

Effective Prayer and Effective Love

Sermon 22 in the James Series

James 5:16b-20

We come now to the end of the Book of James. Lord willing, we will finish the exposition today, and then finish the series next week by recapping what we have learned and where we have been.

I. Effective, Fervent Prayer 5:16b-18

Thomas Manton:

“Prayers rightly managed cannot lack effect. This is the means which God hath consecrated for receiving the highest blessings. Prayer is the key by which those mighty ones of God could lock heaven, and open it at their pleasure. It is wonderful to consider what the Scripture ascribeth to faith and prayer: prayer sueth out blessings in the court of grace, and faith receiveth them.”

That is old Puritan language – and good old Puritan truth.

Elijah was a man – made of the same stuff we are.

That is James point.

The point that James does not mention is – Elijah was a key part of the continuing revelation of God to Israel. That is not the point that James is trying to make. That point was WELL KNOWN to all Jews.

Elijah is and was one of Israel’s HEROES.

He battled against idolatry.

He performed powerful miracles.

He prophetically thundered against sin.

Most of all – he was looked to as the one who would signal the coming of the Messiah – for it was promised that Elijah would come before the coming of the Christ.

And of course he did. As the forerunner.
In the spirit and power of Elijah – John the Baptist.

But none of these things are what James focuses upon.
All of it is there.
But James makes a different point.

Elijah was a man – just like WE are men.

James point is – We should pray because GOD ANSWERS
PRAYERS and prayer is a means God uses to fulfill His purposes.

What He doesn't come right out to say
– and what we don't need to say every time we talk about prayer is
– God always answers prayers according to His own purposes.

Let's look at the incident itself.

1 Kings 17:1

There is a particular reason for this “draught”. There is a historical reality taking place.

Baal was the Canaanite “Storm God” – and it was believed by his worshippers that Baal controlled the weather.

16:29-33

Why a draught. A direct attack on Baal worship.
To punish the idolators AND to prove that Baal does not control the weather. GOD ALONE is GOD!

The rest of chapter 17 shows a few miraculous happenings during this difficult 3 year period of time.

18:1

Obviously, with a draught comes famine and starvation.

And we find a number of CHALLENGES in this passage that is alluded to by James.

1. The challenge to Ahab 17-19

“You troubler of Israel.”

The answer couldn't have come back any more clearly.

Why did Ahab obey the command of Elijah?

It goes against human nature for the Exalted and mighty king to obey the hated prophet.

The heart of the King is in the hand of the Lord.

2. The challenge to the People 20-21

The challenge is issued as PLAINLY as it could be.

The prophet didn't mince words with Ahab.

He didn't mince words with the people.

“Falter” = literally “limp along”.

The people worshipped Jehovah AND Baal.

They were syncretists – just like Ahab.

Notice their shocking response.

The people said NOTHING.

God's covenant people.

So steeped in idolatry.

So stubborn in their sin.

So hardened in their heart.

They will not open their mouths for God OR their idol.

We can see why God chose THIS METHOD of the Mt. Carmel battle to shock them back to some semblance of reality.

3. The challenge to Baal 22-29

“The God who can answer by fire.”

Baal was the rain God who had not been able to defeat Jehovah’s draught.

He was also the God who could send lightning – so this challenge goes right to the heart of his alleged power.

No one answered.

How horrible to engage in a FALSE religion.

Because NO ONE is THERE.

The false prophets tried their best.

They must have been sincere in their false worship.

They took up the challenge instead of trying to find some way to wimp out of it.

The rains would come from time to time.

Every time it rained – these false prophets took the credit and it re-inforced their false belief in Baal.

But it hadn’t rained in 3.5 years.

Why did they believe they could make it rain now?

I don’t know.

Again – the only conceivable I can think of is, God is often pleased to send STRONG DELUSION so that they will believe THE LIE.

We see it in our own day.

We have had roaring fires doing unspeakable damage.

Men fought and fought and did everything they could – but when the winds were blowing and the heat was bearing down – there was nothing they could do except try to re-direct the fire.

But God calms the wind.

God sends cooler weather.

God sends THE RAIN.

The so called uncontrollable fire is gone.

Just a small glimpse into the power of God.

They screamed.

They cried.

They cut themselves.

They worked themselves into a religious frenzy.

Notice Elijah's response to all of this.

At first he ignores them.

Then he begins to chide them.

Then he outright mocks them.

But, no one answers – no one paid any attention.

Then, about 3 pm, it was Elijah's turn.

4. The challenge to the LORD 30-40

This was different from the other four challenges. The other three were challenged by Elijah. Jehovah Himself was behind each of those three challenges – The Lord was behind this challenge directed to Himself.

1) The altar Elijah repaired 30-32

The altar was in a sad state of disrepair.

