

JAMES 5:16

HOW TO PRAY POWERFULLY

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”¹

How would you describe your prayer life? Are the prayers you offer vibrant and vigorous? Or are they anaemic and puerile? Is prayer a joy; or do you struggle to fling even a few requests heavenward? For the past several weeks, we have been thinking about prayer. Though many Christians say prayers, I can only wonder how many Christians pray—and know that they have prayed. And as Christians who do pray, we should be willing to ask how many know what it is to pray powerfully. Our focus today is the last statement of the verse before us: “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

Whenever we come into the assembly of the Lord, each of us should be prepared to testify about the answers we have received to our prayers throughout the previous week; and each of us should come expecting to witness His great power unleashed among His holy people as we gather to worship. We should come before Him with an air of expectancy, eagerly anticipating what the true and living God is going to do. Whenever we are in the presence of the Lord, we should provide seat belts on every chair and a crash helmet for each worshipper.

The Lord our God always stands ready to act on our requests, and when He acts He will reveal His glory, encouraging His people. We who are called by the Name of God’s Son have been invited to share in His glorious demonstration of power as we ask what honours Him and anticipate that He will do “far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us” [see **EPHESIANS 3:20**].

Jesus promised us who follow Him, “Whoever believes in Me will also do the works I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father” [**JOHN 14:12**]. The words that followed should be a constant encouragement to pray. Jesus said, “Whatever you ask in My Name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My Name, I will do it” [**JOHN 14:13, 14**].

This is a bold promise; there is no middle ground. Either the Master has spoken truthfully, or He has lied. His people either believe His promise, or they think the Son of God to be a liar. A review of the prayer life of the average Christian in our nation would lead us to conclude that Christians believe Jesus is a liar, because we ask no great things of God and we do not even seek to do the works that the Master did. Looking at the mundane, pedestrian lives of contemporary Christians, I want to cry out with Elisha, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah” [**2 KINGS 2:14**].

Jesus healed the broken bodies of all who were presented to Him—not one was turned away; He freed demonised souls and stilled raging storms. He restored life to dead bodies, comforted grieving families and gave hope to all who heard Him speak. He provided all that was necessary for His disciples to serve Him unhindered, and He boldly opposed wickedness in high places. Our Master promised that we would be empowered to perform these same works—doing, in fact, even greater works than these, because He would be in the presence of the Father interceding for us as we did what He wills.

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If we see no demonstration of His works in our lives, we can only conclude that it is because we have not taken Him seriously. I read the text, and I am prompted to cry out as did Gideon, “Where are all His wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us” [JUDGES 6:13]. Modern Christians have heard of God saving lost sinners, but we don’t see it. We have heard of God delivering people addicted to alcohol, but we don’t see it. We have heard of God restoring marriages, but we don’t see it. We have heard of God changing hearts, but we don’t see it. I am convinced of the veracity of the promise of God delivered through Isaiah,

“The LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save,
or His ear dull, that it cannot hear.”

[ISAIAH 59:1]

I am compelled to believe that the Word of God that James has already delivered is true of us: “You do not have, because you do not ask” [JAMES 4:2b].

If we do not ask, surely it is because we do not know the power of the Lord; or perhaps we do not ask because we are overwhelmed by our own sinful condition, or because we do not know how to pray powerfully. Perhaps we are timid in seeking demonstrations of God’s power because we are uncertain of what He can do. Surely, we do not ask because we do not believe? Surely, we are not so obtuse as to believe that God no longer answers prayer? Thus, I am proceeding on the premise that we are unaware of how to pray, believing that if we will receive instruction in how to pray powerfully that we will shortly witness a transformation of our lives and of our church.

In preparation for the message, listen again to James’ admonition as it has been rendered in several recent Bible translations. One paraphrase vividly captures the essence of James’ plea. “Make this your common practice: Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed. The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with.”² Are you living right with God? Then your prayers are something powerful to be reckoned with.

Another recent translation renders the verses, “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so God can heal you. When a believing person prays, great things happen.”³ Are you a believing person? They as you pray, great things will happen.

