



Lesson 14 June 3, 2010

Pray Effectively, Pray Fervently, Pray Righteously

James fittingly closes his epistle with his now familiar, characteristic imperative commands to action, as a doer of the word, as he exhorts his reader to pray and underscores its importance by referring to prayer seven times in these verses, the number seven representing perfection or completion in biblical numerology. The subject of prayer has been an underlying theme, albeit a subtle one at times, throughout the book, and James had earlier twice declared that prayer is the only means to appropriate God's Divine wisdom to allow us to cultivate "the fruit of righteousness" (James 3:18) and simultaneously shun the sinful influence of the world, the flesh, and the Devil. As we do so, again as a doer of the word, we can accordingly grow and establish a spiritual maturity that will be manifest in works of love that bring restoration and cover a multitude of sins.

Note that James makes no closing benediction or doctrinal conclusion, unusual in New Testament epistles. Instead, he closes with yet another imperative, a simple exhortation to good works as acts of faith and seemingly says "I have given you the Word of the Lord – now go do it!" In actuality, one could make the logical argument that the whole of his epistle is circular, without a formal starting point or end, as his very practical instruction and commands can be applied, as they should be, on their own merit and strength wherever they are stated in the book and in our own lives.

1. In verses 13-16a, James emphasizes the benefit of personal prayer in times of affliction and trials, which provides the strength and wisdom to "count it all joy" (James 1:2), and of thanksgiving and praise in times of cheerfulness and happiness (v13), acknowledging that there is a balance of both evil and good we all experience in both the trials and God's blessings on us throughout the seasons of life on earth. James then addresses the need for the church leadership to pray on behalf of those who are sick (v14). He implies that sin is the cause of this particular illness (v15) and therefore stresses the importance of confessing sin, before he finally exhorts that all should pray for one another (v16). How do these verses highlight James' admonitions?

Psalm 32:1-5

Ephesians 5:19

1 John 5:14-16



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2. In verses 16b-18, James declares that the effective, fervent prayer of the righteous does much good (v16) and cites Elijah's earnest prayers preventing rain for three and one half years (v17), and then his fervent prayers ending the drought (v18), so fervent that he assumed the position of a woman in childbirth. How do these verses support James' points?

1 Kings 18:42-45

Proverbs 15:8b, 29b

Matthew 6:7-8

2 Corinthians 5:21

3. In verses 19-20, James states that one who is able to restore a fellow believer who has wandered from the truth (19) and into sin has saved a soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (v20). What further support do these scriptures add to James' thoughts?

Proverbs 24:11-12

Ecclesiastes 9:18b

Galatians 6:1-2

1 Peter 4:8



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Personal Application

Like James, we as believers understand and acknowledge that there is power in prayer, and that it should be one of our highest priorities throughout each day. Unfortunately, we often fall victim as prey to the enemy's subtle spiritual intimidation when we read James' description of effective and fervent prayer, particularly when he uses a mighty prophet such as Elijah as an example, since we typically question our own prayers' effectiveness and our own righteousness.

The words *effective* and *fervent* in verse sixteen and the word *earnest* in verse seventeen share similarities in meaning since the original Greek text of Elijah's earnest prayer before God was that he literally prayed in prayer. In the Greek, the word prayer also may suggest the further translation of bowed down or submission, exactly as James commanded us to "*submit yourselves to God*" (James 4:7) and, by extension to be submitted to the word. Jesus Himself proclaimed "*if you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you shall ask what you will and it will be done*" (John 15:7). Remember James said much the same in "*draw near to God, and He will draw near to you*" (James 4:8). To pray effectively is to pray biblically according to the word.

In a slightly different vein, prayed in prayer would also suggest a fervent, passionate, laborious pursuit for our Father's response, even as Elijah bowed down when "*he cast himself on the earth, and put his face between his knees*" (1 Kings 18:42) as he began to pray, repeatedly, in the position of a woman in childbirth. His attitude and action represents passionate effort and labor for he was in reality giving birth to answered prayer, and this second prayer is in marked contrast to his earlier short and simple, effective prayer for God to consume the sacrifice on the altar (1 Kings 18:36-38). Although Elijah did request God to send rain seven times, his prayer did not make "*use of vain repetitions, as the heathen; for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking*" (Matthew 6:7), since he earnestly asked, sought, and knocked (Luke 11:9) with the increasing intensity and fervor that this passage of scripture demonstrates. We are commanded to be "*fervent in spirit*" (Romans 12:11), and to pray fervently is to pray and to constantly commune with our Father in an ever deepening relationship with Him.

As we consider the saints and remarkable persons of faith presented to us in scripture, we have an almost automatic tendency to ascribe an elevated spiritual position and strength to them in comparison to ourselves with our many flaws and failures. Yet James describes Elijah, the prophet who called fire from heaven and stopped the rain, as a man beset with the same nature and passions as us. Furthermore, we have an advantage that Elijah could not enjoy for we are a member of the church, the body of Christ, since God the Father has "*made Him who knew no sin to be sin that we might be the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus*" (2 Corinthians 5:21). If we have placed our faith in Jesus, then we are righteous, period!



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Prayer is a mark of Christian maturity, exemplified by James who was referred to as “old camel knees” in church tradition due to his spending so much time on his knees in prayer. As we consider Paul’s declaration that it is the will of God that we should “*pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks*” (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18), we can begin to understand how to apply James’ command to “*count it all joy*” (James 1:2) and to consequently develop patience as we “*let patience have its perfect work so that you are perfect and complete, lacking nothing*” (James 1:4). James’ high calling for each believer is that he become spiritually mature, which we are only able to perfect through the power of personal and devotional prayer. Indeed, the temptations and “*fiery trials*” (1 Peter 4:12) of everyday life cause us to pray effectively because we are grounded in His word and are rooted in Him, to pray fervently because we fear and reverence Him through devotional communion with Him, and to pray in righteousness because He is our righteousness.