

LEARNING TO PRAY LIKE ELIJAH

James 5: 17-18 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

James has just told us that when we mutually confess our sins to each other and pray for one another, we will be healed. That is the message of the Word of God to us in James 5: 16. Then James concludes verse 16, the context of our text today, telling us that “the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” James’ aim in our text is that we all need to pray more. James is speaking to us as believers, born again saints who have trusted in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, repenting of our sins, and coming to know Jesus personally. True believers have been reconciled to God through faith in Christ. That’s the only way we can pray as righteous believers. Jesus must be our personal High Priest, whose blood has covered all our sin. The invitation of Hebrews 4:16 applies to each of us. “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” To motivate us to pray more, James illustrated it through the life of Elijah. James, whom tradition called, “Old Camel Knees” said, “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

This word about a righteous person may be what stops many of us from praying much. If we have been justified by faith, we stand before God in a righteousness, not our own. If any of us think we can approach God through our own personal righteousness, we don’t even begin to understand the Gospel. The Gospel shuts us all up under sin, showing us that our own righteousness will never satisfy God’s holy justice. Paul stated in Romans 3: 23-24. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” To be justified is to be declared righteous. God never does that because of any merit in you or me, but only by His grace, His undeserved favor. Being made righteous is God’s gift in forgiving all our sins, and clothing us with Christ’s perfect righteousness. That is the standing of each of us have, who have trusted in Christ. Righteous refers to our walk and our standing in Christ.

Being declared righteous doesn’t mean any of us are perfect, or that any of us qualify in our own righteousness, to pray before God. To be righteous means to walk uprightly before God, confessing all known sin, and seeking to obey God in every area of our lives. Elijah was not a perfect man any more than we are. He feared wicked Jezebel and in fear, he fled from her. He despaired in thinking that he was the only godly person left in Israel. That wasn’t true. Our prayers are heard not because we are worthy, sinless, or because we have a perfect track record. Unconfessed sin will prevent us from seeing the power of God working in answered prayer. Walking in sin will rob us of confidence in prayer. Sin in our life robs us of confidence and prevents us from drawing near before God in prayer.

David explains this in Psalm 66: 18. There David said, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.” Our only call to draw near to God in prayer is based on the worthiness and the merit of Christ. Praying as a believer like Elijah prayed, with a nature just like ours, means that if we are not harboring known sin in our lives, in spite of none of us being perfect, if we are walking in the Light, turning from all known sin, God sees each of us as righteous and He hears and wants to answer our prayers, and He will do it.

If we are praying as righteous men, women, boys and girls, our prayers are just as powerful as the God to whom we pray. E. M. Bounds said it well, “Prayer can do anything that God can do.” Over a century ago, E. M. Bounds also wrote, “What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better machinery, not new organizations or more novel methods, but men and women whom the Holy Ghost can use—men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Ghost does not flow through methods, but through men and women. He does not come on machinery, but on men and women. He does not anoint plans, but men and women—men and women of prayer.” We all know that all Israel saw the prophet Elijah as a superhero, as we see him. They remembered he prayed for the widow’s son who was dead, and God raised the boy from the dead, because He listened to the voice of Elijah. (I Kings 17) All Israel knew God heard Elijah’s prayer to send fire down from heaven at Mt. Carmel. All Israel knew Elijah never died, but God took him rather to heaven in a chariot of fire. (II Kings 2). Yet all Israel also knew what James said in James 5: 17, that “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.” After calling down God’s fire from heaven, and after slaying all the prophets of Baal, all Israel knew Elijah’s story, and they repeated the story often to their children. They knew that after Elijah’s victory, he became exhausted like we all get. Exhausted and fearful, they knew Elijah ran for his life away from wicked queen Jezebel. And in Elijah’s fear and depression, though Elijah knew he was a man who could move God through prayer, he prayed to God for Him to take his life. He thought he was the only prophet of God left on earth at the time. God corrected him and said, “I have 7,000 more than you who have not bowed to Baal or kissed him.” Elijah’s prayer to die was the only prayer Elijah prayed that God refused to answer. God wasn’t ready yet to welcome Elijah home. There was more work for him to do.

Your pastor did a similar thing back in 1975. At Moody Bible Institute, at the annual Pastor’s Conference, where one of my favorite preachers was preaching, Vance Havner, I was a sick man. My pulse was 200 beats per minute. A year before, in 1974, I had been at Mayo Clinic. I had almost died from an A-strain flu. I was so weak and in so much pain, that I left the Torrey-Gray Auditorium there in down town Chicago, early in the conference, when Vance Havner was preaching. I went to my room, a dorm room for men at Moody Bible Institute. The pain in my

shoulders and neck was so intense, I asked God to take me Home to Him. I told Him Jinny and my two only daughters at the time would make it. Jinny was a social worker and I wagered Moody, where my Dad went to school, was a good place to go Home to Jesus. God heard my desperate plea, but He refused to answer it with a yes. Rather, I sensed a gentle presence in the room, God's presence, and yet I saw no one. Then laying on my twin bed, I looked up into the upper right-hand corner, there stood Jesus. He gave me a vision of Himself and I kept pinching myself to make sure I wasn't fooling myself, but there He was. He never spoke a word to me, but He tenderly looked at me. He knew how tired I was, how exhausted, how weak, and how difficult it was for me to see beyond my utter pain.