Yet another translation presents James’ request in this manner. “Admit to one another that you have sinned. Pray for one another so that you might be healed. The prayer of a godly person is powerful. It makes things happen.”⁴ Are you a godly person? Then your prayers will make things happen.

Weigh the admonition of one further translation. “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.”⁵ Are you a righteous person? Then your prayers have great power and produce wonderful results.

What is lacking for powerful prayer to again be witnessed among God’s people is for them to live right as believing, godly, righteous people. Then, as godly people, they need to ask, and God will act powerfully to honour their request and to glorify His Name.

² Eugene H. Peterson, **The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language** (NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO 2002)

³ **The Everyday Bible: New Century Version** (Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN 2005)

⁴ **New International Reader’s Version**, 1st ed. (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1998)

⁵ **Holy Bible: New Living Translation** (Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, IL 2004)

THE FOUNDATION FOR POWERFUL PRAYER IS HONESTY BEFORE THE LORD. “Confess your sins to one another.” Certainly, the basis for prayer is the work of the Lord Jesus. Earlier, citing the words of the Master as recorded in John’s Gospel, we saw the promise that if we but ask in His Name, He will do it [see **JOHN 14:14**]. This means that when we present ourselves before Him, asking for that which Jesus asks, it will be done. When we cease to seek our glory and seek the glory of the Father, what we ask will be done. However, in order to make such requests we must be honest to God. We must cease any attempt to hide our sin, instead relying on God’s mercies.

The Psalmist said,

“If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened.”

[**PSALM 66:18**]

The words anticipate what James has written in the text before us. The Psalmist was compelled by knowledge of the Holy One to rid himself of all iniquity if he was to anticipate an answer from God—he needed to turn from evil and the pursuit of his own desires. James says that we must live transparent lives, confessing our sins to one another and seeking the aid of our fellow believers through soliciting prayer and through presenting prayer on behalf of others.

I am not suggesting that we must live as spiritual nudists, publicly relating in graphic detail and in brilliant Technicolor every sin that we have committed, or thought of committing. I said in a previous message that we must never confess sin beyond the circle of that sin’s influence. We need to apply the spiritual maxim that private sins need to be confessed privately, whereas public sin needs to be confessed publicly; this is nothing less than spiritual sanity, a commodity which seems increasingly absent from contemporary church life.

We live in a day in which we go to church, instead of being the church. We are religious, but we are not holy. We flatter ourselves, imagining that we are good, when we know in our hearts that only God is good. We grudgingly do what Christ commands, and then we have the audacity to congratulate ourselves as though we had accomplished some great task. Instead, we should say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty” [**LUKE 17:10**].

Within the Christian community are multitudes that are indoctrinated in the art of wearing masks. We know that if we confess our weakness some soul will condemn us as ungodly; so we hide our true selves, hoping that no one sees us as we truly are. We are wounded and hurt, and we come to the house of God crying out for someone—anyone—to show compassion, only to discover that there are within the congregation of the Lord vicious people prepared to destroy us. We have become masters at evaluating the sin of others while minimalising our own transgressions. This cycle of hypocrisy must be broken.

Someone has observed that Christians comprise the only army that shoots its own wounded. Tragically, I fear that this assessment is accurate. This should never be allowed! The congregation of the Lord must be a place where wounded people are welcomed. Here, within the assembly of the Lord, broken people must know they will find opportunity to be restored to wholeness. Wounded people must find healing and the weary must find rest, as they prepare themselves to live godly lives in the midst of a fallen world. The weak must be strengthened and those who seek righteousness must be pointed to Christ, both through the preaching of the Word and through observing our walk as redeemed sinners who are determined to follow hard after the Saviour.

Just as the wounded, the weary and the weak must be welcomed, so we who are among the saints of the Lord must make ourselves vulnerable, learning to trust one another, determined to build one another, and always seeking to honour the Master in every act. We need to take seriously the teaching of the Apostle once again. “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality” [**ROMANS 12:9-13**].

