

Praying for Results • James 5:16-18

British poet Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote, “More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.”

If we only knew! I believe that history from heaven’s perspective is amazingly different from what we read in our school history books. Most of us are convinced that trained armies and powerful weapons win wars. We think that the center of influence in our country is the Congress and the courts and that the great names of our history are names like Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Clinton or Bush. But someday in heaven we may visit the Library of the Universe and read a different account. The names we thought famous may be found only in obscure footnotes and the greatest names will be those we have never before heard. They will be the names of poor widows, enthusiastic teenagers and faithful Sunday School teachers—otherwise ordinary people who effectively prayed and shaped human history for good.

It is James 5:16 that parts for a moment the curtain so that we can get a fleeting glimpse of the reality behind the appearance of things as we typically see it and explains, “*The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*” It is especially interesting the way the Bible first focuses on the person of prayer.

The first description of an effective prayer-person is righteousness. This person is a Christian who is fully committed to God and desires God’s will. It is the person who is 100% devoted to the Lord. She wants to please God more than anything else in life. His loyalty to Jesus Christ is his highest priority.

Every employer who has had a 100% loyal employee knows what this person is like. He may not be the strongest worker but he will do anything for the company. He will take on menial jobs. He will even take a pay cut if the company budget is running behind.

A righteous person has that kind of loyalty

to Jesus Christ. He doesn’t push his own agenda. He is willing to go anywhere and do anything God asks. She seldom complains and is fiercely loyal. This person is righteous.

It’s interesting what is not listed for this prayer-person. He is not described as having great faith. There is no mention of praying long hours. There is no list of good works she has accomplished. The person who is effective in prayer simply loves God and lives for him. Jesus described how to be this kind of person in Matthew 22:37 when he said, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*”

The second description of an effective prayer-person is “*just like us*”. Ordinary! The example is Elijah and “ordinary” is one of the last words that would come to mind if I were to describe him. Elijah was a prophet of God nearly 3,000 years ago. Elijah prayed for a drought and it didn’t rain for 3 years. Elijah prayed for rain and the drought ended and the crops grew again. Elijah prayed for the dead son of a widow in the town of Zarephath and he came back to life. Elijah prayed for fire to come from heaven and wet wood was zapped into flames. Elijah’s biography does not end with death, either. God took him directly to heaven without dying.

This doesn’t sound like an ordinary man to me! Yet James 5:17 says:

Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

Like us, Elijah had his problems. Like us, Elijah could get terribly discouraged. Like us, Elijah didn’t always know what to do. Like us, Elijah struggled with some of his relationships. Like us, Elijah was human. Like us, Elijah was a sinner.

Elijah is not listed as an example of prayer

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because of the spectacular results of his prayers. If that were the reason he is mentioned we would be discouraged from ever trying to pray. Elijah is mentioned because he was an ordinary person “*just like us*”. The message is clear—God will do great things in response to the prayers of ordinary people just like us.

Recently I was reading a literary review that made a strong and interesting point. It said that in good fiction the plot grows from the characters and not the characters from the plot. In other words, if the writer develops strong characters the story will almost write itself. But if the characters are weak the story probably won’t work.

So it is with prayer. If the person who prays is weak in character, that person’s prayers won’t make much difference. But, if an ordinary person has a heart for God, loves God and lives for God—in other words, is righteous—the results will supernaturally come. “*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*”

James moves from the prayer-person to the results of prayer. But be careful that you don’t skip the order. It is the person and that person’s righteousness and commitment to God and Christian faith that first comes and the results then follow.

The prayers of the righteous Christian access the power of God. Not all prayers do! There are millions of prayers that are prayed that never tap into God’s supernatural power.

Several years ago new computers were installed in the Wooddale Church offices. I sat at my terminal one day and carefully typed a document until I had it just right. I then gave the command to have it printed on the laser printer. I walked to the office where the printer was located and waited for my document, but it never came. I returned to my office and tried again. I checked the manual. I worked at this for hours. It never did print. It wasn’t until days later that I found out that the cable from my office wasn’t connected to the printer. It just went from my office up into the ceiling and stopped somewhere

out of my sight.

There are prayers like that. People work long and hard to get their prayers just right but there is no power because they are not connected to God. It is as if the prayer goes up out of sight and never connects.

By contrast, the Christian who is whole-hearted for God is connected to God’s power. That person may not pray very eloquently or precisely. But, the righteous Christian is connected to the power of God. It is connection to the power that makes prayers effective.

Finally comes the most practical question of all: Does prayer work? And the answer is “Yes! ‘*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*’ ” Understand that not all prayer is asking. In fact, most prayers are not asking. Prayer is communicating with God. It is the way we connect and build our relationship with him. But James 5:16 refers to “asking” prayer. It is a request that is effective.

What does effective mean? It means that prayer makes a difference. Our requests are answered positively. People and circumstances are changed. Miracles happen. Rain stops. Rain starts. But again, understand, that the effectiveness is rooted in righteousness.

Suppose that you are given an overseas job assignment with a multinational company like Cargill, 3M, General Mills or Northwest Airlines. If you are new and unproved you may be able to spend up to \$100 of the company money without anyone’s approval or sign letters after review by a supervisor. But after awhile the home office sees you as a loyal employee who knows well the policies and priorities of the corporation. The CEO of the company knows that every request you phone or fax to the headquarters will be in the company’s best interests. You would not use your position, power or influence to serve your self-interests and hurt the company.

It’s not that the company won’t take care of you. They value you as an employee and want to treat you well and meet your needs. It’s just

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that your requests must always put the company first.

In similar manner, you and I are Christians who are the agents of God here on earth. We have the privilege of prayer to ask anything of the home office in heaven. When God knows that we are absolutely loyal to him and that our requests seek his priorities and policies most of all, he increasingly puts his power at our disposal through prayer.

Does he take care of us along the way? Of course, he does. He has our best interest at heart. He loves us. He's committed to us. He wants what is good for us. But that doesn't mean that we have the right to abuse prayer. Our prayers must always be first for God. They must always seek his will and reflect his thinking. Then it can be said of us that we are righteous Christians whose prayers are powerful and effective.

What then should we do? We must begin where Jesus told us to begin. We must seek God and his righteousness first, not powerful, effective prayers. Jesus was very clear about the first priority. He said in Matthew 6:33, "*Seek first (God's) kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well.*"

Always begin with a passionate desire for God. Love him with heart, soul and mind. But practice prayer in the process. Send lots of requests to God in headquarters. Learn which ones he answers "yes" and which ones he answers "no" in order to grow in our understanding and

relationship with him. Grow in righteousness and in prayer.

May your righteousness be great and your prayers powerful and effective. In fact, may future generations think of you like Elijah. May you be the righteous Christian whose prayers are powerful and effective.

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