

## **“The Significance and Nature of Prayer”**

**James 5:13–20**

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In the opening chapter of his biography of Randall Lolley, Steve Pressley relates a conversation in which our beloved former pastor compared the leadership styles of our church and First Baptist Greensboro. First Baptist Raleigh is a lay-led congregation, Randall said, while First Baptist Greensboro is pastor-led. He preferred our approach, a more participatory approach, even when he was president of Southeastern Seminary. “The last time Jesus was seen,” he once said, “he was a shepherd of sheep, not a cowboy rounding up cattle.” I might use a different metaphor, but I agree with Randall.

In a footnote to this story, Steve says that when challenged to name “the most powerful and influential member” of the Greensboro congregation, Randall needed a day or two to reflect. He eventually named a gentle “prayer warrior” who had taught an older-ladies’ Sunday School class for years (*Randall Lolley: Thanks for the Memories*, p. 31). The fact that it took him so long says something about lay leadership there at that time, but I find his choice intriguing. When asked to name the most influential member, Randall didn’t name an up-front leader or key donor, someone with formal or informal organizational power. He named a spiritual leader, a Sunday School teacher devoted to prayer.

Again, I resonate with Randall’s perspective. Though it may seem naïve or overly pious, in the church, spiritual leadership is the most critical kind, and scripture and prayer are essential for this work. Other gifts and insights are needed. Scripture doesn’t tell us how to run a sound system nor does prayer feed the hungry, as James would note. But when James comes to the end of his letter and sums up what is most important, after all of his admonitions about being doers of the word, he says, “Above all, my beloved, do not swear... let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no...” and then he spends the rest of the time talking about prayer, which he says is powerful and effective for the righteous.

Spiritual leadership is the most critical kind and prayer lies at the very heart of it. Indeed, I suspect James would include prayer as one way of doing the word. It is an active endeavor which seeks the best for others. It makes a difference in our lives and in the world around us.

But if we are going to take a closer look at the place of prayer in Christian life, especially in the context of this reading from James, we need to begin by acknowledging the problematic parts of this text. James not only says that the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective; he goes on to talk about how Elijah's prayers first brought on a drought and then brought needed rain. The prayer of faith will save the sick, he says. Countless people have had their suffering made worse because of a careless application of these words.

There are many to this day who think that if we are people of faith and we pray just the right words, our loved ones will get well. In fact, I had a zealous believer tell me in college that, if I had deeper faith, I wouldn't have the cold I was struggling with at the time. I wanted to tell him that if ragweed didn't bloom in the fall, running me down, I wouldn't be as vulnerable to colds. Maybe God could just kill off the ragweed, I could pray for that!

But there are those who believe that the faithful are invulnerable or at the very least, when we pray, we get what we want, including the healing of loved ones. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. If we don't get what we want, maybe we are not righteous. The prayer of faith will save the sick, James says. But not always. There is no guarantee. Some of the most wonderful people we know get sick, and many of them do not get well, even though fine people pray.

Harold Kushner says that our problem is that we confuse God with Santa Claus. We think we just send up a list and God will give us what we want (*Who Needs God*, pp. 146-148). The difference between magic and religion, he says, is that magic seeks to change God or the gods while religion creates space for God to change us. Prayer is not an attempt to change God or manipulate God into doing something God would not otherwise do. It is an opening to God's presence and love that we might be changed.

Prayers of confession, which James also mentions, are an example of this reality. In confessing our sins to God and one other, we pave the way to forgiveness and reconciliation. As Frederick Buechner once said, in confession we don't tell God anything God doesn't already know, but until we confess our sins, they are an abyss between us. When we confess them, they become a bridge (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 15).

But James does talk about praying for the sick. We pray for the sick because of our love for people and trust in God. And we believe that prayer makes a difference. But how does it? For one thing, prayer brings an assurance that we are not alone, that God is always with us, working for good, even if things do not turn out as we want.

In his book *The Rebirth of the Church* our former Interim Pastor Bill Tuck references a story Anne Lamott tells about a two-year-old who accidentally locked himself in a room one night (in manuscript form, p. 197). He cried out for his mother, and she came quickly, but she could not open the door from the outside. "Just jiggle the door knob, honey," she said several times, but he didn't understand.