We are not the only Christians in the world; God is always at work throughout the world. However, there are times when the hypocrisy of the churches leaves us gasping for breath, wondering if there are any believers left who are holy and not merely religious. I know that there are godly people in each of God’s churches, but what is needed is a congregation that boldly lives out the Faith of Christ the Lord. Our world is dying to witness even one congregation that is genuine—a people that have stripped away the masks and now admit they are sinners saved by grace. The world will not be focused on these dear saints, but they will see the gracious Saviour. I want us to become that church. I do not speak for other churches, but I do speak to a people that I love, and I testify that I want us to become that church.

THE FOCUS OF POWERFUL PRAYER IS TO BLESS OTHERS. “Pray for one another, that you may be healed.” It often appears that the majority of our prayers are self-serving. That is, we are concerned for our own comfort, for our own situation, and we therefore seek answers for ourselves rather than focusing on others. However, in the midst of his instruction, James refocuses our gaze on others.

We are given multiple examples of powerful prayer in the Bible. Think of some of those times when godly people asked great things of God. When God informed Abraham that He was about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham pleaded with God to spare the cities. He did not argue that they did not deserve to be destroyed, but instead he pleaded for God to spare the righteous. Abraham knew that his nephew Lot and his family were then living in Sodom. “Surely,” thought Abraham, “Lot has told others of God and some will have believed.

Therefore, we read, “Abraham drew near [to the LORD] and said, ‘Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?’ And the LORD said, ‘If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.’

“Abraham answered and said, ‘Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?’ And he said, ‘I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.’ Again he spoke to him and said, ‘Suppose forty are found there.’ He answered, ‘For the sake of forty I will not do it.’ Then he said, ‘Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there.’ He answered, ‘I will not do it, if I find thirty there.’ He said, ‘Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.’ He answered, ‘For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.’ Then he said, ‘Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there.’ He answered, ‘For the sake of ten I will not destroy it’” [**GENESIS 18:23-32**].

The account of Abraham praying for Sodom provides an example of a godly person praying for a wicked city; but God expects us to pray for our own communities, and the more so when He is at work in those communities. In the Word of God we are provided the account of Hezekiah, king of Judah. Judah was under attack and Jerusalem was besieged by a powerful foe. The city was surrounded, and the Rabshakeh, representing the Assyrian king Sennacherib, sent a demand to Hezekiah demanding his unconditional surrender. Hezekiah's response was to pray. He presented the insulting demand before the Lord, and what a prayer it was.

"Hezekiah prayed before the LORD and said: 'O LORD, the God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; and hear the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. So now, O LORD our God, save us, please, from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O LORD, are God alone.'

"Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Your prayer to me about Sennacherib king of Assyria I have heard'" [2 KINGS 19:15-20].

Shouldn't we pray for the cities in which we live, asking God to spare our neighbours hurt and harm? Shouldn't we ask the Lord to deliver our neighbours from all injury? And shouldn't we witness to His grace, believing that many will come to faith in the Risen Son of God? Our prayers for the cities in which we live can only result in glory to the Living God?

If you argue that we shouldn't pray for the welfare of people who do not believe in the Lord Christ, then I would invite you to recall Abraham, who prayed for Abimelech and his family. Abimelech was not a worshipper of the True and Living God, but Abraham nevertheless prayed for God to be merciful to him, and God heard Abraham's prayer and healed Abimelech, his wife and his female slaves so they could again bear children [GENESIS 20:17].

Another example of one who knows the Living God pleading for an unbeliever is provided in the account of the unnamed man of God who pleaded for a wicked king. The man of God had prophesied against the ersatz worship offered at Bethel. Jeroboam took exception to the message he heard and stretched out his hand as he commanded his guards to seize the prophet of God. However, his hand was instantly withered and he realised that he had made a serious mistake. The Word of God informs us, "The king said to the man of God, 'Entreat now the favour of the LORD your God, and pray for me, that my hand may be restored to me.' And the man of God entreated the LORD, and the king's hand was restored to him and became as it was before" [1 KINGS 13:6]. The man of God prayed, though the king certainly did not deserve his prayer. God graciously heard the unnamed prophet's prayer and restored the king's hand.

