

This passage closes out the book of James, and I find it interesting that he ends his book with the importance of prayer. He begins the book with the importance of prayer, so he comes full circle as if to say everything in our lives should begin and end in prayer. As he says in the beginning of this passage, “if we’re suffering, pray.” “If we’re cheerful, sing,” (which is a form of prayer, a prayer of thanksgiving). “If we’re sick, ask the church to pray for you.” It sounds so easy, and if you’ve only been in church for 5 minutes of your life, you will hear about the importance of prayer in the Christian life. We know this, but often we just don’t pray. We don’t communicate or talk to God.

First of all, we don’t pray because we think we don’t know how to pray. No one has ever really taught us how to pray. We hear others pray, and we think our prayers don’t sound like that. We are terrified to pray out loud because we think they won’t sound as good or use the right “churchy” language that we’re supposed to use. We drag all of our spiritual baggage into our prayer time, and focus on using the “right” words and how to pray rather than actually praying.

Second, we don’t pray because we’re too busy trying to solve the problem ourselves. We’ll do everything in our power to alleviate our own suffering because we have all this shame bottled up inside us that tells us that we’re the one who caused our pain and suffering, so we’re the one who is supposed to end the suffering. There may be some responsibility that we need to own up to, and makes changes in our lives to get healthier. We go to a meeting, take a class, try a different doctor, medication, or therapy. We finally come to the end of our rope, and say things like, “Well, there is nothing left to do but pray.” Or, “When all else fails, let’s pray.” We pray because we

think prayer is a last resort, but it should be a first priority. We begin and end with prayer, not just end. Because there are some wounds that are so deep, only God can heal them.

Sometimes we don’t pray because we don’t think it will do any good. We’ve prayed for something for so long, and our prayers were never answered. We read in scripture about people like Elijah who prayed that it wouldn’t rain, and it didn’t. Then, he prayed that it would rain again, and it did. That sounds like prayer is being used as a magic wand to wave over our problems or bring about whatever we want. We know from experience that prayer doesn’t work that way. What James doesn’t explain in his Elijah reference is that God prompted Elijah to pray these prayers to prove that God is the one true God over the false god Baal. Context is everything.

James does tell us that Elijah was “human just like us,” a follower of God who sometimes got depressed or had doubts. He sinned, had weaknesses and did not always believe in himself, that he could carry out what God asked him to do. But, Elijah got real with God. He was honest about his weaknesses and sin. Elijah’s poor self-esteem caused him to trust God even more. That’s the point James wanted us to get by using Elijah as an example for effective prayer.

And, not just effective prayer...the heading describes this passage, “Prayer to be reckoned with.” I think if we experienced “prayer to be reckoned with,” we’d be praying a lot more. This is the kind of prayer that changes our lives. Prayers that show we trust God, and God is working. James tells us: “**The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with**” (v.17). That’s the key. If you want your prayers to be something powerful to

be reckoned with, live right with God. Get real. Be honest to God in your prayers and admit what you can and can't do, what sin or affliction you need deliverance from, the pain and suffering that is tearing you apart.

James tells us how to live right with God: "Make this your common practice: Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed" (v.16) Be part of a community where we can confess our sins and pray for each other because there is power in numbers.

God does not want us to be alone. God gave us the church, the body of Christ, so that we come together to care, support, and pray for each other. Our coming together and being vulnerable with each other, confessing our sins and asking for prayer, unifies us. It unifies Christ's church. But, we can't come together and be unified, if we're divided within ourselves. We have to confess what is separating us from God – a particular sin, our ego, shame – we've gotta lay that down, so Christ can reconcile us within. When we are unified with Christ, we can unify with others. And, when a group of people, who are living right with God, pray together for God's will, they are a force to be reckoned with.

Confessing our sin to others is a turn-off for many people. We're private people, and we don't want others to know our business. We don't want others to know that we don't have it all together. That makes us look weak, and in our culture, the weak are devoured. People may judge us if we admit our sin. But, often when we keep things private, we keep things hidden. Hidden things fester. We suffer in silence. The burdens and shame we carry alone can kill us. God gave us each other to walk our faith journey together, so that we can pray for

each other when we can't pray for ourselves or don't know how to pray for ourselves. When we allow others to share in carrying our burdens, we allow God to nurture us through other people.

Living right with God means we fall on our faces and humble ourselves before God. We admit that we cannot do any of this on our own. We surrender our desires, and truly seek for our desires to become God's desires. In our prayers, we make our petitions, but ultimately, we want what God wants for us. Sometimes we don't know what that is, but we trust that God knows, like Elijah did. Elijah didn't know why God asked him to pray for a drought and then for rain, other than to prove that He was God. Elijah trusted God, and "things started growing again" (v.18). We trust that God has our best interest at heart and allow room for God to grow.

God dreams God-sized dreams for us. Dreams and plans that our finite minds never see happening. When we get real with God and align ourselves with God, our prayers are powerful. And, when we come together as a unified body of Christ and pray for what God has prompted, our prayers are something powerful to be reckoned with.

Our most powerful tool for the Christian life is communicating with God. Prayer is not a magic wand to manipulate God into getting what we want or reciting a magical formula using the right words. Prayer that is something to be reckoned with is prayer that comes from our hearts, when we are honest and vulnerable about our shortcomings. We get real with God and confess those shortcomings and invite others into our lives to pray for us. When we live right with God, our prayers are something powerful to be reckoned with. Amen.