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EFFECTIVE PRAYER 2

Understanding effective prayer

Christians generally acknowledge that prayer is very important, but have little knowledge of the subject. Many Christians have a superficial grasp of the issues involved. Prayer is vital to Christian living. It is a major aspect of our relationship with God, our contribution to the Lord's work and the building of God's kingdom. Hence, effectiveness in prayer is an important subject for us to consider. This second message on effective prayer is a continuation and elaboration of the preceding message.

James 5:16

James 5:16 is a key verse which helps us understand what a good prayer is and what it means to pray well. It can help us remember the main issues covered on this subject including what was considered in the preceding message.

James 5:16

... The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

This verse communicates a sense of strength, power and effectiveness in the prayer of a righteous man. When we wish to understand whether a person has prayed well, we seek to understand whether the prayer is effective and whether it accomplishes much. We may ask: How is it effective? In what sense does it accomplish much? How can we be clear that it accomplishes much? In the preceding message, we considered two factors on this subject of effective prayer.

Firstly, for a prayer to be effective and to accomplish much, it must be acceptable to God. If it is not acceptable to God, then the prayer will not be effective.

Secondly, we have to consider the quality of the prayer and its impact on the spiritual realm. To what degree does the prayer contribute to the goal of accomplishing God's will and purposes? Some issues are more significant than others in the heart of God. At times, answers to our prayers may appear dramatic, but the issues may not be significant from an eternal perspective. So, knowing the issues that matter more to God will help us to understand what effective prayer is and how to develop in this area.

Prayer of poor quality

A prayer which sounds good may be of poor quality because there is hardly any impact or contribution in the spiritual realm. You may ask: Why is this so? There may be several reasons:

a. Wrong spirit or attitude

A prayer may sound good, but if the person's attitude or spirit is not right, the spiritual impact of his prayer will be affected. The prayer may even be totally ineffective because it is rejected by God. We have noted that Isaiah tells us God does reject prayers and that prayer can even be an abomination to Him. How effective a prayer is depends on the state of the person's heart, his attitudes, and his spirit.

b. Verbal or mental exercise

The prayer may just be a verbal or mental exercise. The words may sound good, but there is actually very little spiritual meaning, reality and impact.

c. Superficial coverage

The prayer may sound good but there is very superficial coverage of the issues. Much time and concentration may be on issues that are relatively unimportant. It does not really touch critical areas and this could be due to the lack of knowledge and wisdom in prayer.

d. Emotional

Likewise, a prayer that sounds powerful may hardly have any spiritual impact if it is primarily a manifestation of the emotions. The person may pray loudly and in an emotional manner because of the mistaken notion that the louder he prays and the stronger the manifestation of emotion, the more powerful his prayer will be. But in reality, loudness in prayer and the manifestation of emotion do not contribute to the effectiveness of the prayer.

Prayer of good quality

People may think that a person is not able to pray well because he is not eloquent, has difficulty expressing himself and his prayer is not smooth flowing. In reality, his prayer may have greater impact and may contribute more to God's kingdom than another who can pray eloquently. How can this be so? We have noted three important factors in the previous message (AR065):

- a. Quality of life
- b. Knowledge
- c. The degree of spiritual exertion

Let us look at these factors and relate them to James 5:16.

a. Quality of life

James 5:16 tells us “the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much”. In the next verse, James gives the example of Elijah:

James 5:17

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months.

Elijah was a righteous man and his prayer accomplished much. The emphasis in verses 16 and 17 is on the moral quality of the one who prays. Righteousness has a moral sense. It has to do with living a life that is pleasing to God. So, the quality of a person’s life – his spiritual health and stature – has a significant bearing on the effectiveness of his prayers.

Let us turn now to the phrase “can accomplish much” in verse 16. This phrase tells us about the potential of the prayer of a righteous man. His prayer can accomplish much. He has that capacity and potential. But for that potential to be realised, he needs to pray effectively. It is how he prays and the quality of his prayer that leads to the prayer accomplishing much. The next two factors have a significant bearing on how much his prayer accomplishes.

b. Knowledge

Elijah had a close relationship with God and he knew it was the will of God to withhold rain (1 Kings 17:1), and so he prayed earnestly that it would not rain.

A man who has true knowledge understands God, the issues involved, and where and how to direct his prayer.

It is important to be wise and perceptive when we pray. For example, we are concerned for a person who is going through difficulties. We may ask the Lord to take the person out of his difficulties. But is this what we should be praying for? Is this the most helpful thing? At times, the Lord may want to teach that person certain lessons and transform his character through those difficulties. If we are wise and perceptive, instead of praying that he be delivered from those difficulties, we will be praying for him to learn well from what he is going through.

