

“THE POWER OF PRAYER, II.”

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Scripture Text: James 5:13-18

Introduction.

It has been a rough week for Hillary Clinton. She sort of did something she shouldn't have but not really. She sort of confessed, but not really. Just another in an endless list of partial confessions of sin or wrongdoing. Politicians and sports figures are notorious for their poor confessions and weak repentance and aversion to the humility of coming completely clean.

It's no wonder we struggle with the idea of confessing our sin to others, we so seldom see it done well. Do you know anyone who regularly confesses their sins and failures to another person?

Adam sinned and blamed Eve. Cain killed Abel and told God he didn't know where he was. Joseph's brothers sinned against Joseph and covered it up to their father. Ananias and Sapphira gave money to the church but lied about the amount to make themselves look better in the eyes of the apostles.

King David was a politician, the master of cover up until God uncovered his cover. But his repentance was beautiful, full, honest, sincere. A gift for the rest of us.

Peter also sinned as greatly as any man ever did, but when he realized his sin, he broke and wept.

The Prodigal Son gives us as good an example as you can find in Scripture. He went directly to the one he sinned against and made a simple, clean, clear confession of his sin.

The Power of Prayer in Confession, vss. 15-16.

As we consider the power of prayer this morning we see that James connects prayer power with confession of sin. A righteous person doesn't mean elders or pastors or particularly holy people. Romans reminds us that there is none who is righteous. Our righteousness comes from Christ.

The righteous person is an ordinary person who confesses their sin and repents, and who trusts in Christ and obeys Christ. A righteous person is a humble, honest person who comes into the presence of God with a clear conscience, a clean heart and a pure motive.

Psalm 34:15 The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry.

Psalm 66:18 If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

Isaiah 59:2 ... your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

Proverbs 28:13 Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.

Psalm 119:26 When I told of my ways, you answered me.

Confession is good for the soul and good for our prayers. We all know that we are to confess all our sin to God, for all sin is first of all against God. But James takes confession a step further and commends mutual confession. Why does he commend mutual confession? What is the *benefit* of mutually confessing our sins to another?

First of all, secret sin kills our souls. Sin isolates, it drives us apart and away from others. It drives us into silence and darkness and the despair of loneliness. It resists truth and light.

Secret sin not only kills our souls it endangers our families and churches. Remember just after Israel entered into the Promised Land and defeated Jericho, Achan sinned by stealing some of the forbidden goods from Jericho and hid them in his tent. He brought suffering down on the nation of Israel and on his family.

Secret sin is folly because it isn't secret to God. Furthermore it's a misery to our souls, giving us no rest or peace. Guilt and shame are its constant companion. Don't stay in that place, don't harbor secret sin, it will eat you alive, and in the end place you in spiritual danger. And it will render your prayers powerless.

Though our flesh and pride resist, don't neglect this great gift of God's grace and forgiveness. Mutual confession kills pride, it brings to death our old man, our old nature. Mutual confession helps us hate sin, it helps us mortify or kill sin.

Mutual confession brings great relief of guilt and shame and condemnation. Think of how much grief and sorrow and tragedy could be spared if more Christians had at least one person they could unburden their souls to.

Mutual confession brings about a poverty of spirit, the kind that is blessed by Christ, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

It deepens affection and relationship, it invites grace and mercy. It strengthens our faith and walk. Those who have no knowledge of our needs will not pray. Those who know, can care and assist. It invites mutual prayer.

When we humble ourselves before one another, we are more empathic and sympathetic, freer to lend aid and assistance and our own prayers.

Are there pitfalls in mutual confession? Of course, every good gift from God can be turned to unholy uses. It can be manipulative, it can be shallow and insincere, it can become a form of works righteousness, a source of pride.

And we must be wise and discerning with whom we share, having some assurance the person is trustworthy and safe. You should seek out a more mature Christian.

Are there any good guidelines in practicing mutual confession?

If you have sinned against a particular person then you must only make your confession to that person. Private sins are confessed privately, public sins are confessed publically. The rule of thumb is that confession should only extend as far as the sin.

If someone confesses a sin to you that is against you, forgive them in the name of Jesus. If someone confesses a sin to you that is against God, help them seek His grace and forgiveness and encourage them with the truth of God, that He is faithful and just and quick to forgive.

Never say it's no big deal or cavalierly say God will forgive, make sure the repentance is sincere and real. Take sin seriously.

When we confess a sin we should call it what the Bible calls it. It's stealing not the redistribution of wealth. It's lying, not creative diplomacy. It's adultery, not an inappropriate relationship. It's lust, not guys will be guys. Don't say mistakes were made, name the sin.

Don't ignore your sin or think that time will make it go away. If that was true then Jesus didn't need to die on the cross.

Because of the grace of God and the forgiveness of Jesus we don't *have to* confess our sins, we *get to* confess our sins in the sure and certain hope that God will forgive and heal and help us.