It had been neglected for a long period of time.

12 stones were used – it's pretty obvious what the symbolism is – and the 12 stones were a rebuke to the rebellious 10 tribes – who had left the heritage of David and had left the pure worship of Jehovah.

2) The sacrifice Elijah prepared 33a

Israel had a problem far worse than the draught.

Israel had a SIN problem.

Sacrifice was God's appointed way to deal with sin.

That is why Elijah did not make it a challenge of RAIN.
He made it a challenge of fire – the rain would come soon enough.

3) The water Elijah poured 33b-35

He had water poured on the sacrifice – one time – two times – three times.
There could be no mistake.
This was not some elaborate magic trick.
This was not going to be some natural phenomenon of something like spontaneous combustion.

THIS was going to be a MIRACULOUS DISPLAY of God's power.

4) The prayer Elijah prayed 36-37

This prayer was in stark contrast to the ravings of the Baal worshippers.
It was a simple prayer.
63 little words in English.
This was a prayer according to God's will.
If we pray anything according to His will – He hears us.

38-40

The results were dramatic.
The sacrifice was gone.
The wood was gone.
The stones were gone.
It even licked up the dust and the water in the trench.

Elijah's challenge was answered by supernatural means 38-40
There could be no doubt.
The Lord is God.

Remember – James is talking about THE PRAYER that started the draught and the prayer that ends the draught.

But in true NT style of quoting the OT – the entire incident is in view.

3 quick observations: and applications

1. Baal worship was very popular in Israel. In fact, Baal's prophet's outnumbered God's prophets 450-1 that day – not counting the prophets of Ashteroth.

Popularity does not matter. Only truth matters. Only truth as it is revealed by God Himself.

2. The fact that a religion stirs our emotions does not mean it is from God.

The Baal worshippers were FAR MORE EMOTIONALLY demonstrative than Elijah. True religion DOES stir our emotions – but because we are fallen creatures – FALSE religion does too. As I said earlier, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of these prophets of Baal.

3. True praying is praying according to the will of God. Look at Elijah's prayer. There is no aspect of it that you could criticize. He prayed for the glory of God and the good of the people.

James talked about the beginning of the draught and the end of the draught.

41-45

How could James say Elijah was a man with a nature like ours?
We have never done ANYTHING like this!

Because of chapter 19.
God worked in MIGHTY WAYS here.
And now we find Elijah – afraid and running for his life.

Elijah wasn't a superman.
Elijah was God's man – but he was a man.

We are God's children – and God hears OUR prayers!

Back to James to conclude.

II. Effective Fervent Love for the Erring Ones 5:19-20

This is part of being “a community” of believers.

Note – the one who is erring is part of the community.

The one who corrects and helps him brings him BACK into the community.

This is not just “an error”.

This is not just a mistake.

Truth be known – we are ALL wrong about something.

Nobody has PERFECT knowledge.

We need to be able to distinguish between IN HOUSE disagreements and the errors that are damning heresies.

We disagree with our Presbyterian brethren who baptize their babies.

We don't apply this Scripture to them.

These are errors that undermine the faith once delivered to the saints.

These are heresies.

These are fundamental wanderings from essential Christian truth.

But “wanders from the truth” most likely has a specific meaning to James.

The greatest danger for those Jewish believers who now professed to be Christians – that James is specifically writing to is because:

– they are suffering

-- they are being persecuted

-- they are being ostracized by their Jewish society

-- they may have lost jobs, friends and family

HOW TEMPTING IT WOULD BE TO TURN BACK TO JUDAISM AGAIN!

How tempting to deny the Lord.

How tempting to fall back into the ritual of Temple worship.

Wouldn't it just be easier to go back to the old ways?

I loved the old ways and used to cling to the old ways!

Maybe a somewhat similar situation today would be:

A person who professes faith in Christ and leaves the Roman Catholic church.

Those in his family are still ardent Catholics.
He or she receives all kinds of rebuke and flack.

And, after a time, and under pressure – they GO BACK to Rome.

It happens.

And they should be warned.

And if they do not heed – we must wonder if they ever knew Christ in true saving grace at all.

We can and should practice James 5 on a personal level.

In the community of believers – James 5 is practiced through church discipline.

It is always a GREAT THING to see a straying one brought back into the fold.

To cover a multitude of sins – is an allusion to Psalm 32:1

“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven

Whose sin is COVERED

Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity.”

Turn to **Romans 4:3-8**

James – the earthly half-brother of Jesus quotes this OT text.

Paul – the former Pharisee – now a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ goes to the same passage – just as James has done:

And he makes the same application.

READ

May God help us to have this kind of a heart of love toward those we see who by their doctrine or their practice are straying from the essential truths of Christianity.

PRAY

HYMN 396

Benediction: 5:16b