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Sermon Series: *Native Prayer, No. 5*

It's Beneficial

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James 5:13-20 (NIV, ©1984)

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is any 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.

Let's turn back to that passage that was read for us from the book of James, Chapter 5. James 5:13-20.

Over these past few weeks, we've made some declarations about prayer. We've said that prayer is **natural**: it is **native** to us. God made us to communicate with Him.

We've said prayer is **beautiful**. The fact that our Creator loves us and wants us to commune with Him brings not only the promise for change, but also a deep, beautiful peace to our lives.

We called prayer **critical** for anyone who wants to please God because it's through communicating with God that we learn to be obedient to Him.

Last week, we said prayer is **possible**. It is possible for you and me to have a substantial and effective prayer life **because** of God's gift of the Holy Spirit to His Church. The Apostle Paul showed us in Romans 8 that one of the Holy Spirit's roles is to come alongside us and help us pray.

Prayer – communicating with God – is natural, beautiful, critical, possible and finally today, prayer is **beneficial**.

James' focus here in this passage, really, is about how God brings good in our lives through prayer.

Whether in times of trouble, prosperity, sickness or sin, James says here, Christ-followers should face every circumstance of life, first, with an awareness of God's presence, and second, with the assurance that God can do something positive in the situation.

Prayer activates the presence of the Lord by consciously seeking His involvement in our lives.

God has a word for every happening of life if only we'd appeal to Him through prayer.

And, according to James, prayer should really be the first thing we do.

When we're faced with a problem, why do we, so often, resort to prayer only **after** we've exhausted our own resources?

I think it's because, in practice, people tend to live by the totally unscriptural creed, "**God helps those who help themselves.**"

Why do we do that, when right there in verse 13 we have the invitation, "**Is anyone in trouble? Let them pray.**"

God, through prayer, can and will help us in all sorts of troubles.

In that same verse, James also says that in good days, we should acknowledge God in our happiness through song, which is really just prayer set to music.

Has God done good things for you? Then you have a prayer to sing.

In that next verse, verse 14, James says that God can make the sick well – through prayer.

We've seen that happen again and again, haven't we? Praying for the sick is part of the work of the church – the family of faith.

You know, God cares about peoples' suffering. It grieves Him that we have to bear the consequences of humanity's sin in our bodies, and so He welcomes prayer for health and restoration as He works to give us His best.

James says, too, that prayer is the means for forgiveness of sin. That's what repentance is, really: prayer telling God that we realize we've messed up and that we're sorry.

All these benefits – help, health, forgiveness, right relationship with God – are accessible to you and me through prayer.

So, what's the catch?

We're so jaded by our culture that we think there's got to be a catch, because we presume that nobody – not even God – gives anything away for free.

Well, there is a catch – you see it there at the end of verse 16: "**The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.**"

Ah, there it is – there's the catch! All these things are accessible **to the righteous**.

But who are the righteous?

Our minds suggest to us that the righteous are some elite group: people like Abraham, King David, the prophet Isaiah, Esther, Ruth and Mary, Jesus' mother.

Jesus, certainly, and the Apostles Paul and Peter.

We think those are the **righteous** people. They almost seem supernatural, with faith and power in prayer that seems inaccessible to you and me.

But look! It's almost as if James knew we'd think that, and he quickly writes to refute it.

He says there in verse 17, *“Take Elijah.”*

And we think, “Oh yes—sure, Elijah! He ought to be in that list, too—right up there with Abraham and Mary.”

But wait, there’s more. James goes on, *“Elijah was a man—just like us.”*

James wants us to understand, you see, that Elijah, and others like him—those we tend to think of as super-people: they’re really just like us—normal guys.

Elijah, and others like him, had no more capacity for effective prayer than you or I do.

Do you believe that? It’s true! James is declaring it right here.

And what did Elijah do?

James says, *“Elijah prayed that it would not rain.”*

Now, that’s a pretty audacious prayer, isn’t it? It’s audacious, in part, because it’s so public. Everybody knows whether God answers a prayer like that or not.

“Elijah prayed that it would not rain.”

Is that faith? Is that righteous trust? Is that activating the presence of the Lord by consciously seeking His involvement in our lives? I think it is.

And so, what happened?

Verse 17 says, *“It did not rain on the land for three and a half years.”*

God suspended the laws of nature through the prayers of this man. Twice, in fact, because then we read, *“Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.”*

That’s powerful prayer, isn’t it?