I looked at Jesus in that vision for a long time. Then, I went to sleep. Thirty-six hours went by. I slept through the conference. My dear friend, Pastor Paul Barnes, of Grace Baptist Church in Normal, Illinois, knew I was very sick, and he never woke me. I woke up—and the pain was still as intense, and the weakness was still as great, but I had been with Jesus, and I knew He would help me go on. Beloved, never pedestalize any servant of the Lord, not Elijah, your favorite preacher on the radio, not one of us as pastors. All of us have human skin and flesh like Elijah. We all eat, sleep, wake up, and put on our pants one leg at a time as any other man. If we are confessed up before God, we stand righteous before Him, but no more righteous than any other believers in the world. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. So, look with me at this man just like us. He had prayed on Mt. Carmel and God sent the fire Elijah called for to consume the watered-down sacrifice. It was no gas and a match. It was an answer from heaven, from God alone. The people now who wavered in their faith in God and many worshipped Baal too, now they fell on their faces and cried, "The Lord He is God, the Lord, He is God."

It was decision time. There is no middle ground with God. God will not share His glory with any other. Elijah seized the false prophets and executed them. Elijah told King Ahab to go get a bite to eat and something to drink because he heard, the sound of abundance of rain. It had not rained a single drop since Elijah prayed 3 and a half years earlier for God to bring a severe drought—to bring a showdown in Israel. Now Elijah prayed, and the rain came. How can we learn to pray like Elijah --a man like us? I see four answers in I Kings 18: 41-46 and they answer the question. The Jews knew the story better than we do, so keep your thumb in I Kings 17: 1-7 and let's discover how to pray like Elijah and get results from God like he did. How? Is it possible? Yes, it is! Here are the ways Elijah prayed that we can emulate and follow if we are right with God. What are they?

TO PRAY LIKE ELIJAH, WE MUST PRAY FERVENTLY AND SPECIFICALLY TO THE LORD. (I.) Notice James 5: 17. We read, "Elijah was

a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months, it did not rain on the earth.” On the front end of this drought, Elijah prayed. Yet, if you read the account in I Kings 17: 1, all we read is, “Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe, in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” The writer of I Kings never even mentioned Elijah praying, but God the Holy Spirit knew he did, and James tells us on the front end of the drought, Elijah prayed fervently that it might not rain, and it didn’t rain for three and a half years. In James’ epistle, the word fervently isn’t there. Yet in context, it is. Literally, the Greek language says, “With prayer, he prayed.” The doubling up of the word prayer twice by James means it was strong, strong prayer. Also, in I Kings 17: 1, when Elijah said, “As the Lord lives, before whom I stand, in the mind of Jewish people, was that the Jewish attitude of prayer was standing before God, so they would say, Elijah’s prayer is found in I Kings. But Elijah’s prayer was not only fervent or strong, but also specific. He didn’t pray an unmeasurable request, such as, “God bless all the missionaries.” He prayed specifically for rain to stop, and he got it. His impulse to pray from God, as God was setting up His own showdown later with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. If we don’t pray specifically, we can’t measure if our prayers have been answered.

Howard Hendricks once told the story of a family in his community where the father was compelled at God’s prompting, to become a pastor. He sold his business at a great loss and entered his new pastoral vocation. Things went terribly rough for a while. One night during family devotions, Timmy, the youngest of their four boys asked, “Daddy, do you think Jesus would mind if I asked Him for a new shirt? “Of course not,” his dad said. Mom wrote this specific request in their little prayer-request book—a new shirt for Timmy. Mom added—Size seven. For weeks they prayed every night. One day, a Christian business man in downtown Dallas where they lived, called their home. He knew the sacrifice of this pastor and his family for Jesus. He said to Timmy’s Mom, “Our July clearance sale is over. Knowing you have four boys, it occurred to me that you might need some boy’s shirts.” What size, she asked, “Only size seven.” “How many?” “I have 12 of them.” That night, Timmy prayed again for a new shirt, and his Mommy said, “Your prayer is answered.” As his Mommy arranged it, her son Tommy carried in the shirts one by one until Timmy had 12 new shirts. Timmy said, “God went into the shirt business,” but that night, one little boy who prayed specifically, knew there was a God in heaven interested in one little boy’s need in Dallas, Texas.

