

James 5:13-20 - The Prayer of Faith

¹³ Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him ^vsing praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, ^wanointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And ^xif he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore, ^yconfess your sins to one another and pray for one another, ^zthat you may be healed. ^aThe prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.² ¹⁷ Elijah was a man ^bwith a nature like ours, and ^che prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for ^dthree years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ ^eThen he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

¹⁹ My brothers, ^fif anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone ^gbrings him back, ²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering ^hwill save his soul from death and ⁱwill cover a multitude of sins.

We christians spend a lot of time talking about prayer. In preparing for my sermon today I glanced at my theological library and resources. I was amazed by the number of books I have on prayer. Power of Power, Necessity of Prayer, Prayer Basic Training, Does Prayer Change Anything, not to mention books upon books of prayers for every imaginable situation. I've even come across prayers for old horses.

We christians talk about prayer a lot, it's a part of our culture. I'll pray for you, prayer requests, all we can do is pray. We pray together as part of our services. We speak of some of our brothers and sisters as being especially gifted in intercessory prayer.

With the bookstores full of books on and of prayer, and us talking about it as much as we do, and praying in church, you might assume that we christians have this prayer thing in the bag and there is nothing more to really learn about prayer. In fact some of you may be wondering what there is left for me to talk about the next ten or so minutes.

I have found that for many Christians I encounter prayer is a routine or a ritual, and done mostly as a last resort when there is physically nothing left for us to do. All we can do is pray, I hear these words all the time. In my work as a hospice chaplain I am frequently asked to pray for a miracle when modern medicine has failed. So often I hear the resignation in a person's voice when there is nothing left to do but pray.

For a long time my own prayer life followed this pattern. Prayer was a routine that christians were supposed to do, and so I trudged through it as a child,

repeating the words I heard in church because I thought that was the only right way to talk to God. I prayed when I needed something, or when I had done something wrong, and went about my day. Prayer was a means to an end, sort of like putting in a maintenance request at an apartment building. Lord, the air conditioner is broken again, could you fix that? Oh and p.s. I spilled tomato sauce on the carpet, that's covered by my deposit, right??

It wasn't until I was in seminary and working for the department of spirituality that I learned that prayer isn't just for the last resorts and hopeless causes, that there is more than one way to pray and I didn't need to sound like the people I heard in church, and most importantly, that prayer is as important to our health and the health of our churches as breathing.

James begins simply enough. Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Most of us do that already. But James continues, is anyone cheerful? Sing songs of praise. Is anyone sick, let us pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. James talks about praying for each other. In fact, the main point of this paragraph seems to be a call to prayer as a way of life, and not a ritual. And this is how the new testament church functioned. Prayer was not just a ritual or on a checklist to be crossed off, it was an integral part of the life of the church. When we look back through Scripture we quickly find that the people who were closest to God, who knew God in special and intimate ways were also the people with vibrant prayer lives, and prayer lives that were exceptionally honest. Jesus, of course, praying to God the father, is one example, but consider King David, who scripture declares is a man after God's own heart, who wrote many psalms of praise, but also psalms that were excruciatingly real about his struggles, writing things like "God, why have you forsaken me, you lay me in the dust of death" from Psalm 22. Or consider Moses, who frequently interceded for his people, but also stood before the lord, tried every excuse, and finally asked the Lord to send someone else. Consider Abraham who told God of his doubts whether he would receive what God had promised, and even seems to bargain with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah - God will you destroy the city if there are fifty righteous? How about forty five? I still get nervous reading that passage. Or consider my absolute favorite example, Job.

I often encounter people who are angry at God and because of that have a hard time praying. My advice is always the same. Go ahead and be honest with God. Tell God how you really feel. Let God have it. Usually that gets me some stunned looks. I continue that there is nothing you could say that compares to some of the things Job said to God, and God still loved Job, so go ahead, say what you need to, confess it as sin, and move on. The loose translation of certain parts of Job basically accuses God of being the big kid with a magnifying glass who roasts ants

alive. God has heard worse. And I've yet to have anyone get smitted, though I did take a few steps back from someone once.