Confession is a grace. I consider it one of God's best gifts of grace to me that there are men in my life to whom I am able to confess my sin and who love me and pray for me and extend grace to me.

It enables us to minister grace and truth to each other; to hold out hope and mercy.

Isaiah 61:1-2 The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
2 ... to comfort all who mourn;

Consider the hope and mercy what can be held out to the woman who has had an abortion, to the man struggling with sexual sin or sexual identity, to the person living in bondage to sin and in fear of being discovered; to the person wracked with past regrets or failures or sinful decisions; to the person who long ago repented in tears but still lives under a cloud of depression; to the person who's conscience is nagging them.

James is saying that mutual confession of sin is healthy for individuals and congregations. It brings healing of our souls and minds and bodies; deliverance from guilt and shame and condemnation. It is life giving and prayer empowering.

Mutual confession leads to an increase in righteousness and an increase in power in prayer.

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working

When the righteous pray for one another there is great power. Yes, as Christians we are all righteous because we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. But James is referring here to practical righteousness, living by the Spirit and giving evidence of the life of the Spirit. Seeking holiness, by putting off the old man, the flesh and the desires and passions of the flesh.

When we are seeking and pursuing practical, daily, Christ-like righteousness then there is great power in our prayers. Our prayers become effective and one characteristic of effective prayer is a holy boldness, prayer offered with earnestness and fervency.

An Example of the Power of Prayer, vss. 17-18

James 5:17-18 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

The days of Elijah were evil days.

I Kings 16:30-33 And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him. 31 And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him. 32 He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. 33 And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

King Ahab had no regard for God and no respect for His law. He entered into an unholy marriage with not just a unbeliever, but an idolater, a cult follower of the wicked religion of Baal. Together they lead Israel deep into sexual immorality and lust.

He opened the door to tolerance of every sort of evil and idolatry, everything was approved of. Except for the followers of the one true faith in the God of Israel. He silenced God's prophets and priests and tried to kill all those who stood up for the truth.

Such were the days of Elijah, days like ours, days that try men's souls, days that drive the faithful to fervent prayer.

He prayed the only prayer that would bring Israel to her senses and then to her knees. He prayed a prayer that was a direct assault on their Baal-god, the god of the sun and rain, of the crops and fertility. For three years the people prayed to Baal to send rain and there was nothing. Because of the hardness of human hearts, sometimes they have to be brought to the very gates of death before they will see the truth. Their sin hindered their prayers.

And when the fire of God fell on Mt. Carmel and the sin of the land was removed by the deaths of all the prophets of Baal, then God's blessings were restored.

Elijah prayed by faith and so must we. As Elijah was heard by God since he prayed with faith, so with confidence we can know that we will be heard by God when we pray in faith. In other words, since we are ordinary people like him, pray like him and there will be fruit like his.

Do you doubt the effectiveness and power of prayer?

By prayer the sun stood still; by prayer fire fell from heaven; by prayer the mouths of lions were kept shut; by prayer armies were defeated; by prayer rivers were parted and water poured out of rock and bread came down from heaven; by prayer the counsel of wicked men was confused and righteousness men received wisdom; by prayer sicknesses were healed, demons driven out, cities rescued from destruction, the storehouses of rain unleashed and wombs opened.

By prayer the dead have been raised and souls have been saved from hell. By prayer the estranged were reconciled and weaknesses made useful for God's glory. By prayer God is pleased to minister to all our needs. Prayer is the mother of all our blessings. Nothing is too great, too hard or too difficult for prayer to do.

Well said Mary Queen of Scots, "I fear John Knox's prayers more than an army of ten thousand men." Do you doubt the effectiveness and power of prayer?

Elijah was passionate before God, he hated sin and what it was doing to the people of God, he cared about the glory of God and the truth of God and he prayed fervently and was heard.

Jacob wrestled with God in prayer.

Hannah pleaded with God so much that the priest Eli thought she was drunk.

Ezra fell on his knees and spread his hands out to God and prayed (Ezra 9:5-6).

Nehemiah poured out his heart in prayer and wept over the condition of Jerusalem and her walls.

And of Epaphras Paul said to the church in Colossi he is “always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God” (Colossians 4:12).

Application and conclusion.

May God in His mercy and grace lead us to being a confessing church and a praying church. Is the Holy Spirit nudging you, then don't put Him off. Find a mature Christian brother or sister and begin laying a foundation for trust and confession and prayer. Push through pride or embarrassment or fear and seek the Lord together in confession and prayer.

Infuse your prayers with earnestness and zeal, with passion for truth, for God's glory, for repentance and faith, for growing in love for God and His people. Earnestness and sincere faith are more important than eloquence. Don't be casual or lazy.

God wants us to be dependent on Him and God wants us to express that dependence in prayer. He wants His children to come to Him and seek Him and talk to Him.

John 14:13-14 Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

Jesus promises to do whatever we ask in prayers offered for the glory of God.

“Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”