He was frightened and crying, and his mother didn't know what to do. Finally, she bent down, got on her knees and slid her fingers under the door. She asked her son to kneel down and feel her fingers. After searching for a while, he found her fingers and just held them until he began to calm down and stopped crying. "Now stand up and jiggle the door knob," she said gently. He did and the door opened.

Bill says that in the low moments of life, when God seems hidden away, we grope for the fingers of God, some experience of God's presence to assure us, and somehow in the darkest of times, God reaches motherly/fatherly fingers under the door and calms us enough so that we can go on. That's what prayer does. It calms us. It assures us we are not alone. It frees us to do what we already have the ability to do.

Sometimes we get well or a loved one does or we overcome some major challenge. Sometimes we do not, but even then, the assurance of God's presence, from which not even death itself can separate us, enables us to go on. This doesn't mean we shouldn't ask for healing and peace, for a better job, for whatever we need. God knows what we are

thinking, even if we don't verbalize it, God knows our hearts and wants us to be honest, and thus there is value in simply expressing our desires.

I have shared with some of you before this prayer of a rural southern preacher included in a biography of Harry Emerson Fosdick.

Lord, send us rain. The ground is dry and hot and burns the bare feet walking over it. The tobacco leaves next to it are curling up. The cotton plants are wilting in the sun. The corn stalks are already stunted in their growth, the fodder leaves are withering, there won't be anything but nubbins, and Lord thou knowest I hate worse than hell to shuck nubbins. So, Lord, send us rain. Don't send us any flimsy dizzle drizzle. Send us a gully washer and a trash mover.  
(*Harry Emerson Fosdick*, by Robert Moats Miller, p. 239)

In prayer, we openly ask for what we need, trusting that God wants us to be honest and hears us with compassion, even if we cannot always get what we want.

Prayer opens us to change, it assures us we are not alone and it allows us to express our heartfelt needs and joys to God. James urges us to pray for the sick and suffering *and* to sing songs of praise when we are cheerful. Prayer is sharing the whole of our experience with God. But this brief passage of scripture references one other aspect of prayer that we would benefit from appreciating.

James says the sick should call upon the elders of the church to pray over them, anointing them with oil. Anointing has value, and the fact that elders are called upon makes sense — they are spiritual leaders — but the most significant detail here is the gathering of the community for prayer. Prayer is not just an isolated act for individuals. It is a communal act made more powerful by the presence of others.

It is what we have missed most in the church during COVID — not being able to lift up our voices together in song and prayer. It is why we find rituals like baby dedication, baptism, communion, ordination and commissioning so meaningful — because we are praying together.

Those rare times when we have gathered around each other as we have prayed, even though it may feel awkward and is not possible right now, have felt even more meaningful because we could physically touch each other while we prayed. Prayer is deepened when shared with others.

It is a helpful word for our culture which values individualism so highly that we often fail to consider the needs of others much less the community. It is a part of why we have struggled to get COVID-19 under control. Part of the problem is politically motivated disinformation and crazy conspiracy theories. But another part lies in our obsession with individual rights and freedoms, which as this pandemic has proven, can be self-destructive. Only when we look after our neighbor can we thrive because our wellbeing is inextricably linked with the wellbeing of our neighbor; indeed, it is linked with the wellbeing of the world as viruses are not bound by borders or walls. We need to adopt an African saying — there is no me without us.

Commenting on our reading from James, Howard University Divinity School professor Gay L. Byron talks about how prayer has sustained the African-American church, linking people to the power of God (*workingpreacher.com*). She references a prayer of nineteenth-century political writer Maria W. Stewart in which she talked about the individual and communal aspects of prayer. For Stewart, prayer brings the weak or sick individual closer to God for healing. But conversation with God does not stop there. The individual has a responsibility to seek healing and wholeness for others who are poor and needy or separated from God. So, even when we pray alone, we are connected to others, but when we can pray with others, it is a powerful thing.

I think of a prayer vigil I participated in last year with fellow clergy, leaders of the Shaw Divinity School, the police chief and the mayor. It is one thing to talk about addressing racial injustices and building bridges between law enforcement and communities of color. It is quite another thing for all parties involved to pray together for the common good. That is a powerful and effective thing!

Even praying together, we don't always get what we want. But we open ourselves to the presence, power and love of God. We ask God to change us. And the knowledge that God is with us makes a difference.