

## Effectual Prayer

James 5:13-18

By Randy Wages

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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

### I. Introduction:

- A. This morning's message will deal with the subject of prayer – more specifically, “Effectual Prayer.” And our primary text will be James 5, verses 13 through 18 if you'd like to be turning there.
- B. As you turn there, let me share some of my own thoughts (which I believe you will be able to relate to) – thoughts which led me to study this subject.
1. True believers, sinners saved by grace, are brought to see that God is sovereign in all things, including our very salvation. We know from Daniel 4:35 that God does ***“...according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?”*** We know as Ephesians 1 tells us that due to our having been made one with Christ, in Him ***“...we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.”***
  2. We know that God is immutable as He tells us in Malachi 3:6 saying, ***“... I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.”***
  3. So we know that prayer does not change God's mind. He changes not!
- C. So why do we pray? We naturally think, well if God is truly working all things after the counsel of His own will, if I can't change God's mind (God who is immutable and changes not), then why bother?
- D. And yet from God's word, believers know:
1. That we should pray – that we actually are commanded to pray. Consider these verses:
    - (a) Philippians 4:6: ***“Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.”*** In other words, don't worry anything, but pray about everything!
    - (b) I Peter 5:6-7: ***“Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: <sup>7</sup>Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.”*** So we are commanded to continually pray for all things, petitioning God with our every request and need.
  2. And we also know that prayer is effectual and powerful, that it truly does have an effect. The key verse I will be focusing on today in James 5, verse 16b, says just that, reading, ***“...The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”***

3. Well, I know that personally, I don't always appreciate the significance and power of prayer as I should. And that can affect how we approach God in prayer. So I'll just admit that I chose to study this subject for my own benefit. That said, I do trust and pray that this message will bless you as much as it has me in my preparation.

II. James 5:13-18: (So, with that, look with me now in James 5 where we will begin in verse 13).

- A. Verse 13: Now we know from the context of the preceding verses, verses 7-12, that this is directed toward the "brethren" – that is, spiritual kin folks, the adopted saints for whom Christ lived and died who have been born again, given spiritual life, so as to look to Christ for all of their salvation. And here in verse 13, God, through James says to these fellow believers, "***Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms.***" The thing that struck me here is that whether afflicted, enduring trials or difficulties, or merry (as in times of happiness or prosperity), we are to be ever mindful of God, both in praying to Him for deliverance from our difficulties in bad times and in thanksgiving and praise over the good times.
- B. Verse 14: Continuing in verse 14, we read, "***<sup>14</sup>Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord:***" Now in this context, as we move towards verse 16, keep the last phrase of verse 14 in mind as it communicates that these prayers and efforts are to be "***...in the name of the Lord:***" This is significant to our proper understanding of effectual prayer.
- C. Verse 15-16a: He continues in verse 15 and the first part of verse 16 where we read, "***And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. <sup>16</sup>Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed...***"
1. The prayer of faith, as mentioned here, is described for us in Hebrews 4:14-16 where we read, "***Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. <sup>15</sup>For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup>Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.***" Note the "therefore" in that passage – that is, that seeing we have Christ as our high priest, our Intercessor and Mediator who understands, knows and even experienced the difficulties of this life on earth, let us boldly come to God in prayer, knowing of our acceptance and forgiveness in Christ – having the merits of His perfect obedience unto death, His righteousness imputed or accounted unto us.

So the prayer of faith is the prayer that always sees our fitness, our acceptance, and access before God in Christ's Person and work. It is praying on the basis of that central truth of the gospel, believing ON the Lord Jesus Christ – on His doing and dying.

2. Now that is not a guarantee that if we pray with enough faith that God will physically heal everyone for whom we pray, though that may well be our expressed desire. It may be that God's will is that one for whom we pray will be healed eternally, particularly in this context in which it speaks of praying for other believers whom we know shall assuredly be eternally healed.
3. Now notice that the first part of verse 16 indicates, we are to confess our faults to one another and pray for one another, that we may be healed in accordance with His good will and pleasure. The confession of true faith includes the confession of our faults for by faith we confess that we are sinners who do not deserve and cannot earn salvation. And that brings us to where I'd like to focus this morning on the latter part of verse 16 where we read...

