

The 1-2-3's of a Powerful, Praying Church

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James 5:13-20

I want to start our sermon this morning with a question: What would you say is the secret to powerful prayer? You know the kind where you can ask God for big things, and he will hear you. The kind of prayer that really gets answered. What is the secret? Is there a secret? A magic formula for powerful prayer?

I was thinking about that this week, and I don't know if there's a question that brings out the sort of goofy side of modern Christianity more than that question. What is the secret to powerful prayer? I've seen Christian publications that said "Stand in a photocopy of this televangelist's feet while you pray and your prayers will be answered." I've seen publications that said "Wrap your prayer around an arrow and shoot it into the sky," and it will be answered. I remember a few years ago when Kelley and I lived in Kansas we randomly got an envelope in the mail from a ministry in Oklahoma, and the envelope contained three things:

1. A self-addressed return envelope to the ministry.
2. A page with a really strange sort of line-drawing of the face of Jesus with his eyes closed, but where you could see that someone had faintly penciled in open eyes in the background.
3. An instruction sheet that told you the secret of powerful prayer.

You were supposed to put the envelope under the bed for three nights and pray for whatever you wanted. It suggested things like healing or a new car or a certain amount of money - whatever you wanted. Then on the fourth day you were supposed to send the envelope back with a financial gift for that ministry, and then stare without blinking at the drawing of Jesus. It said "When you see the eyes open you know that you are going to get what you prayed for." Well, let me just say that is NOT the secret to powerful prayer. I stared at that thing for hours. I never could get the eyes to open. Just kidding, but it's a natural question: What is the secret to powerful prayer? We all want to know. We really want to know here at Perry Creek, because prayer is one of our values. We believe in prayer, and we want to see God answer it powerfully.

So what is the secret to powerful prayer? Today we are going to finish our study of the book of James. If you're like me, it's a bittersweet parting. James has been good, but he's been kind of brutal: Talking about true faith, and favoritism, and our tongue, and relationships and adversity. It's been rough. I thought we should follow it up with something softer, so next week we're going to start a series on Leviticus. Just kidding. This is our last message in the book of James, and James is going to close his book with a passage about prayer. Let me invite you to turn in your Bibles to James 5:13-20.

Today James is going to give us a passage that seems sort of random, but it actually fits together and is what we might call "a 1-2-3 of powerful prayer:"

1. Example of powerful prayer
2. Instructions about prayer that show us how we should pray

3. Benefits of following those two instructions

1-2-3. We've got a good start on what James is going to talk about today. We long to see God move powerfully through the prayers of this church. If we are going to be what God has called us to be and if we are going to do what he has called us to do, God has to move. What James is going to tell us here today is not THE secret to powerful prayer, but it is one factor that can make our prayer as a church more powerful. I long to see what we are talking about today reflected in our small groups, in our lead team, in our relationships, and in the DNA of our church so that we can be a powerful praying church. James says this:

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. 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. 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. 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. 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. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

- James 5:13-20

James is going to give us a 1-2-3:

- * One example
- * Two instructions
- * Three benefits.

He starts with:

One example of personal powerful prayer

In the first three verses of this passage, James gives us an example of an individual who experiences a powerful moment of prayer for a personal need. I wish we had time to explore these verses in depth. There are some rich theological truths here and a couple of mysteries that I don't have figured out! These are great verses! Let me just try to paint a picture for you of the situation James is describing. Let's read verses 13-15:

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. 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. 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.

- James 5:13-15

So this is a person who is experiencing a moment of great personal need. In this instance, they are very sick - so sick that they cannot go to the elders for prayer, so they call the elders to come to them. The reason they call the elders is because, as spiritually mature people, the elders know what to do. That's not to say they have everything all figured out. But as people who know the word, as people who have walked with God and acted as shepherds over God's flock, the elders know how to pray for the sick. These elders do three things:

First they anoint the person with oil. They're not doing this because the oil is magical. They aren't just using oil as medicine - it's "in the name of the Lord." Rather, they are using the oil the way it was used throughout the Old Testament on Kings and Prophets and even on the sacred implements they would use in worship at the temple. They are taking a dab of oil and placing it on that person to mark them off as belonging to God. Just like that King or priest or implement, they are marking that person as belonging to God and for God's special attention. It's kind of like what we did for John Duke earlier today! We marked him off as belonging to God. In fact, John and Sarah, if you could bring him up here again, this is the first thing they do.

