

Fil-Am Community Church

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“THE EXTRAORDINARY POWER OF PRAYER”

James 5:13-18

¹³ 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.

Good morning! Last Friday, we woke up to the news about the horrible mass shooting in a theater in Colorado. Twelve people lost their lives while scores were injured. It was a senseless killing. As a result, many again are bemoaning the fact that heinous crimes like this happen because of the educational, court, and social systems in this country that have gone out of kilter. These systems are proceeding down the wrong path. And many are growing up disturbed and troubled. But what many don't realize and, perhaps, don't admit, is that this country has strayed far away from its Judeo-Christian roots. It no longer values its Christian heritage. God has been

relegated to the background while more and more liberal, anti-Christian, and anti-God groups and individuals have been promoting their agenda.

I believe it all started when prayer and Bible reading were banned in public schools 50 years ago. They banned prayer because they said that there must be a separation between state and religion. Of course, that move was unconstitutional but that's another matter.

When they took out prayer and Bible reading, they took out the very things that provided strong moral support to the educational system. And so, what we have now are children growing up with weak moral and spiritual fibers. In fact, this country's morality has declined since that ban.

Here is a prayer commonly used in schools up until 1962:

"Almighty God we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers, and our Country."

What happened in the United States in the years following the banning of prayer and Bible reading from public schools? Now, I'm going to cite statistics that have been carefully compiled by Charles D. Barton in his book "America: to Pray or not to Pray."

Just to cite a few examples:

*Pregnancies in Teen Aged Girls - By 1994 had gone up 400%-Highest rate of teen aged motherhood in the West.

*Sexually Transmitted Diseases - Cases of gonorrhea up almost 400% among students age 10 to 14.

*Two Thirds of teenage boys say they've had sex. By the time they are 18 they've had on average, 5 partners.

*Rapes committed by 13-14 year old boys increased 186%.

Folks, these are just some of the startling statistics that are contained in the 40 charts that the author presented in the book. And all these statistics came from government records. 40 charts clearly show the degradation of morals, the increase in violence, the increase in disease, and the drop in performance on standardized tests since 1962. The question is, what was the case before the ban in 1962? Let me tell you, and the author shows in statistics as well that almost all these indicators of civilized life were pretty much constant until 1962.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to conclude that prayer is the difference. So, what do we need more in this country? Prayer! What do we need to bring back this country from moral decay? Prayer!

This morning, prayer is what I'd like to talk about. Prayer is the one instrument that God uses to bring us closer to him and show his power to us. Sadly, not many people believe this. Even Christians! They believe they have

been saved, they believe in Jesus, in heaven, in the virgin birth, in the fundamentals of the faith, but they don't believe in prayer. If that were so, they would make it one of the most important tasks of their everyday lives.

I know we say a prayer here and there and then rationalize that we're praying without ceasing. I'm not discounting that because that's biblical. But the Bible also says to allot a portion of our time to be with God in a concentrated manner. That's why the Bible says that Jesus went away many times in order to be with his father. Mark 1:35 says, "*Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray.*" Should we do less than our master?

So today, we come to the third message in our series, "Extraordinary Power for Ordinary People". Our text comes from the book of James. Please turn to your Bibles and open to James 5:13-18 and let us read together. According to research, the writer is not the apostle James but the half-brother of Jesus.

This morning, I'd like to talk about four principles we need to know about the extraordinary power of prayer. I think we can only start to take prayer seriously if we know what's truly involved. So, let me tackle the first principle which is this:

1. PRAYER IS POWERFUL

In our passage, James enumerates just a few of the things that prayer can do. In the first few verses, he says prayer can help you when you're in trouble. Maybe because of circumstances or relationships. Prayer can also make the sick person well. And through prayer we can be forgiven of our sins.

So, pretty much he touches on the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of our lives that prayer can make a difference in.

No one can really explain how prayer works. But one thing is sure. It works. The Bible is clear that it is our lifeline to God. The Bible is clear too that our prayers reach heaven and enters the throne of God. Hebrews 4:16 (CEV) says, *“So whenever we are in need, we should come bravely before the throne of our merciful God. There we will be treated with undeserved kindness, and we will find help.”*

Because prayer works even the secular world has taken notice of the power of prayer. Scientists, for example, have been studying prayer's role in healing people who are sick. In general, these studies have suggested that people who are religious seem to heal faster or cope with illness more effectively than do the non-devout. In fact, a study was conducted in 1988 about intercessory prayer at San Francisco General Hospital. That study, one of the only published studies of its kind, found that prayer was beneficial because patients who were prayed for and didn't even know they were being prayed for were able to go home from the hospital sooner than those who weren't prayed for.

