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Sermon: November 25, 2012
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“POWERFUL AND EFFECTIVE”

James 5:14-18

○ Over the past twelve weeks we have discovered that the Book of James is, indeed, {Heb 4:12, 13b, NIV} **“living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”** This book has **“uncovered and laid bare”** the recesses of our souls, has it not?

As we finish this series we come to a passage that cuts me deeper than any other in James. It pierces my soul and lays open my heart, exposing my faith and doubts and hopes and fears.

○ Yet this text, like {2 Ti 3:16-17, TNIV} **“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all”** of us who are **“God’s people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”**

○ So it is my prayer that today I will {2 Ti 2:15, TNIV} **“present [myself] to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”** It is also my prayer that you will do the same and that God’s Word {Is 55:11, NIV} **“will not return... empty, but will accomplish what [he desires] and achieve the purpose for which [he] sent it.”**

■ Please turn with me to James 5:14-16:

Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make them well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

? “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” *What does James mean?*

At first glance, the answer is obvious: when a righteous person prays for the sick, sins are forgiven and diseases are healed. It does happen.

Scripture records scores of astonishing healings.

The pages of Church history are filled with many more since Scripture was written.

☑ And it still happens. In the early 1960s my Dad was an over-the-road driver. One day he fell asleep at the wheel, rolled his truck, and suffered massive injuries including a fractured spine. The doctors expected him to die. Then, after he pulled through, they said he would probably be paralyzed for the rest of his life. But people prayed, God intervened, and Dad’s strength and mobility were restored. I was conceived a few years later. I am, literally, the result of a miraculous healing.

Almighty God is well able to restore sight to the blind, motion to the lame, hearing to the deaf, and life to the dead. And he does; except when he doesn't.

☑ AmyLynn has been afflicted with Amplified Pain Syndrome for two years. Her physical symptoms are bad enough, but that isn't the whole story. When chronic pain invades your life, it tends to bring some nasty friends with it: fatigue, frustration, anxiety, anger, fear, depression.

We have repeatedly gone to the {Heb 4:16, TNIV} “**throne**” seeking “**mercy and... grace.**” We have entreated the Lord with extended petitions, with the one-word cry for “**Help!**” and with silence. We have wept before God. We have prostrated ourselves before God.

Our family and friends are praying for AmyLynn. Their small groups and prayer chains have prayed. My pastor friends have prayed.

This congregation has prayed. Some of you pray for our daughter's relief and restoration every day. We have prayed dozens of times in worship. And on July 15th we prayed over AmyLynn (and several others), with the laying on of hands and anointing with oil.

Thank you. We are stronger, more patient, and more hopeful with your prayers than without them. Sovereign God is using this struggle to glorify his Name, to conform us to the likeness of Jesus and to bless others, and prayer is essential to that process. Please, keep on praying. We will.

Still: God has not yet healed Amy-Lynn. Will he do so before the resurrection? We cannot say.

Some would say to us that we have not prayed enough. I say to them: How many prayers do you think it takes before the Living God hears his people?

Some would say to us that we have not prayed in faith. I say to them: Our {Mt 17:20} faith is at least the size of a mustard seed. Christ Jesus said that is enough.

Some would say to us that we must not be righteous people. I say to them: Hundreds of people have prayed for AmyLynn. Is not even one righteous?

? So, *in what ways is “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective”?*

- In chapter 1, verses 5-8 James writes:

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. Those who doubt should not think they will receive anything from the Lord; they are double-minded and unstable in all they do.

Does the Scripture say “If any lacks bodily health, or money, or safety and ease, you should ask God and it will be given”?

No! It says: **“If any of you lacks *wisdom*, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.”** This is not to suggest that we must not ask for other

things; it is to say that God is under no obligation to say “Yes” if we do.

📖 The promise is that the Lord will give us **“wisdom,”** by which James means supernatural knowledge that empowers us for righteous living and is manifested in deeds of holiness, mercy and justice.

○ God’s promise has to do with character instead of comfort. This is driven home by the immediate context. Verses 2-4: **“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know”** what – that God will always rescue you from tribulation? No! **“because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance”** (that is a character quality). **“Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything”** (those are character qualities).

James consistently reveals that God’s priority is not to spare us *from* hardship but to strengthen us *in* and transform us *through* hardship.

🔮 *Might it be that “the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” because it helps to develop patience, hope, humility, gratitude, purity, self-control, mercy, love, and faith?*

■ But there is more to it than that. James 5:17-18: **“Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.”**

But haven’t God-fearing Christ followers lost their homes and lives to floods even though they fervently prayed for the rain to stop? Haven’t faithful Jesus people lost everything to drought despite heartfelt prayers for the rain to start?

✈ The example of Elijah is not about controlling the weather or performing miracles through prayer: it is about God accomplishing his purpose through righteous people as they pray.

☑ Righteous people prayed and my Dad was not paralyzed. Righteous people prayed and Joni Eareckson has been a quadriplegic for the past 45 years. God accomplished his purpose.

☑ Righteous people prayed and Corrie Ten Boom was released alive from a Nazi concentration camp. Righteous people prayed and her sister Betsie died there. God accomplished his purpose.

☑ Righteous people prayed and the apostle John died of natural causes at a very old age. Righteous people prayed and all the other apostles and James who wrote this book were martyred. God accomplished his purpose.

Hearing this, some are tempted to give up praying. What’s the point, they say, if God is going to do what God is going to do?

But that contradicts the command to bring our petitions to him, it assumes that the main function of prayer is to get God to do things for us, and it presumes that we understand God’s specific will for particular situations. (We can be very confident of God’s general will for us: it is revealed to us in {Ex 20:1-

17) the Ten Commandments; in his call to {Mic 6:8} do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with him; in {Mt 5-7} the Sermon on the Mount; in {Mt 28:18-20} the Great Commission; and above all in {Mt 22:37-40} the commandments to love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.)

○ This takes us back to 4:3: **“When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”**

It is often right to pray for sustenance or healing. Nevertheless, otherwise good requests become sinful when we are substantially motivated by pride, envy, hatred, bitterness, laziness, greed, gluttony, or lust.

A word of caution: when God answer’s our requests with a “No,” it is not always an indication of human sin. Pure motives do not guarantee that God will act as we desire. But they do help us to pray in harmony with God’s will, and they do equip us to serve his purposes.

? *Might it be that “the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” because it makes us better instruments in his hands?*

I do not pretend to have all the answers. I will continue to wrestle with these questions until I see the Lord Jesus face to face.

In the meantime, I take comfort in knowing that God is God, and God is good.

By his grace, we are able to have a faith that is alive and active and powerful to save, regardless of our trials and tribulations. By his grace, we can {Jas 1:4, TNIV} **“let perseverance finish its work so that [we] may be**

mature and complete, not lacking anything.” And {Jas 1:12, TNIV} **“when”** by his grace we **“have stood the test, [we] will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”**