

“Your Prayers Have Power”

1 Kings 18:36-39

James 5:13-18

Matthew 18:19-20

In the 1950's, young married couples, fresh off of WW II and the Korean war were having babies that become known as the baby boom. Douglas McArthur was a war hero and very much respected. Kirk Douglas was a rising star in Hollywood. Thus, some baby boomer boys were named Doug. Doug Smith, Doug Doza, Doug Rommel, Doug Kronenberger, and Pastor Doug. The name “Doug” had clout.

Today, nobody names their kid Doug! Why? The animated T.V. show is about an obnoxious kid named Doug. Liberty mutual has an insurance T.V. ad with a yellow emu and a nerdy guy dressed in yellow named Doug. Today, the name “Doug” carries no clout whatsoever.

But if you have taken on the name of Christ, you have clout with the most powerful being in the universe. When you speak, God listens. When you pray, heaven takes note. "When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action" (Matt. 18:19 THE MESSAGE).

Your prayers impact the actions of God.

For proof, consider the story of Elijah. He lived eight centuries prior to the birth of Jesus. The Northern Kingdom had twenty kings, each one of whom was evil. The evilest of the monarchs was Ahab.

His life is described in this sad summary: "There was never anyone like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD urged on by Jezebel his wife.

He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel" (I Kings 21:25-26).

This was as dark a time as we ever read about in the history of Israel. The leaders were corrupt, and the hearts of the people were cold. But comets are most visible against a black sky. And in the midst of the darkness, a fiery comet by the name of Elijah appeared.

The name Elijah means "My God is Jehovah," and Elijah lived up to his name. He gave King Ahab an unsolicited weather report. "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve. there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word" (1 Kings 17:1).

Elijah's attack was calibrated. Baal was the fertility god of the pagans, the god to whom they looked for rain and fertile fields. Elijah called for a showdown: the true God of Israel against the false god of the pagans. How could Elijah be so confident of the impending drought? Because he had prayed.

Nine centuries later the prayers of Elijah were used as a model. "When a believing person prays, great things happen. Elijah was a human being just like us. He prayed that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years! Then Elijah prayed again, and the rain came down from the sky, and the land produced crops again" (James 5:16—18 NCV).

James was impressed that a prayer of such power came from a person so common. "Elijah was a human being, even as we are" (James 5:17), but his prayers were heard because he prayed, not eloquently, but earnestly. This was not a casual prayer or a comfortable prayer but a radical prayer. "Do whatever it takes, Lord," Elijah begged, "even if that means no water."

"So, Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, ' How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.'

But the people said nothing" (I Kings 18:20—21). Elijah put the 450 prophets of Baal and the Israelites in a decision posture: How long are you going to waver between two opinions? The word translated *waver* is the exact Hebrew word used later for "danced" (v. 26). How long are you going to do this dance? You dance with God and then Baal. How long will this continue?

What happens next is one of the greatest stories in the Bible. Elijah told the 450 prophets of Baal: "You take a bull; I'll take a bull. You build an altar; I'll build an altar. You ask your god to send fire; I'll ask my God to send fire. The God who answers by fire is the true God." The prophets of Baal agreed and went first.

At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." (v. 27)

(Elijah would have flunked a course in diplomacy.) Though the prophets of Baal cut themselves and raved all afternoon, nothing happened. Finally, Elijah asked for his turn. He poured four jugs of water (remember, this was a time of drought) over the altar three times. Then he prayed.

LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command.

Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again (vv. 36—37).

Note how quickly God answered.

Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice. the wood, the stones, and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!" (vv. 38—39)

No request for fire was made. Just the heart of the prophet was revealed, and *pow!* The altar was ablaze. God delighted in hearing Elijah's prayer. God delights in hearing yours as well.

But why? Why would our prayers matter? We can't even get the repairman to call us back, so why would God listen to our ideas?

Simple. Your prayers matter to God because you matter to God. You aren't just anybody; you are his child.

Our prayer chainers, those who pray with me before worship, our communion carriers, our Stephan Ministers, Loretta and now Lori are all intentional and persistent pray-ers.

So are you. When God saved you, he enlisted you. He gave not only forgiveness for your past but also authority in the present and a role in the future.

This life is on-the-job training for eternity. God is preparing you to reign with him in heaven. "If we endure, we will also reign with him" (2 Tim. 2:12). We shall "reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:10). We are part of God's family. Ruling the universe is the family business. When any of you pray the father listens. He has a vested interest in our development.

Our Father has a vested interest in listening to us. When you, as God's child, seek to honor the family business, God hears your requests.

"God, grant me deeper faith so I can serve you."

"God, please grant my promotion so I can honor you."

"God, show me where we can live and best bring glory to your name."