When we are wise and perceptive, we will know the priorities, the emphases, the issues that really matter in a situation. We will know how to direct our prayer and release spiritual life and energy accordingly.

c. The degree of spiritual exertion

A person may be righteous like Elijah. He may have the capacity to pray effectively. But for his prayer to be effective, he needs to exercise his spirit, exert spiritual strength and have the spiritual stamina to persevere at it. James 5:17 tells us Elijah prayed earnestly.

Effective prayer illustrated by water flowing through a hose

Spiritual life and energy released through prayer can be likened to the quantity of water flowing through a hose. This depends on the quality of that person – whether he is righteous, what is his heart attitude, his spiritual stature, and how much he exerts and perseveres.

The same quantity of water can be released from the hose as a diffused spray or as a powerful jet. If as a diffused spray, the water that is available may not be directed to areas that need it more. Praying in general terms can be likened to that. For example, we can pray for the Lord to undertake and bless a country. There is a place for this kind of prayer. The prayer is general and not concentrated on any particular issue. However, there may be a need to be more focused in praying for important specific areas and issues.

When the water is concentrated in a single jet, there will be a concentration of energy. In the same way, more power can be released in prayer on specific areas when we focus on those areas. The impact on those areas will be greater compared to praying generally.

To be effective in prayer, it is important to know where we ought to channel the power of prayer. If prayer is directed at unimportant areas, then little is accomplished. If effective prayer is directed at the right areas, then life and power are released on those areas and much can be accomplished. A proper sense of priorities, emphases and wisdom in prayer is important if we want to release effective prayer that accomplishes much for God's kingdom.

Some considerations in prayer*a. Appropriate words in prayer*

Although a prayer that sounds good and eloquent may not be effective, there is a place for the choice of appropriate words. Appropriate words can help us express what is in our hearts. This is so in our personal prayers and when we pray with others.

In corporate prayer, unity of heart is important. And for there to be unity of heart, the congregation needs to understand and agree with the direction of the prayer. If we pray vaguely or utter carelessly whatever words that come to our minds, the

meaning that comes forth may be different from what we intend. Others will then not be able to join in the prayer properly and the effectiveness of corporate prayer is reduced.

While appropriate words are helpful, we must still be careful that we do not choose words just to make our prayer sound nice, when there is no corresponding spiritual meaning and reality behind the words. Appropriate words are meant to help us express effectively the reality within. If the reality is not present, then whatever words we use will be in vain.

b. Earnestness in prayer

Another point to take note of in prayer is the issue of earnestness. Consider James 5:17:

James 5:17

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months.

Besides being a man of spiritual stature, Elijah also prayed earnestly. Earnestness in prayer has a bearing on the effectiveness of prayer. It is not just about spending time in prayer. Are we earnest in exercising our spirit? Do our minds drift and we become distracted?

During corporate prayer, when someone else is praying, are we concentrating and joining earnestly in the prayer, or are our minds drifting away? If our minds drift away, we would not be contributing effectively to the prayer.

And when we are the ones praying, it is not sufficient that we cover the issues or just utter the words. The words may sound correct, but if we are half-hearted and distracted, the quality and the effectiveness of our prayer would be diminished.

It is therefore important that we be earnest in our prayer, whether we are praying on our own or with others.

c. Appropriate emotion and feeling

God has created us as human beings with emotions and there is a place for appropriate emotions or feelings in our prayers. Emotions are appropriate when they are an expression of earnestness and concern for issues that we are burdened about. For example, when we are deeply concerned for someone who is undergoing intense suffering and difficulties, it is difficult to imagine how we can pray for that person earnestly and yet be completely emotionless. A certain degree of emotion will tend to surface and that is fitting.

But this is an area that we have to be careful about. Expressions of emotion in our prayers can be easily mistaken for effectiveness or earnestness. Emotions must be regulated as too much emotion can lead to loss of self-control and can hinder the effective exercise of our mind and spirit in prayer.

Let us look at how the apostle Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit:

Galatians 5:22-23

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

An aspect of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control, which should characterise our lives if we are going about our Christian lives properly.

Some believers mistakenly think that when they entrust their lives to God, they can just let God take over their lives. God works effectively in our lives in the context of our actively choosing to cooperate with Him. We are to constantly choose to align our hearts with God's, to choose to cooperate with the Spirit of God, to choose His will, to choose to follow Him. When we adopt such a posture, God will have freedom to meaningfully and effectively work in our lives.