### III. Verse 16b: ***“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”***

A. First, allow me to comment on the translation of this sentence.

1. The Greek word that is translated for the phrase, “effectual fervent” and for the phrase, “availeth much” is actually one and the same. It's a word from which we get our word energetic. It refers to that which has power or energy and is fitted to produce an effect and so, translated “effectual.” The construction of this sentence then could be understood to be saying that “a prayer which is effectual is effectual.” Now, the significance of me pointing that out is to note that “effectual” is not an adjective describing the praying itself (as if to infer that the issue is that if you will but pray effectually, then it will produce an effect) but rather, this verse is telling us why the prayer is effectual. And it is simply because it is the prayer of faith – the prayer of a righteous man. Not any man or woman, but a righteous one.
2. The word “righteous” there is describing someone who is found just before a holy God. It is speaking of a justified sinner who stands before God perfect, holy, unreprouvable, unblameable, not guilty, having the very merits of the perfect satisfaction to God's justice which the Lord Jesus Christ rendered by His substitutionary obedience unto death, charged or imputed to his or her account – just as their sins were inputed or charged to the account of their sinless Savior that He might pay the penalty due unto them before the justice of God. What a glorious exchange that finds these otherwise guilty sinners, justified (or righteous) before God through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

B. And their prayers (the prayers of the righteous) are powerful, energizing, and effectual.

IV. Prayer is Effectual: Now, in spite of the fact that we don't always get exactly what we request in our prayers, it is an undeniable truth of scripture, both here in James 5:16 and elsewhere that the prayers of true believers, justified sinners, are effectual and powerful. Consider these other verses pertaining to the effectiveness and power of prayer:

- A. James 1:5: In the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of James, he writes to the brethren, to believers, ***“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”*** And then consider these passages from the Gospel of John...
- B. John 14:13-14: First, in John 14:13-14, we read where Christ told His disciples, ***“And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it.”***
- C. John 15:7: Then in John 15:7, Christ said ***“If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.”***
- D. John 16:23-24: In John 16, verses 23 & 24, Christ said, ***“And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. <sup>24</sup>Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.”***

V. How is Prayer Effectual? Well, I don't know about you, but I often pray for things (both for myself and others) that don't always come to pass. And this prompts the question, “How then is the prayer of a righteous man (a justified sinner) effectual?”

A. Verses 17-18: Well, the context of James 5 helps us with that as James gives an example of the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man as recorded for us in the Old Testament. The example he cites is that of Elijah as we read, beginning in verse 17, ***“Elias (or Elijah) was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. <sup>18</sup>And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.”***

1. First note, that it describes Elijah as “a man” who was “...***subject to like passions as we are,..***” In other words, he, like every other fallen son and daughter of Adam was a sinner, with sinful passions. So he too would have those sinful principles of self love, pride, etc. And although Elijah was a prophet, he was still just a man – a man of like passions. Now this teaches us that the effectiveness of Elijah's prayers were not due to his own merit or goodness but rather because of His standing before God as a justified or righteous man. In other words, as a sinner justified by the blood of His promised Messiah, his prayer was effectual because of the grace of God towards him. God reckoned to Elijah the merits of the work Christ would accomplish in time on the cross and thereby declared Him righteous.

So this should remind us that these men of God such as Elijah and Moses did not have a unique access to God as if their prayers were only effectual because of their great faith or because of our perception of them as spiritual giants. It's not that such effectual praying is reserved for some class of believers or what some might refer to as "super Christians." Remember, it's their standing before God as justified, or righteous, which describes those whose prayers are effectual. And the only righteousness any sinner has before God is that which was accomplished by Christ and imputed or accounted unto them. So all who are righteous are equally righteous – they have the same righteousness as any other believer – the very righteousness of God in Christ.