When outsiders are hurting, even hurting as result of their own rebellious choices, it is a mark of God's greatness for the child of God to ask God to show mercy. We ask, knowing that God is a merciful God who delights to demonstrate His grace and mercy. Who knows, as we pray it is possible that those for whom we pray will turn in faith to the Living Saviour.

We have examples in the Bible of godly men praying for God's people when they have rebelled, and God heard and answered their request. On one occasion when the people of God were complaining—a dreadful sin that we often minimise, God began to strike them down with his fire. We read the account in Numbers, "Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire died down" [NUMBERS 11:2]. The people realised they were in error and cried out for relief, and Moses graciously prayed for them.

Another time when God promised to hear such prayer is provided in the Book of Job. Job's comforters had slandered God, imagining that they knew why Job suffered as he did. Though they thought they knew what was happening, they actually slandered God, just as we often slander God when we imagine that we have all the facts. God was angered with their exaltation of ignorance and so He commanded them, "Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" [JOB 42:8].

We should pray for fellow believers that are rebellious—not that God will ignore their sinful actions, but that God will gently turn them to righteousness. There are consequences for our choices, but there is also grace and mercy to be found when we look to the Master.

If we pray for the wicked and for the rebellious, shouldn't we pray also for the innocent? Elijah asked for the life of a child who had died. The mother of that child had shown great kindness to Elijah, and now her child had died. Elijah's response was to ask the Lord to restore the child's life. The Word of God tells us, "The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived" [1 KINGS 17:22].

In a similar manner, Elisha had been used of God to bless a kind woman who showed him hospitality on repeated occasions. The woman had a child, and this child died unexpectedly. She went to Elisha and would not leave until he had prayed for her child. Though Elisha sent his servant with the command to lay his staff on the child, the child was truly dead. The mother insisted that Elisha must come as God's representative. And Elisha did go to the dead child. Elisha "went in and shut the door behind the two of them and prayed to the LORD" [2 KINGS 4:33].

In either instance, the child was restored to life in answer to prayer. These are not fantastic legends, but accounts given to encourage the people of God to ask great things of God, expecting great things of God. It honours God to ask Him to act in great matters.

Likewise, it is appropriate for us to ask God for our own deliverance, and the more so if we are doing the work of God. Hezekiah was sick, and the illness appeared to be terminal. However, we know Hezekiah was a man of prayer. So, the Word of God relates how he prayed a great prayer and how God answered. "Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, saying, 'Now, O LORD, please remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight.' And Hezekiah wept bitterly. And before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: 'Turn back, and say to Hezekiah the leader of my people, Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD, and I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend this city for My own sake and for My servant David's sake'" [2 KINGS 20:2-6]. Now only did God restore Hezekiah to health, but He promised to deliver the city over which Hezekiah reigned.

What a gracious and powerful inducement to prayer is the promise of God that is found in the Proverbs.

"The LORD is far from the wicked,
but he hears the prayer of the righteous."

[PROVERBS 15:29]

How much greater is the prayer of faith when it is intended to bless others!

THE FORCE OF POWERFUL PRAYER IS GOD WORKING IN CONCERT WITH HIS SERVANT. “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” The Living God is powerful beyond all understanding. He does not need any individual to accomplish His will. However, the Lord our God is gracious in addition to be mighty, and He invites His people to partner with Him in accomplishing His will.

Think about that! The Lord God, Creator of all mankind, deigns to lend His power to His people so that they may share in the advance of His Kingdom work! Indeed, as we pray, asking for God to act to the praise of His glory, we become His fellow workers [see **1 CORINTHIANS 3:9**]. As we point others to Christ, we are “working together with Him” [see **2 CORINTHIANS 6:1**]. This God, who called all things into being with His Word, encourages His people, saying, “If you ask, I will do it.” No wonder that James confronts our failure to ask [see **JAMES 4:2, 3**]!

I recall some preachers in my ken who were powerful in prayer. Their work was not always easy; but it was always powerful. I recall one preacher labouring in the Okanagan who doubled the membership of his congregation within a very short time. When I asked what he had done, he responded that he gave himself to intense prayer each day. I had a former student for whom I conducted a revival meeting many years ago. He had accepted the call to a small rural church that had seemingly grown explosively. When I asked him for the secret of church growth in that rural location, he informed me that he invested up to six hours each day in prayer. God is delighted to reveal His power as His people ask for Him to display His glory.

