

EFFECTUAL, FERVENT PRAYER

Dr. Arthur Maricle

The book of James, chapter 5, is comprised of 3 distinct but complementary parts. First, there is a warning to rich believers who are overly enamored with, and distracted by, the power and pleasures they can purchase with their wealth. Second, there is an appeal to us as saints to patiently await our ultimate deliverance, when we will receive the rewards of our faithfulness. Third, there are practical suggestions for enduring the crises of life that we must encounter during our earthly sojourn.

The last of those practical suggestions for living our short but difficult lives on this sin-cursed planet in sin-saturated flesh is this exhortation to us from the Holy Spirit:

📖 James 5:

- 16 **Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.**
- 17 **Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months.**
- 18 **And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.**
- 19 **Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him;**
- 20 **Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.**

These 5 verses begin with a command attached to a great truth, followed by a demonstration of the power of that principle, and closing not just the passage, but the whole book of James, with a promise to those who will trust that doctrine, and practice it as a spiritual discipline.

The command is found in:

- 16 **Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed....**

Note that we are to confess our **“faults one to another”**, not our *sins*. True, Bible-believing pastors do not function as do Roman Catholic priests, who pretend to have the authority to hear the confessions of individuals, and the power to absolve them from the guilt and penalty of those sins. In the first place, we are instructed to **“Confess your faults one to another”**, not necessarily to a pastor or any other “man of God”. This is one way that Christians care for each other.

So, what is the difference between faults and sins? A fault is a weakness in one’s character; a sin is a specific act of rebellion against God’s Word. It’s the difference between admitting to a brother that I struggle with laziness, and asking him to pray that I may become more industrious; and telling him that yesterday I slept the day away instead of going to work. It’s the difference between admitting that I struggle with a loose, critical tongue, and asking him to pray for me that I might be more discreet and charitable; and telling him that yesterday I called a dozen of our mutual friends and told them every bad thing that I know about him. It’s the difference between asking my brother to pray for me as a struggle with impure thoughts and impulses; and informing him that I am not only actively watching pornography, but fantasizing about committing adultery with his wife. At the one level (confessing my faults), I am engaging sympathetic support in my personal struggles; at the other extreme (confessing my sins), I may create unforeseen complications that will permanently sever trust and forever compromise relationships.

Yes, there is a time and place when I need to be very forthright and honest about my fleshly indulgences, but I must be sure that I am seeking the counsel and intercession of a particularly Godly, mature spiritual mentor — one whom I can trust absolutely. As a rule, however, I should only go so

far as to confess my faults to a brother, and my sins to God. **“For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus...”** {1st Timothy 2:5}

The truth around which this passage in James 5 is wrapped is the second half of:

16 ...The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

People confess their faults to us as we serve them in our roles as mates, parents, pastors, ministry leaders, business owners and managers, and friends. When we follow through and pray for them regarding those defects in their characters, those weaknesses can be repaired by the Holy Spirit. The wounds can be healed. The breaches can be closed. The chasms between what they are and what God wants them to be can be bridged. Only then can those people find peace with God and contentment in their lives.

How, then, can we not pray as we ought for those who confess their faults to us? Consider the wonderful balance achieved by Samuel when he reassured Israel by saying, **“...Fear not: ye have done all this wickedness: yet turn not aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart; And turn ye not aside: for then should ye go after vain things, which cannot profit nor deliver; for they are vain. For the LORD will not forsake his people for his great name’s sake: because it hath pleased the LORD to make you his people. Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way: Only fear the LORD, and serve him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great things he hath done for you. But if ye shall still do wickedly, ye shall be consumed, both ye and your king.”**¹

Consider what the Holy Spirit is teaching us in James 5:17 and 18 about the Prophet Elijah. The God who will hear the prayers of a man and, in response, bring a nation to its knees through a 3½ year drought, and then honor one more prayer from that same man so that the rains did return, restoring that country’s prosperity, has the power to rectify and restore an erring saint. For that matter, God can save a failing marriage, a straying child, a backsliding friend, a lost soul, a faltering church, a deteriorating ministry, or a dying business. Through the power of God accessed and activated by prayer — **“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man”** — a blundering sinner can be converted; an erring saint can be restored.

Clearly implied in the next 2 verses is the pleasure of the Father that results from our prayerful intervention in the life of a wayward brother.

**19 Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him;
20 Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.**

This passage is also tied to the promised rewards that come to those who are patient and remain faithful to the Lord in consistently exercising themselves in their spiritual disciplines.

7 Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for [next 3 words] the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.

11 Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen [next 5 words] the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.

¹ 1st Samuel 12:20-24

God sets aside great rewards for the Christian who will utilize the power of prayer to coax an erring brother out of his rebellious state, and back to a life of service to the Lord. If we as Biblical fundamentalists ever needed to see wounded spiritual soldiers healed and returned to active duty, it is *now!*

But such a miracle demands a specific kind of prayer from the right kind of person: **“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”**

“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” The prayer must first be EFFECTUAL.

