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James 4:1-3, 5:16-18

“PRAYER PAYS BIG DIVIDENDS”

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In a simple statement, James declares that prayer pays big dividends. “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” Our Lord Jesus Christ said a similar thing in Matthew 21:22: “And all things, whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive.”

But just what does this mean? Does this mean that God gives anybody just anything he asks for? If so, many people would say, “It doesn’t work. I’ve asked God for a lot of things which I have never received.”

No, this verse says that God answers all true prayer. It does not say that God answers all selfish begging, or that God answers all baby crying or pitiful pleading.

I’ve heard people pray for what I considered to be nothing more than an utterly materialistic selfish request. And when they received no miracle answer to their utterly materialistic request, they said, “See, prayer does not work.” They called it prayer, but God did not call it prayer. God called it selfish begging. James 4:3 says: “You ask and receive not, because you ask amiss, that you may consume it upon your lusts.”

At the other extreme, some tell me that they never ask God for anything for themselves. They only ask for other people. James says that is bending too far in the other direction. In James 4:2 he states that “you have not, because you ask not.”

You see, there is a lot of confusion about prayer and how it works. Is prayer a way to “twist God’s arm” until He gives in? Does it have more effect, when you get “a righteous man,” like a minister or TV evangelist, to pray for you? If we get lots of people to pray for us, is it like getting more signatures on a petition to the county commissioners; and they will have to budge, because of the sheer weight of numbers?

To me, prayer can better be illustrated by this idea: If you are in a boat, and you approach the shore, and if you throw the anchor out until it digs into the sand... then you get hold of the rope and pull the boat to shore until it slides up on the sandy beach, what have you done? You have not moved the shore to the boat. You have moved the boat to the shore.

Prayer is not a scheme whereby we can move God. Rather, it is an exercise whereby we draw ourselves to God, until we are in harmony with God’s plan and purposes, and we have peace. The whole purpose of prayer is not to give us what we

want, when we want it, in just the way that we want it. The whole purpose of prayer is to turn us into the kind of person that God wanted us to be when He put us on this planet! I suggest that a great deal of crying and begging and complaining that goes under the name of praying is not prayer at all in the mind of God.

That's why I believe James qualifies his statement, "The fervent (energetic) prayer of a righteous man avails much." (And, that's why he gives Elijah as an example of true prayer.) True prayer is always answered by a living God. Always!

To make this easier for us to remember, let me suggest that God answers true prayer in one of four ways.

I. WHEN OUR IDEA IS NOT RIGHT, HE SAYS "NO"

When it would prove destructive to our own welfare... no! When it would prove harmful to someone else in God's family... no! When He envisions a better solution to our problem... no! And when He says "no," God is giving you what is best for you!

There is a great church in Toronto, Canada, called "The People's Church. It is world-renowned for sending out and supporting more missionaries than any other church in the world. But there is an unusual story behind it.

Back in the 20's, there was a young minister named Oswald Smith, who wanted to become a foreign missionary. And he prayed: "Oh Father, I want to be a missionary. Open a door of opportunity for me." Now that was a true prayer. It was not begging or selfish. It was a prayer that was aimed at trying to become the kind of person that he thought God wanted him to be. So he prayed: "God, send me to any country where you want me, and make me an effective missionary for thee."

Then Dr. Smith went before the examining boards and the people who approve foreign missionaries, and he failed the test. He didn't meet their (health) qualifications. No matter what he tried, the doors to overseas work were shut.

His first reaction was to weep. Another reaction was to wonder: "Does prayer really work? Here I am offering my life to God as a missionary, and He isn't taking it." Apparently, he was "asking amiss." And he was getting a "no" answer.

Then this brilliant idea came from God: "If I can't go myself, I can build a great mission-minded church that can send others." And he did! Hundreds have gone under his inspiration and sponsorship. God answered the desire of Oswald Smith's heart, even when He had to say "No" to the actual request.

How does God answer prayer?

1. "No," when the idea is not the best idea possible.
2. "No," when the idea is just plain wrong.
3. "No," if—though it might help you—it could prove to be a burden to someone else.
4. When the idea is not right, God answers "No."