It is, and you see, James figured that people would tend to idolize the one who prays: in this case, Elijah.

That’s why he’s quick to point out that Elijah’s righteousness—his power in prayer—was a righteousness *that we can share.*

Our prayers *can be like* Elijah’s prayers—and with even *greater* results!

Jesus said *“You’ll do greater things than what even I do* (or greater than anything Elijah accomplished.)

How? Jesus said, *“Because I’m sending the Holy Spirit to you.”*

Can you imagine that: that your prayers and my prayers can be as effective as Elijah’s? And more?

Will you believe it?

Seeing as how God says it, will you believe it—and seriously begin to pray?

For your own benefit—for the benefit of your family, your church, your world—will you begin to activate the presence of the Lord by consciously seeking His involvement in your life?

A couple years ago, I read a book on the life of Francis Asbury, the Methodist bishop. He was called God’s apostle to the American frontier, and let me tell you, that is no exaggeration.

Asbury gave up his relationship with his parents—he left them in England.

He gave up his one true love, and along with her any prospect of marriage and family.

He gave up every comfort of England and came to preach Christ to the colonists settling the United States. In his 45 years, he traveled by horseback over 130,000 miles, often preaching three or four times a day.

He slept outside more often than inside.

He was attacked by enemies, by disease, and by all sorts of wild animals, including fleas.

Many of the English in America didn’t like him because he sided with the colonists in their fight for independence.

Many of the colonists didn’t like him because he remained a British citizen.

As I read about Asbury’s life, a few thoughts came to me.

First, it occurred to me that people with this kind of commitment and dedication are why we exist as Methodists today. This is our heritage.

A person like Asbury, with this kind of drive to win people to Christ and to live a holy life: this was why the fire of Methodism spread over our country and brought revival and built churches and schools and Christian environments in our cities and towns.

A huge part of the Christian heritage of our nation traces its roots to Francis Asbury.

I also admit that as I sat in my comfortable chair in my air-conditioned house and read about Asbury hiding from murderers for three days in a swamp, all for the sake of preaching the gospel, I was not a little convicted.

“What have I given up for the sake of the gospel?” That’s a question that we all have to answer with God as our confidant.

But I guess the thing that really struck me was that Francis Asbury was a real person, just like you and me.

Reading about him and the things he did, you start to think that he was almost superhuman.

But then you read how he was sick a lot, and that the flea bites made him itch just as they would make us itch.

You read how he got discouraged, and how he was afraid, and how he even battled depression from time to time.

Francis Asbury, like Elijah, was a real person who was useful to God. Like Elijah, he prayed prayers of faith that were powerful and effective, and things happened—things that have proven beneficial even to us all these years later.

You see, Elijah’s God is our God.

Francis Asbury’s God is our God.

He hasn’t changed over the years. He still holds out His hand to those who will trust in Him. He hears our prayers in trouble, in joy, in sickness and in sin, and He stands ready to respond with a better answer, a more beneficial answer, than we can even ask or think.

The strength of Elijah or Asbury was not in their cleverness or insight or intelligence. Their strength was that they knew whom to turn to in their weakness.

They prayed, and God answered, for their good and for His glory.

So, do you pray? I've asked that question several times in these weeks.

Do you pray? For your benefit, for the benefit of your family, your church, your world – do you regularly, intentionally, thoughtfully, carefully activate the presence of the Lord by consciously seeking His involvement in your life?

Prayer is native to us – we were born with the desire to pray.

But being a *person of prayer* is a decision of the will. It takes discipline to decide to consciously involve God in our lives.

If we never develop it, prayer tends to be self-centered and sporadic.

But if we will discipline this native living within us, our world could be a different place.

Francis Asbury got up at 4:00 every morning so he could pray – spend dedicated time with the Lord – for two hours a day.

But he wasn't superhuman. He was just a person like Elijah – like you and me, who knew the difference that God could make through his prayers.

Now, please understand that I'm not trying to guilt or shame anyone into anything, and I'm not suggesting two hours a day is some sort of gold standard.

All I'm saying is that God wants us all to know Him more intimately than we do in this moment, and I believe He's calling all of us to *something* – to *some greater place* – to some greater *commitment* with regard to prayer.

I don't know what that is for you. I simply ask you, will you do as He says?