Now to have a sense of where prayer fits into the whole picture we need to get a heavenly perspective on just how powerful prayer really is. There was a time when a missionary named Irene Webster-Smith was working in Tokyo. This was in the early after World War II. She was working in Tokyo and she was working with IntersVarsity Fellowship, teaching Japanese college students about Christ. They needed a center for the student work in the city, and so she went and talked to a Japanese woman about a piece of property there in Tokyo and the woman said, "I'm sorry. It's not for sale anymore. Someone has already agreed to buy it." And so Irene said to her, "Well, in case it falls through, please let me know." The woman said, "It's not going to happen because we already have an agreement."

A day or two later the woman contacted Irene and said, "The deal fell through; so I am offering it to you, do you have the money for it?" At which point, Irene said, "No, I don't. I don't have a penny of it, but I serve a God who owns the cattle on a thousand hills. I will pray about it. Would you be willing to take \$3,000 a month for the next six months for us to pay?" And the woman said yes she would.

So, on the last Friday of every month, Irene was supposed to make a deposit in the bank and it was to be transferred to the woman's account. And she made that payment, holding on to the verse from the Book of Philippians, the fourth chapter that says, "Don't be anxious about anything but through prayer and supplication with thanksgiving make your request known to God" and so she did, and so she made the payments month after month. But there

came one month that that final Friday came, and she did not have the money. On that day, the bank called her saying, "We are doing an audit and doing some inventory in the bank. We are not taking any new transactions today. Could you wait and do your deposit on Monday?"

On that weekend she spoke to a bunch of American GI's there in Japan and she raised \$3,000 and the next day went to the bank to make the final payment. When it was all over, and she had paid for it all and the property was hers, she talked to the woman who owned the property and the woman said to her, "When you said that you didn't have the money, but that God would give it to you, I made the decision to let you do that because I have been a Shinto believer my whole life, and I have made countless prayers and none of them have been answered. I have lost my husband and my sons to the war and I made a decision at that point that if your God would answer this kind of prayer, then I would follow that God." And so at that point, Irene Webster-Smith led this Japanese woman to know Jesus Christ.

Prayer is powerful. It makes a difference. That's the first principle. The second principle says,

2. THE POWER OF PRAYER COMES FROM A POWERFUL GOD

The power of prayer is not the result of the person praying. Rather, the power resides in the God who is being prayed to. 1 John 5:14-15 (NASB) tells us, *"This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything*

according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him." No matter the person praying, the passion behind the prayer, or the purpose of the prayer - God answers prayers that are in agreement with His will. His answers are not always yes, but are always in our best interest. When our desires line up with His will, we will come to understand that in time. When we pray passionately and purposefully, according to God's will, God responds powerfully!

We cannot access powerful prayer by using "magic formulas." Our prayers being answered is not based on the eloquence of our prayers. We don't have to use certain words or phrases to get God to answer our prayers. In fact, Jesus rebukes those who pray using repetitions. In Matthew 6 he says, *"And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him"*.

Prayer is communicating with God. All you have to do is ask God for His help. Psalm 107:28-30 (NIV) reminds us, *"Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven."*

The important thing to remember is that God who answers our prayer is powerful. Because he is alive and real.

The Bible tells the story of the prophet Elijah who challenges the 450 prophets of the false god Baal to a contest. He wants to prove to the Israelites and to these prophets as well who the real God is. These false prophets make sacrifices, even hurt themselves, to get Baal's attention. But nothing happens after several hours. Then, Elijah prepares his sacrifice. He pours water on it three times, and prepares a moat to keep the water in. This makes the offering difficult to set fire to. Elijah calls on God once. And the Lord sent fire which not only consumes the wet offering, but also all the wood, the stones, the very dirt under the altar, and also took all the water! The people recognizes God and worship him.

This episode in Elijah's life brings us to the third principle of prayer.

