

Effective Prayer - James 5:16

by Jon Courson

Jon Courson emphasizes the power of effectual, fervent, and righteous prayer, using Elijah as a model for effective communication with God.

Scripture: 1 Kings 17:1, 1 Kings 18:45, Matthew 6:7, Luke 11:1, John 15:7, Romans 4:3, 2 Corinthians 5:17, 2 Corinthians 5:21, James 5:16

Topics: "Effective Prayer", "Faith In God"

Description

Jon Courson emphasizes the power and priority of prayer, using the example of Elijah to illustrate the effectiveness of effectual, fervent, and righteous prayers. He explains that effectual prayer is aligned with God's Word, fervent prayer involves persistence and deep relationship-building with God, and righteous prayer is based on faith in Jesus Christ. Courson encourages combining prayer with reading the Word to have engaging devotional times and to pray consistently with confidence in God's promises.

Transcript

All of us know there is power in prayer.

And most of us understand that our priority is to be prayer.

After all, we know that although the disciples observed Jesus raising the dead, healing the sick, feeding the multitudes, preaching the Word, walking on water, and casting out demons, they asked Him to teach them how to do only one thing. They asked Him to do the one thing they understood to be foundational to everything else He did. They asked Him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1).

We too understand that there is power in prayer, that our priority is to be prayer -- yet most of us have a problem with prayer because simple exhortations like the one before us become subtle intimidations to us. In our text, I suggest the problem lies in three words . . .

Effectual

James tells us very clearly that it is effectual prayer which avails much -- and uses a man named Elijah as an example of effectual prayer . . . The first time we meet Elijah, he's storming into King Ahab's court, saying, 'It's not going to rain but according to my word.' Scripture records that the clouds indeed went away and no rain fell on Israel for three and a half years (1 Kings 17:1).

How could Elijah speak with such boldness?

James tells us something we wouldn't know from reading the Old Testament account when he tells us Elijah prayed earnestly. What does it mean to pray earnestly? The Greek word translated 'prayer' is 'deesis', which means 'to bow down'. The Greek word translated 'earnestly' is 'proseuche', which means 'to pray'.

This means Elijah could speak to Ahab with certainty and could pray effectively because he was bowed down, submitted to the Scriptures. You see, Deuteronomy 11:16-17-- a text Elijah would surely have known -- says this:

Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them; And then the Lord's wrath be kindled against you, and he shut up the heaven, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit; and lest ye perish quickly from off the good land which the Lord giveth you.

Aware of this promise, Elijah could say to Ahab, 'Because of what you have done in this land by introducing Baal worship, it's not going to rain.' Time passed, and in a confrontation with Elijah, the prophets of Baal found themselves on Mt. Carmel praying hour after hour for their god to send fire as they danced and screamed and slashed their bodies. Finally, Elijah said, 'You've been going all day, boys. Your god has baal-ed out. Now it's my turn.'

And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at they word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the Lord God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again. (1 Kings 18:36-37)

And, after praying this prayer which takes about 7 seconds to utter, fire came down. 'Do not be like the heathen who think they are heard because of their much speaking,' Jesus said (Matthew 6:7) -- and then gave us for a model a prayer 65 words long which takes less than 15 seconds to say slowly.

We think we've got to impress God with lengthy prayers and fancy words. Jesus says, 'No, that's the way of the prophets of Baal, the way of the heathen. Just talk to Me simply.' Elijah knew the Word, was submitted to the Word, and prayed according to the Word.

So too, we must understand that to pray effectively is to combine prayer with reading the Word. You will never again snooze through a service or doze off during devotions if you are praying while you're listening. That is, when a point comes to you that you know is convicting you, talk to the Lord about it right then.

For years, I didn't know this. I thought the right way to fellowship with God was to read a chapter or two in the Word and then pray. But that is as silly as if I called Tammy and said, 'We've got to talk,' and then I proceeded to talk for ten minutes straight --talk, talk, talk, talk, talk -- before saying, 'Now you talk' -- at which point she'd talk, talk, talk, talk to me.

That's the way I thought I was supposed to communicate with the Lord. 'OK, Father, I know You speak to me through Your Word, so I'll listen, listen, listen, listen. Done. Now it's my turn. Pray, pray, pray, pray, pray.'

I'm not saying you can't do it that way, but there's a much better way. That is, as you are reading the Word, a phrase or two will strike you and you right then to talk it over with the Father. You pray about it right then. Then you read a verse or two or three more until something else stirs your thinking or strikes your heart. You pause, and talk to the Lord again.

With tens of thousands of precepts, principles, and promises in this Book, I guarantee you'll never have a boring devotional time if you pray with open Bible and talk to the Father about what you read. So too, if you come in on a Sunday morning or Wednesday evening and say, 'Every time a point hits me, confuses me, or stirs me, I am going to pray about it right then, Bible studies will never, ever again be drowsy for you because it's just impossible to talk to the Father as you're taking in the Word and find yourself bored and slumbering.

'If you abide in Me -- stay close to Me -- and My words abide in you,' Jesus declared, 'you shall ask whatever you will and it shall be done,' (John 15:7). 'If My Word is stirring in you and you're staying close to Me, you'll be able to ask whatever you want as you pray Biblically and it will happen. You'll see.' To pray effectually is to pray Biblically.