TO PRAY LIKE ELIJAH, WE MUST HUMBLE OURSELVES BEFORE THE LORD. (II.) We read in I Kings 18: 41-42, “And Elijah said to Ahab, (this was after the 3 and a half years, after fire fell from heaven, after the prophets of

Baal were slain, Elijah said to Ahab, “Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain. So, Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Mt. Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth, and he put his face between his knees.” However, Elijah was humbling himself at a time of great victory. It’s easy to be proud when we are winning, but Elijah wasn’t missing God’s heart a bit. He was on his knees and on his face before the Lord for God to end the drought that day. The Jews speak of this kind of prayer as an agonizing position of getting low before God, on your face before Him. This I have done quite often, and I know it is when I know the request is huge and I know only a miracle could answer my request. Only a miracle could end this three and a half year drought. Philip Keller in his book, “The Challenge of Elijah, wrote, “Before there could be any blessing from above, there had to be a brokenness before God. Before there can be refreshing, there must be repentance.”

Now, alone before God, except for his servant, some think this servant could have been the son of the widow of Zarephath, the boy he prayed for who was raised from the dead, Elijah now prostrated himself with his face to the ground, between his knees, Elijah prayed again. Robert Law once said, “Prayer is not getting man’s will done in heaven. Prayer is getting God’s will done on earth.” We cannot separate God’s Word and prayer. In His Word, God gives us His promises, and in prayer, we claim those promises. Prayer by itself is not powerful or magic. What is powerful is when we call on our heavenly Father to open-up the windows of heaven with His unlimited kindness and His unlimited ability to help us in times of need. What we see when God answers prayer is not the goodness or the merit of one of us who are praying. No, what we see is the power and the grace of God at work. Just as God heard Elijah’s specific prayers and answered him, He will hear and answer our prayers as well. Go back to verse 16. We read, “The power of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” Elijah didn’t do more than we can do. He prayed, and we must pray specifically and fervently and humbly. God’s response is always up to Him. In this case, James says, “the heaven gave rain.”

TO PRAY LIKE ELIJAH, WE MUST PRAY EXPECTANTLY TO THE LORD. (III.) Notice I Kings 18: 43. “And Elijah said to his servant, Go up now, look toward the sea. And he went up and looked and said, “There is nothing. And Elijah said, “Go again, seven times.” When Elijah’s servant saw no indication in the western sky of a coming storm, the prophet simply told him to keep looking. He had a certainty in his soul that a sign from God would appear in the heavens. Imagine these first six trips to go look over the pinnacle of Mt. Carmel toward the sea. Elijah kept bowed humbly with his face to the ground between his knees. I picture this young servant coming back each time with the gloomy words, “There is nothing.” When the young servant returned the sixth time after Elijah said, “Go

look again, and the horizon was nothing but blue sky, do you think Elijah began to wonder, “Did I get it right? Was I too hasty in telling king Ahab that rain was on the way?” Maybe you or I might have felt that way, but Elijah wasn’t put of in his expectant prayer. His faith didn’t rest in the clouds or lack of them, but in the God who promised him the prophetic words that when it was time, He would send rain. Circumstances didn’t dictate Elijah’s faith. To Elijah, the question was no “if” but only “when.” Beloved, when God prompts us, and we know it is Him, it is never a matter of “if” but “when.” With Abraham, the father of faith, we see he did falter for a time in doubt. But even when we are faithless, God remains faithful. He cannot deny Himself.” (II Timothy 2: 13) Abraham wanted Ishmael, his idea with Sarah, to be the child of promise. But with God, all things are possible, and for God, it wasn’t a matter of “if” but “when.” The promise took 25 years to be fulfilled, but it was fulfilled gloriously. If we expect nothing from God, we will seldom be disappointed. Matthew 7: 7 tells us to keep on asking, seeking, and knocking in expectancy. Once on his way aboard a ship, to speak in Quebec, George Mueller was told he could not make his meeting because of a dense fog. He told the captain he had not broken an engagement in 57 years of serving Jesus. He asked the captain to go down to the chart room of the ship to pray. George prayed, and the captain said, “Do you want me to pray?” George Mueller said, “No, because you don’t believe God will answer.” Just go open the door and see if you can see any fog. The fog was gone, and he spoke that night at his meeting. To pray like Elijah, we must pray fervently and specifically, humbly, and expectantly.

TO PRAY LIKE ELIJAH, WE MUST PRAY PERSISTENTLY TO THE

LORD. (VII.) Notice in James 5: 18. “Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.” In I Kings 18: 44, we read, “And at the seventh time, the servant said, “Behold, a little cloud like a man’s hand is rising from the sea.” And Elijah said, “Go up, say to Ahab, “Prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you.” And in a little while, the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. And the hand of the Lord was on Elijah, and he gathered up his garment and ran before/in front of Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.” When the answer is promised, we know one thing for sure. God will keep His promise and answer our prayer. God’s timing is not based on our Standard or Daylight-Saving Time. He is never too late. Often it appears He deliberately delays, as going to Mary and Martha’s house in Bethany 4 days after Lazarus was buried. He didn’t plan to heal him, but to raise him from the dead when everyone knew he was stinking. The test for us in persistence is the waiting for God’s sure answer—in His time. Too often we pray and want our answer now, right now. God waited to answer when Elijah was an exhausted man, because God wanted to have one final victory that day, for His marathon prophet to outrun Ahab with his fastest horses and chariot. Pray like Elijah--1, 2, 3, 4. Amen.