In the military there is a command to “Fire for effect”. When that instruction is issued, it means that there is not merely a need for a vast volume of fire directed toward the enemy; rather, the soldier is being ordered to carefully aim each round at a specific target. Likewise, to *pray for effect* means not just sending toward Heaven a quick list of generalized prayers (“Dear Lord, please save souls; and, dear God, please bless our church”), but rather to bring specific details about a given matter to the throne of grace (“Dear Lord, please break down Bob’s stubbornness and pride, and overcome his atheistic excuses, so that he will soon put his faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ; please, Holy Spirit, draw Bob to our Saviour so that he will be born again and join us in Heaven someday”).

During the first Gulf War, we learned about and heard much about “smart bombs”. Unlike bombing campaigns in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, we no longer needed to carpet bomb whole cities and cause massive civilian casualties; rather, an airman could drop a bomb and then guide precisely onto a specific target, minimizing damage to surrounding structures and saving innocent lives. Likewise, you need to view your prayers as smart bombs or guided missiles that are focused on very exact objectives. You need to “program” your prayers for maximum effectiveness.

Most prayer in our personal lives, families, and churches is so generalized and haphazard that it is almost worthless. If you pray, “God bless all our missionaries all over the world”, it’s a nice sentiment; but what does it accomplish? And how will you know if and when your prayer is answered in the affirmative? It is so much better to ask individual missionaries whom your church supports, or with whom you feel a special affinity, to include you on their mailing lists so you can receive their prayer letters; then, one by one, bring the exact needs of those brethren and their ministries before the throne of grace. And don’t just offer a single prayer. Organize yourself so you can bring those petitions before the Lord daily, or perhaps weekly, until you receive a given missionary’s next prayer letter, or you learn that the prayer has been answered, or until the Holy Spirit impresses upon your mind to cease bringing that matter before Christ.

Pray for effect.

Jesus taught that for prayer to effectual, it must be prefaced with a recognition of the Almighty God whom you are addressing. Our Lord taught us in:

 Matthew 6:

9 After this manner therefore pray ye: “Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.”

Make it clear to the Heavenly Father that you recognize that He alone is Almighty; that He is absolutely holy; that He is your only hope to accomplish that which is otherwise impossible; that you are nothing, and He is everything.

As you begin to pray, Jesus would have you express an acknowledgement that your ultimate goal is for His will to be done, even if you don’t receive the outcome that you are seeking.

10 “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.”

Effectual prayer is very personal prayer. Notice the pronouns as they appear in the next 3 verses:

- 11 **"Give [1] us this day [2] our daily bread.**
 12 **"And forgive [3] us our debts, as [4] we forgive [5] our debtors.**
 13 **"And lead [6] us not into temptation, but deliver [7] us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen."**

This is prayer not just for yourself (me, my, mine), but for others as well (us, we, our) — even for the person who may not pray properly for himself.

You are familiar with the "blood donor" who at some inconvenience to himself divests himself of some of his own blood that he might benefit someone else who needs that blood, even a stranger. Even more laudable is the "bone marrow donor" who endures a painful procedure in order to prolong the life of someone who is suffering from a disorder such as leukemia. You and I as Christians are to enlist as "*prayer donors*": people who sacrifice some measure of personal time and comfort that we might pray for others, even if they are ignorant of the price that we are paying for their wellbeing, or perhaps would even be disdainful of our efforts (as are so many lost souls).

When you get serious about making your prayers effectual, you must ultimately admit, as I have had to do, that developing a prayer list is a vital necessity. Unless you have a phenomenal memory, or are only willing to pray over a handful of matters, you will not be able to remember everything that you need to bring before the Lord on behalf of yourself, your mate, your children, your pastor and church family, your extended family, your friends, your neighbors and coworkers, your nation, etc. A detailed, well-maintained prayer list transforms your petitions from a basic ray of light into a powerful laser beam as you direct the power of God onto a specific issue in a person's life.

There's that word *specific* again, for specificity is vital for you to arm and aim your "smart bombs" of prayer. Be specific in your personal prayer list. May more of our churches become much more specific about the items listed on their church prayer lists.²

When do you as an individual need to add something to your personal prayer list? You add an item to your prayer list whenever the Holy Spirit impresses your mind about a weakness in yourself or another that requires spiritual demolition and reconstruction. **"Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed..."**

When your prayer list becomes so lengthy that it requires more time than you can invest in it on a given day (which will inevitably happen if you truly work at becoming a genuine prayer warrior), give yourself a length of time that you can devote to prayer on a given day, and when that time is expired, place a marker at the spot where you finished praying. Continue praying the next day from that point. Of course, there will always be situations that are of vital, immediate import that you will want to pray about daily until they are either resolved or become routine. It is for this reason that I maintain a "daily priority prayer list" consisting of items that are so crucial to me that I will bring them before the Lord every day, without fail, for one year.³

