying. He is not discouraged or dissuaded. He keeps at it and doesn't quit. So even though he is praying faithfully and he is seeing nothing, and he's hearing, *“There is nothing there,”* he keeps at it.

That is what we need to do as well.

The seventh time, the servant says, *“A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea.”* Often times the answer to our prayers may appear very small and insignificant. Like a small cloud on the horizon – it might look like something the wind will just dissipate. But the answer to prayer can start small and gradually grow, it takes time and faith to wait and watch for it.

This can be especially true in praying for people who have gone astray. We are going to have a gathering at BBC on December 2 in the evening, for anyone who has a family member who has gone astray, wandered away, or is a prodigal. Pastor Mary is going to lead the time in which we can share, pray, and ask God's help. Prayer involves God, two-way communication, and a believer and James tells us, *“Whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”*

Tony Campolo tells a story about being at a worship service in Pennsylvania where a man prayed aloud for a friend. *“Dear Lord,”* he said, *“you know Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives in that silver trailer down the road a mile. He's leaving his wife and kids. Please do something to bring the family together.”* The man prayed again, repeating the location: *“the silver trailer down the road a mile.”* Annoyed, Tony wanted to say, *“Enough already. Do you think God's asking, ‘What's that address again?’”*

After the service ended, Tony was driving home when on the PA turnpike he noticed a hitchhiker. He decided to give him a ride. *“My name's Tony,”* Campolo said. *“What's yours?”* *“Charlie Stoltzfus,”* the hitchhiker said. Campolo was dumbfounded. It was the man for whom the prayer had been offered. Campolo got off at the next exit. *“Hey where are you taking me?”* asked the hitchhiker. *“Home,”* Campolo said. The

hitchhiker stared in amazement as Tony drove right to the young man's silver trailer. That afternoon that man and his wife gave themselves to each other and to God.

We need to remember Elijah's lesson of faithfulness, persistence, and perseverance in prayer. In *My Grandfather's Blessings*, Rachel Naomi Remen tells "of an endearing grandfather who brought presents when he came to visit her. One day, when she was four years old and living on the sixth floor of an apartment building in New York City, he came with a little paper cup filled with dirt. They went into the nursery together where he found a teapot from her dollhouse set. Here grandfather filled the teapot with water and showed her how to put a few drops of water in the cup, saying: *"If you promise to put some water in it every day, you may see something happen."* She promised her grandfather she would do this, and then he placed the cup of dirt on the windowsill.

At first, the little girl was interested in seeing what might happen, but as the days went by and nothing changed in the cup of dirt, she found it harder and harder to put water in it. After a week she asked her grandfather if it was time to stop. He told her "no" and added reassuringly, "Keep watering it every day." The second week was even more difficult for the little girl to put water in the cup, and she started to resent it. She even tried to return the cup to her grandfather. He simply smiled and said, *"Every day, every day."* By the third week, she sometimes forgot and would have to get out of bed at night to do the watering, but she never missed a single day. Each time she told her grandfather that she wanted to stop, he smiled lovingly and encouraged her with the same words, "Every day."

One morning when she went to put water in the cup, she was astonished to see two little green leaves above the dirt. Each day the leaves grew bigger. She couldn't wait to tell her grandfather about the wondrous thing that had happened. When he came to visit, he shared her joy at the green leaves and explained to her, **"Life is everywhere, hidden in the most ordinary and unlikely places."** She was delighted and asked him, *"And all it needs is water?"* Gently, her grandfather touched her on the top of the head and said, *"No, all it needs is your faithfulness."*

Like this young child who watered the seemingly dead soil in the little cup, we must be willing to faithfully tend our relationship with God each day so it can grow, Prayer is a great way to help us do that. There will be times when we forget to or don't feel like "watering," but we keep on doing it anyway.

James concludes by reminding us that prayer, suffering, and sin all take place within the church. We all have a responsibility to help one another in the trials of life to be doers of the word.

Blessing:

The fruit of silence is prayer. The fruit of prayer is faith.

The fruit of faith is love. The fruit of love is service.

The fruit of service is peace. Mother Teresa

“Pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18

Elijah: 1 Kings 18:41-46

“And Elijah said to Ahab, *“Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.”* So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.

“Go and look toward the sea,” he told his servant. And he went up and looked.

“There is nothing there,” he said.

Seven times Elijah said, *“Go back.”*

The seventh time the servant reported, *“A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.”*

So Elijah said, *“Go and tell Ahab, ‘Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.’”*

Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. The power of the Lord came upon Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.”