Failure to maintain self-control results in difficulty exercising our faculties effectively. We will then be hindered from walking well with God.

There are many injunctions and instructions in the Scriptures. These instructions are directed at our mind and our will. When we are overwhelmed by our emotions, we can't think clearly, and we will find it difficult to exercise our will effectively. And when we can't exercise our will properly, our spirit will also not be able to express itself properly.

When we are too emotional, there is also increased danger of spiritual manipulation. We tend not to think clearly, and we tend to move on the basis of emotion. The evil one can then take advantage and manipulate our emotions and deceive us.

We should be earnest in our prayer without being dominated by emotion and without losing self-control. True earnestness in prayer is basically expressed by our concentration in the prayer and spiritual exertion. It is not through the release of a lot of emotion because in the end the impact must be in the spiritual realm. The release of much emotion does not have that kind of impact in the spiritual realm. We can be earnest and effective in our prayer and yet there is not much emotion manifested because we are primarily exercising ourselves spiritually. Some degree of emotion is in order as part of our expression of love and concern and the burdens in our hearts.

Long prayers and spending much time in prayer

Let us now consider the issue of long prayers and spending much time in prayer. We saw in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector that the tax collector's prayer was brief yet effective. It was acceptable to God and God heard him, answered his prayer, and was merciful to him. We may then ask: Is short, brief prayer better?

There is a place for long prayers and spending much time in prayer. The Lord Jesus often spent much time in prayer. The Scriptures often urges us to pray earnestly and to make prayer a prominent part of our lives. The apostle Paul prayed much and also exhorts us to pray without ceasing.

Luke 6:12 tells us the Lord Jesus spent the whole night in prayer. In Luke 18, the Lord Jesus told a parable about persevering in prayer:

Luke 18:1

Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart,

He went on to instruct His disciples to pray and not to lose heart. In verse 3, He talked about a widow who kept going to the judge to seek legal protection. At first the judge was unwilling to heed the widow's request. But afterwards he agreed.

Luke 18:4-7

4 ... 'Even though I do not fear God nor respect man,
5 yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection,
otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.' "
6 And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge said;
7 now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day
and night, and will He delay long over them?"

There is a place for crying to God day and night. Spending much time in prayer is a common feature in the lives of those who have developed their prayer life well.

Misconceptions and pitfalls

There is a place for long prayers and spending much time in prayer. However, there are various misconceptions, pitfalls and complications that can arise. We need to pay heed to the words of the Lord Jesus in Luke 20:46-47:

Luke 20:46-47

46 "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets,
47 who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation."

The Lord Jesus warns us about the practice of the scribes and the Pharisees who, for appearance's sake, offer long prayers. They will receive greater condemnation. Long prayers may not always be pleasing to God. In all likelihood, the scribes and the Pharisees prayed in this way because they wanted to impress others that they were spiritual and pious. It is also likely to be related to the false notion that if a person can pray for a long time, it means that the prayer is good or effective. Unnecessarily long-winded prayer may come under the category of "meaningless repetition", as described by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 6:7.

Matthew 6:7

"And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.

Those who engage in meaningless repetition in prayer suppose that they will be heard for their many words. Praying for a long time and using many words in prayer do not mean that we are praying effectively.

Long prayers in public

For those who associate lengthy prayer with effective prayer, or have a tendency to be lengthy when praying in public, here are some points to take note of:

a. Equating long prayer with effective prayer

We should not equate length with effectiveness though there is an important place for spending much time in prayer. Long prayers can be less effective than short prayers.

b. Insufficient stamina

In order for us to be able to pray long prayers on issues that are significant, we will need a certain degree of spiritual strength and spiritual life. If we lack the spiritual strength and life, we may not be able to sustain the prayer meaningfully. The prayer can then degenerate into a mere verbal and mental exercise with hardly any spiritual reality. This will be negative both in corporate prayer and in our personal prayer life. Even if the issues we are praying are not very major, it is not easy to sustain the prayer with spiritual life if it is prolonged. We have to evaluate whether we have sufficient life and stamina to sustain a lengthy prayer.

