

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ **Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.** ¹⁵ **And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.** ¹⁶ **Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.**

¹⁷ **Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.** ¹⁸ **Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.** (NIV84)

Theme: The Power of Prayer Comes from the Lord.

In 2001 the Mayo Clinic issued a doubled-blind study on the power of prayer. They split up 799 coronary surgery patients into two groups. For one group they assigned five people for each patient to pray for them at least once a day; while the other group received no extra intercessory prayers on their behalf. After 26 weeks the researchers concluded, "intercessory prayer had no significant effect on medical outcomes after hospitalization in a coronary care unit." Many other studies on intercessory prayer have come to the same conclusion. So why bother, then, with prayer? Why does God urge us to pray and pray often, when it has little to no effect? There are many problems with the Mayo Clinic's study and those like them—it didn't take into effect the spiritual disposition of the patients, the faith of those praying for them, and the sincerity of their prayers. Plus, they counted only a positive outcome as an answer to prayer.

We Christians know and believe to be true the power of prayer. James says in verse 16, **The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.** Which is more literally translated, "the plea of a righteous one is able to bring about many things." Because of this and because the Lord tells us to pray, we pray on a regular basis—many times a day.

But what exactly is prayer? There are many Christians who have a false understanding of prayer. Prayer is an act of worship. As we pray

to the Lord we are confessing our faith in him—that he exists, that he hears us, that he has promised to answer our prayers, and that he has the power to help us. We wouldn't pray to an idol like Buddha or Allah because they don't exist. We wouldn't pray to a tree or a rock because they can't hear us, or to other people or saints in heaven because they don't have the power to help us. So prayer is an act of worship which we do with other like-minded believers. Prayer, is not a means of grace. That is, it is not a means by which the Lord gives or strengthens faith; our knowledge of God's Word will not increase, nor will our faith become stronger simply because of prayer. Prayer, then, is not to be a substitution for worship or reading and studying God's Word.

And yet, prayer honors God by showing that we trust and believe in him. It shows that we are his children and have a personal relationship with him and can come before him and ask him for anything as a little child does his father. The Lord uses us in our prayers to change things in our lives and in the lives of others. And so we pray to the Lord and we pray often—but mostly, we pray because the Lord promises to hear and answer our prayers.

But how can you be sure that your prayer will actually be answered? If that Mayo Clinic study and those like it are to be believed, prayer has absolutely no effect and is pointless? Again, go back to the end of verse 16 where the NIV translates, **The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.** Who exactly is a righteous person? To be righteous means to be perfect and without sin—to be holy. And that is none of us. For we are sinners who fail to obey the Lord perfectly for even one hour. And we have been this way ever we were conceived from our sinful parents. But not Christ. Not once did he sin or stray from God's Word. He is the only one who has lived a righteous life. And that life he has given to us when he suffered and died on the cross. As Paul says in Romans 5, **just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.** Through faith in Jesus we receive all the blessings he has won and given for us, including the gift of righteousness. Again Paul in Romans, **This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.**

So then, who is a righteous person whose prayer is able to bring about many things? You. Any believer is someone who is righteous! Your prayers are powerful and effective; they are able to bring about many things. It's not as if one believer's prayers are better than others. It's not as if a pastor or some other church leader has some special access to God and put in a good word for someone. No, we are all sinners, but all considered righteous in God's sight through faith in Jesus. It is Christ who serves as the intercessor for us all. Because of him we are considered righteous, because of him our prayers are acceptable to God—and in this way, they are powerful and effective. And that is why every prayer is prayed in Jesus' name, that is, through faith in him.

As a Christian, your prayers are powerful and effective and the Lord promises to answer your prayers. But, why does it seem as if many of your prayers go unanswered? Why didn't you get the job you prayed for? Or why did that person get sick and die? Why didn't that person fall in love with you? Often it's not that God didn't answer your prayers, it's simply that he didn't answer them as you had hoped. Perhaps the problem is that we often pray for the wrong things. But what exactly are and aren't the wrong things to be praying for? Some may think that we should not pray for the harm of others. But there is a group of Psalms, called the imprecatory psalms, in which the psalmists pray for the death and destruction of God's enemies. It is true that we want to love all people, and that like God, we want all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. And so we pray that all may hear the gospel and be saved, and yet praying for the destruction of those who have hardened their hearts against God and seek to hurt and harm him and his people and prohibit the spread of the gospel, is not wrong.