Preparing His disciples for His departure, the Master spoke repeatedly of His desire to receive the requests of His people, giving His promise that He would answer. We have already seen the wonderful promise, “Whatever you ask in My Name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My Name, I will do it” [**JOHN 14:13, 14**]. Add to that this promise. “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you” [**JOHN 15:16**].

However, the Master was not finished with urging His followers to pray. Looking forward to the situation following His death and resurrection, He encouraged those who would follow Him, “In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” [**JOHN 16:23, 24**].

The encouragement to ask the Father for great things was not something which Jesus confined to the waning days of His ministry on earth. As He began His ministry among men, He is recorded as instructing His disciples, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him” [**MATTHEW 7:7-11**]!

If you take nothing else away from the message today, carry this thought with you—God seeks to display His might and His glory through you as you ask what you will. God is not glorified through our asking for trinkets; God is glorified through audacious requests! God seeks those who will ask boldly for what otherwise is impossible. Our prayers are too timid! Our prayers seek little of lasting consequence. I challenge you to ask great things of God, expecting that He will do “far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” [see **EPHESIANS 3:20**].

Listen carefully to what I say, for it can transform our prayer life. We ask for the things that matter most to us. Listen to our prayers. We ask for health, and God graciously answers. We seek comfort and safety for our families and for our friends, and God graciously answers. We ask for relief during financial struggles, and God graciously provides our needs. We have become so accustomed to receiving His mercies in these areas that we take them for granted. Yes, we are concerned about health issues when they are presented, and we ask for healing. Of course, we love our children and our grandchildren, and we pray for their safety.

Because we know that God hears our prayers, what would happen were we to become focused on the revelation of His glory in our day? What would happen if a group of people sought God's glory in the midst of a wicked world? Would God not be delighted to have a congregation that asked for His Name to be magnified and known throughout their communities? Would God not be delighted to respond to the request for the salvation of many peoples?

I believe that God wants us to ask some great thing. He would not encourage us to ask if He did not intend to display His glory. As I look around, I see a world in crisis. Economies are failing, and men's hearts are failing for fear. Continued employment for many people is tenuous, and the future often seems uncertain. Evil seems unrestrained as politicians and judges wring their hands and try to reason with scofflaws. Our great cities are growing more violent, as every passing day brings new and even more alarming reports of violent crimes resulting in the death of innocent people. Our smaller communities seem just as lawless as people seek an escape from the pressures of an uncertain life through abusing drugs and alcohol. Above it all, our political elites remove the moral restraints that have marked society for centuries, believing that they are able to eliminate immorality through redefining evil.

In the face of this growing wickedness, preachers advocate political and social activism. Based on the promise of God seen in our text today, I am encouraging God's people to pray. I am asking each of you to accept responsibility before God to pray for revival. I am not advising you to pray for our communities alone, I am advising you to ask God to be glorified through you as you place yourself in the midst of your community as an instrument of His might. As you pray for the normal Christian life to be displayed through you, you will ask for God to use you in some great way to the praise of His glory.

Some of you will become powerful witnesses to His grace, and it will surprise all of us when God uses you powerfully. Some of you will become bold to resist evil where you work and within your circle of friends, and each of us will marvel and glorify God for you. Some of you will be empowered to take on jobs you never dreamed you could do, and you will be successful. God will hear, and God will work. We need to but ask.

I am asking God to save lost people. I do not know the heart, but God does. As I speak with people, I do not know whether they are fellow believers or merely religious. However, God knows the heart, and it is the Spirit of God who opens the heart. I am asking God to use my words to the praise of His glory for the salvation of many people. I anticipate that God will shortly fill this hall, and that He will begin to work among us in power. When He does so, He will have begun a work that cannot be contained in one church, but it will spill over to encourage His people in many places. It is time for God to work; and His work awaits the requests of His people. Let us ask. Amen.