

James 5:16-18 - Righteousness and Effective, Powerful Prayer

Today we continue in James chapter 5, covering verses 16-18.

Memory Verses:

James 1:2-4 NKJV

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Revision

Last week we read how James encourages us to “Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16 NKJV). To help us remember what we learned last week, I’ll start with some interesting quotes about confession:

“The root form means literally *to say the same thing*; hence, it means that in confession of sin we agree to identify it by its true name and admit that it is sin.” (Heibert)

“Now, in the [early] church [confession] was openly done as a rule, before the congregation. The earliest manual of the church practice prescribes: ‘you must confess your sins in church, *and not betake yourself to prayer with a bad conscience*’ (*Didache* iv.)” (Moffatt)

“Real, deep, genuine confession of sin has been a feature of every genuine awakening or revival in the past 250 years. But it isn’t anything new, as demonstrated by the revival in Ephesus recorded in Acts 19:17–20. It says, *many who believed came confessing and telling their deeds. **This was Christians getting right with God, and open confession was part of it.***” (David Guzik).

Acts 19:17-20 NKJV

This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. ¹⁸ And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. ¹⁹ Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totalled fifty thousand pieces of silver. ²⁰ **So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.**

The point here is to remind us of what we learnt last week. We will never overcome secret sins as long as those sins remain secret. We need to overcome the shame and condemnation that the devil piles on us, and in humility confess our sins to one another, and pray for one another so that we will have victory over the sin. Like a cancer, the sin must be exposed before it can be dealt with. Otherwise it will only continue to grow and will eventually kill us (*These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death* — James 1:15 NLT). If we want to have our own personal revival, then we must confess our sins. If we don’t, and we are not wanting to give up our sin, then we will remain slaves to that sin.

Romans 6:15-16 NLT

Well then, since God's grace has set us free from the law, does that mean we can go on sinning? Of course not! ¹⁶ Don't you realize that you become the slave of whatever you choose to obey? You can be a slave to sin, which leads to death, or you can choose to obey God, which leads to righteous living.

There will never be a revival, personal or otherwise, unless people are praying and confessing their sins, making themselves available for God to use or work through. They are becoming a vessel of honour, having *cleansed themselves* from sin. God cannot use us to our full potential if we remain a vessel of dishonour, contaminated by sin. Just like you wouldn't use a dirty dish to serve food on to your guests, so God can't use us when we are contaminated by sin. We need to choose to turn away from the sin; this is what the Bible means when it says that we need to choose to cleanse ourselves.

2 Timothy 2:20-21 NKJV

But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honour and some for dishonour. ²¹ Therefore if anyone **cleanses himself from the latter**, he will be a vessel for honour, **sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.**

Power only comes through purity. It's so easy just to be going through the motions of Christianity, but not really experiencing the power of a life that is genuinely submitted to God. Remember that in order to be filled with or empowered by the Holy Spirit we need to be in full submission to God, which means there is no sin separating us from God. Remember (as we read in Romans) that even as Christians, we can only have one master, sin or God. Choose this day who you will serve. Be willing to give up every sin, because any sin will keep you out of God's perfect will for your life. Let's read today's scripture.

The Effect of Sin and Confession on our Prayer Life

James 5:16-18 NKJV

¹⁶ **Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.**
¹⁷ **Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. ¹⁸ And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.**

v ¹⁶ **The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much:** Here we come to the result or consequence of confessing our sins — powerful (**availing**) and effective prayer. Instead of being apathetic and lethargic in our Christian walk because of the effect of sin in our lives, we become enthused or energised by God, filled with the Spirit as we submit to God, and therefore truly motivated and empowered by God to live the Christian life.

Philippians 2:13 AMP

[Not in your own strength] for it is God Who is all the while ***effectually at work in you [energising and creating in you the power and desire]***, both to will and to work for His good pleasure *and* satisfaction *and* delight.

