

Answered prayers are yours, a gift of God the Father, through the work of God the Son. Amen.

Prayer is an act of worship in which we speak to God from our hearts. But why do we do it? **Why pray?** Well, what do you got going on?

Is anyone among you in trouble? (5:13) I guarantee it. I don't need to follow you around all week to know this, you have trouble. And if you're in trouble, what does God want you to do? **Let them pray (5:13).**

Trouble is the trigger that gets us to fold our hands, bow our heads, and lift up our hearts. God wants us to come to him with any and every trouble. The train wreck of your marriage, the disaster you call a checkbook, the misplaced remote control – no problem is too big, no problem is too small. God wants us to bring our troubled lives to him.

But maybe life isn't so troubled. Maybe life is good. Like, really good. **Is anyone happy? (5:13)** Yeah, of course! Happiness is a gift from God. And if you're happy, what does God want you to do? **Let them sing songs of praise (5:13).**

Thank God for your happiness. Sing! That's what Christians do. We sing. Sometimes softly, sometimes off-key, but we sing. God wants us to pray in song, to thank him for happiness.

Because we won't always be happy. **Is anyone among you sick? (5:14)** Sickness makes us unhappy. We're familiar with sickness, probably too familiar. Every Sunday we pray for the sick, the ill, the ailing, the unwell. God wants us to.

Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord (5:14). God wants us to care for the sick, body and soul. James mentions anointing with oil because oil is a healing agent, a way to make the sick comfortable.

But much more important than oil is prayer. Because **the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up (5:15).** That is an awesome promise, isn't it? God will hear; God will heal. Not only does God invite us to pray; he also promises to help.

His biggest help? **If they have sinned, they will be forgiven (5:15).** God's biggest help is forgiveness. Sin is serious, and God is serious about forgiving it. We should be too. **Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed (5:16).**

God doesn't want us to ignore our sin or carry it around like a weight on our neck. If you sin against someone, confess to them. If someone sins against you, pray for them. Don't retaliate, don't pick a fight, don't sin right back at them.

No, the best thing you can do is pray for them. And if they confess, forgive them, "just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

So, time for review. If you're in trouble, what does God want you to do? Pray. If you're happy? Pray. If you're sick? Pray. If you sin? Pray. You get it. **Why pray?** Because **God wants us to!** Every situation in life calls for it.

So what kills your prayers? After all, if God wants me to pray, if God promises to answer, what could possibly keep me from praying? A lot.

Prayer is a lot of the unknown. You never quite know what it accomplishes. You can pray and pray and pray, and never see any results. Sometimes it's like all I'm doing is remembering people in need and telling God about them. We all have stories of prayers answered the way we want. But we all have more stories of prayers that were not answered the way we want.

So **why pray?** Because **God wants us to?** Why does God want us to pray if he isn't going to do anything with it? Pray as persistently as Abraham (Genesis 18:20-32)? Once is enough. I prayed. Didn't happen. Must not be God's will. Did Abraham stop? Did he give up after one request? No. But I don't always pray like Abraham. Neither do you.

We are sinful. What is it that James says? The prayer of a sinful man is powerful and effective. No. That's not it. Can't be. Sin is the ultimate prayer killer. Isaiah 59:2, "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear."

Iniquity separates us from God. Sin hides God's face from us, and he does not listen. If you want your prayers heard, you can't have any sin. What is it James says? **The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (5:16).** We are righteous if we are in a right relationship with God. That means no sin. Try to conjure up that sinlessness on your own and God says this: "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). Sin creates an insurmountable divide between us and God.

But something crosses the divide: the cross. Someone reveals God's face: Christ. Christ bridges the gap between sinner and God. You are righteous because Jesus is righteous for you. A righteous man is somebody who has righteousness through faith in Christ Jesus, somebody whose sins are forgiven for Christ's sake.

Jesus is the only reason we can pray. Why do you think we end our prayers with, "through Jesus Christ our Lord"? Because "in Christ and through faith in Christ we may approach God with freedom and confidence" (Ephesians 3:12).

That's why non-Christians cannot pray to God. Unbelievers can talk all they want, but God does not listen. So why would Christians think that prayer is a waste of time? We're the only people on the planet who actually have their prayers heard!

Maybe we think that way because prayers are not answered how we want, when we want. But prayer is not a chance to get God to do things our way. Remember, we pray, "Thy will be done," not "My will be done" (Matthew 6:10). Things do not happen according to our will. Thank God! It would not be good if they did!

What God wills is always better. God always answers prayer, always with what is best for you. He promises, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Luke 11:9).

Take Jesus' promise at face value. When we pray according to his will, God always answers our prayers yes. But God's yes is better than our yes. God improves on what we anticipate. If my friend asks for ten dollars and I give him twenty, I guess you could say I told him no, but not really.

It's the same with prayer. Our Father promises to answer even better than what we ask (Ephesians 3:20). That's his will. But he does not promise that we will always understand how his will is better than ours. "We live by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Dying of pneumonia doesn't seem like the relief we pray for, but I guarantee that grandma will say being with Jesus in heaven is better than being with us on earth.

Finally, the Christian must admit this: God's ways are not my ways; his thoughts are not my thoughts (Isaiah 55:8). I am nothing before God but dust and ashes (Genesis 18:27). And yet, God wants me to pray! God listens to dust and ashes! **Why pray? Prayer changes things.** Think of Elijah.

Elijah was a human being, even as we are (5:17), a sinner like us, righteous for Christ's sake like us. First he prayed for no rain, then he prayed for a lot of rain (**5:17-18**), because the Israelites were worshipping Baal, a rain god. Withholding and giving rain showed the people whose will gets done. Not the made-up rain god Baal, but God, the Father, the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

Elijah is proof that **the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (5:16)**. So just think of the power we have! The power to pray like a beggar with no shame (Luke 11:8), knowing that God is never too busy, never too bothered, always happy to hear, always willing to do what is right in his sight. **Prayer changes things.** That is some power!

And how often do we leave it unplugged? I've got to work this out. I've got to take this medicine. I've got to fix this. I. I. I. And if all that doesn't work, then, maybe then, it's in God's hands. How arrogant am I, when God is my last resort? We do not pray perfectly.

But there is One who did. Not Abraham. Not Elijah. Jesus. Not only does he teach us how to pray; he prays in our place as our Substitute. When it's time for the horror of crucifixion, Jesus prays, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

Jesus does God's will to forgive you for all your imperfect prayers. The perfect prayer life of Jesus is all God sees when he looks at you. Look to Jesus and see your righteousness. Look to Jesus and learn to pray. Look to Jesus and find the power to pray. Amen.