Secondly, they talk to this person about their spiritual condition. Is there sin in their life that they have refused to turn away from? God takes that very seriously and at times, God does allow us to experience illness or adversity, not to harm us but as a means of getting our attention. So if there's sin, the elders help this person deal with it and find forgiveness.

Thirdly, they pray the "prayer of faith." The prayer of faith is not just a prayer where they really believe hard, although you do have to believe that God will answer. It's a prayer that is informed by their understanding of Scripture, by their walk with God, and by their spiritual understanding of the situation - a prayer based on faith, and a prayer with faith in it.

They do these three things, and then James says these elders get extreme results. The person's sin is forgiven. God's chastisement is removed. They are healed. They are raised up, not just through medicine or the power of positive thinking, but through prayer. James gives us here one example

of powerful prayer. God does answer prayer in powerful ways. You need to know that this does happen

I have friend in Kansas who was diagnosed with cancer in his 60's, and he was not doing well. He called the elders. They anointed him with oil and prayed over him. He immediately began responding to chemo at a much greater rate. Today, years later, the doctors tell him he is literally in uncharted medical territory. We believe that's an answer to prayer.

Some of you have heard Tim Brannigan's story of a woman who had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and had been wheelchair-bound for years. She asked Tim to pray for her healing to leave her wheelchair in public. The next day she had a doctor's appointment. She left her wheelchair and never went back to it. God does answer prayer.

Sometimes, it seems to me that God answers prayers more powerfully when we are outside of our comfort zone - when we are overseas and away from our doctors, and police-forces, and safety nets. Some of you have experienced that where all you have to depend on is God. Kelley and I were talking to UK and Veronica Okam the other day. UK grew up in Nigeria. He talked about church services where they needed God to stop the rain, because they were meeting in a building with just a roof and no walls. He said the Pastor would stop the service lead the church in prayer, and he would say "God is going to stop the rain." UK said "You knew God was going to do that and he would." Kelley and I have known people who were protected from attackers by swarms of bees and lightning strikes because they prayed.

It happens, but one of my favorite stories of answered prayer came in an email a few years ago. A lady in my church wrote me this: "When I was a child, I began to have terrible boils (sores). After seeing doctors and specialists, it was determined that these were caused by a strong allergy to chocolate. I know my parents prayed for me, but I continued to have the problem. Every time I ate chocolate, I reacted and got these boils. One day my father, who was the Pastor of my church, preached on James 5:14-15 and asked if anyone felt that God was moving them to be prayed for. I believed that God had moved in my heart to ask for this prayer, so I responded to that invitation. I don't recall all the specifics, but I was anointed with oil and prayed for by the leadership of the church. That day, when I went home, I asked my mother to bake me a chocolate cake. My mom tells me to this day that baking that cake was one of the hardest things she's ever done. She baked the cake, I ate it and I've been a chocoholic ever since."

Listen Prayer changes things. God doesn't always answer our prayers with a yes. There have been times when I have anointed people with oil and not seen God heal by our standards. But we serve a powerful God and God can move in powerful ways through prayer. The "1" is one example of powerful personal prayer.

The "2" is this:

Two things we do to become a powerful praying church

Look at verse 16. James has addressed individuals now. He addresses the whole congregation:

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

- James 5:16

Now if we're going to understand this verse and really the rest of the chapter, we need to understand that what's in this verse is really just a continuation of what James has already said. This isn't a new concept. It's a continuation. That's why James says "therefore."

