

Ordinary Prayers from Ordinary People

Endurance-Part 5

James 5:16-18

Every one of our four children used to have the same problem. They inherited it from their mother and their father, by the way.

In fact, I've seen the same thing show up in your kids as well.

In the last couple of months I have received envelopes from a couple of our children's Sunday school classes from the youngest of them with children around the ages of 3 and 4. They were sent to me with words of thanks. I considered them precious gifts.

They of course, colored all over the pages. Interesting colors were used for all sorts of things.

The more artistic among them drew pictures of animals. A couple drew what looked like this pulpit, with a stick figure standing behind it wearing glasses and with little tufts of hair on the sides of his head. It didn't look like me at all! I assumed the kids were drawing Dr. Burggraff; it looked a lot more like him.

But the cards were all addressed to me. By the way, they were sweet gifts of encouragement.

As a child grows up, he learns to color with the right crayons. Blue isn't the color of the sun, red isn't the color of the lawn and purple is not the color of a horse.

And when using a coloring book, every child had to learn another key ability, such as how to color in between the lines.

Every child we have ever raised and every child we have met have the same issues to overcome; that is learning how to choose the appropriate colors and learning how to color in between the lines; learning how to stay on the right page.

Every Christian has similar problems relating to prayer. We have to learn how to choose the appropriate words; we have to learn how to pray along biblical lines and within biblical boundaries . . . staying on the right page with God.

And we have some misconceptions about prayer. Early on we get the idea caught in our minds that only the really spiritual people get a hearing with God. You gotta be among the elite to pray with any sense of expectation. And so the average Christian doesn't expect much.

In the autobiography of Helen Hayes, she told the story of one Thanksgiving Day when she decided to cook her first turkey dinner for her husband Charles and their son, James. Before serving it, she announced to them, "Now we all know this is the first turkey I've ever cooked. If it doesn't taste good, I don't want anybody to say a word. We'll just get up from the table without making any comments and we'll go out to a restaurant to eat." She went back into the kitchen and when she was finished and finally entered the dining room, bearing that turkey on a platter, she found her husband and son seated at the table, with their hats and coats on.

They were not expecting much.

Guys, that is not a suggestion; don't try that at home.

I wonder if we approach God with our hats and coats already on; as if to say, "Lord, we know we're supposed to be sitting here at the table, but we're really not expecting much from the experience."

Ladies and gentlemen, what you expect out of prayer has a lot to do with determining when you will pray and why.

As James the Apostle comes closer to the last words of his letter, he wants the believer to literally pray about everything.

He knows that endurance will depend upon communion. Perseverance will require prayer; spiritual determination will depend upon spiritual communication.

In the *last chapter of James in verse 13*, the Apostle begins to give us at least 5 different opportunities to engage in prayer.

1. In our last study we were challenged to pray whenever we are overflowing with emotion.

Notice verse 13. Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises.

In other words, no matter where your emotions lie on the spectrum between sadness and gladness, make sure you talk to the Lord about it.

Singing and praying are interchangeable imperatives. In other words, James is implying you can pray when you are cheerful and you can sing when you are suffering.

Then James goes on to give another scenario.

2. You are to pray when you are overcome with weakness

He writes, *“Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins (third class condition, and more than likely he has) they will be forgiven him.*

In our last study, we looked carefully at the words translated *sick* in verses 14 and 15. They could be translated, “weak” in verse 14 and “weary” in verse 15.

Both words appear throughout the New Testament to speak of physically weary and weak people who have undergone the trials and tribulations of life.

This is what the writer of Hebrews meant when he used the same word used by James here in this text as he encouraged the believer *to endure, to run the race, to fix our eyes on Jesus who endured the cross . . . to consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart so you will not grow “weary”* (Hebrews 12:1-3), the same word used only one other time in the New Testament here in James chapter 5.

So you are to pray when overcome with weakness.

3. Thirdly, you are to pray when you are overpowered by sin.

The elders are called for here in this text, because this individual is weak and weary, primarily because of unrepentant sin.

The context here, requiring the elders, is that of a disciplined believer who now desires to repent and he calls for the elders of the church to come to him.

He’s at the end of himself, besieged by guilt and sorrow, spiritual weakness and fatigue from his disobedience.

Like David the Psalmist who described his unrepentant state as a time in his life when *his body wasted away, his vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer (Psalm 32:3-4).*

The elders come and anoint him with oil – a practice the Jewish audience of James’ letter would have been well aware of.

This word for anoint does not mean a little dab on the forehead; the Greek participle James uses here means that the person is literally given a full body rubdown.ⁱ

This is the best ancient treatment that your spa still to this day delivers to a weary and fatigued body.

But the bigger issue is addressed – sins are admitted and fellowship is restored.

So we’re told to pray:

-when we are overflowing with emotion

-when we are overcome with weakness

-and when we are overpowered by sin.

