



## POWERFUL AND EFFECTIVE

VERSE *The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*

PHONE I can remember that when I was young my parents decided to have a telephone. In the late 1960s, to have a phone you had to wait for months until someone came to install a line and because the system was so inefficient by modern standards, many people had to share a line with a neighbour in the same street. It was called a party line and you paid less standing charge for using it. There was a button on top of the phone which was used to connect to the exchange and get a dialling tone. However, if your neighbour was on the line, instead of getting the dialling tone, you got them. You could hear everything that was being said and even butt in on the conversation if you wanted to! We didn't always get on with the neighbours particularly as my sister used to spend hours on the phone to her friends much to the ire of our neighbours and everyone was so pleased when the GPO offered us an exclusive line – it was worth the extra charge. These days you can book a three-way conference call when you want to – how things have changed!

So often we hear in sermons that our prayers should be two way communication – between us and God. However, we have learned over the past few months that God makes us part of His family the Church. It's not an optional extra; it's the God- appointed environment in which we grow and thrive as believers. As a result we find that prayer is not just a two way private conversation between me and God, but it is also a three way conference call between me, the Lord and my fellow believers. Too often we think of prayer as a private affair but in reality we also grow because we are supposed to have three way conversation with God and that's done in the context of church – the God- appointed place in which Christians grow.

VERSE *The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*

One of the points stressed in the AGM last week is I believe as a Pastor that the area the Lord wants us to develop in as a church is the area of prayer, particularly our praying together as a church. He wants us to be a people of prayer that is powerful and effective. James 5 says much about prayer but it can be summed up by verse 18: the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. James wrote to Christians because he knew that there were great trials and persecutions ahead of them and they needed to be equipped to deal with them.

What's interesting about the context of prayer in these verses is that James wasn't wanting them to have powerful and effective prayer to carry out an amazing ministry full of miracles and society changing acts – although that might well have happened to some of his readers – but to equip them for a life where they would have to endure opposition and persecution and still hang on to their faith because they KNEW it was real and dynamic and life-changing. And that power and effectiveness was what was so transforming in the first, second and third centuries where the church grew rapidly. How did people come to Christ in a world where preaching was illegal and saints persecuted? Because they saw the power of God and the presence of God in these people.

I believe God wants us to be a people of powerful and effective prayer because through it we will have the dynamic faith that draws people to Christ like a moth to a flame. It does not mean that our

lives will be problem-free, prosperity-filled and action-packed, but it will make us distinctive in how we are able to deal with the issues of life which expose the presence of God and draw people to Christ.

So what is powerful and effective prayer all about? So often I've had the conversation with people who think that prayer is a pot-luck affair. To them, when we pray we ask God for things. It's a common attitude to prayer. It's known as VENDING MACHINE PRAYER. We ask and hopefully something comes out. Let's have a look at a CLIP called God-a-matic.

SO WHY ISN'T OUR PRAYER POWERFUL AND EFFECTIVE? When I used to commute every day to London I often got hungry but quickly learned to never use a vending machine on the underground because it always kept my money and I never got my bar of chocolate. In fact, I wondered why the machines always looked battered but then I realised that it was because frustrated people used to hit them to at least try to get their money back.. So I understand the plight of the man in the clip who got his hand trapped in the machine trying to get what he had paid for.

That's how many Christians approach prayer. We ask for something and then nothing happens. What do we do? We rationalise it don't we. "God said 'no'" we say. Why did He say no I wonder? Or the other approach is we say to ourselves that our faith must be weak. What does God say about that? We have an answer for that question before we think of anything more creative – "God moves in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform". God is mysterious – is He? Or is it just that we have never looked at God as Paul describes Him – One who has made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ. There's no rocket science in God – it's all here – everything you need to know about understanding the mysteries of God.

Of course the other response that people have when the "Vending Machine" God doesn't produce is that they have a crisis of faith. And then of course annoyingly we hear of answered prayer, transformed lives and people coming to Jesus in droves in other countries and we say, why Lord? Actually we know the reason for that one – well, I hope we do.