II. WHEN THE TIME IS NOT RIGHT, GOD ANSWERS “SLOW”

Nowhere in the Bible is there a verse saying that God will do what you ask Him, when you snap your fingers. Never! God never even promises to tell us WHEN He will answer our prayers. His timing is always perfect, and He knows when it is best to give us what we need.

But, rest assured, God’s delays are not God’s denials! Many people don’t suffer as much from doubt about the effectiveness of prayer, as they suffer from impatience. Hebrews 10:36 encourages us: “For you have need of patience that, after you have done the will of God, you might receive the promise.” God is answering, but perhaps He is saying “slow.”

James uses Elijah’s prayer life as an example. It says “he prayed earnestly that it might not rain,” and at face value, it sounds like he got a 3½ year drought out of it.

I think we need to check the entire story more carefully. (I Kings 17-18) Actually, Elijah’s main desire had been to see his nation come back to God. Israel had been led into idolatry and apostasy by their new king, Ahab, and his heathen wife, Jezebel. And Elijah had fervently prayed about this situation.

I doubt if a drought had crossed his mind at first, although it was a way that God had said He would shake His people up, when they turned away from Him. As Elijah prayed earnestly, God showed Elijah that a 3½ year drought was the only way that the stubborn king and people could be awakened to the fact of their, sinfulness.

So, actually, Elijah had to wait 3½ years before he got an answer to his original prayer that His nation get right with God.

By the way, would you be more zealous for the honor and plan of God for your loved ones than you are for their materialistic well-being? We often pray for our unsaved children or loved ones, that they might come to Christ. But sometimes it takes a disaster — a little working-over in their lives to wake them up. Would we want their salvation so much that we could be willing to pray for God to do whatever it takes? And would we dare, like Elijah, to speak up for God and court their anger, as well as to pray?

God answered Elijah’s prayer by saying “Slow.”

1. If the IDEA is not right, God will answer “NO.”
2. If the TIME is not right, God will answer “SLOW.”

III. IF WE ARE NOT RIGHT, GOD WILL ANSWER “GROW.”

Often God will not answer our prayers until we are ready for them. Elijah was not ready to lead the nation back to God, when he first prayed, any more than they were ready to come back to God. During the 3½ years that followed, God was conditioning him for the day when he would destroy the heathen priests and turn the people back to God. He had to learn more about God’s power and to obey unquestioningly, so that he would be fit

to lead in such a momentous undertaking. So God made him wait 3½ years in order to GROW!

Just so, God must evaluate our readiness for the desires we ask in prayer. When we are not ready for it, God says “Grow.”

The ambitious politician, who doesn't rise immediately to the top in his youthful energy and ambition like he wants to, prays; and probably God says, “Grow up. Power that comes too fast will corrupt you. You're not ready yet. It will spoil you.”

Or here's an aggressive money-maker. Perhaps fortunes are not materializing in the way he planned. He experiences set-backs in his business. And he says: “What is wrong? I've prayed about it. I give a tenth (tithe) of all I make to my church. And now I have a financial set-back. What's wrong?” Probably, if he achieved his financial goals as quickly as he planned—who knows—it might be too fast. He would not be ready for it spiritually.

Or, here is an office-seeker. Now a high position can be terribly destructive. It can go to your head. Success has ruined many a man, unless they are inwardly secure. If our ambition is primarily for ego-satisfaction, then you can expect God to say: “Grow up first.” That is the kindest thing He could do for us!

As a young minister, I used to wonder why God didn't turn me loose on a waiting world. Why, there were a couple little old ladies who said I could preach as well as Billy Graham. (You've got to watch those little old ladies. They love their Pastors, and try so hard to encourage them. They like to “mother” them.) I had heard several pastors of big “First Baptist” churches, and I was certain that I could preach circles around them. And here I was, with 35 people to preach to, and them with hundreds. I used to pray: “Lord, give me my chance. Turn me loose on the masses.”

But I was very insecure. My comparisons showed that. Did I care about the masses or did I need to prove something to my ego! God knew I needed to grow. If I had to face the pressures back then that I have to face today, I would have cracked up. God knew, and mercifully He said, “Grow.”

