

Psalm 32
Hymn: 773 LSB

Where Does Prayer Get its Power?
James 5:13-18

Merciful Father, bless the preaching and hearing of our your Word that we might trust in the righteousness won for us by the obedient life, holy passion, and victorious resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ and in that confidence have boldness to call upon you in every trouble, confess our sins, and receive your forgiveness; we ask it through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

On this day last year, I preached on the first part of the text from James where he speaks of the anointing of the sick, this morning I would like to focus on the second part of the reading especially these words from verse 16: "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."

What is the power of prayer? Sometimes we hear pious Christians make statements like "There is great power in prayer" and then go on to describe wondrous things which happen because people have engaged in prayer. There is a danger here if folks get the notion that the potency of prayer lies in the act of praying. Then we might be tempted to believe that prayer is effective because we use the right formula or we are persistent or that we recruit enough people to join us in making the petition to God. Where this happens prayer is made a means of grace and we are tempted to rely on our own prayers instead of God's promises.

Now there is power in prayer, but it is the power of God's Word on which all genuine Christian prayer is based. Without God's Word prayer is futile. It would only be a speaking to ourselves. Like the Pharisee who stood in the temple praying to himself, "I thank you that I am not like other men," it would be empty. We can pray with confidence only because God has commanded us to pray and has promised to hear us.

Prayer does not create faith. Only the Word of God does that as the Scriptures make it clear that faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word of Christ (Rom. 10:17). Faith is not created because we pray but prayer is an exercise of faith. Faith calls upon the name of the Lord, clinging to His promises that all who call upon His name will be saved.

God delights in hearing His children speak to Him. He wants us to pray and not be shy in our bringing before Him every need of body and soul. He "tenderly invites" us the Catechism says to approach Him as dear children come to a dear father.

Without faith in Christ Jesus, genuine prayer is not possible. There can be an abundance of words even addressed to God but this is not real prayer. There can be a lot of emotion and excitement where people work themselves into a frenzy but without faith in God's promises, it is only empty talk.

Listen instead to what James says, "The prayer of a righteous person has great power in its working." Here James is describing the prayer of faith. That is, he is talking about the prayer of the one who is

righteous before God for the sake of the suffering and death of God's own Son, Jesus Christ. He is our righteousness. His word declares us righteous, that is, justified. This is the prayer which is exemplified by the tax collector who like the Pharisee goes into the temple to pray. But unlike the Pharisee, he prays "God, be merciful to me a sinner." Jesus says that it is this man, not the Pharisee who goes down to his house justified. He is the righteous man whose prayer has great power in its working!

Like Elijah who prayed in the Old Testament that God would shut up the heavens that it might not rain and again that He would open the clouds and send rain to the parched earth and was heard, so all who in faith call upon the Lord will be heard. Such is the power of God's Word and promise.

This prayer which Jesus has commanded and promised to hear includes the confession of our sin. James says "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." This is what we do when we pray the prayer Jesus taught us: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." This is what we pray in this confessional service as acknowledge that we have sin against our Creator in thought, word, and deed and in doing so we have sinned against each other too. This prayer has great power because it lays open our dark hearts before the light of the God from whom no secrets are hid. To confess your sin is to let go of sin's deadly hold on your life; it is to relinquish that sin into the mercy of God.

There is a promise to those who confess: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). So today we pray that God would open our lips to confess our sins and that He would open our ears and hearts to receive His word of absolution: Your sins are forgiven. Amen.