



THE PRAYER OF A RIGHTEOUS MAN • Prayer

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

James 5:12-18

There are many passages about prayer in Scripture, and different authors highlight different facets of it. What seems most important to James is the communal side of prayer, the humble reliance of prayer and the effectiveness of prayer. They are, as we'll see, interrelated, but we'll look at each in turn.

The Humble Reliance of Prayer

The contrast between humility and pride is made often in James and when not stated it can be read between the lines. If spiritual health is found in wisdom, then pride is the equivalent of HIV. It is our prayer life that is the primary vehicle of expressing our humble reliance upon God, just as “self-talk” is the language of pride. It might be fruitful to flesh-out the differences.

When I'm suffering, prideful independence says:

This hurts. What's the quickest way to get out of this and get rid of this pain? I'll go buy something, go somewhere, numb myself with drugs, sex, pornography, alcohol...whatever. I'll show those people who hurt me; I'll be smarter, better, prettier, funnier...

Humble dependence prays:

Lord, this is hard and I don't know what you're doing, but I know you're good and I know you're in control. My hope is in you. I don't know why this is happening but I know your love for me hasn't changed. I know you'll work this for my good. Please sustain me, God, and strengthen me...

When I am happy, prideful independence says:

I cannot believe I landed this job. This is going to be incredible; I'm going to get that amazing apartment downtown with a flatscreen the size of Kansas. I should celebrate – I've earned it, I've worked so hard for this. I can't wait to tell everyone, they're going to be impressed...

Humble dependence prays:

I can't believe this; this is such a gift from you, Lord. I am so undeserving and yet you lift me up, and give me favor and lead me every step of the way. Please, God, help me not to get ahead of you on this. Keep my mind and heart from drifting, and keep me from putting my hope or finding my joy in this instead of you...

What's the Big Idea?

Ineffective prayer is indicative of a lack of faith, righteousness and humility.

The wise and mature believer is humbly reliant upon God and his faith is fully integrated with his actions – he “walks as he talks.” This is the “righteous man” whose prayers are powerful and effective.

What's the Problem?

We are inclined to pridefully live in isolated independence, which is the opposite of humble, prayerful reliance.



When I sin, prideful independence says:

I can't believe I did this again. I'm serious this time I will never, ever do this again. I hope people don't find out about this...I have been doing a lot for God lately. I can't imagine He'd embarrass me and have people find out; I'm probably being too hard on myself here.

Humble dependence prays:

Lord I trust that you will ultimately deliver me from this, no matter how long it may take – my hope is in you. Thank you that you don't treat me as my sins deserve. Lord, who could I tell, who could I bring in to this to help and pray? Lord, help me to not consider my own reputation here. Help me to be courageous and take the steps you've shown me to take in this area.

Well, even if the narrative voice here is a little canned and candied, you get the idea. This is the prayer life James envisions for us – humbly reliant upon God in every situation and all circumstances.

Corporate Prayer

James emphasizes the community dimension of prayer, perhaps due in part to his other two concerns: “effective” prayer and “humble” prayer. Jesus said, “where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matt. 18:20), so we know that communal prayer is both powerful and effective. Communal prayer is also humbling, unless you don't find confessing your sins others humbling.

It's instructive to note the difference in emphasis between James 5:16 and 1 John 1:9 on confession. James 5:16 says “confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed,” putting the emphasis on healing. 1 John 1:9, on the other hand, says that when we confess our sins to God, he “cleanses us from all unrighteousness,” putting the emphasis on forgiveness and cleansing. Both are important, but we confess our sins to one another in order to get well or “be healed” – which is both humbling and effective.

We can focus a great deal of our time in personal prayer – as we should – but in missing this corporate element, we miss out on empowerment needed to get well and engage in the spiritual battle.

Powerful, Effective Prayer

In these verses James puts an accent on “effective” prayer, mentioning “the prayer of faith” and that the “prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” In chapter 1, he mentioned that the prayer of the “double-minded,” or doubting man, is ineffective.

It's not the major concern of James that our prayers may go unanswered, it's that he sees ineffective prayer as indicative of a lack of faith, righteousness and humility. The wise and mature believer, whose faith is fully integrated with his actions, sees his prayers answered. That's what James means when he describes the “righteous man” whose prayers are effective.

That doesn't mean that God always says ‘yes’ to our requests or always provides healing when we ask, but the principle that “the prayers of a righteous man are powerful and effective” is true.

What's Our Response?