3. A RIGHTEOUS LIFE RESULTS INTO A POWERFUL PRAYER

In verses 17 and 18, James tells us of another time when Elijah prayed, *“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.”*

Note that he says Elijah was just like us, he was an ordinary human being. An ordinary man who experienced the extraordinary power of prayer. In fact, most of his prayers were answered by God. Like when he prayed for God to bring back to life a boy who was dead and God did.

What sets Elijah apart from many of us is in verse 16 which says, “*The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*” Obviously, James had in mind Elijah when he wrote this. He realized that Elijah lived a righteous life that’s why his prayers were always answered.

What does it mean to live a righteous life? In simple terms, it means to live a life that is right. Right before the eyes of God. Today, many people say that they are right but they are actually wrong. We’ve heard of the term politically correct.

It may be politically correct but spiritually wrong. Man’s standards are not God’s standards. And God’s standards are written in his word the Bible.

Let me give just two of these. Two that are important. First is humility. We cannot come to God unless we acknowledge our lowly position before a holy and just God. Unless we admit our sins to God, we cannot come to him.

The Psalmist says, “*Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false.*” (Psalm 24:3-4) He is saying we cannot come to the presence of God unless we are living lives that are pure and godly. And James himself expresses the same principle in his letter in 4:8, “*Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*”

The problem is, we don't admit to our sins. Today we use other words. We say, "I goofed" or "I blew it" or we talk about "mistakes" and "weaknesses" and we say "I made a boo-boo" or "My bad." But those terms tend to define sin downward.

It has been said that the three hardest words to say in the English language are: "I was wrong." Every husband soon learns how hard it is to say those words. But when all is said and done, no wife likes to say them either. Most of us would rather do anything than to admit we were wrong. Do you remember how much trouble Fonzie had with this issue on the TV series *Happy Days*? Fonzie was too cool to ever admit he was wrong. Richie Cunningham would say to him, "Go ahead, admit it, you were wrong." So Fonzie would go, "I was wr-r-r-r-r-r-r-." And he couldn't get the word out. So he would end up saying, "I was wr-r-r-r-r-Not right!" But "not right" is not the same thing as "wrong." If you're wrong, you're wrong. But if you are "not right," nobody really knows what you are.

I read the story of this man whose marriage was in trouble. After many years of marriage, his wife told him recently that she is thinking about leaving him. The reasons are not easy to explain but he admitted that he has problems with intimacy and knowing how to show love and affection. For several months they have been in counseling and the man said that his wife and the counselor figured out his problem long before he did. He then said: "You know what they say. Denial is not just a river in Egypt." How true. Many people are in trouble spiritually because they are floating down the

River of Denial. They would rather live in blissful ignorance than to look in the mirror of reality. But until you are willing to come clean about your problems, you can never get better. The River of Denial flows into the Ocean of Disaster.

The second standard is Obedience. To live a righteous life means to obey God and obeying God means living according to God's will. So, after confession, repentance must follow. Repentance is doing what God requires us to do. It means forsaking our old ways and doing what is right before God. The Bible says in 1 Samuel 15:22, *"Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams."* This is repeated in Proverbs 21:3 which says, *"To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice."*

So, the question is, is there anything in our lives that we need to confess and repent of? Are we harboring grudges? Are we sneaking to our computers in the darkness of night to get to the internet? Do we have a critical spirit? Do we gossip? Do we desire things we shouldn't? Do we say things we shouldn't?

Do we have secret sins? Do we love our neighbors as we should?

4. Being Prayerful Unleashes the Power of Prayer

Now, it is easy to believe and apply the first two principles, prayer is powerful and the power of prayer comes from a powerful God.

The third principle could be a bit hard. But the fourth principle is where the rubber meets the road. Because it demands something from us. It requires us to do something every day and every moment of our lives.

By the way, the writer of this passage we are talking about, James, has been dubbed as “Old Camel Knees”. James was called such because his knees were calloused from time spent in prayer--on his knees. He prayed so long and so much that his knees were known as camel’s knees.

Now, of course, you don’t have to kneel to pray. Any position will do just fine. God knows the position of your heart. What we’re talking about here is if we want answers to prayer, we need to pray and pray more often. Prayer is not a one-shot deal. It requires patience and persistence. That’s why we haven’t scrapped our prayer meeting every Wednesday night even though there are only a few people praying there sometimes. I still want us to see and to know that prayer matters in this church. But I do hope that more of you would come to our prayer meeting. Every now and then, we also hold prayer and fasting. One is coming up. On August 25th. We will have it at Kuya Elvin’s residence. It’s about time we pray again together as a family. It’s about time we experience again the extraordinary power of God through prayer.

