

A Powerful Prayer

St. Mark Lutheran
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Pastor Ken Welsh
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The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. James 5:16

We can certainly say, on the basis of accounts in the Holy Scriptures, that prayer can be very powerful. The people of Israel cried out to be free from slavery in Egypt and God heard and answered their prayers. (Exodus 2:23) Moses prayed and got a glimpse of God's glory. (Exodus 33:18) Elijah prayed that God strike from heaven and consume his sacrifice covered with water before the prophets of Baal, and fire came from heaven. (1 Kings 18:38). Elisha prayed that God would blind and then open the eyes of the Syrian army to protect Elisha and his servant, and it was so. (2 Kings 6:18) Hannah prayed that she would have a son, and promised that she would give that son to the Lord, and she gave birth to Samuel, one of God's prophets. (1 Samuel 1:11) Jarius prayed that his daughter, who was at the point of death, would be healed and Jesus healed her. (Mark 5:23) Peter was in prison, his life in danger because King Herod had just killed the Apostle James. The church prayed that Peter would be rescued, and he was. (Acts 12:5).

While Christians can believe that God answered prayers in the Bible, many find it more difficult to believe that he answers prayers today for them! We must not forget that we are God's people also. We have been purchased at a price (1 Corinthians 6:20), are deeply loved (John 3:16), and are members of his church and his ambassadors at this time in history (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Of course God answers prayers for his people today. Last Sunday we had class #6 in our Life With God series. The title of that lesson was "Five Keys to a Strong Christian Life". Prayer is one of the five keys. How could anyone possibly have a strong Christian life when he is not talking regularly to the one who gave him life in the first place and then paid for his sins?

So, as we are New Testament Christians, let us look at what the New Testament says about prayer. James 5:16 states "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." But know this, we are not righteous in or of ourselves. We are covered with the righteousness of Jesus Christ because of faith in him. Furthermore, let us understand one more thing. The power is not our own. The power is from the Holy Spirit, who can direct things and change things.

So we should pray. But how our prayers are going to be answered is up to God. We have to respect his sovereignty here. He is an all-knowing God and knows factors that relate to our request that we don't. His answer may be "Yes". His answer may be "No". Or he may be silent. The answer may come much later on.

Now we can't do much about God's thinking about our requests. But there is one thing we should look at closely. This may surprise you. We need to make sure that WE are not the reason the prayer is not answered. Pastor Derek Gelhart wrote a whole sermon on this subject. He called it "7 Barriers to Effective Prayer". I tinkered with it a bit and came up with six, but the following is mostly from his thoughts on the matter:

Barrier # 1: We make an inappropriate request. What would you think of a person praying to be rich? I would think not, unless it had a very good Christian purpose. How about praying for a son or daughter to be born and be a professional sports star? I would think that selfish requests to gratify one's desires is not what God is looking for in prayer.

Barrier #2: Prayerlessness. Have you ever had someone share the terrible details of a problem they are facing with you, and you instantly tell them you are going to pray for them, and you don't? Or how about the "one and done" prayers? If that is all the time we can invest in praying for someone else we can't be very concerned.

Barrier #3: Sin that is not confessed. Don't ever forget that we are praying to a holy and perfect God. If we don't talk to him for six months, and then we have a big problem and there is no way to solve it, what does he think when we run to him as our last option? We are also told in Scripture that cherishing sin in our heart can lead to God not listening to us. (Psalms 66:18; Isaiah 59:2)

Barrier #4: The fourth barrier to unanswered prayers is unresolved conflict with others. Mathew 5:23-24 says if you are leaving a gift for God at the altar, and remember that somebody has something against you, you should go and be reconciled with that person before leaving your gift. Also, never forget the words of the Lord's Prayer which say, forgive us our trespasses AS we forgive those who trespass against us."

Barrier #5: Do you pray but have an uncaring attitude about the matter. That could be a barrier. The command to love one another is not filled just with words, but also with deeds. For example, to pray for the hungry, but to have the means and never do anything about feeding the hungry, would certainly indicate an uncaring attitude.

Barrier # 6: Doubt. James tells us that those who ask in a doubting manner are like a ship being tossed about by the waves of the sea. A person like that should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. (James 1:6-7)

We have a good example of a powerful prayer in our epistle reading from Ephesians 3 today. You need to know some of the context to appreciate what makes this a powerful prayer. Paul is suffering-again. He is in prison. What is he doing? He is thinking of others. He knows that the Ephesians have to be concerned about what is going to happen to them now that Paul is in prison. Will they be arrested too? Should they possibly return to their old-time safe religions? Paul prays to God to calm their worries and fears. He prays that they "may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth", in other words, the enormity of God's love for them.

Probably many of us go through a season of prayerlessness at some time. It may be due to one or more of the barriers mentioned, but it can easily occur when things are going well and you are being blessed on the mountaintop. If your life is at a peak right now, don't forget how you got there, and to whom you owe your very life. Let us praise our God always, and remember that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective if asked with the right attitude and with the goal of glorifying God.

Let me conclude with one last thought. I have no doubt that some people do not pray because they are not sure how to do so. The disciples themselves asked Jesus to teach them to pray. He responded by teaching them The Lord's Prayer. It's a wonderful prayer, but it is a model, not a prayer meant to cover all situations.

If you have trouble praying, or are not sure what to say, you should try the "ACTS" method. Many of us have used that for years. It is based on teachings in the Holy Scriptures. Each letter in the word "ACTS" stand for an important area that can be covered in our prayers. The "A" stands for adoration; the "C" stands for confession; the "T" stands for "thanks"; and the "S" stands for supplication, or praying for others. "ACTS" helps keep us focused, and it can help form the framework for a powerful prayer. For your personal prayer time, I would also recommend that you have a regular time to do it, find a private place, and pray out loud, so that your mind does not drift off during your prayer. Expect to be blessed.

Let us pray: "Heavenly Father, we praise you for life and salvation and the many blessings you shower on us. We confess that we often come up short and give in to sinful ways too many times. Thank you for your love and your patience, and the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Be our guide and our strength as we travel on toward the better place and the better life that you have in store for us. And help us to share the good news about Jesus Christ that others might come to know the way also. In the Name of him who died, that we might live forever. Amen."