Keep in mind that one of the most important parts of our Christian walk is our prayer life. Like any other part of our Christian walk, our prayer life can become mundane and a drag, something that we can begin to force ourselves to do because the bible says that we should; or we can pray as we are led by the Holy Spirit, and it becomes something that we look forward to doing and we see real results. These results are seen both in others and in ourselves. Remember that prayer doesn't just change our circumstances, it also changes us. Our will, desires, and attitude towards others are conformed to God's as we submit to God and pray according to His will.

So remember that it's sin that robs us of our zeal and enthusiasm for the things of God, and especially our desire for the word of God, prayer, and fellowship. *"Sin will keep you from reading the Bible, and reading the Bible will keep you from sin."* This applies to prayer, evangelism, and fellowship as well. If we are lacking in desire or motivation to pray, read, or fellowship, then we should be asking God to reveal any sin or sinful attitude that we may not be aware of. Once we become aware, we must confess and forsake that sin so we can continue to progress or mature in our Christian walk.

Sin

It's important to realise that sin comes in many forms. *It can be a sinful attitude or desire, a sin of commission, or a sin of omission.* Firstly, there are **sinful attitudes or desires** that we can have like: self-righteousness, pride, materialism, greed, idolatry, unforgiveness, and the sin of fear, doubt, or unbelief.

Also, concerning the things that we do or say, there are two types of sin. Some sins are called **sins of commission**. These are the wrong things that we choose to do. Examples of sins of commission include; lying, stealing, gossiping, swearing, immodesty, etc.

Other sins are called **sins of omission**. This is when we choose not to do the things that we know that we should.

James 4:17 NKJV

Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.

Examples of sins of omission include: prayerlessness, neglect of the word of God, failure to help others when we know that we should, failure to speak or witness when we are called by God to do so, and failure to fellowship (church).

The point here is that it can be tricky to pinpoint what particular sin maybe affecting us in our relationship with God; it could be an attitude, something that we are doing, or something that we are not doing. That is why I believe it's so important to pray David's prayer in Psalm 139 regularly to keep our relationship with God strong.

Psalm 139:23-24 NLT

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.

²⁴ Point out anything in me that offends you,
and lead me along the path of everlasting life.

If we want to be effective in the kingdom of God, if we want to rid ourselves of our spiritual lethargy and have our own personal revival, if we want to be filled with the Spirit and become enthusiastic in our walk with God, then we must be willing to deal with our sin. We must be willing to humble ourselves and ask God to show us if there is sin in our lives. Then we must be willing to further humble ourselves and confess that sin to other believers and be prayed for.

Remember that in the kingdom of God, purity = power. Here is an example of the sin of unbelief stopping the disciples from being effective in their ministry.

Matthew 17:19-21 NKJV

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast [the demon] out?"

²⁰ So Jesus said to them, "**Because of your unbelief**; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. ²¹ However, **this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.**"

There are many powerful enemies that we battle against; one of them being sin. To overcome and have victory, we must choose to engage and fight the spiritual battle. Doing nothing is to guarantee defeat and render ourselves ineffective in the kingdom of God.

Back to James 5:16, which describes the result of having an unhindered or pure relationship with God on our prayer life:

James 5:16b NLT

"The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results" (James 5:16b NLT).

James 5:16b AMP

The earnest (heartfelt, continued) prayer of a righteous man makes tremendous power available [dynamic in its working].

James 5:16b NKJV

The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

Let's take the time to break down this verse and get some amazing insight into availing or powerful prayer. We'll look at the three main points:

1. What it means to be **a righteous man**
2. What it means to **avail much**
3. What is **effective, fervent prayer**

1. What it Means to be "A Righteous Man"

v 16 **of a righteous man**: the Greek word translated **of a righteous man** means: upright, fair, just, righteous, innocent, to be put right with, honest, correct, and observant of right.

It's important to understand that a person who is born again is forever righteous in God's eyes. They have right standing with God for eternity. Their salvation is secure. They have been justified (just-if-I'd never sinned). They have been declared innocent in God's heavenly court. This is called **positional righteousness**. Nothing we do can change or take away this right standing we have before God. Again, this "**positional righteousness**" is our position in Christ we received after asking Him to forgive us of our sins; it has nothing to do with how obedient we are once we are saved. Romans 5:20-21 clearly explain that there is no sin so great that God can't or won't forgive. Take comfort in this promise that God's grace is more than sufficient to cover any and all sins a believer may commit after they are saved.