"God, please give me a spouse so I can serve you better."

God hears these prayers as quickly as they are offered, Why? Because they come from his child.

Will God do what you ask? Perhaps. Or perhaps he will do more than you imagined, He knows what is best. Stand firmly on this promise: "When a believing person prays, great things happen" (James 5:16 NCV). You are never without hope because you are never without prayer.

A dramatic illustration of this promise is found in the experience of one of our Divinity members, Karl Schmidt. 3 ½ years ago, Karl was diagnosed with a form of pancreatic cancer that has been treatable. When Karl invited me out for lunch a few weeks ago, I assumed it was to update me on his battle with cancer. Karl had something else on his mind – prayer.

Karl is one of our resident wood artists who came across the idea of prayer crosses individually carved from a single unique piece of beautifully grained olive wood pruned from the olive trees around Bethlehem. Christians have been carving crosses like this for hundreds of years, originally for pilgrims and more recently for tourists.

The prayer cross is designed to fit comfortably in the palm of your hand as an aid to prayer or meditation. Jack and Carol Scott share their experience of what they call the "holding cross"...

“The HoldingCross Story”

Carol had been ministering and serving as a Hospice and Nursing Home volunteer for over a decade. Jack had been making wooden crosses for many Ministries : Cursillo, Kairos, Walk to Emmaus, Via de Cristo, Hospice care, nursing homes visits and others for over a decade.

But God had a plan for a ministry and a cross. In the Fall of 2001, Carol came home after one of her hospice visits and shared with Jack a "need" to bring something to her patients ... something that could be held, something that was meaningful and something that "felt good in the hand". A traditionally shaped cross was not the answer as we discovered hands and fingers that did not work "right" anymore. Hands that were crippled with age or arthritis have lost their grip and had difficulty holding on to anything. And so, The HoldingCross™ was born.

Notice the simplicity of The HoldingCross™ : the wood, the shape, the feel. Place The HoldingCross™ in the palm of your hand and wrap your fingers around the uneven cut and rounded edges. Your hand will naturally cradle the cross. The HoldingCross™ gently fits itself inside.

The HoldingCross™ is a personal process. Through your sense of touch and reflection, you express your love of Christ and your need for him. Sometimes you may find that saying a familiar prayer, such as the Lord's Prayer, the 23rd Psalm or calling out the name of Jesus, is meaningful and comforting while holding the cross. No words are needed. Simply holding your cross silently during quiet meditation is prayer. Offering a hymn or song of praise while holding your cross is also an act of prayer. Or, it can be helpful to hold your cross when making an act of penitence.

Many just fall asleep at the end of the day with their HoldingCross™ in their hand.

Holding your cross can also be a useful tool when praying for others, especially for those who are suffering or in need. Placing your HoldingCross™ in their hand while praying for them is simple yet it can be a very special moment encouraging them to focus on His presence, His voice and His peace. For the ill, blind or elderly, simply holding it throughout the day can be a blessing of comfort and peace. Children and youth find a prayerful reminder in The HoldingCross™ of the promise of God that He will never leave us or forsake us. No matter what the situation or where we are, he is always with us.

Carrying The HoldingCross™ in your pocket or purse is a subtle reminder of whose you are. It can be carried everywhere confidentially and confidently. Set upon a nightstand, coffee table, credenza, kitchen counter or desk, The HoldingCross™ presents an open invitation of prayer any time of the day.

Using a hand-held cross is an ancient tradition that has been used throughout the world for centuries. Since the early church, being identified with the cross has been a universal acknowledgement of being a Christian. Today, The HoldingCross™ is used in hospitals, nursing homes and hospice care. The HoldingCross™ can also be a blessing to youth ministries, mission trip teams, Christian education, small group settings, family prayer time, fundraisers, wedding, baptism, confirmations, funerals ... wherever people are ministering and reaching out to the body of Christ in a personal way.

Young or old, in sickness or in health, in good times and trying times, the gift of The HoldingCross™ is **a gift of love from one hand to another**. Blessings to you - Jack and Carol Scott

Karl has created prayer crosses or HoldingCrosses for our prayer ministers being commissioned today. Karl has learned that prayer is not the last resort but the first step. God delighted in answering Elijah's prayers and he delights in answering our prayers.

Today we give thanks for Loretta leading and organizing our prayer ministry over the last 19 years. We give thanks for Lori being called to take up the prayer mantle. We give thanks for the Happy Sew & Sews who created "prayer bears" for our prayer ministers.

This morning we give thanks that the prayers of John and Lauren have been answered with the birth and now baptism of John Aloysius Petsche V. We pray that John is raised and nurtured as a follower of Jesus Christ.

May the peace of God . . .