



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Letting Prayer Go to Work

James 5:16-18

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Introduction

1. Having looked in multiple sermons at specific questions raised by 5:13-18, it's time to again consider the text as a whole and hear the main thing James wanted to say.
 - a. Remember, he wrote to people for whom trials, often in the form of attacks by others, were a way of life; he called them to be steadfast and unwavering in their faith.
 - b. This is nowhere more clear than in vv. 13-16, his ultimate call for unwavering faith.
 - 1) Were they suffering (many were)? Pray.
 - 2) Were they sick or spiritually weak? Call for the church's leaders whose prayer would save/heal and see them raised up by the Lord.
 - 3) Was the sickness/weakness due to sin? The elders' prayer would solve that, too.
 - 4) Were there troubles in the church community (the letter shows several)? Acknowledging sins and prayer was the solution for the group, too.
2. If they were like most groups, they had among them some who would have agreed in principle, but were dealing with life's realities. There *was* favoritism at church (2:1ff.), brothers *were* quarreling (4:1-3), oppression from outsiders *was* nearly unbearable (5:1-11). Facing such trouble, they would only be human if they asked, "but does prayer work?"
3. James was sure it does, supporting his claim with a reminder of how it had worked before.

Body

I. Assurance Stated (v. 16).

A. Let's first stress that the subject of the sentence is "prayer" (δέησις, *deēsis*).

1. This third word for prayer in vv. 13-18 "appropriately focuses attention on the petitionary aspect of prayer (see esp. those verses in which *deēsis* occurs with *proseuchē* [Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6; 1 Tim. 2:1; 5:5]."¹
2. Stripped down to the basics, James's sentence is, "Prayer is much strong."
3. The focus is on prayer, powerful only "because God responds to it."²

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, 247. See also Luke 1:13; 2 Cor. 9:14; Phil. 1:4, 19; 2 Tim. 1:3; Heb. 5:7, other texts where the petitionary sense is prominent.

² Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 258.

- B. Stressing that point helps us see the other key words in v. 16b properly.
1. There is “righteous” (δικαίον, *dikaion*), used only one other time in James (5:6).
 - a) We do see “righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη, *dikaiosunē*; 1:20; 2:23; 3:18) and “justify” (δικαιόω, *dikaioō*; 2:21, 24-25), used of those practicing the unwavering faith James emphasizes.
 - b) The righteous one who prays is not a “super-saint” who, because of his superior holiness, makes the prayer powerful.
 2. We see that better when we properly understand the word translated “as it is working” (ESV), the present participle, ἐνεργουμένη (*energoumenē*).
 - a) Grammatically, it can either explain (1) the working or effectiveness of the prayer or (2) the power at work when one prays.
 - (1) The KJV shows the first: “The *effectual fervent* prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”
 - (2) The ASV shows the second: “The supplication of a righteous man availeth much *in its working*.”
 - b) The second sense is preferred, meaning either that the prayer is powerful when a righteous person exercises it (middle voice) or, passively, because he recognizes that it is powerful because God activates its power.³
 3. Either way, James intends to emphasize the power⁴ unleashed by prayer, not that of the person praying, e.g., “The prayer of a godly person is powerful. It makes things happen” (NIRV).

II. Assurance Illustrated (vv. 17-18).

- A. “Elijah was regarded in Judaism as second only to Moses as a prophet” (McCartney, 259), known for his bold faith in the most trying of times.
1. Jewish tradition mentioned his prayer for the people to receive rain.⁵
 2. Prayers for drought and rain are not as obvious in 1 Kings 17:1 and 18:42-43.⁶
 - a) Some saw it in 17:1 in the phrase, “before whom I stand.”
 - b) In 18:42, “he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees.”
 3. The question is why James chose this example when one like the resurrection of the son of the Zarephath widow (17:17-24) would have better fit his emphasis on healing and God raising up the sick (vv. 14-15).
 - a) The answer may lie in the traditional use of the episode (see above).
 - b) More significant may be the oppression in the time of King Ahab.⁷
- B. James intended to stress three things about Elijah’s example of prayer.

³ See Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 245, for discussion of this distinction and the view that it is best understood as a passive. See also the discussion in McCartney, 258; and Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, 196-197.

⁴ Blomberg & Kamell, 245, say it is “adverbial and temporal.” See also McCartney, 258.

⁵ For example, “I answered and said, ‘How then do we find that first Abraham prayed for the people of Sodom, and Moses for our ancestors who sinned in the desert, . . . and Elijah for those who received the rain, and for the one who was dead, that he might live, . . .’” (4 Esdras 7:106, 109, NRSV). See Davids, 197 for more discussion.

⁶ William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, The New Daily Study Bible, 154; also Blomberg & Kamell, 246.

⁷ See Blomberg & Kamell, 246.

1. His prayers had power: one stopped the rain, the second resumed it.
 2. He had “a nature like ours” (ὁμοιοπαθῆς ἡμῖν, *homoiopathēs hēmin*), i.e., he was “simply a representative human being rather than a larger-than-life-hero, somehow holier than us. His ability to pray and obtain results did not differ from us in any way” (Blomberg & Kamell, 246).
 3. He was serious about his prayers: “he prayed fervently,” literally “he prayed with prayer” (προσευχῇ προσήξατο, *proseuchē prosēuxato*).
- C. When we reflect on the example James cites, we notice some other things.
1. The prayers mentioned were offered under duress – the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, the time when, as the episode right after the Mt. Carmel triumph shows, Elijah felt all alone in his faithfulness (cf. 1 Kings 19:18).
 2. He had to keep praying.
 - a) There were “three years and six months” between the two prayers.⁸
 - b) Even after he told Ahab rain was coming (1 Kings 18:41-42), he had to send his servant to look toward the sea “seven times” (v. 43-44).
 - c) Like James’s readers awaiting the Lord’s coming (5:7-11), he prayed “in the context within which the believer faithfully waits for God’s justice” (McCartney, 259).
 3. His nature was “like ours,” i.e., challenged by life’s limitations and evils, seen in his despair after the triumph at Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 19:9-10).

III. Assurance Applied.

- A. Like James’s readers, sometimes we suffer, are sick/weak, burdened by sin and have troubles in the church community. We face other trials and temptations, too.
- B. James’s answer is the same.
 1. First, keep praying; it’s a key indicator of unwavering dependence on God.
 2. Do not confuse righteous standing before God with sinless (or nearly sinless) perfection: we do not have to be “super-saints” to have our prayers heard.
 3. But, do not think God will necessarily act quickly, spare us from trouble now or in the future, or keep us from having questions or despair.
 4. Above all, remember that the power is not in us, or even *per se* in our prayers: they are powerful because God responds to them.

Conclusion

1. William Barclay notes that James stresses several basic ideas of the Jewish religion.

Above all, there is the idea that no limits can be set to the power of prayer. The Jews had a saying that the one who prays surrounds his house with a wall stronger than iron. They said, ‘Penitence can do something, but prayer can do everything.’ To them, prayer was nothing less than contacting the power of God; it was the channel through which the strength and grace of God were brought to bear on the troubles and problems of life. How much more must this be so for a Christian? (Barclay, 153)

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⁸ The specific length of time is a deduction from 1 Kings 17:1 and 18:1 (cf. Luke 4:25). Peter Davids suggests the possibility that this time fits Jewish judgment terminology, the number being half of seven (see Dan. 7:25; also Rev. 11:12; 12:14) (Davids, 197; cf. the comment by Blomberg & Kamell, 247, note 45).