

Session 3 Characteristics of Effective Prayer

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. There are different ways to pray (see future sessions), but here we will look at the characteristics of prayer that is effective or that makes a difference and accomplishes its intended goal. Prayer is first about relating to God, but it is also about results that serve God's will on the earth.

"It is not enough to begin to pray...but we must patiently, believingly continue in prayer until we obtain an answer." George Müller

- B. James, the brother of Jesus, was known as a great man of prayer. He gave the church invaluable insight into this subject. He emphasized effective prayer and what it accomplishes. It is the destiny of every believer to release the power of God through his simple prayers.

¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up...¹⁶The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. ¹⁷Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain...¹⁸And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain... (Jas. 5:15-18)

- C. James taught that the *prayer of faith* heals the sick (v. 15) and that it accomplishes much (v. 16). Our prayers accomplish much more than we can gauge with our five senses. Our perspective on life changes dramatically when we believe that our prayers really make a difference.
- D. James highlighted four characteristics of effective prayer: prayer rooted in faith; prayer in the context of good relationships; prayer from a lifestyle of righteousness; and prayer that is earnest.
- E. ***Prayer rooted in faith***: this speaks of prayer that is rooted in a threefold confidence in God.

1. It is prayer with confidence in Jesus' authority over sin, sickness, and Satan.
2. It is prayer with confidence in the blood of Jesus that qualifies weak people such as us to be vessels that release His power and receive His blessings. We boldly enter God's presence by the blood of Jesus (Heb. 10:19). We are not to shrink back due to shame or guilt, for He has given His own righteousness to us as a free gift (2 Cor. 5:21).
3. It is prayer with confidence in the Father's desire to heal, set free, and bless His people by the power and work of the Holy Spirit (Lk. 11:13).

¹¹If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone?...¹³If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him! (Lk 11:11-13)

- F. ***Prayer rooted in faith:*** Jesus emphasized the importance of praying with faith (Mk. 11:22-24).
²⁴I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them. (Mk. 11:24)
1. Our faith is anchored in the knowledge of Jesus' authority over every power that exists.
¹⁸Jesus...saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." (Mt 28:18)
 2. We are to pray with faith that our prayers will actually produce results as God answers them by releasing a greater measure of His blessing and power. Jesus affirmed the need for faith. He affirmed the Roman centurion who had great faith (Mt. 8:10), and He told two blind men, "According to your faith let it be to you" (Mt. 9:29). Jesus was unable to do mighty works where there was great unbelief (Mk. 6:5-6). He rebuked the unbelief of the disciples who did not believe those who had seen Him after He rose (Mk. 16:14).
 3. A man brought his epileptic son to Jesus' disciples and later complained that they could not cure him (Mt. 17:14-21). When the disciples asked why they could not drive the demon out of the boy, Jesus stated the reason simply: "Because of your unbelief."
¹⁹The disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁰Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief...if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move..." (Mt. 17:19-20)
- G. ***Prayer in the context of good relationships:*** In teaching on effective prayer, James exhorted us to confess our sins to one another (Jas 5:16). We follow this exhortation most often in context to strong relationship with others. Some are committed to growing in relationship with others, but are content to have a weak prayer life. Others are committed to grow in prayer, but are content to have weak relationships. The Bible sets these two values as complementary, not competing.
1. A strong prayer life will eventually lead to strong relationships with people. Prayer is not about being anti-relational or antisocial. True prayer has the opposite effect. It is all about love—loving God and people. People of prayer should be the most energized in love.
 2. The Lord cares so much about relationships that husbands must honor their wives so that their prayers are not hindered. The measure of a husband's effectiveness in prayer is connected to the measure with which he honors his wife. He can pray with eloquence in public, but if he speaks in unkind ways to his wife in private, his prayers are hindered.
⁷Husbands...giving honor to the wife...that your prayers may not be hindered. (1 Pet. 3:7)
 3. 1 Peter 3:7 is significant for the global prayer movement. As the prayer movement matures, so the emphasis on honor in marriage will increase, especially honor for wives.

- H. ***Prayer from a lifestyle of righteousness:*** Commitment to a lifestyle of righteousness is essential to cultivating an effective prayer life (Jas. 5:16). This biblical condition is often minimized, even by some who are deeply involved in the prayer-and-worship movement today.

¹⁶The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (Jas. 5:16)

1. The righteous person in this passage is any believer who *sets his heart to obey Jesus* as he seeks to walk in godly character. Setting our hearts to obey is very important, even if we fall short of mature, consistent obedience. I have never met a person who is so mature in righteousness that he is above all temptation and never falls short in his walk with God.
2. The prayers of a “righteous person” include the prayers of imperfect, weak people who *sincerely seek* to walk in righteousness even as we stumble in our weakness.
3. The Lord responds to His people because they seek to keep His commands and do the things that are pleasing to Him.