2. Now having said that, we recognize from this passage that Elijah prayed it would not rain and it didn't. And some 3-1/2 years later he prayed again for rain and it did rain. Have you ever prayed for rain and yet it did not rain? I have. So, how are we who have trusted in Christ alone for all of our salvation and thereby have assurance of our righteous standing before God as a justified sinner – how are we to relate to the example of Elijah?
3. Well, if you will think back on that story of Elijah as recorded in I Kings, you will recall that God brought a drought to the land of Israel (the northern kingdom) in judgment of their rampant idolatry during the reign of King Ahab. Ahab was married to Jezebel who was an idolatress who persecuted and even had killed the prophets of the true and living God. And Elijah had a divine order from God to pray for that very judgment upon them – that it would not rain. In other words, Elijah prayed as he was instructed to pray by God.
4. Likewise, 3-1/2 years later, he prayed again as instructed by God. The Lord spoke to Elijah and told him to go before King Ahab as he informed Elijah that he planned to send rain. It was at that time that Elijah confronted the 450 prophets of Baal with a test to validate the true God before the nation in sharp contrast to the idol Baal which they were worshiping. Those of you familiar with the story will remember that God brought a consuming fire down upon the altar constructed by Elijah to prove to the people that Elijah's God was the true and living God, not Baal. And it was then that Elijah had the people take and kill all of the 450 prophets of Baal.
5. And so just after that, Elijah went up to the top of Mt. Carmel where he sent his servant to look toward the sea 7 times. On the 7<sup>th</sup> time, the servant noticed a cloud out over the sea which then produced a great rain. Well, when considered with our text today, it appears that Elijah likely persisted in prayer for rain, as divinely ordered by God during each of the 7 times his servant was sent to the seaside to check for the cloud. But again, in praying for the rain, Elijah was praying as instructed by God.

B. Characteristics of Effectual Prayer: So the significance of this example is in that it shows the efficacy of the prayer of a justified (righteous) sinner that is made in accordance with the will of God. Elijah's prayer was both: 1) In His name – or for His glory and 2) in submission to the will of God, as instructed by God. And just as Elijah's prayer was effectual, likewise, when any justified sinner who prays in His name and that His will would be done, subordinating their will and desires to that of God – they too can know that it will be done.

1. Praying In His name and for His glory – Recall in verse 14 of today's text, it made mention of praying in the name of the Lord. Also, recall those passages I read from John that stated that if we asked in His name, it shall be done. Praying in the name of our Lord is akin to praying that God will be glorified for His name refers to how He is identified – who He is, what He is like – His very glory. We know that God's glory is His chief design in all that He does – that He might receive all honor and glory, that He might be worshipped as He is. So when we pray in the name of Christ, we are praying with an overriding, Spirit-led desire that the triune God be exalted and receive all honor and praise in all things.
2. To pray in His name requires that we know God as He is revealed in Christ—how He can be both a just God and a Savior. It's to know the Lord as Jeremiah 23:6 puts it, as ***THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.*** That's the name in which a righteous (justified) sinner prays.
  - (a) Elijah prayed for the drought to be brought upon Israel as part of God's judgment upon Israel for their rampant idolatry. And following their elimination of those prophets of Baal, Elijah prayed for the rain to end the drought. Do you see how Elijah was praying in His name? To pray in His name is to pray with a regard for God's glory which He would not share with the idol Baal. Nor will God share His glory with any idol of our imagination that we might call "God," but whose imagined way of salvation denies the very holy attributes of the true and living God of this Bible.
  - (b) Well, likewise, every righteous (justified) sinner prays in His name once they have been delivered from their blindness to see God as He is, as both a just God and a Savior. They see their only hope for salvation in His imputed righteousness and so they possess a God-given desire that God likewise be glorified, set forth, and revealed as He has been in their hearts. Where there is no regard for God's glory, (or for His name), there is no evidence that such a one is righteous (or is a justified sinner). This is often exposed in many who profess to be a Christian while never having never even considered how God could be holy and just and still accept them as a sinner into His holy presence without denying or setting aside His justice.

Instead of focusing on how a just and holy God could accept a sinner, their natural focus is on the sinner's acceptance of God as if all is in the hand of the sinner and salvation is conditioned on his or her decision. Just like me in years past, it doesn't cross their mind to consider how could God be holy and just and accept them. They just don't think of it from God's perspective. And that is to have no regard for the honor of His character – for His glory.