Romans 5:20-21 NLT

God's law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant. ²¹ So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, **now God's wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

A warning here before we go on. If you continue reading in Romans 6, it starts with a very clear warning not to sin. Why? Because sin hurts us, others, and God. It's stupid to sin now that God has given us the power not to. But the point I'm making here is that God's grace will always be greater than our sin, no matter how difficult we may choose to make life for ourselves, others, and God.

However, in addition to the *positional righteousness* that the believer receives when they were saved, there is what I call "**practical righteousness**". This refers to the practical condition of my relationship with God. Ask yourself the following questions: is my love for and faith in God strong or weak right now? How submitted am I to God right now? Is there any sin in my life that I am not willing to confess and forsake right now? Am I loving God with all my heart, soul mind and strength? Am I enjoying and motivated when it comes to prayer, the word, and fellowship?

Take the example of marriage. I get married, so my position is "married". But practically, I may be fighting with my wife. My practical relationship with my wife could be described as broken, weak, or even loveless. However, positionally, I am still her husband and we are still married; we are still part of the same family. In the same way, although we have been adopted into God's family and have positionally received right standing with God, practically, our relationship with God may be in tatters. It could be weak, broken, or even loveless.

So back to James 5:16. What does "**of a righteous man**" mean here — *positional* or *practical* righteousness? We get the answer from the following verses:

Isaiah 59:2 NLT

It's your sins that have cut you off from God.
Because of your sins, he has turned away
and will not listen anymore.

This verse can be applied in two ways: The first application applies to the *unbeliever*. The *unbeliever* does not have positional or practical righteousness before God. Why? They have never been forgiven and therefore their sins continue to keep them eternally separated from God.

The second application refers to the *believer*. The *believer* has been forgiven, and so has received *positional* righteousness. However, and this is the context of the verse in Isaiah, their sins have *practically* separated them from God. Because they are sinning and have not repented, God won't hear their prayers. Another example of sin disrupting our relationship with God and therefore our prayers is in:

1 Peter 3:7b NLT

Treat her as you should so your prayers will not be hindered.

Peter is referring to marriage and how the husband treats his wife. If the husband is sinning by not treating his wife in a godly way, then his own prayers are hindered; God will not hear the prayers of the sinning husband (or wife). This is so important for us to understand. If our relationship with God is broken, if sin has made it so we are not *practically righteous* before God, then our prayers will be hindered. Why? Because our hearts are hard, we have embraced sin somewhere in our lives, and we are no longer in submission to God. It is not until we have confessed and repented that we will restore that *practical* right relationship with God, our *practical righteousness*.

2. What it means to “Avail Much”

v 16 **avails much**: There are two Greek words used here. The Greek word translated **Avails** means to: *be strong, be able, have power, be mighty, have strength, be capable of, be effective, to be able to do something, and to prevail against*.

The Greek word translated **much** means: *many, much, extensive, great, and abundant*.

So the results of a **righteous** man praying **effectively** and **fervently** are not just **availing** (powerful, strong, capable, mighty, and prevailing), but they **avail much** (very powerful, exceedingly strong, very capable, abundantly prevailing). James is emphasising the power and strength that results from a righteous man who prays effectively.

“It was so with John Knox, whose prayers were more dreaded by Mary of Scots than the armies of Philip.” (Meyer)

So now we know that when James is talking about righteousness he means practical righteousness, and that the results of his effective and fervent prayers are exceedingly powerful or strong. Now all we need to know to complete the picture is what James means by effective and fervent prayer. The answer may surprise you.

3. What is “effective, fervent prayer”?

v 16 **effective, fervent**: They are one word in the original Greek: *energeo*, meaning: effective, working, to be at work, to be active, put into action, functional, operational, and productive. Think of an English word that we get from the Greek word *energeo* — energised.

