

## THINGS TO TEACH YOUR CHILDREN: Things Change When You Pray

Eighth in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin from James 5:13-20  
*“The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” James 5:16*

You can blame David and Debbie Frank. The Franks are long-time missionaries from Cornerstone Presbyterian Church who run a camp in the foothills of the Pyrenees in Spain, called L’Arcada. A number of years ago, Barb and I led a group of our church’s high school students on a Summer missions trip to L’Arcada, and David and Debbie thought we could help the camp by bringing with us several tents and a number of T-shirts. We agreed. But I neglected to ask how many T-shirts they had in mind. When the shipment arrived there had to be a half million shirts. David and Debbie helpfully suggested each student might pack a few into his suitcase. The thing driving this “pack-your-suitcase-full-of-T-shirts” strategy was that if we shipped the shirts and tents, L’Arcada would pay import duty. Since the shirts and tents weren’t going to be sold, no import charge was required, but try telling that to a Spanish bureaucrat!

We got off the plane and loaded our mountain of baggage on a cart which I was elected to push. We were still concerned that some over-zealous immigration officer might demand import fees, so someone said, “Why don’t we pray?” We gathered our team in the hall outside the restrooms and prayed, “Lord, these shirts and tents are for your work. Would you please make the immigration people blind so that they don’t notice all this stuff we’ve got so we can pass into Spain without charge?” By the time we finished, the other passengers from our plane had moved through immigration. We stood out like a sore thumb. And then the whole team abandoned me. They walked through customs as I fell behind, inching this elephant on wheels toward the inspection counters.

As I approached I noticed all the customs officers had disappeared, except for one who was staring right at me. How could he not? There was nothing else to look at. I knew he was going to stop me, and to relieve his boredom he’d go through every suitcase and tent bag looking for contraband. I knew we’d have to pay hundreds of dollars. But just as I approached the immigration desk, his phone rang. He picked it up and then waved his arm, directing me to pass through. I emerged into yet another hall and David Frank was there beaming, welcoming us to Spain. However, I was still waiting for the long arm of the law to tap me on the shoulder. I asked, “Where do I have to go next?” David said, “You’re through!” I want to talk with you about prayer, this morning, and what we teach our children about prayer. Because prayer changes things. Turn with me to James chapter 5, verses 13-20. James wants us to consider three points: **1. When to pray**, **2. How to pray**, and **3. What to expect when you pray**.

**1. When to pray.** Of course the Bible says we should “pray without ceasing.” (I Thessalonians 5:17) In other words, we ought to be in continuous communication with God. But James lists six specific situations where prayer is especially called for. The first is **when you’re suffering**. In verse 13 he says, *“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.”* We immediately think of suffering as sickness, but you can suffer for any number of reasons. Perhaps you’re out of work or maybe work has become a trial for

you because of your boss or your fellow workers. You can suffer because of what is happening in the lives of your children. Perhaps your heart is broken for them. You can suffer because your marriage is in conflict. Maybe you're being slandered or criticized. When we suffer, we have a tendency to grow discouraged or to become bitter or angry. So we need to pray because when we take our problems to God things change. A friend loaned me the DVD of the movie, *To End All Wars*, the true story of prisoners held by the Japanese during World War II. For three and a half years those men didn't have a day free from the most unimaginable suffering. Yet there was one Christian who led them to Christ, so that instead of hating, they triumphed over the horrible conditions and constant injustice by the power of God's love. When you suffer, pray, and God will help you.

Second, pray in times of **celebration**. In verse 13 James mentions the opposite of suffering. He says, "*Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises.*" I was talking with a new grandfather a few days ago. He described how he held his granddaughter in his arms for the first time. He was the last one to get her, he complained with a laugh. But as he looked at her delicate features he was filled with overflowing joy and happiness, and it was just him, his granddaughter, and God, alone in a shared moment of celebration. In those times, be sure to give thanks, for God blesses us with great mercies.

Third, pray in **sickness**. Notice something interesting in verse 14. "*Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him.*" We have occasional services when you can have the elders pray for you when you're sick. Our pastoral staff and ruling elders try hard to visit people in the hospital and to pray there for them. You need to let us know when you are in the hospital. But let's ask why we should call in reinforcements to pray for us when we are sick. It's because your body and your soul are so closely tied together. If you're seriously ill, you won't have much energy to pray. Other Christians can do that for you as a ministry to you in your weakness. Last evening a friend called me from Ft. Lauderdale. His voice was weak and I was at once alarmed. He'd awakened with chest pains, and now here he was in the hospital, far from home, lonely and afraid. I prayed for him, and I trust he went to sleep with the peace of God upon him. Let someone else carry the prayer load when you're ill.