There is a place for a congregation to spend much time in prayer together where various ones are participating. In the present context, we are considering an individual praying a long prayer during corporate prayer.

c. Joining in meaningfully in long prayer

Personal prayer is different from corporate prayer. In personal prayer, we may be able to pray long prayers with life and meaning. But when we take a long time in corporate prayer, other people may not be able to join in meaningfully. So, we

should bear that in mind. If the whole way we pray is not meaningful and lacking in life, it can be even more problematic. Some people can find the prayer tedious and hard to bear. They may find it difficult to concentrate and to join in the prayer. Their spirit can be dampened and the effectiveness of the corporate prayer can be hindered.

d. False sense of spirituality

There can be a false notion that one is spiritual when one is able to pray for a long time. It is true that a person's spiritual health can enable him to sustain longer prayers meaningfully, whether on his own or corporately. However, it does not mean that the longer we pray, the more spiritual we are.

Spending longer time in prayer

Spending a longer time in prayer can be meaningful and important especially in personal private prayer as we seek to pray over various matters such as:

a. Seeking guidance

Regardless of our spiritual maturity, we can all seek for God's guidance in our lives. The Lord Jesus spent a whole night in prayer, after which He chose the twelve apostles.

Luke 6:12-13

12 It was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God.

13 And when day came, He called His disciples to Him and chose twelve of them, whom He also named as apostles:

Choosing the twelve disciples was a significant matter and so the Lord Jesus spent much time to pray over it. Likewise, there is a place for us to spend a longer time in prayer when seeking the Lord's guidance in major issues.

b. Evaluation over our lives

When we are evaluating our lives, it is helpful for us to spend extended time before the Lord. During such times, we seek the Lord to understand whether there are aspects in our lives that are not right. As we do so, we ask the Lord to wash us and cleanse us. We also take definite steps to correct our lives. Just as a car requires oiling and repairs, we need to go through regular thorough spiritual check-ups to make sure we stay in a healthy spiritual state.

We may also look to the Lord to help us see more clearly what are the positive areas He wants us to pay more attention to, what ought to be our priorities and how best to channel our time, energy and the resources He has entrusted to us. We then ask

the Lord to strengthen us and to fill us afresh with the Spirit as we affirm our love for Him and our commitment to Him.

It is difficult to evaluate our lives properly within a short space of time. So a longer time spent in prayer before the Lord would be helpful.

c. Major and complicated issues

Sometimes length of time in prayer would be important where it relates to significant, difficult or complicated issues, and also struggles in spiritual warfare. The length of time spent praying over these things can have a significant impact in the spiritual realm and on our contribution to the attaining of the goal of the prayer, provided we have the stamina to pray meaningfully. If there is effective spiritual exertion in prayer, then there will be the continuing release of the Lord's life and power. It will have a bearing on the effectiveness of the prayer over those issues.

d. Worship and fellowship with God

We should spend sufficient time in worshipping God and deepening our oneness and fellowship with Him. During such times of prayer, we affirm our love for Him and our commitment to Him. We ponder over how we can live our lives more effectively and faithfully. Here, I am not referring to pondering over areas that are not right in our lives. I am referring to general worship and fellowship where there is the positive sense of deepening our oneness with God. Such times can be very enriching and meaningful.

Approach to personal prayer

Although it may be more appropriate to spend a longer time in personal prayer, we should bear in mind these points:

a. Spiritual reality and life

We may think that it is always good to spend a long time in prayer. But then, we may not be able to sustain ourselves in meaningful prayer. Our mind wanders. Our prayer becomes just a verbal or mental exercise. For prayer to be meaningful, we must be able to sustain the meaning of the prayer. We must have the spiritual life and reality for the prayer to be meaningful.

b. Significance of issues

It is not wise for us to spend much time and energy praying over minor issues. It is not that the Lord is not concerned about minor issues. Rather, it is that we should be wise to concentrate on issues that are more important. We should know our priorities because we all have limited amount of time and spiritual energy to exercise ourselves

in prayer. It is therefore needful for us to be discerning in the way we channel our time and energy in prayer.

c. Strenuous praying

It can be strenuous to spend a long time in prayer and we need to exercise care not to be spiritually overstretched, especially if spiritual warfare is involved. Any major issue that we pray over earnestly will have spiritual implications. It will attract spiritual opposition from the powers of darkness. The nature of the issues involved and the approach we adopt in prayer can make a difference to the kind of spiritual opposition we encounter.