Will you hear His Spirit drawing you to Himself – and will you follow? Will you do what He's asking of you with regard to prayer?

At the beginning of this series, I mentioned how, years ago, Doug Newton spoke here on prayer and asked two questions:

The first was, "Do you feel, in your heart, that your prayer life is not really all God wants it to be?"

And then he asked, "If so, what are you going to do to change that?"

What is your plan to give prayer the place you know it ought to have – that you know God wants it to have – in your life?

Each Sunday over the next few weeks, we're going to offer a practical way, a practical resource, to expand the practice of prayer in our lives.

I *don't* mean that we *all* should do them *all*. No, none of them will be for every one of us, necessarily. But surely there will be something suggested that would speak to each of us.

And we'll begin with that yellow page in your worship folder. Would you take a look at that with me?

If you've been here for more than a year, you've seen something like this before. We highlight this list of opportunities for church-wide prayer about this time every year because we want everyone to know about

them. And for some of them, we need to know your interest so we can include you.

That second group that starts about half way down the page that says, "*I'd like more information or to join*," those are a variety of church prayer groups that you're welcome to be a part of. For men, for women, for teens – and then there are some for specific purposes.

You can just show up at the time and place listed there if you like, but if you want more information about them before you show up, mark that line and we'll get that to you.

It's about the top part really, though, that we need to hear from you.

That first thing: we want every person and family in our church to be prayed for regularly, so if you would be willing to pray for five or so other WFMC people or families, right out of the new directory, would you mark that first line and we'll get that page to you. That's how that works.

The next two: we ask you to tell us of your willingness to pray for a teen or adult in our youth ministry, and/or on our Bible Quiz Team. If you're willing to pray for one, mark that and we'll get that name to you – so you can pray specifically and even get to know the person for whom you're praying.

The next one there, "Prayer Notes and News," that's an e-mail that comes from the church office most weekdays with urgent prayer needs and also reminders of events that affect, if not all of us, the vast majority of us.

So, if you're not on that e-mail list, check that and we'll put you on.

The last one there is about receiving the praises and prayer needs that are shared at each Wednesday night prayer meeting. It would be great if you can come on Wednesday nights, but if you can't, yet you're willing to share in the praises and to pray for the needs, check that and the office will e-mail that list to you every Friday.

You can also actually get that by mail if you don't use e-mail.

These are all ways to expand our practice of prayer and to engage with the Lord about our church family.

So, would you take that and mark it. Mark either what you already do or what perhaps the Lord is asking you to do, and put in in the offering boxes as you leave today?

And then, as I said, every Sunday for the next few weeks, we're going to offer another resource to help enrich and expand our prayer lives.

Again, all of them won't be for every one of us, but would you ask the Lord to show you how He might want you involved?

We just want to give all the resources and opportunity we can to make this house – our *church family* – a house of *prayer*, but *also* to make *this house* [point to self] – each of us *individually* – houses of *vibrant, real, effective prayer*.

What is God saying to you about expanding,
deepening, broadening your prayer life?

What is He asking of you?

Don't listen to me, necessarily. But please do listen
to Him.

He has somewhere He wants to take each of us in
our lives of prayer – and we don't want to miss
wherever He wants us to go.

Closing Prayer:

Father, we know it's true, just as James says here.
We know that all around us, and all around our world,
there are people who are experiencing your blessings.
They're happy and fulfilled and we should praise you
and thank you for those.

You also tell us – and we know very well – that all
around us and our world, there are people in trouble.

You tell us there are people who are sick.

You tell us there are people in need, people who
are lost, and people who don't know you.

And you tell us, among other things, that we need
to pray for these – to talk to you about it all.

Lord, help us to be faithful to do that.

Help us to willingly give whatever it takes to go
where you want us to go in prayer:

- so we might know You and Your will,

- so we might walk as closely with You as can be,

- so that our prayers will be powerful and effective.

Closing Song: *Wherever He Leads, I'll Go* (vv. 1,2,4)

Benediction:

May we seek the Lord's *teaching* us to pray.

May we welcome His *help* as we pray.

May we experience His *power* through our
prayers.

And may we work with His Spirit as He *comes
alongside us* in prayer –

so that:

we might grow closer and closer to Christ,
so we might join Him in what He's doing in
every way,

and so those we love and the world around us
might be healed and redeemed.

Amen.