²²And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. (1 Jn. 3:22)

4. Prayer is no substitute for obedience. I have met those who imagine that if they pray and fast more, they can walk in a little immorality or be dishonest in their finances or slander people who do not treat them in the way they want. They think that being extra zealous in the spiritual disciplines will balance out areas of persistent compromise.

²And your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear. (Isa. 59:2)

5. Prayer is far more boring and difficult if we seek to live one part of our lives as if it belonged to God and another part as if it belonged to us. There is a relationship between our lifestyle and our ability to enjoy prayer (Mt. 5:8). Ongoing, willful compromise in our lives greatly hinders our prayer life and our capacity to agree with God in prayer.
6. When we come up short in our obedience, we must acknowledge it and confess it, rather than seeking to rationalize it. We call it sin, we repent of it, and we freely receive God’s forgiveness. Then we “push delete” and stand with confidence in God’s presence.
7. Walking in obedience is not about seeking to earn the answers to our prayers; it is about living in agreement with love because God is love. Some who teach on prayer overlook the necessity of obeying God. It is more popular to emphasize *only* our authority in Christ without mentioning the necessity of setting our heart to obey Jesus.

***²¹He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.*”
(Jn. 14:21)**

- I. Prayer is not about informing or persuading God, but about connecting with Him in relationship. He is looking for conversation and dialogue with us. Some believers think that by praying more they earn the answers to their prayers. God wants us to talk with Him more because He loves relating to us. We do not *earn* answers to prayers by *either* our persistence *or* our obedience.

II. EARNEST PRAYER

- A. ***Prayer that is earnest:*** It is important to understand what earnest prayer is because it is one of the primary biblical conditions of effective prayer.
- ¹⁷***Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. (Jas 5:17)***
- B. The work of the kingdom is based on who Jesus is and what He did on the cross, not on how we feel. God answers our prayers because of the blood of Jesus and His desire to partner with His people. If we measure ourselves by a wrong idea of what passion or earnestness in prayer is, then we will be tempted to pray much less.
- C. First, earnest prayer comes from a heart that is engaged with God. To be earnest implies that we are not praying by rote or just going through the motions. It is the opposite of speaking our prayers mindlessly into the air. We are to focus our minds toward the Lord when we pray.
- D. Second, earnest prayer is prayer that is persistent (Mt. 7:7-8; Lk. 11: 5-10; 18:1, 7). The Greek word *proseuche*, translated as *earnestly* in James 5:17, literally means, “he prayed with prayer,” which is an idiom expressing persistence in prayer.
1. Elijah refused to be denied answers to prayers that were in agreement with God’s will.
 2. We must never stop asking and thanking God for the answers of the prayers that are offered in His will until we see them with our eyes. We must be persistent. We are to pray “with all perseverance” (Eph. 6:18) and to “labor fervently” (Col. 4:12) in prayer.
 3. Jesus taught a parable emphasizing persistence in prayer (Lk. 11:5-10). The Greek verbs for “ask,” “seek,” and “knock” are in the continuous present tense (v. 9). Thus, we are to ask and keep on asking, seek and keep on seeking, knock and keep on knocking.
⁸***...yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs. ⁹So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. (Lk. 11:8-9)***
 4. When we highly prize something, we seek the Lord for it with all our hearts (Jer. 29:13). When we ask casually, with little effort to focus our minds on the Lord, or when we stop praying for something that is in God’s will, we show that we do not value it very much.
¹³***And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. (Jer. 29:13)***
- E. Earnest prayer doesn’t have to be loud. We should not conclude that our prayers are ineffective or that we lack earnestness simply because we do not have a loud, aggressive public prayer style.
1. Passion in prayer is not mostly about energy and volume; it is about being engaged from the heart with the Lord while praying and persevering in faith without quitting. So keep at it and do not draw back, even if your prayer style is softer than that of others.