Fervent

James tells us that it is not only effectual prayer which avails much, but fervent prayer. And, again, Elijah is our model . . . After calling down fire with a prayer that took only five or six seconds to utter, and after telling Ahab it was going to rain, Scripture records that there, on the top of Mt. Carmel, Elijah placed his head between his knees and prayed for rain. 'Any clouds coming?' he asked his servant. 'There's not a cloud in sight. It's clear and sunny,' his servant answered.

So Elijah put his head between his knees again and prayed some more. 'Any clouds yet?' he asked. 'It's as clear as a bell,' his servant answered. So Elijah put his head between his knees and prayed a third time. 'Any clouds yet?' 'Nothing.' Elijah did this a fourth time, a fifth time, a sixth time. But when he popped up the seventh time, his servant said, 'There's a little tiny cloud the size of a man's fist on the horizon.' 'Great!' said Elijah. 'Batten down the hatches! A storm's coming!' And indeed it did (I Kings 18:45).

If you lived in Bible times, you would know that to give birth a woman would place her head between her knees. That's exactly what Elijah was doing. Prior to this, we saw him standing serenely and praying expectantly. Now we see him praying with fervency, with his head between his knees.

'But I thought we didn't have to go through contortions when we pray,' you say. 'I thought prayer was to be simple.' It is. Then what's Elijah doing? There comes times, gang, when in prayer I will go to the Father and I will pray like Elijah in the first example. I'll pray simply and casually and comfortably. But the fire doesn't come down or the heavens don't open up, and I wonder why.

I have learned that during such seasons, the Father is saying, 'Pray fervently. Come back a second time and a third time, an eighth time and a twelfth time. Why? Because I know what's ahead.'

You see, as the story unfolds, on the heels of his incredible victory on Mt. Carmel, we will see Elijah fall into such depression and despondency that he will despair even of life itself (I Kings 19:4). Knowing this, God says to Elijah, 'What you need, Elijah, is not for Me to respond immediately but to come into My presence repeatedly. I know what's coming -- and you need to log in time with Me.'

So too, sometimes I pray, 'Father, Your Word promises this . . .' and boom! it happens immediately. Other times, God says to me, 'You think you need that relationship resolved or that ministry opened, or that financial matter worked out. But I see where you're going to be tomorrow. I see that what you're really craving is not what you're asking. You're craving Me. So come back three times, seven times, 27 times, 42 times and spend time with Me.' And you know what I have discovered, dear precious people? In coming back over and over with my head between my knees, so to speak, laboring and wondering, I find that what I was so concerned about fades from importance, for I find in Him everything my heart desires.

What was birthed by Elijah that day on the mountain wasn't a rain cloud. It was a relationship. That's what it means to pray fervently -- not to get God's attention, but to birth a deeper relationship with Him Righteous

Righteous

James tells us it is not only effectual and fervent prayers which avail much, but effectual and fervent prayers prayed by a righteous man. And yet again, Elijah is our example . . . James calls Elijah a man of like passions -- a man who had the same vulnerabilities as we do. That explains why, after calling down fire from heaven, and hacking up 450 prophets of Baal single-handedly, frightened by the words of a woman, Elijah ran 70 miles like a chicken with his head cut off only to end up in a cave depressed, discouraged, and defeated.

Here's a man who's just like me. One minute he's up on the mountain; the next minute he's in a cave. One minute, he's victorious over Baal; the next minute, he's done in by despair.

Yet James refers to Elijah as a righteous man. Why?

Because in the New Testament particularly, righteousness is not dependent upon the way we behave. It is dependent upon what we believe.

How do I know this? In Romans 4, Paul reaches back through the tunnel of time and grabs a name for our consideration: Abraham. Simply because Abraham believed God would do what He said He would, that God is Who He declared Himself to be, Abraham was declared righteous (Romans 4:3).

Do you believe God? Do you believe the foundational fact of faith -- that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died on the Cross for your sin and after three days rose again? Do you believe He is your Savior? If so, you are righteous.

'Oh, but you don't know where I was last year,' you say. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says that if any man be in Christ -- and you are -- he is a new creation. Old things are passed away, behold all things are become new. Therefore, regardless of where you've been or what you've done, you're a new creation in Christ. You're righteous.

'Yes, but I have sinned greatly even after becoming a new creation, a believer.' Paul goes on to say, 'And He made Him who knew no sin to be sin that we might be the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus,' (2 Corinthians 5:21). That means God put our sin -- past, present, and the stuff we haven't even done yet -- on the Son.

Therefore, if you are a believer, you are surrounded by Christ, covered with Christ, and washed by the blood of Christ. And you can't get any more righteous than that.

The effectual, fervent prayers of a righteous man availeth much. 'Effectual', 'fervent', and 'righteous' are words which, unless understood Biblically, can intimidate us and keep us from praying consistently. But once we understand their meaning, all that remains is to understand the word, 'much' -- for 'much' is what God has done and wants to continue to do in our lives as we walk with Him and wait on Him in effectual, fervent prayer. Amen.

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