Who is it that energises us? The following verses use the same Greek word *energeo*. Look at how it is used and how God is the one who “energises” us or “gives us the energy, enthusiasm, empowerment, and motivation” we need to do His will (makes us effective and fervent).

Ephesians 3:20 NKJV

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that **works [Greek: *energeo*]** in us,

Philippians 2:13 NLT

For God is working **[Greek: *energeo*]** in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.

Colossians 1:29 NKJV

To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which **works [Greek: *energeo*]** in me mightily.

I went through these verses to show that it is impossible to live the Christian life by human strength (by the power or effort of our sinful human nature). James is making the point that our prayer life is no different. For our prayer to be effective, it must be “energised” (motivated, guided, and empowered) by God. That’s what James is saying here. The prayer that avails much or is powerful is the prayer that is energised, motivated, empowered and guided by God. Paul explains in Romans 8 exactly how the Holy Spirit helps us when we pray. He makes very clear what our human limitations are and why we need the help of the Holy Spirit when we pray.

Romans 8:26 AMP

So too the [Holy] Spirit comes to our aid and bears us up in our weakness; **for we do not know what prayer to offer nor how to offer it worthily as we ought**, but the Spirit Himself goes to meet our supplication and pleads in our behalf with unspeakable yearnings and groanings too deep for utterance.

²⁷ And He Who searches the hearts of men knows what is in the mind of the [Holy] Spirit [what His intent is], **because the Spirit intercedes and pleads [before God] in behalf of the saints according to and in harmony with God’s will.** [Ps. 139:1, 2.]

David Guzik summarises how the Holy Spirit helps us to pray when he writes, “The Holy Spirit’s help in intercession is perfect because He **searches the hearts** of those whom He helps, and He is able to guide our prayers **according to the will of God.**”

Summary for effective prayer

1. I must be righteous in thought, word and deed — fully submitted to God.

How? I must submit to God’s authority over my life by confessing and forsaking all sin. Remember that if I am being ruled by sin I am not being ruled by God.

Romans 6:16 NLT

Don’t you realize that you become the slave of whatever you choose to obey? You can be a slave to sin, which leads to death, or you can choose to obey God, which leads to righteous living.

James shows us how to submit to God by confessing and repenting of our sin in James 4:7-11.

James 4:7-11 NLT

So humble yourselves before [submit to] God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. ⁹ Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honour.

This is a daily practice. We sin every day, so we should be confessing, repenting (and therefore submitting to God again) at least daily. Notice the attitude here. It must be genuine, heartfelt repentance, a real turning away from and hatred of the sin.

2. Only when I am submitted to God will my life (especially my prayers) be motivated and guided by the Holy Spirit (God).

Galatians 5:16 AMP

But I say, **walk and live [habitually] in the [Holy] Spirit [responsive to and controlled and guided by the Spirit]**; then you will certainly not gratify the cravings and desires of the flesh (of human nature without God).

Remember, **purity = power**. Once I make the decision to please God and not myself,

3. Only prayers initiated (motivated and guided) by God will be answered by God.

Because a righteous person's prayers are directed and motivated by God, they will always be according to His will and so will automatically be answered — this is powerful or availing prayer. Think about it. If the prayers I offer are in line with God's will and they are offered with the correct motivation (according to God's heart), then it is guaranteed that they will be answered (of course, in God's time).

On the other hand, if a man or woman is not fully submitted to God, then they will not be energised, helped, motivated, and guided by the Holy Spirit, which means that their prayers will not be according to the will of God. Now, I think that it's plain for all to see that if our prayers are not according to the will of God, both in content and intent (motivation), then they will not be answered. It will be like our prayers are bouncing off the ceiling; they will not be answered. Probably the only prayer that God will hear is the humble prayer of repentance (See Psalms 32 and 51 for excellent examples of prayers of repentance and confession).

We could write James 5:16b (*The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much*) as "***The energised prayer of a righteous man is powerful and strong.***"

Elijah as an example of answered prayer

James 5:17-18 NKJV

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. ¹⁸ And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

Let's quickly see what events in the the life of Elijah that James is referring to.