I hope that I have grown, and today He has trusted me with an awesome opportunity. Perhaps some young minister out there is sure he can preach circles around me, but is he ready for the rest of the task? God will answer correctly.

Now it says that Elijah prayed “earnestly.” It says that the “fervent effectual” prayer avails much. That comes from a Greek word, meaning “energetic.” Does the amount of energy we put into our prayers give us a better chance of God giving what we want? Does asking a “righteous man”—some living saint—to pray for us carry more clout with God? If we call in to some famous TV evangelist, will their prayers get faster results? I doubt it! (I doubt if they will ever personally even see your request.)

Listen, there are no “saints” that have more clout. Elijah wasn't. It says ‘early that “he was a man of like passions as we.” He was far from perfect.

A “righteous man” is not necessarily a “sainted man.” A righteous man is any man who has been made right with God through the mercy of Jesus Christ. He is a justified man. (Romans 5:1) You can't get any better than that. We all have our righteousness “in Him.” (Romans 8:1)

Now we do need to confess any known sin and receive daily cleansing. “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.” (Psalm 66:18)

But, beyond that, it makes no difference if we ask our Pastor to pray, or call in on TV for prayer, or send a letter to someone’s prayer tower, or ask St. Christopher to pray for us.

1. When the idea is not right, God will still answer “No.”
2. When the time is not right, God will still answer “Slow.”
3. When WE are not right, God will still answer “Grow.”

But there is a fourth way in which God answers our prayers:

IV. WHEN EVERYTHING IS RIGHT, GOD SAYS “GO”

God flings open the door and says “go for it.” Do you have prayers that are not being answered? Maybe you have to “grow.”

Is there a problem you have, and it’s not being solved amid much prayer by yourself and faithful friends? Perhaps there is something you have to do first.

Do you have a dream and it’s not unfolding? Then perhaps you have not yet made your deepest commitment to Jesus Christ. And to answer your prayer now, without your deepest commitment, could turn you into a power-hungry, miserable person.

Is there an opportunity you’ve been working on, and it doesn’t seem to be working out right. Perhaps you aren’t right.

1. The self-centered person has to grow in unselfishness before God says “Go.”
2. The cautious person must grow to be more courageous before God says “Go.”
3. The reckless person must grow into more discretion and stability before God will say “Go.”
4. The timid person must become more faithful before God will say “Go.”
5. The self-belittling person must develop more confidence in Christ’s ability to work through him before God will say “Go.”
6. The dominating and manipulating person must develop more sensitivity and respect for other people (as persons) before God will say “Go.”
7. The critical person must grow in tolerance.
8. The negative person must grow in positive faith.
9. The power-hungry person must grow in kindness and tenderheartedness.
10. The pleasure-seeking person must grow in responsibility and compassion.
11. The God-ignoring soul must become the God-adoring soul.

And, when everything is right, that’s when God says “Go.” That’s when miracles happen.

A great church rises out of a palmetto patch;
A hopeless alcoholic is set free;
A doubter, who has never gone to church in his life, becomes warm, child-
like in faith, and fervent in spirit;
Diseased tissue responds suddenly and mysteriously to treatment, and healing
begins;
The door to your dreams suddenly swings open...
And there stands God, saying "Go!"

"The fervent effectual prayer of a righteous man avails much."

Are you a righteous man? Are you right with God? Mind you, I am not talking
perfection or comparing with others. "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of
God."

But have you accepted the forgiveness and new life that Jesus purchased for you and
me; when He died on the cross for our sins? "For He hath made Him, who knew no sin, to
become sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him."
(II Corinthians 5:21)

Christ has finished providing His righteous standing with God for us. Believe it.
Accept it. Trust in it. And pray to God in CONFIDENCE!

(Pastor Holbrook thanks Dr. Robert Schuller for this helpful four-point outline.)

SERMON NOTES

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Intro:

Prayer is an exercise whereby we draw ourselves to God, until we are in harmony with
God's plan and purposes, and we have peace.

- I. When our IDEA is not right, He says "NO."
- II. When the TIME is not right, He says "SLOW."
- III. If WE are not right, God will answer "GROW."
- IV. If EVERYTHING is right, God says "GO."