It also is not wrong to pray for earthly things. In the fourth petition of the model prayer, the Lord's Prayer, we pray for just that. When we pray, **give us this day our daily bread**, we are asking God to provide for our earthly and physical needs on a daily basis. So again, it's not wrong to pray for earthly things; but they aren't to be the sole focus and only content of our prayers. In that model prayer there are seven petitions, or requests; and only one of those petitions has to do with earthly things. In the other six petitions we are asking God for spiritual gifts—that is to be our focus when we pray. And when we

do, the Lord promises to take care of our spiritual and physical needs as he says in Matthew 6, **seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.** But the Lord has no interest in granting your request for something that will only turn you away from him. He may not give you that good paying job because it means that you would have to work Sunday mornings and would keep you away from worship. The girl that you've been praying would notice you, may lead you down the wrong path and away from God; so he may not grant that prayer either. And the Lord always isn't going to give you what you want when you pray for something sinful. He isn't going to change his mind about divorce simply because you want out of your relationship; and he isn't going to make your boyfriend say, 'yes' when you ask him to move in with you. When we pray for such things, we are not following God's will and he will not grant our requests.

And there are times when the content of our prayer isn't necessarily the problem, but our attitude is. We think of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable found in Luke 18, who prayed, **God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.** It's certainly not wrong to thank God in our prayers for leading us to live a life according to his will. But we should most certainly realize that we are nothing but sinners who deserve God's wrath and we plead for his mercy. We approach God humbly as sinners and yet in full confidence because of Christ.

Or how many times do we pray prayers by heart, like the Lord's Prayer, or the common table prayers, that we say the words without even thinking about what we are praying. When we do so we are merely babbling like pagans, and the Lord does not hear us.

So we strive to pray with the proper motivations and intentions, with our whole hearts and minds, and according to God's will. And yet, even when we do that, it seems as if God still doesn't answer our prayers. When we pray, we are essentially giving God suggestions—we are suggesting to him things that we think might be a blessing to us in one way or another. But in the end, we leave it up to the Lord's will and we put it in the hands of the one who knows all things and who is able to do all things.

It is the Lord's will to bless us. The Lord is concerned with doing what is best for us—not necessarily what is best for our earthly lives, but what is best for our spiritual lives. Think of what Jesus taught at the end of our gospel for today. No Father is going to give something to his son that he knows would harm him. In the same way, God our Father is not going to give us something that he knows will harm us spiritually. So he will always answer our prayers in a way that benefits us. And often the answer to our prayers is going to be 'no.' We might not always see the reason right away, maybe we'll realize it years down the line, or maybe never. But we pray knowing that whatever answer the Lord gives us, it will be for our good and for the good of his loved ones. That is one thing that Mayo Clinic's study doesn't take into account. Just because the Lord didn't save the people for whom they were praying, doesn't mean he didn't answer their prayers! We know that the prayer of believer brings about many things because the Lord answers them. And that is true no matter how many studies try to claim otherwise.

So what do we, as Christians, do? We pray and we pray often. Continually. In our text for today James mentions prayer six different times. It is something that is constantly on the mind of a Christian. When we are facing any sort of trouble or difficulty we pray to the Lord for help and deliverance. When someone is sick we pray to God on their behalf. We visit them and pray with them as we assure them of the sure hope of eternal life. And if they think that their sickness or disease a direct result of some sin they have committed we aren't afraid to assure them of the free and full forgiveness won for them by Christ and received through faith in him. And then we pray to God that he would work through that gospel to comfort and encourage. We pray again and again and we pray boldly and confidently. Like Abraham in our first lesson we pray persistently to God on the basis of his love and mercy. We know that he hears our prayers, promises to answer them, and has the power to do so. We know that he will always answer our prayers in a way that benefits us and all his loved ones eternally. It doesn't matter what some study says; the Lord has promised to hear and answer our prayers; and that is a guarantee. And so we pray boldly and confidently, persistently and continually; knowing that the Lord loves us and cares for us and will always graciously give us to what is good. Amen.