

St. James UCC Havertown, PA
March 24, 2019 | James 5:13-18
Rev. Emily Garcia Livingston | “The Power of Prayer”

For the past three Sundays in March, we’ve gone through our “Powered Up” series. Throughout this series, we’ve focused on the power found in several topics that can help improve or restore our relationship with God and other people. The season of Lent gives us an opportunity to reflect upon our journeys and to “power up”, in other words, to strengthen our faith as we remember Jesus’ journey to the cross and the price He paid for our freedom.

The series ends today with a look at prayer. There’s so much to say about prayer and a series on prayer alone could take weeks but we don’t have time for that. So, I want to highlight a few points that we can take away regarding prayer so that we can reference them when “life happens.” And life is happening all the time. Is it not?? Whether it’s *to us* or to people in our families; our friends; our work associates; our colleagues, life is always happening whether we’re ready for what it brings or not.

The scripture we just heard this morning is from the epistle of James. Many New Testament scholars agree that it was written by Jesus’ brother (technically his half-brother) and that it’s intended audience was to Jewish Christians living throughout the Hellenistic diaspora. His focus was to encourage them in their faith. Life was very challenging for Jewish people who accepted the Gospel of Jesus Christ because they held views that opposed Jewish orthodoxy as well as their Roman oppressors. They were isolated and living on the margins of the Roman empire as well as their ancestral Jewish communities.

James is trying to tell them to hold on. He’s trying to tell them to hold on to their convictions in Christ Jesus. He’s trying to tell them that that their faith in Christ will get them through the difficult days they were facing. And what’s interesting about the passage today is that it reminds us to pray AND to praise God. If you or someone you know has a need, then pray for them. And if you or someone you know is happy, then praise God for that also. Come what may in life, pray to God and praise God for the good times.

The main verse I want to focus on is v16: *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.*

Now we talked about forgiveness and peace in prior weeks of this series and we see James reminding us of the same. Forgive those who have wronged or harmed you and also seek forgiveness that you may be in right relationship with God and others. And this is what helps to bring about peace. Some people find the last part of verse 16 to be controversial because it has been misused to judge people. The NRSV reads: *The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.* The NKJV reads this way: The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Some of you here today may be wondering, who is righteous? What does James mean by this?

Let me share my perspective. We are not righteous because we're Christians or because we think we're "good Christians." We're not righteous because we are "Americans" in a God-fearing land. We are not righteous because we believe that we have the exclusive rights to Almighty God and that we have the "correct" interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. We are not righteous because we believe we are living holy lives before God. Nothing we do can make us righteous ... only God can make us righteous.

We are *only* made righteous through Christ Jesus who cleanses us and forgives our sins. When *we* take ownership of what we've done wrong; when *we* account for our sins, and when *we* seek forgiveness from God, God faithfully forgives our sins and forgets them. When we are made righteous by Christ, it is not for our own benefit so that we boast about it or to make others feel judged, less than, or condemned. No, when we are made righteous, we are able to go before Christ's holy throne of grace and mercy and make our request directly to God. I believe that is what James is talking about when he wrote that the prayers of the righteous is powerful and effective.

The question is...do we believe in the power of prayer today? Every week, many churches like St. James recite what we call the "Lord's Prayer." This prayer is what Jesus shared with the disciples when they asked Him to teach them how to pray...it was a template for them to follow as they learned about prayer. Should we use it in our corporate and personal prayers? Absolutely. And we should pray with intention and thought, not solely out of pure memorization that has no meaning to us anymore? Absolutely!

Prayer can be intimidating and I believe it stems from our theology about who God is and who we are, in relation to God. I think what happens with some of us is that we either feel overwhelmed by the idea of prayer because we feel we're going to mess it up somehow OR that we have no idea where to start and so we never really do it because we're afraid we're going to do it "wrong."

Another reason is that we feel we need a mediator to pray for us and someone with “more authority” like a pastor, a priest, a person who’s been in the church for decades, etc.

If we understand the basic elements of prayer, we may have a different opinion. If we understand that God desires to be in relationship with us and that each of us has the ability to talk to God directly, then our anxiety around prayer begins to lessen. If we understand that in order to maintain and grow in our relationship with God, we need to spend time with God in prayer, we may be more open to praying more regularly, even if we feel our prayers are simple and unsophisticated. Those kinds of prayers can be some of the most powerful and sincere prayers ever uttered.

Social and behavioral scientists have done multiple studies through the years on the effectiveness of prayer. I always find the results interesting whether the study shows that prayer plays a role or not on a person’s physiology or neurology because it demonstrates that people are wrestling with the idea of a Divine Being who actively participates in the lives of people. Modeling our prayers after the way Jesus taught us to pray is one way to improve the effectiveness of our prayers. Another way is to recognize prayer has the ability to change God’s mind.

Now some of you may be thinking about several verses that talk about God’s nature never changing...being the same today, yesterday and ever more. And yes...that is true. What I am referring to is not God’s nature and God’s character.... those things never change, but I am talking about several instances in the Scriptures where God made a declaration about something and because of the effective prayer of a righteous person, God changed God’s mind. And that is powerful.

One example is in Genesis 18 when Abraham is speaking to God about not destroying the righteous with the wicked in the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. God tells Abraham that the towns and everyone in them are going to be destroyed and Abraham says “well if there are 50 righteous people, will you still destroy it?” And God says no...I will not destroy it if there are 50 righteous people. And Abraham goes back to God and says, “well what if there are 45 righteous people? Will you destroy the towns then?” And God say no...I will not destroy it if there are 45. Abraham goes back to God several more times until he gets down to 10 people and God says, He will not destroy the cities if there are at least 10 righteous people. So, because of

Abraham's talk with God, which is equivalent to praying, God spared Lot's family from the total destruction of those cities.

Another example is in 2 Kings chapter 20 when King Hezekiah became sick and was visited by Isaiah the prophet who told him to get his affairs in order because he was going to die very soon. Upon hearing this, King Hezekiah wept and prayed to God for mercy and for more years to live. Before Isaiah could walk out of the King's palace, God spoke to Isaiah again and told Isaiah to go back to Hezekiah to tell him that God heard his prayer, saw his tears, and that God would heal him. God also told King Hezekiah that he would extend his life by 15 years.

I know life can be discouraging and sometimes you can feel like God doesn't hear your prayers, especially if you're praying for the same thing and nothing is changing in your life. Sometimes, God may be changing someone else in your circle, even though you don't see a change in what you're praying for. I believe God hears all prayers and God is especially moved by the prayers of those who first come humbly seeking forgiveness and who offer praises to God for who God is. God desires to be in relationship with us and one of the ways to nurture that relationship is through prayer.

Jesus demonstrated to us the power of prayer. Jesus' prayers strengthened and sustained Him during the most difficult times in His life; Jesus' prayers healed and set people free; and Jesus' prayers forgave sinners. There is power in prayer through Jesus' name to restore what is broken in the world. Don't underestimate the power of prayer. Prayer is able to strengthen and sustain us during difficult times; prayer is able to heal us and set us free; and prayer helps us to walk in forgiveness. *The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.*

And now to Him who is able to do exceedingly and abundantly above all that we could ask or think, according to the *power* that works within us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.
AMEN!