You want every member in the group to have someone with whom they can confess their sins – for healing, forgiveness, accountability and encouragement.

Also help the group to see the power of communal prayer. If your ministry has a time of group prayer, encourage people to start attending. If your ministry has no weekly prayer time, then perhaps you could start one.

As this is the last study, you may also want to allow some time for the group to share what has been most helpful in the past six weeks.

Last, in recapping make sure they leave knowing that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom”(Col 2:3).

Having wisdom is having “the mind of Christ.” Such wisdom is the fruit of being in the Word and having a close intimate walk with Christ, where He transforms our worldly thinking into godly wisdom.

What Are the Questions?

James 5:12-18

LAUNCH

Describe someone you know who truly exhibits a life of humble dependence. What is he like? How does he live out humble dependence? Besides humility, what qualities characterize his life?

EXPLORE

Read James 5:13-18.

1. We are told in Scripture to pray in all circumstances. What are the circumstances touched on here?
2. There are many facets of prayer taught throughout Scripture. What are the key things about prayer that James wants to highlight?
3. In James, the humble and reliant lifestyle of prayer is set in contrast to prideful independence. Why do we continually migrate back and forth between these two lifestyles?
4. When you're tending toward prideful independence, how do you respond to things going well? To difficulty? To suffering?
5. When all seems to be going well, why do you think it's critical to praise and thank God?
6. Why do you think James emphasizes the community aspect of prayer rather than our personal prayer life?
7. James is concerned about 'effective', 'humble' and 'reliant' prayer. How does communal prayer uniquely address these?
8. If you weren't embarrassed and could call together all of God's people to pray for you in a specific way, what would it be? What about for a specific sin?
9. From what you know of the Old Testament, what might the oil symbolize?
10. While it's important to pray in faith, just because we earnestly ask, trusting in God, doesn't mean we will be healed or get what we ask for. From what passage(s) of Scripture can we infer that this is true?
11. The person who prays in faith is contrasted, in chapter 1, with a double-minded person. What does it mean to be double-minded?
12. Read 1 John 1:9. What differences do you see between confessing to God and confessing to one another (James 5:16)? Who do you share your sin struggles with?
13. Though Scripture emphasizes communal prayer and confession, why do we tend to resist both?
14. When James refers to a "righteous man" what does he mean by 'righteous'?
15. It's hard to imagine bolder, more confident faith than that which is displayed when one prays for a momentous climate change like Elijah. What things are you praying for that clearly demonstrate bold, expectant faith?

APPLY

16. As you've considered what living in humble dependence looks like, where do you find your heart naturally moving toward prideful independence?
17. How does believing, anew, in the grace demonstrated at the Cross shatter our pride and lead us to humble dependence?
18. What lessons have stuck with you the most from this study in James.
19. How would you define wisdom? What is its opposite? Why do we need it, and how and where do we get it?

What Are the Answers?

1. When in trouble, sick and happy.
2. The power of community, a lifestyle of humble reliance and faith make for effective prayer.
3. Our hearts are sinful and broken.
4. Allow the group to discuss.
5. We can become self sufficient, as well as unthankful.
6. It is powerful, effective and requires humble reliance.
7. See notes under "Corporate Prayer."
8. Discuss. You might share first to break the ice.
9. Typically it symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit.
10. In 2 Cor. 12:7-9, Paul pleads with God to heal him and He doesn't. Sometimes for purposes of growth, learning reliance, humility or reasons not clear to us, God's purposes are best served by not healing us. We all will be lifted up some day, but in some cases that may not be until the Lord raises us up with Him.
11. A person plagued by doubt, perhaps because of the selfish motives of their prayers (See James 4:3).
12. See notes under "Corporate Prayer."
13. This would be a time to encourage the group to be a part of whatever ministry prayer takes place each week.
14. In light of what James has been saying throughout his book, the "righteous person" is the wise and mature believer, whose faith is fully integrated with his actions.
15. You might want to suggest some major faith goals for their personal ministry or the ministry as a whole. What about trusting God to bring to Christ 20, 30 or even 50 people this year?
16. Allow the group to discuss.
17. We see how undeserving we are of God's love and how gracious God has been to us. We see how humbly Christ submitted to the Cross and how much He humbled Himself in becoming one of us.
18. Allow the group to discuss.
19. Wisdom is maturity and completeness – our beliefs aligned with our actions. Wisdom integrates life (brings together into one). The opposite is doubleness of life or hypocrisy. All wisdom is found in Christ. To be wise is to have the mind of Christ.

Memorize

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

James 5:16