"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." The prayer must first be EFFECTUAL, but it must also be FERVENT. Jesus continued in:

² Sadly, too many church prayer lists are an almost meaningless hodgepodge of names and needs spread in microscopic text across a sheet of paper that is almost universally ignored by the brethren. I recommend having fewer items presented with accompanying details so that the saints can pray intelligently about those matters, and in a font large enough to make it readily legible. When I was a pastor, I began each prayer list with praises from the past week, followed by current vital prayer requests (which remained on the prayer sheet no more than 8 weeks for a church ministry or member, and 4 weeks for someone outside our church), then by exact needs presented by the missionaries supported by the church (the latter remaining on the prayer sheet for no more than 4 weeks), then by routine and ongoing petitions that rotate onto the prayer sheet from week to week.

³ In the rare instance in which I fail to pray through this list on a given day, I will "double up" and pray through it twice the next day. When the year is expired, I want to know that I brought each of those matters before our Lord 365 times through the foregoing year.

- 6 **“But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.**
- 7 **“But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.**
- 8 **“Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.”**

Maintaining fervency is a challenge for me, as it may well be for you. It often happens that I find myself merely going through the motions of praying through one of my prayer lists. Those petitions have become “**vain repetitions**”. But I do not allow that sad, though temporary, state of affairs to discourage me. I simply reprove myself, and then discipline myself to “put my heart into” my prayers.

It is thrilling when, in the course of pursuing my petitions and bringing them before the Lord, I feel the heat of true fervency overtake my soul. It does not happen in every prayer session, but it is extremely exciting when it does! At such times I feel that my spirit is truly at one with the Holy Spirit. My soul proceeds to soar! Those moments make it worthwhile to “endure” all the hours invested in routine personal devotions.⁴

As our spiritual forefathers used to say, “Keep praying ’til the light shines through.”

Please note in verse 8 that although “**your Father knoweth what things ye have need of**”, the end of the verse emphasizes that He still expects that “**ye ask him.**” Indeed, elsewhere in the New Testament the Holy Spirit has put you on notice that “**ye have not, because ye ask not.**”⁵

“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” The prayer must first be EFFECTUAL, and it must be FERVENT; but it must also emanate from a RIGHTEOUS MAN.

This is where your cultivating of personal righteousness — such as promoting your convictions, maintaining your spiritual disciplines, upholding your standards of proper behavior, and generally striving to do right and live right and think right and speak right — really begins to pay off.

Prayer can be offered by an unrighteous man, but except it be a penitent cry for salvation or restoration, that appeal may never penetrate the stratosphere to reach Heaven.⁶

- 5 **And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.**

Proverbs 15:29 declares, “**The LORD is far from the wicked: but he heareth the prayer of the righteous.**”⁷

“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” Prayer must first be EFFECTUAL, and FERVENT, and generated in the heart of a RIGHTEOUS MAN; then we can be assured that it AVAILETH MUCH. It taps into the miracle-working power of God. The mustard seed of faith translated into prayer can move mountains!

⁴ I liken it to an athlete scoring a winning goal, winning a race, setting a new record, or **otherwise accomplishing something so noteworthy that it makes all the untold hours of practice and self-discipline sink into oblivion.** “Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible.” {1st Corinthians 9:24-25} There is no feeling quite like kneeling before your Master as He places the victor’s crown of laurels upon your brow!

⁵ James 4:2

⁶ “**The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD: but the prayer of the upright is his delight. The way of the wicked is an abomination unto the LORD: but he loveth him that followeth after righteousness.**” {Proverbs 15:8-9}

⁷ Proverbs 15:29

A SUBSEQUENT WORD TO PASTORS

The Holy Spirit reveals in Acts 1:14, “**These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.**” Prayer consists of the routine petitions that we bring before the Lord for His intervention. Supplication takes you a big step further: think of it as going beyond the routine into the urgent. “Please pass the potatoes” is a prayer; “Help, help, I’m drowning!” is a supplication. While every believer is commanded, “**Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints...**”⁸, how much more must this be true for the man of God on behalf of the sheep in his pasture?

Consider further that which is elucidated to us by the Holy Spirit in Acts 6:1-4. “**And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, ‘It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.’**”

A good pastor has many demands made upon his time, physical strength, mental faculties, and spiritual resources. But his first and foremost responsibility is, and must remain, “**prayer and supplication**” combined with “**the ministry of the word.**” If you are too busy for that which we refer to as your “personal devotions” — that is, daily time you spend alone talking to Jesus and allowing Him to speak to you through His Word — then *you are too busy*. Something must be trimmed back to allow you to fulfill those vital responsibilities of prayer, supplication, Bible reading, and sermon preparation; otherwise, you are laboring in the flesh, and thereby diminishing your effectiveness even as you wear yourself out. Think of prayer as being the spiritual hydraulics that multiples your power even as it preserves your strength.

⁸ Ephesians 6:18