

THE PURPOSE AND PRACTICE OF PRAYER

James 5:13-20

Raul was diagnosed with cancer and had to undergo the usual ordeal of surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy. During his illness and treatment a faithful prayer chain of people in his congregation upheld him in prayer. Later, when he received a good report from his doctors, he said, “I don’t think I would have made it without the support of so many people in the prayer chain.” (1)

“Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. (choral prayer) Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them...The prayers of the faithful will heal the sick,” writes James.

A pierced and tattooed man quietly bows his head at a noisy lunch counter. A **child in pink pajamas** kneels at her bedside and recites a simple blessing. A **baseball player** crosses himself as he steps to the plate on national TV. A **white-haired woman** lights a candle and weeps silently into her handkerchief for her dying husband. A **dark-robed minister** prays for peace on earth and the congregation in one voice cries out “Amen!” (2)

Prayer is common practice in our time and place. It weaves its way into the daily practice and rhythms of life. According to pollsters, more people say they pray daily than those who regularly attend worship services. Today and over the centuries, prayer’s practitioners include saints and scoundrels, skeptics and believers, the meek and the mighty, and especially students before and during tests. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and

“Nones” of every station of life reach out to a reality higher than ourselves.

Prayer has been called “the native language of the soul.” (3) It is a universal expression of an innate human desire to contact the divine. The 16th-century mystic St. Teresa of Avila described prayer as “an intimate friendship, a frequent conversation with the Beloved.” It has always been a central feature of every religion. Jews and Christians believe God is a personal being who wish to have a loving relationship with his creatures; God hears and responds to us. As Jeffrey Sheler notes:

The earliest prayers in the Bible are intimate dialogs: Adam conversing with God in the cool of the evening in the Garden of Eden; the elderly Patriarch Abraham boldly expressing puzzlement over God’s promise that he would father a great nation – “*O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless?*” and Moses responding in awe, “*Here I am!*” to the voice of God in the burning bush and then obeying God’s call to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage. (4)

Like biblical characters, we pray because we believe God is listening. We almost cannot help ourselves.

But we live in a utilitarian age. (5) For many folks the bottom-line question, however, is: Does prayer work? The assumption is that the purpose of prayer is to get something from God. Isn’t that what James is saying in today’s text? Pray and get relieved of suffering and illness? If we understand prayer in this manner, then we read passages like ours from James with an eye toward how to pray, toward methodology. If we do not get the desired results, we wonder: Is it because we did not ask the elders to pray and anoint with oil? Or, because we didn’t have

someone James describes as “righteous” praying for us? We begin to think we need more prayers, as in more people praying and using more and better words, plus more faith and more ritual. All of these – people, faith, prayer rituals – are important components of prayer. I’ve used them all and more in ministry. However, seeing prayer as a means of getting something from God misses a larger point.

Prayer is less about how we pray and what we get from it and more about the One to whom we pray. Prayer is communion with our Creator, Redeemer, and Father. It sits at the center of our relationship with God. The point of prayer is to enjoy a relationship with our Creator who loves us infinitely and eternally. Ronald Knox, a Jesuit theologian and practiced prayer, insists, “God loves you personally. When you pray, God is at that moment thinking of you individually, paying more attention to you than you are to God.” (6) Prayer is our response to God’s invitation to receive his love. We pray because the Creator of the universe asks us to enjoy a loving relationship with him. Prayer is about God.

Let it both awe and comfort you to know that Almighty God awaits your prayers like a child waits for Christmas morning. Before we bow our heads or fold our hands, God is here, waiting. This is true whether it is a simple bedtime verse of a child, or the desperate cries of a person in danger or in pain, or the articulate, well-prepared, and written expressions of the Worship Book. It is true whether we are alone or in a sanctuary of a thousand. God invites us into relationship and awaits the pleasure of our company.

When we understand the purpose of prayer to be relational, we recognize that it is not primarily, or even

secondarily, about getting things from God. It is correct to believe that God has promised to meet our needs out of the riches of divine grace. Jesus taught us to ask for such when he prayed, *“Give us this day our daily bread.”* But, first he prayed, *“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.”* Jesus defines the purpose of prayer by centering it on God and God’s kingdom. The Lord’s Prayer tells us our lives gain significance as they are drawn into God’s purposes. Yes, we need all for which this prayer asks, but what is most important is the coming of God’s kingdom. As Jesus said elsewhere, *“Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things will come to you as well.”* In God’s kingdom our needs will be truly, fully, and finally satisfied.

Still, questions persist. Does prayer work? Why are some prayers answered exactly as requested, or nearly so, while other prayers fall ignored or denied? If prayer is loving communication, why is God so quiet? C.S. Lewis wrote that prayer “is either a sheer illusion or (it is) a personal contact between embryonic, incomplete persons (ourselves) and the utterly concrete person (God).” (7) Lewis offers no middle ground. Either we talk with God when we pray or we do not. Yet more important to Lewis than whether or how God answers prayer is the realization that “in prayer God shows himself to us.” That Jesus’ own prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (*“Let this cup pass from me”* wherein he asked to be spared being crucified) was not granted, Lewis continued, suggests that the notion of prayer as “a sort of infallible gimmick” must be dismissed.

Ronald Knox adds another perspective: If God refuses our petitions, it is not because he is bending to some larger

necessity or overlooking the minor consequences of his providential plan, “it is because this was best for us...than if the other issue would have come about.” (8)

Carol Zaleski wrote, “A prayer refused is a prayer compensated, but not by the same currency.” (9) I think she nails it. Consider again Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane. It is a spectacular example of unanswered prayer, a request denied or ignored. Jesus asked – if only it could be his Father’s will, which he clearly desired – to be delivered from the agony and shame of death by crucifixion. The Father, however, granted the request by denying the petition. Jesus’ refused prayer not to die was compensated by his resurrection. God granted the prayer by refusing it, converting it to grace. No prayer, even those seemingly denied, is wasted but is enfolded into the unfolding of the kingdom of God. Jesus’ prayer especially, seemingly denied, was used to advance God’s kingdom. His death and subsequent resurrection displayed the truth, goodness, and beauty of God’s kingdom to all as nothing else could.

Judy Vander Zee suffers from multiple sclerosis. Her husband, Leonard, prays for her healing daily, apparently to no effect. He asks, “Has my prayer not worked?” In answering himself, he places his prayer within the confines of God’s emerging kingdom and his relationship with God. He says, “God may (answer my prayers) now or when his kingdom comes. I do not know...Though I’m not sure it will matter much in the splendor of the new creation. Whether my specific prayers work or not, my ongoing relationship with God works every day.” Judy and I have richly experienced God’s sustaining care and felt his presence. (10)

James calls you and me to pray. He calls for prayers of petition, praise, intercession, and confession. As we heed his call to pray with the many others prayer summons throughout the Bible, we discover that our desire to pray is God's invitation to receive his loving embrace. Prayer's purpose is to include us in the unfolding of God's kingdom. Our practice is the first way we do so.

Did you know that if you rearrange the letters of Presbyterian you get "best in prayer"? We could take that as we of all Christians are the best at praying. However, better we hear it as: We are at our best when we pray!

SOURCES:

1. Leonard Vander Zee, "Prayer That Works," *The Banner*, March 7, 1994.
2. Jeffrey L. Sheler, "The Power of Prayer," *USNews.com*, December 20, 2004.
3. Ibid
4. Ibid
5. Vander Zee, cited above.
6. Carol Zaleski, "Ask and Receive," *The Christian Century*, January 13, 2009.
7. Sheler, cited above.
8. Zaleski, above.
9. Ibid
10. Vander Zee