

The Prayer of the Righteous Is Powerful and Effective

James 5:13-20

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This sermon is entitled "The Prayer of the Righteous Is Powerful and Effective." It is the third and final sermon in my series from the Epistle of James, which, as we said last week, is Christian wisdom literature.

I remember reading a book in seminary by H. Richard Niebuhr, a Yale theologian, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*.ⁱ Niebuhr said that the purpose of the church and its ministry is to love God and neighbor. It's hard to disagree with that. But HOW do we love God and our neighbor? James has an answer: PRAY. Pray. The Jewish community was an institution at prayer, and James wants the same for the church. He says that if someone is suffering, they should pray. If someone is sick, they should pray, and folks should confess their sins to one another and do what? Yes, pray for one another. The church, then, is a praying community.

I am fond of watching reruns of the '70s and '80s television show "M*A*S*H." Would you like to guess who my favorite character is? That's right, Father Francis Mulcahey, played by William Christopher. In one episode, Fr. Mulcahey is uncertain of his role at the 4077. He asks Hawkeye in surgery, "Is there anything I can do?" Hawkeye says, "Pray, Father, pray." Fr. Mulcahey rolls his eyes and says, "Aw, that's all that they ever ask me to do." That's right, Father, that's all the world will ask of you and of me and of us: to pray. And we better do it well and consistently. Perhaps Fr. Mulcahey needs to reread James 5:13-20. Prayer is our holy responsibility.

James uses the example of Elijah, who literally was a rainmaker--and a rain stopper.ⁱⁱ He was that righteous one whose prayers were powerful and effective. He prayed that it might not rain, and it didn't rain for three and a half years. And he prayed again, and it rained. Perhaps Elijah would have come in handy with the torrential rains here in CT earlier this year.

Ever since graduate school I've been fascinated with a late first-century Galilean teacher named Honi the Circle-Drawer or Onias the Righteous. One time when there was a drought, he drew a circle around himself and told God that he would not leave the circle until God made it rain. And God complied: it rained.

The Old Testament speaks about not only men such as Elijah who prayed, but also women who prayed, such as Hagar, who was Abraham's slaveⁱⁱⁱ, and Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel.^{iv}

So how does one pray? My spiritual teacher in seminary always used to quote the 19th and 20th-century teacher Abbot John Chapman, "Pray as you can, not as you can't."^v

You can pray with your hands in a traditional prayer posture, looking upward and releasing thoughts toward heaven. Or you can say your prayers aloud.

You can sit with a prayer shawl with your hands folded, your eyes closed and listening to what God has to say to you. This prayer shawl was made by someone in the church and left in my office. I want to assure you that I was praying and not sleeping. Suzanne the office manager can vouch for that.

As I said in Sunday Notes, I will be praying for the church each morning, Tuesday through Friday 10:00 to 10:05. I invite "whosoever will" to join me in my office or your home or wherever you are.

Another way to pray is to write your prayers. Here I am writing what I say to God, but sometimes I write what God says to me.

Again, pray as you can, not as you can't.

In the book that some of you are reading, *Love Is the Way*, Bishop Michael Curry points to the example of Elizabeth Gilbert, who begins each day by "praying to be relieved of the bondage of self." She writes a love letter to herself, meditates, and dances. She writes, "This is the most important part of my day, when I connect to Love herself, and ask her what she would have me know today."^{vi}

So, pray as you can, not as you can't.

I would like for us to pray here in these few moments by looking at some digital images I painted, entitled "prayer." As you look, simply silently release your thoughts, emotions, and sensations to God.

I conclude with this poem: Mary Oliver's "Praying"

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.^{vii}

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ⁱ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (Harper & Row, 1977; 1956 original).

ⁱⁱ See 1 Kings 17:1, 18:1, 41-45

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 16:7-14

^{iv} 1 Samuel 2:1-10

^v <https://theotherjournal.com/2012/08/23/pray-as-you-can-not-as-you-cant-exploring-a-prayer-slogan/>

^{vi} Bishop Michael Curry with Sara Grace, *Love Is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times* (Avery, 2020), 92-93.

^{vii} <https://becomingflame.com/2018/01/19/praying-by-mary-oliver/>