Now James continues within this context of sin and confession and fellowship – now with the entire church body involved – as he gives us a fourth reason to pray.

4. Pray when you are overwrought with spiritual needs

Notice verse 16. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another.

In other words, you have seen what happens when you don’t confess your sins. You have seen the discipline of the elders and the church. You have seen the mental and physical and spiritual weariness and weakness brought about by unrepentant sin, so don’t go there! Keep your accounts short and clean. In fact, these are two more imperatives, two more exclamation points from James. You could translate them, “Make a practice of confessing your sins to one another, and make a practice of praying for one another.”ⁱⁱ

This word for confession is a compound word that refers to open and honest sharing with another believer of your struggles and your failures; it means to let people know the battle you’re in so that you won’t also become weak and defeated.ⁱⁱⁱ

James is not prescribing or promoting a sacrament of confession between a believer and a priest. In fact,

would you notice that James tells us to openly acknowledge our sins, not to some spiritual authority, but to whom? It is to one another.

The idea of sacramental confession was unheard of in the church until the fifth century when Pope Leo I officially instituted it in the Roman Catholic Church.^{iv}

One of the doctrines we hold dear, coming out of the Reformation in the 16th century is the doctrine of the individual priesthood of the believer. You as a believer have direct and immediate access to God through Christ.

There is no hierarchy between your full and open confession to God. There is only one mediator between God and man, the God-man, Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5)

What is James recommending here is the admission of our weaknesses, failures and sins to other believers and the creation of a fellowship of mutual accountability and prayer.

Earlier, in *verse 14*, James was referring to someone who is alone. He has to call the elders to come to him. He is outside the fellowship of the assembly.

James is highlighting a wonderful benefit of the body, spiritual protection through honest and open accountability and prayer.

I have just begun a 2010 publication on the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, given to me by a couple in our church. It is the newest and perhaps most exhaustive biography on this German Pastor who eventually died at the order of Adolf Hitler.

In one of his books, Bonhoeffer wrote about the isolating effects of sin. Listen to this insight: “Sin drives Christians apart and produces a hellish individualism, a deadening independence. Sin withdraws us from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him.” But confession to a fellow brother or sister destroys this deadly autonomy. It pulls down the barrier and allows the free flow of grace in the community once again.^v

That is exactly the point of the promise from James in *verse 16; confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another (why?) so that you may be healed.*

The word ‘healed’ refers to restored spiritual well-being. If all James was writing about was physical sickness, which you can certainly pray about, this would be a guarantee of health. If you get sick, just go to church, have someone pray over you and presto!

But the rest of scripture doesn’t support that interpretation either. In fact, Christians are not given a guarantee to permanent health. We get sick too, and men like Job and Paul prove that sickness can be in the middle of God’s will.

The same Greek word James uses for healing appears a few chapters earlier by the writer of Hebrews who says, “***Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble and make straight paths for your feet so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.***” (*Hebrews 12:12-13*)

The writer is using the word as a metaphor for spiritual strength: strong hands, strong knees, and strong feet as you walk in obedience which allows for endurance.

So don’t go it alone! This is the blessing of the assembly. This is the blessing of a circle of accountable partners. This is the blessing of a believing family. This is the blessing of a believing spouse.

I cannot describe for you the blessing I had of a praying grandmother; a praying mother-in-law; a praying mother and father; and a praying wife who prays for me to walk with Christ.

Marsha gave me just this past year a small decorative box filled with little cards, at least 100 of them, which she handcrafted herself, taken from verses of scripture and quotes from pastors of old like Spurgeon and Wesley that she literally prays will be my experience. It is a treasure box.

Listen, we need to pray for one another, for spiritually strong hands and knees and feet and hearts and minds.

A call came into Wisdom’s offices a few weeks ago. The receptionist took the call from a listener whose son was in a critical care unit. This middle schooler had been playing alone outside and in a freak accident had gotten tangled up and was found hanging by his neck. His father called for prayer. A few days ago, he told me over the phone that his son had died and the funeral had been held. He and his wife were rejoicing that 15 people had given their lives to Christ at the funeral service, but he confided in me some of his despair and doubts and questions.

I listened, and then he said, ‘Look, I know you’re busy and I’ve asked questions that don’t have answers. What I really wanted was to call so you could just pray for me.’ Which I did.

James doesn’t say you find spiritual strength and restoration after you’ve had all your questions answered. No, he just says, ‘Pray, get real with one another and pray for each other.’”

Pray when you are:

-overflowing with emotion
-overcome with weakness
-overpowered by sin.
-overwrought with spiritual needs.

One more—number 5:

5. Pray when you are overwhelmed with godly desire

First, James gives us a declaration and then an illustration.