In verses 14-15, James said the elders should do three things for a person in extreme need. They should:

1. Anoint them with oil
2. Deal with sin
3. Pray for them

Now if you look at verse 16, you'll see that James is calling us to do the same thing, minus the oil, for each other as a congregation that he called the elders to do for the individual in crisis. We are to (1) deal with sin and (2) pray for one another.

It's the same thing. Now if we were to look at the Greek of these verses very closely, we would notice that not only has James gone from singular (let him call the elders) to the plural (confess your sins to one another), but he has also changed the tense of his command. In verse 14 "call the elders." The tense only commands the fact of the action. It's almost like a one-time thing. In verse 16, James uses a present, continuous tense. The idea is very much "keep on confessing" - "Keep on praying." This is something we do repeatedly. The basic idea is this: What we do with the elders in time of crisis we are to do for one another on a day-to-day basis. What James tells us to do for one another on a day to day basis, is two things:

1. Confess our faults to one another

Look at the beginning of verse 16. James says "Therefore confess your sins to each other." What does that mean? What does it mean to confess your sins?

The word "sin" there is a very general word. Most of us when we think of "sins" probably think of something like breaking the 10 commandments or physically doing something we know is wrong. But this word "amartia" is more general than that. It doesn't just relate to behavior. It was originally used to describe someone who had missed a target. The idea is "to miss the mark" - to fall short of what we were meant to be in any way. So when James says we are to "confess our sins," he is referring not just to things I've done between you and me, but also to confessing any falling short of what I was made to be - from deeds we have done that are wrong to wrong attitudes, to shortcomings, to struggles, to temptation, to brokenness, to spiritual confusion. So really this is not just dealing with behavioral sins. It includes any falling short, so that's what "sin" is .

Now what we are supposed to do with this sin is confess it to one another. I've talked before about this concept of confession before. It's very important that we understand that to confess doesn't mean "to beg for forgiveness." It doesn't mean to go into a booth and confess to a priest. The word really just means "to say the same thing as" con-fess. Originally, the word meant to speak the same language. When I "confess" my sin to God, I am saying to God the same thing about my sin that He says about it. I am agreeing with him that it is sinful. Here we are confessing our faults to one another, so now I am saying to you about my sin what God says about it. We are naming our faults for one another.

This week I had the opportunity to work with some dear brothers and sisters who were confessing their faults to one another. We were meeting and someone said "Look what I did was wrong. I did not treat you the way I should. It was sin, and I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?" Listen that's a direct application of what James is talking about here: confessing your sins.

I think what James is calling us to do also goes beyond that. Because I think James is calling us to name our brokenness (all kinds of it), he's calling us to confess our faults. To take what I would rather hide about what I've done, and who I am, and where I struggle, and how I think and share it with someone. Not necessarily to share it indiscriminately but to share it. It may be that I've directly wronged a brother or sister in Christ and, if that's the case, I go directly to them and name it. But maybe it's not something I did. Maybe I have a character issue that I struggle with. James calls me to confess that too.

Later in the week I had another conversation with someone that I love deeply. We weren't at odds, but we were trying to work something out it was a high pressure moment. In the middle of that, that person stopped and said "I'm sorry. I don't know why, but I think I'm feeling insecure. I'm worried about what people will think of me." Do you have any idea how much that changed the conversation for the better? It did a 180, because suddenly I was invited into that person's brokenness and struggle. I was able to encourage them in the gospel and say "Yeah, I feel that way myself sometimes, but there's enough grace. It's going to be OK."

That is also what James is talking about and, Perry Creek, that is the church that God has called us to be: not a church of people who look perfect on the outside, not a church where we hide our flaws, not a church where we power up when we face conflict, but a humble, loving church of people who unapologetically need God's grace through the gospel and confess our sins, our faults, and our struggles to one another.