Fourth, pray when you're in **sin**. In verse 16 James says, "*Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another.*" This confession of sins comes in the context of the elders of the church. It's not always a good idea to confess your sins to just any Christian. The situation James describes here involves confidentiality and wise counsel. Some years ago a member of the church asked to see me and he told me how he had embezzled a small amount of money from his employer. He had paid it back and made things right, but his conscience was still bothering him. We prayed together and he left with a much lightened heart. When we confess and deal spiritually with God, he forgives us. And beyond that, prayer can be a great help in fighting off temptation in the future.

Fifth, pray for the nation or the community in times of **social crisis**. James gives a Biblical example of Elijah and the wicked king Ahab. (v 17-18) The government had been persecuting the faithful people of God, and the king had ordered the execution of hundreds of preachers and prophets. So Elijah prayed and asked God to send a drought

that would bring the government to its knees. Then, three years later, he prayed for the drought to end. The result was a revival in Israel. When we pray for the nation, it may take a long time for the prayer to be answered. But don't stop. On the other hand, there are times when God intervenes quickly to help the nation. For example, in the 2000 election, many Christians were praying about the outcome. George Bush won the state of Florida by about 300 votes. Ten months later the reason became clear as America was hit by terrorists and plunged into war against the greatest evil of our generation.

Sixth, pray for the **salvation** of your family and friends. Verse 20 says, "*He who turns a sinner back from the error of his way will save his soul from death.*" It's not specifically said that prayer is a factor in a person's salvation, but it's implied by the context of the passage. Prayer releases the Holy Spirit to go where you and I can't—right into a person's heart and mind. In some mysterious way, God uses our prayers to save sinners. Who might you pray for? Your spouse? Your children? Extended members of your family? Colleagues at work? Neighbors? Train yourself to pray for others that they might be saved. Use these six circumstances as an outline to construct a regular prayer list: your suffering, your celebrations, the sick, your sins, the society around us, and those who need to be saved. You'll cover almost everything.

**2. How to pray.** Here James suggests three ways to increase the effectiveness of our prayers. First, **Pray with confidence.** Go back to verse 14 where the elders are summoned to pray for the sick. Notice that James says the elders should "*anoint...[the sick person] with oil in the name of the Lord.*" The oil here is olive oil. It's not a magic potion. It is not, as some have suggested, the practice of medicine. It's a symbol of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Why anoint a sick person with oil? A mother took her young daughter with her one day when she was delivering lunches to the elderly. In the various homes the little girl saw wheel chairs, walkers, and canes, and these intrigued her greatly. Then they came to one home where the little girl spotted some false teeth in a glass of water. The mother thought to herself, "Oh, boy, here come the questions!" But the little girl had a different reaction entirely. She said to her mother and whispered, "The Tooth Fairy will never believe this!" A lot of times we don't believe God will answer prayer, and that's especially true when we're sick. So the application of oil becomes a visible aid to faith. Please realize that there is no guarantee that just because we anoint a person with oil and pray for healing, God will heal. He may or he may not. You and I don't have any way to make God do anything he doesn't want to do. Faith involves two things. First, we believe God *can* do anything. But secondly, we trust him to do what is pleasing to him. That's confidence. We are to pray in all things, trusting God to hear our prayers and then to do what seems best to him.

Second, **pray with contrition.** Go back to verse 16. "*Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.*" James commends "*the effective prayer of a righteous man.*" Put it together. If we want God to hear our prayers, we must be in right relationship with him. You can't expect God to listen to you if you are sticking to your sins. Why should God reward someone who is only playing at prayer, or who uses prayer as a lever to manipulate him. Only you and God know what is in your heart. Some of the most spiritual sounding people are praying to impress other

people. Jesus told a parable about two men who came to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee who prayed very openly and boastfully thanking God he was not sinful like other people. However in the corner, in the shadows, another man, who had a reputation for dishonesty beat his breast and cried out to God from the depths despair. “Be merciful to me, a sinner,” he begged. Jesus said, “Which man do you think God heard?” (Luke 18:9-14) You may not be very religious, you may have gross sins in your past; but if you come to him contritely, seeking to be forgiven and reconciled to God, he listens.

Third, pray with **concentration**. In James’ illustration from the experience of Elijah in verse 17, he says Elijah “*prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it did not rain.*” Prayer is serious business. Not like the request a pastor received one Sunday from ten-year-old Alexander. “*Dear Pastor,*” the boy wrote, “*Please say a prayer for our Little League team. We need God’s help--or a new pitcher.*” How many times do we throw up a prayer just to keep our bases covered, so to speak. Do we or do we not want God to work on our behalf? If we do, then we need to pray with concentration. Put these three conditions to work in your prayers—confidence in God; contrition, realizing that he doesn’t owe us anything; and concentration—and you’ll see God answer your prayers. Bill Moyers worked early in his career for President Lyndon Johnson. On one occasion he was asked to open a meeting with prayer. Half way through his prayer the President called out, “Speak up. I can’t hear you.” Moyers stopped and looked at the President. “I wasn’t talking to you,” he said. Let’s get talking to God on God’s terms.