I want to look at this subject in the context of the church rather than focus on us as individuals this morning as that is what this passage is trying to address – James wants us to be a people whose prayer is powerful and effective.

So what makes our prayer powerful and effective? Here's a few suggestions from this passage. You'll find all these relate to praying with those we have a relationship with being part of a church. We often believe that our relationship with God is personal and the things we need to deal with are personal, like dandruff, combed hair or shiny shoes. However, all these involve praying with others in the context of praying together for one another and ministering to one another.

I believe that if we want to see real progress as a Church, we need to recapture the pleasure and the power of praying with one another and for one another because in doing so, we anchor our relationship with the one who is our bond anyway – Jesus Christ. I'm going to deal with a couple of these this week and the rest next week.

#### ◆ Pray with integrity

*12 Above all, my brothers, do not swear--not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.*

What has this passage got to do with prayer? The word isn't mentioned but it has everything with speaking in a way which calls on God's name. If you know people of middle eastern origin you often find that in order to stress how truthful they are being, they swear to something. I swear before God that the evidence I shall give should be the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

I once had a student from Algeria and he had become so casual about swearing that he swore against anything when I required him to tell the truth. Once he even swore on his mother's grave – which was quite a cheek as she was very much alive and well!

The issue here is simple. We are the people of God and we should not take the name or authority of God casually. Actually as I think James indicates here, the reason isn't for one of blasphemy or not, but that actually as the people of God our integrity should be 100% watertight. What we say should be what we mean and what we mean is what we say, and like God it should be completely truthful. And to bring God at all into matters of truth is inappropriate.

In other words there is a time to pray and invoke the name of God or of Jesus and a time when we shouldn't – and that time is whenever we speak, whatever we undertake to do, whatever truth we are witnesses of, we need to be people of integrity and we should never have to use the name of God – ever – to back up what we say is truthful. "I swear by Almighty God" is a prayer that should never cross our lips in our relationships with one another.

Therefore we should come before God and before men with integrity. And as we shall find next week, if we can't then we need to admit that and find forgiveness and reconciliation. In a world where integrity is often hard to find effective and powerful prayer happens when God's people speak and act with integrity.

#### ◆ Pray worshipfully

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

This looks straightforward. If you are in trouble you pray right? I hope so, but often God is someone of last resort. Sign outside a church "*Why pray? when you can worry and take tranquillizers*" But for many Christians, when they do get around to prayer, praying to get themselves out of trouble, or praying that someone else might get you out of trouble – or maybe the reverse – that they won't get in to trouble; is the sum total of their prayer life. That's the essence of a Vending Machine prayer life.

That is not how this verse balances. When we are happy, we should praise God - we should worship. For most of us, we are usually happier than we are sad, but how often do we really worship and pray that one up with God. These days I always try to start any prayer meeting off with worship because when we are happy, the emphasis of prayer is worship; recognising the blessings God gives us. And it's in worship that we most open ourselves to God speaking to us – and in the end, this is what prayer is actually all about.

Prayer is about worship as much as it is about intercession. God expects us to come to Him asking for things, but He also expects us to come before Him in worship. Why? Because worship makes us examine our lives before God. We see what He has been doing and we give Him glory. And as we come before Him in worship, we hear His word – it may be through reading His written Word, it may be through music, it may be through testimony, it maybe through a prophetic word. And when we do that, it brings the bit about ourselves being in trouble or others being in trouble into perspective. In fact it brings us God's perspective – and when that happens it can change the whole character of how we pray for problems.

Worship is always best done with others and in the following verses we'll see that praying together has an amazingly potent effect on situations. Come next week when we shall examine the next few verses which are very challenging. But for now remember this. God

is not a vending machine who is conformed to our desires, He's a God who has shown us love and grace, who deserves our worship and desires for us to listen to His voice.

Why? Because in doing so as people of integrity, we find that the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. God wants us to be Elijah in our prayers, not left behind with our hand stuck in the machine trying to get what we want out of Him.

Let's pray

*Preached by Mark Reid  
MRBC Felixstowe 15/11/09  
© Mark Reid 2009*