2. Some conclude that they lack the necessary “passion” for God to answer them because they do not express themselves with great emotion or volume. If we define earnest prayer by shouting, then I guess about 99% of our prayers would be classified as non-passionate prayer, because most of our prayers are offered as whispers from our hearts throughout the day.
 3. Hannah prayed for a child with great anguish because of her barrenness. She wept as she spoke from her heart so softly that Eli the priest could not hear her (1 Sam. 1:13, 27).
 4. The NKJV translators used the word *fervent* in James 5:16 to convey the concept of *earnestness*. This word is not found in Greek manuscripts. It was inserted because the translators sought to emphasize the strength of the word “earnestly” in James 5:17.
- F. Earnest prayer doesn’t depend on what we feel. Some draw back in their prayer lives because they think they must feel God’s presence when they pray. Thus when they feel discouraged or tired, or when they simply feel nothing, they assume their prayers will be of no effect, and they stop praying. I have good news—our prayers are effective even when we are discouraged, or not in a good mood. We offer our prayers to the Lord who is in a good mood and is not tired.
- G. Weak people can pray earnestly. Elijah was a weak man with a nature like ours. He was prone to fear and discouragement, and he faced the same temptations that we do; yet his prayer life was effective (1 Kgs. 17-19). James emphasized this to give us courage to pray in our weaknesses.
- ¹⁷Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain...¹⁸And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain... (Jas. 5:17-18)***
- H. If we ask anything according to God’s will, no matter how difficult it is, God will answer us. For God to “hear” our prayers means that He approves of them, no matter how impossible it seems.
- ¹⁴Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. (1 Jn. 5:14)***
- I. We must not assume that a prayer is outside of God’s will when we don’t receive an immediate answer to it. God may answer in a *different way* or *different time* than we expect (Isa. 55:8-9). The delay of answered prayer is designed to provoke earnestness in us to continue to seek Him.

III. THE DIVINE AND HUMAN SIDES OF EFFECTIVE PRAYER

- A. The divine side of effective prayer is Jesus’s work on the cross and His power being released through us. We receive God’s favor as a free gift. When we combine agreement with God as seen in our believing, righteous, earnest prayer, then we experience more of what is freely given to us by Jesus. God doesn’t love us more when we live in greater agreement with Him, but He is able to use us more, and we are able to experience a greater measure of blessing in our life.
- B. The human side of effective prayer is coming into agreement with God—living and praying in accordance with His will, heart, and priorities. As we pray with faith, we pray in agreement with God’s authority and Jesus’s work on the cross. As we live righteously, we live in agreement with God’s character. As we pray persistently, we live in agreement with God’s priorities.

- C. Effective prayer is earnest prayer that is in agreement with God’s will and is offered in faith in context to building strong kingdom relationships and walking in righteousness.
- D. The characteristics of effective prayer include the following conditions:
- Faith (Mt. 21:21-22; Mk. 11:23-24; 1 Jn. 5:14-15)
 - Right relationships, including husbands honoring wives (1 Pet. 3:7)
 - A righteous or holy life (Ps. 66:18; Isa. 59:2; 1 Jn. 3:19-22)
 - Earnestness or persistence (Isa. 30:18-19; 62:6-7; Mt. 7:7-11; Lk. 11:5-13; 18:1-8; Jas. 5:17)
 - In accordance with the will of God (1 Jn. 5:14-15)
 - In the name of Jesus (Jn. 14:13-14, 26; 16:23-24)
 - Pure motives (Jas. 4:2-3)
 - Boldness (Heb. 4:16)
 - Forgiveness (Matt. 6:15; 5:23–24)
 - Prayer of agreement or unity (Mt. 18:19-20)

IV. OUR PRAYERS REMAIN EFFECTIVE FOREVER

- A. The prayers of God’s people *avail much* or *accomplish much* (Jas. 5:16). Indeed, our prayers accomplish much in this age *and* in the age to come. The challenge is in not being able to measure fully right now the extent to which our prayers impact us, other people, and the nations.
- B. All the prayers prayed in God’s will throughout history are stored in bowls near God’s throne. The bowls of prayer will one day be “full” (Rev. 5:8). The fact that the bowls of prayer in heaven “fill up” implies that God does not forget our prayers. We may forget them, but God does not.
- ⁸When He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders... each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. (Re 5:8)*
- ³Then another angel...was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints...before the throne. (Rev. 8:3)*
- C. The Lord will never forget the love we show toward Him in ministering to others in prayer or in other acts of service (Heb. 6:10). He would consider it an “injustice” if He forgot anything we do in love for Him. Knowing that our “weak” prayers are not forgotten motivates us to persevere.
- ¹⁰For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. (Heb. 6:10)*
- D. Our prayers avail so much that they remain effective, or “alive,” in God’s sight long after this life. I assume that they “live” forever in God’s heart. Even the prayers from the distant past—from thousand of years ago—are still effective in God’s presence. I believe that the prayers we offer today will still be effective in the distant future, hundreds or thousands of years from now. There is continuity between what we pray and do now and what happens in the age to come.
- E. The prayers for revival and justice did not “die out” after they were partially answered by the revivals in history. Our prayers have a significant, partial release in our generation and a greater, more complete release in the future, even in the age to come.