**3. What to expect when we pray.** James mentions five things. First, **restoration of the sick**. In verse 15 he says, “*The prayer offered in faith will restore the sick.*” As we’ve said, God doesn’t always heal the sick, no matter how much faith we put into our prayers. The proof of this is that all of us, sooner or later, are going to die. If God answered every prayer for healing, the world would be a good deal more crowded. And the other side is also true. A person may recover from sickness even if no one prays for him. So what are we to make of this statement in verse 15? Does it matter if we pray for the sick? Oh, yes. At the very least, prayer for the sick becomes a means of entrusting ourselves to God’s care, and a help in yielding our wills to God. What really matters, you see, is what God wants. However, there are times, I am absolutely convinced, when in some mysterious way God uses our prayers as part of the means of accomplishing his will. We participate with him. If we pray for healing and God chooses to restore the sick person, then we rejoice. I humbly suggest that after another round of doctor’s visits and check-ups that have found me well and healthy, it is the result of God’s answers to your prayers on my behalf. So thank you.

The second thing we may expect when we pray is **reconciliation**. The implication of verse 16 is that when we confess our sins, he forgives us, and relationships between us and God or between us and other people are healed. Do you need to be forgiven? I John 1:9 says, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” God doesn’t owe us forgiveness, but he gives it when we ask.

Third, we may expect when we pray that things will be **reordered**. In verse 16 James gives this wonderful promise, *“The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.”* When we are in South Africa next week, we hope to meet Derek Hammond who Cornerstone supports as a missionary. A year ago on a Sunday night, Derek and Sandy heard noises outside their bedroom. they looked, but couldn’t see anything, and went back to sleep. This was God keeping them safe, for thieves were stealing their four wheel drive vehicle and they might have been injured if they had tried to confront them. They awoke Monday morning to find the truck gone and sent out an urgent request that we and others around the world should pray. Early Wednesday morning the police called to say that the vehicle had been found intact, stuck in the mud, a few yards short of the Mozambique border. Police said the chances of recovering the vehicle had been about zero, but there it was. Along the jungle road, the skies had opened up just before the car got to the border, and created a sea of mud. The criminals bogged down and then couldn’t get the four wheel drive to engage. Then they tried the winch, but for some reason it wouldn’t work. So they fled. They hadn’t even looted the car, which usually happens. When we pray, God reorders things, according to his will.

Fourth, when we pray we may expect **reclamation**. Verse 20 James says that because of our prayers (implied) we may save a person’s soul from death. John Koessler, professor of Pastoral Studies at Moody Bible Institute tells of working at a Jack-in-the-Box fast food restaurant after graduating from college. His mother was dying from cancer. His father was an alcoholic, and John was sliding into depression. One night at work he carried on a silent conversation with God. “God, if you’re up there I just want you to know that I wish I had never been born.” He didn’t expect a reply, but when that thought had formed, he noticed someone at the drive-through window. John recognized him as a local “Jesus Freak” named Dave. Dave paid, and as John gave him his change, Dave grinned and thrust a piece of paper into his hand. On the paper it said, “If being born hasn’t given you much satisfaction, try being born again.” God reclaims lost souls.

And finally, when we pray, we may expect **renewal**. Verse 20 says that because of our prayers for an errant soul, we will *“cover a multitude of sins.”* I came out of a restaurant last week and encountered a man in an act of Christian service. The friend who was with me said, “that man is a walking miracle.” He told me the man’s story, “He was an alcoholic, bitter and angry, corrupt with a trail of broken relationships. I tried to tell him about Jesus,” my friend said, “but he refused to listen.” But then God got hold of the man’s heart, and he turned to Christ for salvation. God turned his life around. He stopped drinking. His marriage healed. His whole demeanor changed. Today he beams with joy and happiness. He goes to church each Sunday and now in retirement, he spends his time in Christian service, helping people. You might know this man, but if you knew him before, you would not recognize him now. Dear friends, we need to pray. And we need to teach our children to pray. Things change when we pray.

Preached by Dr. Rick Perrin on February 26, 2006 at Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, 45637 Bush River Road, Columbia, SC 29212 and Dutch Fork High School Tel. 803-772-1000

[www.DiscoverCornerstonesc.com](http://www.DiscoverCornerstonesc.com) Copyright 2006