Even in areas that may not have obvious intense spiritual warfare implications, we can still become spiritually drained if we pray over many things of significance in God's kingdom and cover a lot of ground. So we need to be alert to such things and carefully evaluate what we are ready for.

d. Content of prayer

If we spend much time to pray for others and for various issues pertaining to the advancement of God's kingdom, we can become spiritually exhausted. This would be even more so if these issues have a direct relationship with spiritual warfare. But where the content of our prayer has to do more with worship and fellowship with God and pondering over our lives, the time we spend in prayer is not likely to result in our becoming spiritually drained. If we do it properly, we can become spiritually refreshed and strengthened instead.

e. Spiritual refreshment

We need not pray for the major issues continuously. We can pray longer and more meaningfully over major issues if our prayers are interspersed with times of spiritual refreshment, during which we strengthen ourselves in the Lord by worshipping Him, praising Him and having fellowship with Him. After being strengthened, refreshed, renewed, we can continue to pray over the major issues.

In fact, it is a good practice to first spend some time to praise the Lord, worship Him, and strengthen ourselves in Him before we pray for others and various issues.

f. Worship of God

Times of worship are very meaningful for our lives and for the whole meaning of our relationship with God. During such times, it is good to learn to affirm relevant truths and principles revealed in the Scriptures that can enrich our expressions of worship of God and our faith in Him. As we do so, our relationship with God is deepened and we will be strengthened and refreshed in Him.

When we praise and worship God and affirm the sovereignty of God and His other attributes, there is impact on the spiritual realm. It will have a bearing on the effectiveness of the time of prayer and the attainment of the goal of the various areas we are praying for.

There is an incident recorded in the Scriptures which illustrates in a pictorial form this spiritual reality. King Jehoshaphat's army was facing a superior and far bigger army. He led Judah in crying out to God for help and also praised and worshipped God. In response to their prayer, God routed the enemy. Even as they began singing and praising God, the Lord destroyed the enemy forces.

2 Chronicles 20:1-6, 20-24

1 Now it came about after this that the sons of Moab and the sons of Ammon, together with some of the Meunites, came to make war against Jehoshaphat.

2 Then some came and reported to Jehoshaphat, saying, "A great multitude is coming against you from beyond the sea, out of Aram and behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar (that is Engedi)."

3 Jehoshaphat was afraid and turned his attention to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah.

4 So Judah gathered together to seek help from the Lord; they even came from all the cities of Judah to seek the Lord.

5 Then Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the Lord before the new court,

6 and he said, "O Lord, the God of our fathers, are You not God in the heavens? And are You not ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations? Power and might are in Your hand so that no one can stand against You.

20 They rose early in the morning and went out to the wilderness of Tekoa; and when they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, "Listen to me, O Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, put your trust in the Lord your God and you will be established. Put your trust in His prophets and succeed."

21 When he had consulted with the people, he appointed those who sang to the Lord and those who praised Him in holy attire, as they went out before the army and said, "Give thanks to the Lord, for His lovingkindness is everlasting."

22 When they began singing and praising, the Lord set ambushes against the sons of Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah; so they were routed.

23 For the sons of Ammon and Moab rose up against the inhabitants of Mount Seir destroying them completely; and when they had finished with the inhabitants of Seir, they helped to destroy one another.

24 When Judah came to the lookout of the wilderness, they looked toward the multitude, and behold, they were corpses lying on the ground, and no one had escaped.

Though King Jehoshaphat faced a physical enemy, there is a parallel in the spiritual context of prayer. When we praise and worship God in the context of prayer, it can make a difference to the effectiveness of our prayer. It will have an impact in the spiritual realm and on the forces of darkness involved in the situation.

Concluding remarks

As we conclude this message, let us go back to James 5:16.

James 5:16

... The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

Prayer is a very major aspect in accomplishing God's work in the spiritual realm and in the furtherance of God's kingdom. In order to make progress in the area of prayer, and to equip ourselves to accomplish the Lord's work, let us recognise two aspects highlighted in James 5:16. First, the "righteous man", and second, "effective prayer".

The "righteous man" aspect is crucial. This means taking care of our lives, our hearts before God, our spiritual growth and development, in the direction of spiritual maturity and stature.

As we look to the Lord to help us to grow spiritually, we also seek to understand how to pray effectively. We need to exercise wisdom in our prayers, regulate our prayers, concentrate on areas of priority, and perceive more accurately the issues that are precious and important to God's heart and His purposes. This applies both to the general direction of God's purposes as well as what God wants us to concentrate on at a particular point in time.

Let us reflect on the life of the Lord Jesus and on the quality of His life that bears a direct relationship with the power of His prayer. Let us reflect on His character that we, too, may be conformed to His image.

As we ponder over the prayer life of the Lord Jesus, let us also pay attention to our own prayer life, to nurture it and learn to be more effective in prayer.

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