Prayer is how we get to know God, and God wants all of us, not just the rituals and the prayer lists. God wants to hear from us. Image desperately wanting to know someone who only calls you out of obligation, or when the air conditioner goes out. When we, as flawed humans, love someone, we want to really know them, the good and the bad. How much more does God want to know us, not because God approves of our flaws, but because God wants us to share all of ourselves with God, to trust God with our authentic selves, God wants prayer to be the place that we start from, not the last resort. As CS Lewis wrote "We must lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us."

For some of us, this is really hard. A lot of us were taught one way to pray and that included a lot of church language and ritual. Some of us who grew up in the most frozen of chosen churches may even squirm a little with this laying on hands thing James is talking about and anointing with oil and breaking out in song. Working in the spirituality department in seminary I was exposed to a multitude of ways to pray, comfortable or not, and truly that made all the difference. During my time there, I met a professor who had always been in trouble as a little girl for squirming in church. As an adult she discovered the way she prayed was movement and dance. When one of my classmate's wife was extremely ill to the point of death a prayer service was held. The American students prayed silently, but the Korea students wailed and screamed and cried to God. When I was going through a dark time and all the words dried up, my teacher introduced me to praying through art, and I colored names with crayons when the words failed me. To this day, as someone who can rarely sit still and has to always be doing something with my hands, I incorporate movement and art into my prayer life and this has helped me through some of my darkest days. In the same way I express myself to others through movement and art, I can confidently express myself to God in this way, knowing that God made me this way, and it comes as no surprise, and God wants my authenticity.

For James, prayer is a part of all of life, and just as life is varied, so too can our prayers be. The important part is that we pray in all things, not just the bad. Pray. Pray for the bad things, pray for the good. Pray about your needs, your thanks, and even just your day. Pray like you're talking to a loved one who dearly wants to hear from you, because you are. Pray trusting that your prayers are actually doing something, because they are. The prayers of the righteous are powerful. Pray first, pray last, and pray with confidence, know that by praying you are accomplishing much even if the visible outcome is not what you expected, you are accomplishing much.

Sadly, many Christians, at least on some level, don't feel like they're really accomplishing much. Have you ever heard a prayer that was almost apologetic in tone, it might go something like God we ask you to do A, but if you don't, it's okay, it's not your will, we understand, we're terribly sorry to have bothered you with this, in fact, just forget it, Lord, just forget it, I'll see myself out.

Do you think that is how James prayed? Or the New Testament church? Did Elijah make excuses before even going to the Lord in prayer?

The thing is, when you start to believe that prayer is weak, or even useless, or just a ritual we do because it's what Christians should do, but we don't really think it changes much of anything, then we stop praying with enthusiasm, we stop praying with power, we stop praying with confidence, and often, we stop praying. For churches, and for Christians, this is spiritually devastating.

There is a book called *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* by Thom Ranier. The author served as a consultant to churches in decline and compiled a book of the dozen or so commonalities among churches that ultimately closed their doors. One of the reasons he lists is when churches cease to pray, but not necessarily in the way one might expect. The consultant would ask church members of declining or dead churches if they prayed together. Always they would answer why yes, of course. He would then ask them to describe their prayer time. They would point to the prayer in worship, or passing around a prayer list. He would then ask if that was meaningful time of prayer, did it reflect the passion of the new testament church? What he wanted to know, was were these churches praying for the suffering and sick, singing songs of praise, confessing their sins and praying for one another, was prayer an important part of their life, were they unveiling themselves in prayer with authenticity? Were they passionate in prayer? Always, the answer was no, in favor of a mere ritual or routine. Ranier concludes the chapter with this statement "Not coincidentally, prayer and the health of the church went hand in hand. When the church is engaged in meaningful prayer, it becomes both the cause and the result of greater church health."

James calls us to pray, and not as a ritual or a routine, there is no requirement to use church language, or spoken language at all. The only requirement is that we actually do it, that prayer becomes a part of our lives, that we reach for God during our lows and our highs, and everything in between, in the suffering and in the cheerfulness, in times of sickness, but also in times of health and happiness. James knew that the prayers of Christian are powerful, and whether seen or unseen, accomplish much, and so calls us to live into this power by being a prayerful people, remembering always that God desires to hear from us, God seeks all of us, including our hurts and disappointments, our anger and misguided desires. Whatever words we offer, or whatever prayer practice we choose, James

calls us to pray in all things, for the prayer of the faithful accomplishes much in our lives, in the life of our churches, and even in the world.

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