1 Kings 17:1, 18:1, 36-39, 41-46 NLT

17:1 Now Elijah, who was from Tishbe in Gilead, told King Ahab, “As surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives—the God I serve—there will be no dew or rain during the next few years until I give the word!”

18:1 Later on, in the third year of the drought, the Lord said to Elijah, “Go and present yourself to King Ahab. Tell him that I will soon send rain!”² So Elijah went to appear before Ahab.

[the big confrontation between the 450 priests of Baal and Elijah — who’s god was really God — let the real God send fire down to burn up the offering]

...³⁶ At the usual time for offering the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet walked up to the altar and prayed, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, prove today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant. Prove that I have done all this at your command.³⁷ O Lord, answer me! Answer me so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God and that you have brought them back to yourself.”

³⁸ Immediately the fire of the Lord flashed down from heaven and burned up the young bull, the wood, the stones, and the dust. It even licked up all the water in the trench!

³⁹ And when all the people saw it, they fell face down on the ground and cried out, “The Lord—he is God! Yes, the Lord is God!”

...⁴¹ Then Elijah said to Ahab, “Go get something to eat and drink, for I hear a mighty rainstorm coming!”

⁴² So Ahab went to eat and drink. But Elijah climbed to the top of Mount Carmel and bowed low to the ground and prayed with his face between his knees.

⁴³ Then he said to his servant, “Go and look out toward the sea.”

The servant went and looked, then returned to Elijah and said, “I didn’t see anything.”

Seven times Elijah told him to go and look. ⁴⁴ Finally the seventh time, his servant told him, “I saw a little cloud about the size of a man’s hand rising from the sea.”

Then Elijah shouted, “Hurry to Ahab and tell him, ‘Climb into your chariot and go back home. If you don’t hurry, the rain will stop you!’ ”

⁴⁵ And soon the sky was black with clouds. A heavy wind brought a terrific rainstorm, and Ahab left quickly for Jezreel. ⁴⁶ Then the Lord gave special strength to Elijah. He tucked his cloak into his belt and ran ahead of Ahab’s chariot all the way to the entrance of Jezreel.

James 5:17-18 NKJV

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. ¹⁸ And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

v 17 **Elijah was a man with a nature like ours:** I find this so comforting. As you read through all of Elijah’s life in 1 Kings, you will find that he often doubted, was fearful, lonely, and weak. One day on top of the world, the next down in the dumps and depressed. Yet when he was submitted to God, and so in tune with God, praying as God directed Him to, he had an amazingly effective prayer life. He could even call down fire from heaven and stop and start the rain.

Again, **Elijah was a man with a nature like ours**, which means that our prayers can be as effective as his — and this is exactly what God wants for us. It's God's will for us that we pray with all the authority of heaven behind us. Listen to what Jesus said to the disciples.

John 16:23-24 NKJV

And in that day you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, **whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you.** ²⁴ Until now you have asked nothing in My name. **Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.**

v 17 **Prayed earnestly**: Literally, this is *prayed with prayer*.

“He prayed with prayer; a Hebraism for, he prayed fervently.” (Clarke)

“To truly pray, by definition, is to pray **earnestly**.” (David Guzik)

Basically, when the Holy Spirit prompts us to pray, we need to be fully committed. We need to give it everything we have. Prayer is hard work, it's tiring. Our flesh hates it when we pray. There will always be distractions. To overcome all these fleshly difficulties we need to be motivated and disciplined. Our hearts must be in it. We need to truly care for the people we are praying for.

James 5:16-18 NKJV

Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. ¹⁷ **Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months.** ¹⁸ **And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.**

Finally, let's remember one last time the application of James 5:16:

“The energised prayer of a righteous man is powerful and strong.”

1. If I submit to God by confessing my sin I will be righteous (not controlled by sin)
2. If I am righteous then I will be guided and motivated by the Holy Spirit
3. If my prayers are guided and motivated by the Holy Spirit they will be according to God's will and so will be answered by God in His perfect timing.