The first thing we want to do to become powerful in prayer is confess our faults to one another. Now the second thing we have to do if we want to be a powerful praying church is kind of obvious:

2. Pray for one another

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

- James 5:16

This one's kind of obvious. It's kind of hard to be a powerful praying church if you never pray! Again James is telling us that what the elders do for us in times of crisis we should do for each other on a day to day basis. And again, the verb-tense implies that this is a regular repeated thing. We are to pray for each other again and again. We are to be a church of prayer.

We've got a good start on that here at The Church at Perry Creek. Prayer is one of our core values. In a couple of weeks, we are going to start a three week series called "DNA" where we take a look at our values. In that series, we will mostly be focusing on Community, Missions and Family, so let me take a minute today to talk about prayer.

We value prayer. This church was birthed, not out of my mind or out of someone's suggestion, but really it was birthed out of a corporate prayer meeting. That's significant, and we want to continue to be a church of prayer. That's why we have days of prayer and fasting as a church. That's why we pray at 9:30 every Sunday, before each service. That's why we take time in our worship service to really pray.

We want to be a church that prays regularly and powerfully for each other - in our small groups, on our lead team, whenever we see the need. Oftentimes if you look for me before or after service, you'll see me stopping to pray with someone. I really love it because our church is developing that discipline. I love it when I see you guys praying for each other! I see that all the time! There were multiple times this week, when I was facing an important moment and I had people from this church take the initiative to call and pray with me over the phone. We are a praying church, and we want to become more of a praying church!

Now as we look at what James is saying it's very important that we not miss the connection between confession and prayer. Think with me: If we are a confessing community, we will be a community that really wants to pray for each other, because when I confess I admit my vulnerability. I say "I'm not enough. I make mistakes. I struggle. I need help!" That's what makes us want to pray for each other. When we are confessing our faults to each other, we really know how to pray for each other.

It's amazing how, when we drop our guard and are vulnerable and confess our sins, our faults, our fears to one another, how much we are able to see the real issues in life - how much better we are able to support one another - how much better we are really able to pray for one another. This is why it's so important that you be in a small group. That is, in many ways, the place where most of this will take place, if we can be truly vulnerable.

The "1" is one example and the "2" is two things we do to become a powerful praying church:

- * Confessing our faults to one another
- * Praying for one another

Now the last thing James wants to show us is "3."

Three benefits of being a confessing, praying church.

James is going to give us three benefits and, I've gotta say, at first I didn't see the connection between those benefits and the command to confess and pray. But as we go through them, I think you'll see that these benefits are firmly anchored in confession and prayer. Let me give them to you briefly:

1. Healing. Look near the end of verses 16 James says:

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed
- James 5:16

Healing is what James has been talking about throughout this passage, and he encourages us to ask for that here. He says "Confess your faults to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed." A church where people are authentic about their needs and fervent in prayer for one another is a church where people can find the healing power of God. That does relate to physical healing. I mean that's the kind of church I want praying for me if I'm sick, but it also relates to emotional and spiritual healing. Sometimes these all come together. Some of you know that when we were first married, Kelley used to have terrible migraine headaches that put her in bed for days. They did MRI's and had her on all kinds of medication. She had thousands of dollars of work done on her jaw, and nothing helped. You know what fixed it? Confession and prayer. During that time, we met a wonderful Christian counselor and friend who really just helped Kelley confess. She helped her take a lot of self-condemnation and guilt that came from her family of origin and really didn't belong to her and get it out of her. She helped Kelley confess her brokenness and then she reflected truth back to Kelley and prayed through it with us. Once that was out, Kelley's headaches went away, and she was healed through confession and prayer. James is saying through confession and prayer we can be a community where you, and I, and people in our community find healing. The first benefit is healing.

2. Powerful Prayer. This is the one we talked about at the beginning of the sermon. Look at:

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. 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. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.
- James 5:16-18

Wow! That's some kind of powerful prayer! At first, I think I kind of look at that and say "Yeah, but that was Elijah. He was a famous prophet. That was Old Testament. That doesn't relate to us." But James is encouraging us here that we too can be powerful in prayer. That's what happened in James' day. Remember when we looked at the book of Acts all the amazing things God did in the church in Acts? He healed people. He delivered them from danger. He responded powerfully to sin. And he moved in the community spreading the gospel. Well, James is not saying God is going to stop the rain for 3 ½ years, but he is saying that God move powerfully in our midst.