Notice the declaration at the end of verse **16**. ***The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.***

The average Christian reads that declaration and says, “That’s obviously my problem. I’m not effective because I’m not righteous. Maybe if I were more holy, I would get more answers.”

And so what do we do? We try to pray more effectively, more passionately. We try to earn God’s answers. We pray longer and earlier in the day. I mean, if we’ve got to be a cut above the norm, i.e., righteous, we’d better get started.

I can remember in Bible College, believing along with most that God didn’t take note unless you somehow got His attention. So I figured I’d get up and pray when just about everybody else was sleeping. That would get God’s attention. So I began getting up at 5 a.m. and going to the prayer tower in the middle of campus, which was a small room with kneeling benches at the top of an old chapel. I was convinced that God would be impressed, even if I nodded off a time or two.

And then you look at the end of this verse which says that a righteous man’s prayers “accomplish much” and you think, my prayers don’t really seem to accomplish all that much, from what I can see.

It must be because I’m either not righteous enough, or effective enough, or disciplined enough.

Now don’t misunderstand. Slouches make poor intercessors; you don’t need any of that.

Paul commanded Timothy to train himself for the purpose of godliness (**1 Timothy 4:7**).

But James is actually making a different point. In fact, James isn’t shutting off the potential of prayer for the elite; he’s actually opening it up.

That’s why in a moment he’ll remind us that powerful, praying Elijah was a man just like us.

So what does James mean?

Well, first of all who is praying here? A righteous man. The word man doesn’t appear in the Greek text, so James is referring to both men and women – you could render it, a righteous person.^{vi}

So who is a righteous person? A perfect person? Thankfully, no.

The word righteous, *dikaiou*, refers to a person who has been born again. They now have the righteousness of Christ entirely granted to them from Christ’s own account.

Paul wrote to the Philippians and said that they were ***filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.*** (**Philippians 1:11**)

Paul wrote to the Corinthians that ***God made Him (Christ) who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him*** (**2 Corinthians 5:21**)

Listen, here’s the point. If you’ve come to believe in Christ by faith in Him alone, you have had His righteousness credited to your account, transferred as it were to your bankrupt account.

You can now practice something like that for your children online. You look at their bank account and there is nothing in there but an outstanding overdraft fee. And so you transfer money to their empty bank account from your bank account which is now closer to empty than you wanted.

But Christ’s account never registers any lower no matter how many transfers.

The righteousness of Christ is never diminished by transferring from his reservoir to our bankruptcy.

We, Paul wrote, ***have received the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness and will reign in life through ... Jesus Christ*** (**Romans 5:17**).

So who can pray effective, God-answering prayers? It is the ordinary Christian, the run of the mill believer. **You** have access to Him. He’s listening.

Now, in light of this context, it’s obviously referring to the believer who is confessing his sins. Right? The believer who isn’t cherishing or hiding sin.

If that’s the case, your first prayer is one of confession, right?

The Psalmist David wrote, ***“If I acknowledge sin in my heart, He will not hear me.”*** (**Psalm 66:18**)

So who can pray with expectation? A Christian in right standing with God, first through Christ’s righteousness and secondly, through daily confession of sin.

So this isn’t a reference that the “super saints,” the holiest of the holy, get to pray with expectation.

Only those in the prayer tower at 5:00 am get their foot in the divine doorway.

No. Listen, if you are a Christian, no matter how ordinary you think you are, you have an invitation to approach the throne of God ***with boldness and***

confident access through faith in Christ (Ephesians 3:12). And that invitation is good anytime, day or night.

And James says here that the praying of the ordinary believer is *effective*. You could render that, **powerful**.

By the way, the word for prayer here is different than in *verse 15*. In *verse 15* we're told to pray with each other, and that word for "prayer" refers to anything and everything.

But here in *verse 16* it's a word that refers to making a special request, a petition, often used by the Greeks for a person who is making a request to a sovereign King.^{vii}

So you could render it this way, powerful is the petition of an ordinary believer.^{viii}

That just staggers my mind. And that's why I've wanted to take you through the tedium of my translation, because I want you to understand what is so easily misunderstood and therefore, discouraging and defeating to so many believers.

James is saying, powerful is the petition of an ordinary believer.

Young or old in years, young or old in the faith. Your prayers are heard!

Vernon Janzen told the story of a young boy who was banking on it. Vernon was sitting in a Sunday morning service. A young boy was acting up during the service. The parents both did their best to maintain some sense of order. Finally, the father picked the little fellow up and walked sternly down the middle aisle on his way out. This kid was in trouble. Just as they reached the doorway to the foyer, the little boy called out loudly to the congregation, "Pray for me! Pray for me!"

Trouble is he probably still got a spanking. And he might have thought the congregation either didn't pray for him, or their prayers didn't make it past the ceiling.