And those who persist in that frame of mind, may repeatedly assert in their prayers that they ask all these things in the name of Christ. But those are empty words and those prayers reach no further than the ceiling. There is only access to God for the righteous – for those who have the righteousness of Christ imputed to them as evidenced by their being brought to see that nothing else will do for them.

3. Praying in Subordination to God's will: Now closely akin to praying in His name, is praying in subordination to God's will.
  - (a) We know that Elijah was certainly praying in accordance with God's will for He was directly instructed to do so by God.
  - (b) In Philippians 2:5, we're instructed, to "***Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:***" In that context it speaks of Christ's humility in taking on the form of the servant to be made in the likeness of men to come and die on the cross as a Surety for a people. And we should strive to emulate that sort of humility.
  - (c) Consider Christ, the God-man, co-equal and co-eternal with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, humbling Himself to take on human flesh and to die for sins He had no part in committing – all in accordance with the Father's will. As the time of His death approached, He sweated drops of blood there in the Garden of Gethsemane, agonizing over that which He was about to face. In His humanity, he truly dreaded facing that death on the cross which He came to accomplish – drinking the cup of God's wrath against the sins He bore. And yet, hear what He prayed there as is recorded for us in Luke 22. Beginning in verse 41 we read, "***And he was withdrawn from them <i.e. – His disciples> about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, <sup>42</sup>Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.***"

(d) Well, let this mind be in us which was in Christ Jesus when we pray. We're instructed to bring all our requests to God, to express our wills or desires for things. But if we, like Elijah, are praying in accordance with God's will, then our true Spirit-implanted desire is that even if it is contrary to our own will as expressed in our prayers, that we too might say even so, "*...nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.*"

4. Summary of Characteristics of Effectual Prayer: So, when a justified sinner, a righteous man, prays as Elijah did – as we are instructed from God's Word to pray – that is, (1) in His name and (2) according to His will, our prayers avail much – they too are powerful and effective.

C. How can sin tainted prayer be Effectual? Now like me, you may think, "Well try as I might, I'm don't always have in the forefront of my mind this desire that His will override my own on." I often see my own self-centered, selfish, sinful focus even reflected in my prayers. I pray most often for me and for those I care about. I pray for my family more than I pray for any of you and your families and that's because of self-love that springs from that remaining sin principle that plagues us all – including justified, born again believers.

I think that is why many of the old commentators describe the prayer that is effectual as "in-wrought" or "Spirit-wrought" prayer. In other words, they believe it is effectual only to the extent that a righteous or justified sinner's prayer is directed by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Some even translate James 5:16 so as to understand an effectual prayer to be one that is inspired. And I think there is something to that; however, it would certainly be difficult for us to always discern what is inspired and what is not. We know that God the Holy Spirit leads and guides us, impressing things upon our hearts.

We also know that the Spirit of God breathes into men the breath of spiritual life and so they become alive spiritually. And just as we physically breathe when we are physically born, likewise prayer is equated with being the spiritual breath of the spiritually alive – prayer being the product of the indwelling Holy Spirit impressing the minds of His people, the righteous, with a proper sense of their wants and needs and of the will of God.



But as I consider these things, I can't help but be reminded in the example of Elijah's effectual prayer how God first reminds us that Elijah was a man of like passions. So his prayers were likewise tainted with sin as is anything that proceeds from a sinner. In light of that, I believe that the intercession of both God the Son and God the Holy Spirit cleans up our prayers so to speak. And so I believe that all who have His indwelling Spirit, all who are born again of the Spirit as a fruit and effect of what Christ accomplished for them by His obedience unto death whereby they are justified / righteous – I believe that the prayer of these, God's people, accordingly will always avail much.

The Scripture tells us in Romans 8:26-28: ***“Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.”***<sup>27</sup> ***And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.***<sup>28</sup> ***And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”***

A little further down in that chapter in verse 34 we read, ***“Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.”***

So for those with a new principle of life, who walk not according to the flesh but the Spirit as evidenced by their looking to Christ for all of their salvation, they have the Holy Spirit interceding for them in accordance with God's will. So when I pray that God will physically heal someone but they go onto die anyway, does it mean my prayer was not effectual and powerful? I don't think so. If the Holy Spirit Himself and Christ Himself is ever interceding for me, then all my prayers are ultimately submitted before the Father in accordance with His perfect will. And His will shall always be done!