Let me share a true story of how being prayerful unleashes the power of prayer. This was told by Helen Rosegreave, a missionary to Africa, in her testimony at Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg.

One night, in Central Africa, I had worked hard to help a mother in the labor ward; but in spite of all that we could do, she died leaving us with a tiny, premature baby and a crying, two-year-old daughter. We would have difficulty keeping the baby alive. We had no incubator. We had no electricity to run an incubator, and no special feeding facilities. Although we lived on the equator, nights were often chilly with treacherous drafts.

A student-midwife went for the box we had for such babies and for the cotton wool that the baby would be wrapped in. Another went to stoke up the fire and fill a hot water bottle. She came back shortly, in distress, to tell me that in filling the bottle, it had burst. Rubber perishes easily in tropical climates. "...and it is our last hot water bottle!" she exclaimed. As in the West, it is no good crying over spilled milk; so, in Central Africa it might be considered no good crying over a burst water bottle. They do not grow on trees, and there are no drugstores down forest pathways. All right," I said, "Put the baby as near the fire as you safely can; sleep between the baby and the door to keep it free from drafts. Your job is to keep the baby warm."

The following noon, as I did most days, I went to have prayers with many of the orphanage children who chose to gather with me. I gave the youngsters various suggestions of things to pray about and told them about the tiny

baby. I explained our problem about keeping the baby warm enough, mentioning the hot water bottle. The baby could so easily die if it got chilled. I also told them about the two-year-old sister, crying because her mother had died. During the prayer time, one ten-year-old girl, Ruth, prayed with the usual blunt consciousness of our African children. "Please, God," she prayed, "send us a water bottle. It'll be no good tomorrow, God, the baby'll be dead; so, please send it this afternoon." While I gasped inwardly at the audacity of the prayer, she added by way of corollary, "

...And while You are about it, would You please send a dolly for the little girl so she'll know You really love her?" As often with children's prayers, I was put on the spot. Could I honestly say, "Amen?" I just did not believe that God could do this. Oh, yes, I know that He can do everything: The Bible says so, but there are limits, aren't there? The only way God could answer this particular prayer would be by sending a parcel from the homeland. I had been in Africa for almost four years at that time, and I had never, ever received a parcel from home.

Anyway, if anyone did send a parcel, who would put in a hot water bottle? I lived on the equator!

Halfway through the afternoon, while I was teaching in the nurses' training school, a message was sent that there was a car at my front door. By the time that I reached home, the car had gone, but there, on the veranda, was a large twenty-two pound parcel! I felt tears pricking my eyes. I could not open the parcel alone; so, I sent for the orphanage children. Together we pulled off

the string, carefully undoing each knot. We folded the paper, taking care not to tear it unduly. Excitement was mounting. Some thirty or forty pairs of eyes were focused on the large cardboard box. From the top, I lifted out brightly colored, knitted jerseys. Eyes sparkled as I gave them out. Then, there were the knitted bandages for the leprosy patients, and the children began to look a little bored. Next, came a box of mixed raisins and sultanas - - that would make a nice batch of buns for the weekend. As I put my hand in again, I felt the...could it really be? I grasped it, and pulled it out. Yes, "A brand-new rubber, hot water bottle!" I cried. I had not asked God to send it; I had not truly believed that He could. Ruth was in the front row of the children. She rushed forward, crying out, "If God has sent the bottle, He must have sent the dolly, too!" Rummaging down to the bottom of the box, she pulled out the small, beautifully dressed dolly. Her eyes shone: She had never doubted! Looking up at me, she asked, "Can I go over with you, Mummy, and give this dolly to that little girl, so she'll know that Jesus really loves her?"

That parcel had been on the way for five whole months, packed up by my former Sunday School class, whose leader had heard and obeyed God's prompting to send a hot water bottle, even to the equator. One of the girls had put in a dolly for an African child -- five months earlier in answer to the believing prayer of a ten-year-old to bring it "That afternoon!" "

And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear." Isaiah 65:24

Let us Pray...