And you might be saying the same thing, "Stephen, thank you for letting me know that ordinary believers get to pray too and God hears us all, but my prayers don't seem to accomplish much," and if you'll notice at the end of the verse, James says our prayers **will accomplish much**.

Now follow me carefully.

The participle translated, **can accomplish much**, is a word that appears several times in the New Testament. Every time except one, it refers to the working of God.^{ix}

It's the verb, *energoumene* (ενεργουμενη) which gives us our word, energy.

What James is saying is this: **the powerful petition of an ordinary believer is energized!**

Now this verb can be translated to mean that prayer has energy all by itself. Linguists call that the middle voice; and many translations translate it this way.

However, it can be translated to mean that prayer only works if someone else energizes it. Linguists call that the passive voice.

It means that the prayer has to be energized by someone outside of it who makes it work. And that's exactly the context of what James is about to illustrate.

Elijah's prayers by themselves were ineffective. But his prayers were acts of obedience that corresponded to the will of God.

In fact, if you travel back to Elijah's biography in 1 Kings, you'll discover that God actually told Elijah what to pray about and when to pray about it.

Elijah was simply praying the will of God, and God touched his prayers because they aligned to His will and they then accomplished much.

And the same can be true of you and me when our prayers line up with the will of God. God will energize them into action.

Now notice the illustration in *verse 17*. **Elijah was a man with a nature like ours**.

Now stop. Why say that here? Because the Jewish audience of James' believed that Elijah was a super saint.

He was called the grandest character that Israel ever produced. By the time James was writing this letter, traditions had grown up around Elijah that had actually ascribed superhuman traits to him.

Look what he did: he raised the dead, called down fire from heaven, slew the false prophets of Baal, and outran the chariot of the King. This guy was superman.

It was all exaggerated if taken out of context. Elijah was a prophet of God who obeyed God and through Elijah, God did miraculous things. But James wants us to know that he was an ordinary man too!

But Elijah was also overwhelmed with godly desire.

Because his nation was rebelling against God and the punishment for apostasy was drought, and a repentant nation could expect rainfall (Deuteronomy 28), that was his prayer.^x

Elijah was merely praying the prescribed will of God. Notice further in verse 17: **and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit**.

Go back to I Kings sometime on your own and discover that rain came after the prophets of Baal were defeated in that duel of fire, after all the people shouted as they returned to the God of their Fathers, “The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God.” (1Kings 18:39)

And the rain came soon after. Listen, Elijah wasn’t just praying to control the weather. I mean, if we could all manipulate the weather, we’d probably never have any crops. It would always be 72 degrees. That’s like it is in California & look how messed up they are; it’s just not right!

We pray with boldness and belief. But we pray, not to have our will done in heaven, but to have God’s will done on earth.

Listen, we pray for many more reasons than for answers:

- we pray because it develops our relationship to Christ
- we pray because God commands us to
- we pray because it reminds us of our inadequacy
- we pray because it focuses our dependency on God
- we pray because it is an act of worship
- we pray because others need our intercession
- we pray because our minds and hearts need daily cleansing
- we pray because we need and long for His presence
- we pray because it surrenders us to His will

- we pray because we believe that God always answers us:
 - it might be no or never
 - it might be wait, not now
 - it might be yes, but not like you asked
 - it might be yes, exactly like you prayed.

Now don’t miss this. You could say, “Well, God will do what God will do and I don’t need to pray about it.” Or you could say, “If I don’t pray, God won’t do what God wants to do and we’ll be in a jam.” Both are extremes and both are imbalanced.

When we pray, we can rest assured that when our petitions and God’s purposes intertwine, the result becomes an energized combination of Divine power with the believer’s partnership which leads to action and fulfillment and movement and growth and fruit and a cause for great joy to those who prayed, overwhelmed with godly desire.

Like the missionary, William Carey who lived by the motto, “Attempt great things for God, expect great things from God.”

There’s the balance. And so James says pray, when you are:

-overflowing with emotion

-overcome with weakness

-overpowered by sin

-overwrought with spiritual needs

-overwhelmed with godly desire . . . for the glory of God!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 06/12/2011 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ D. Edmond Hiebert, James (BMH Books1992), p. 296

ⁱⁱ R.C.H. Lenski, The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James (Augsburg Publishing House, 1966), p. 666ii

ⁱⁱⁱ John McArthur, When The Healing Doesn’t Come (Word of Grace Communications, 1988), p. 33

^{iv} Spiros Zodhiates, The Patience of Hope: An Exposition of James 4:13-5:20 (AMG Books, 1981), p. 167

^v Quoted by R. Kent Hughes, James: A Faith that Works (Crossway Books,1991), p. 265

^{vi} Zodhiates, p. 197

^{vii} Zodhiates, p. 193

^{viii} Hiebert, p. 300

^{ix} Zodhiates, p. 194

^x John Phillips, Exploring the Epistle of James (Kregel, 2004), p. 193