Some are disappointed to learn that God's will and purpose shall always be realized and that their prayers will not change His mind. But that does not mean that the prayer of a righteous, justified sinner is not effectual and powerful. In ways I do not come close to fully understanding, God uses the prayers of His people as an effectual means in accomplishing His objectives. I know the prayers of a true believer are powerful and effectual because God says so.

Our natural tendency is to think, “Well, if my praying isn’t going to change God’s mind, then why bother?” But consider this: Many who claim to believe this Bible, concur with its assertion that it is appointed unto men once to die. That is they bow to the truth that God has determined the length of their life and appointed the very time of their death. They agree that they shall not live one minute longer nor die one minute sooner than God has determined, regardless of what they do. And yet, if they get sick, they go to the doctor, take medicine, refrain from jumping off skyscrapers or running in front of a big truck barreling down the highway. Why? If they are not going to die one day sooner or one day later than God has determined, why do they attend to the means? It’s because they know the means are effectual. If you get an infection and don’t treat it, it can kill you! God is a God of means!

We who believe the Gospel and promote, serve in, and or support a Gospel ministry, know that the Gospel of God’s grace sets forth salvation that is totally conditioned on the doing and dying of Christ as a Substitute for a people chosen by God, according to His own good pleasure and will. Not one of God’s elect for whom Christ died shall perish. And none of the rest shall be saved. All of God’s elect will be saved, and only they will be saved whether I preach the gospel to anyone or not. So why do we preach and strive to spread the Gospel? It’s because it (the Gospel) is God’s ordained means by which He chooses to reveal Himself to each and every one He saves. We don’t change who they are, but what a privilege to be used by God in setting forth that message that glorifies Him as He is – whereby He draws His elect unto Himself.

Well, likewise, prayer is ordained by God as an effectual means of accomplishing His perfect, unchangeable will and purpose. What a privilege to have such access to God that we might be used in accomplishing His purpose.

I certainly can’t prove what I’m about to say, but I would not be surprised to someday learn (perhaps in eternity) that God the Holy Spirit impressed one or more of His righteous, justified children to pray for the salvation of each and every individual soul that God brings to faith and repentance. Or for that matter, the Holy Spirit may impress justified sinners to pray for all things that God accomplishes. We know that takes place in a general sense whenever we pray that His will be done in all things. But regardless of my speculation, I take God at His word and so (although we may not understand how), we can know that the prayer of a righteous, justified sinner has its powerful effect as a means to achieve God’s will. Now that should encourage believers to pray.

As I read a moment ago in Romans 8:28, knowing “...*that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose*” would we rationally choose to have what we think is best for us rather than the all-knowing God’s eternal best for us – God, who is infinitely wise? Granted, due to the remaining presence of sin that shall plague us until we die, we may at times be tempted to not exactly relish putting our own desires in subordination to God’s will, but thankfully, the God who saved us, will preserve us unto the end. He keeps us and continually draws us back to Himself in submission to His perfect will. And thankfully, we have the constant intercession of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit cleaning it up, so to speak – interceding in accordance with the perfect will of God the Father.

## VI. Closing:

Well, are your prayers effectual? They are if you are a righteous or justified sinner for “*The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*” So the real question is, “Are you such a person? Do you stand just or righteous before a holy God who requires nothing short of sinless perfection?” Well who so stands? It is all those that come to Christ, pleading His righteousness, the merit of His work of redemption, as their only hope of eternal salvation. Christ died for them and they are a blood-bought people. He purchased for them all of salvation including the gift of faith and repentance by which they in time come to place their trust in Him and look to His imputed righteousness alone as the sole ground or basis of their salvation.

So flee to Christ and look to Him and His finished work for all of your salvation, repenting of having ever imagined anything else would find you accepted before a holy God.

Even now, a justified sinner prays for just that if it be according to God’s perfect will. And the “...*effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*”

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God’s grace found in the only infallible source, God’s word itself – the Bible.