How does that happen? How do we become powerful in our prayer? James says “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful in its working.” When I first read that, it stuck out to me. I wondered: why does James highlight his righteousness? Why not highlight his faith? Or his persistence?

Then I realized that James is connecting to what he’s said earlier. In Scripture, righteousness is always connected to confession of sin. The righteous man is the man who has confessed his sin. In this passage, James has just instructed us to confess our sin to one another. So I think James is telling us this: If we want to be a church that is effective in prayer - if we want to be a church where God moves powerfully - we have to be a church where we confess our sins first to God, because that’s where it starts, but then also to each other. We have to be a church where we love each other and serve each other by owning our weaknesses and failings by confessing our need for grace to each other and by confessing our sin when we’ve done wrong to each other. We have to be that kind of church.

In saying this, James isn’t saying anything new. Jesus said “If you want God to hear your prayers and receive your offerings at the altar, you have to reconcile with your brother first. Confess your faults to him and make things right.” He said if we don’t forgive each other we won’t be forgiven and God won’t hear our prayers. In the book of Acts, when God moved so powerfully in the church it says “they were all in one accord.” Being a loving, confessing community is essential to powerful prayer. I don’t see anything in Scripture about shooting arrows into heaven when we pray or photocopies of Jesus’ face, but I do see again and again that when God’s people love each other He hears their prayers.

So James says a confessing community (1) will have healing and (2) will have powerful prayer. Now the last benefit is this:

3. The return of the wandering

My brothers and sisters, if one of you wanders away from the truth, and someone helps that person come back, remember this: Anyone who brings a sinner back from the wrong way will save that sinner’s soul from death and will cause many sins to be forgiven.

- James 5:13-20

Once again, I had never seen the connection between these verses and what James says in the preceding passage. I’d always sort of seen this as the conclusion to the epistle, like James is saying “Hey you just need to know that people who confront people that have strayed from the path, are doing it out of love They save lives. They cover a multitude of sins. I just wrote you a confrontational epistle to tell you that you were off the path. So know that I did it for your own good.” I think that’s valid. I do think James is kind of laying that out there, hoping that his readers will connect the dots.

But I think there’s more. I think there’s a connection to what precedes it, because James isn’t just telling us what he has done. James is inviting us, as believers, to go out and get those who have wandered away - those who have strayed from the path of truth. Here’s the connection: There is

no community that is equipped to do that - to reach out to those who have left the faith - like a confessing, praying community. Because as I confess and pray, I am made aware of my own sin, my own failings, my own vulnerabilities and shortcomings. I am made aware of the times that I have wandered from the path of truth. And that, in turn, enables me to approach others who are wandering with the humility that I should have. It enables me to offer them the forgiveness that I've found. I'm able to invite them not to a perfect community, but to a confessing, praying community, where broken people are welcomed with the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ. A community like we want The Church at Perry Creek to be.

Perry Creek, James tells us in this passage that as we more and more become a praying, confessing community, we can see God's healing in this place. We can see him answer prayer in amazing ways. We can see the return of people who have wandered to spiritual health. This is the church God is calling us to be.

Lord, there are some of us here today who need powerful answers to prayer. Some who have physical needs. Some who have financial situations that are concerning or overwhelming. Some who have relationships that are broken and need repair. Some of us have friends or loved ones who have wandered from the faith and it breaks our hearts. And Lord, we all long for you to move powerfully through this church spreading the gospel to the children and the communities around us. And so we come to you simply asking that the Church at Perry Creek may be a community that is powerful in prayer. A community where we confess our faults to one another coming to you and to each other for grace. A community where we pray for one another. A community that truly trusts you and invites your activity in lives of our children and in our lives and in the life of this church. Glorify yourself here at Perry Creek.