

The Mighty Mystery of Prayer

Sunday, September 26, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
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James 5:13-18

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

Prayer is such a mysterious practice. We believe in prayer, yet there is so much about it which we do not understand. Why are some prayers answered while others are left unanswered? If God already knows our minds, why must we pray? The list of questions goes on. How blessed we are today to come upon James' teaching on prayer, which is more than one brief, mysterious insight. Instead, he gives us a threefold, more comprehensive teaching on this wonderful practice of prayer. Perhaps such a thorough explanation will help us de-mystify the matter of prayer.

Our lesson begins with a most basic understanding of prayer—it is **an expression to God**. *Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.* In joy and in sorrow, tell it all to God! When in trouble, let God know all about it, and when joyful blessings come your way, let God know about them too. James tells us to sing songs, and it appears that he sees these songs as prayers. The hymn comes to mind: *What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry, everything to God in prayer.* Prayer is a wonderful outpouring of feeling. Joy is multiplied as we express it, and grief becomes bearable as we share it with our caring God. How many times it has felt as though our souls would explode with sadness were we not able to pour out our hearts to God.

As Christians we can pray, confident that our God hears and cares, for Christ is the proof of that caring. Many live with the mere assumption that there is a God out there that loves them, hears, and cares. But why would one believe in such a God with only

the evidence of such a God being the world around us? Such faith is not likely to hold up under questioning. But as believers we have Christ as the proof of our loving God. In Christ we see God revealed, not as some impersonal cosmic force, but as a personal, loving being. By Christ's incarnation we see plainly God's love for us, that He would come all the way from heaven. By the crucifixion and resurrection, we see God's loving victory over sin and death given to us freely, even when we were rejecting Him. Yes, what a friend we have in Jesus!

This is James' first lesson in prayer, but it is only the beginning. Prayer needs to be understood as much more than an emotional outlet. Many times we have heard it said that prayer might not change the situation, but it can change us. At face value this may be true, for many times our prayers do not bring the change of circumstance we had desired, but we find our own spirits changed and strengthened. But this is a deceptive teaching as it can easily lead us to see prayer as *only* an emotional exercise with no real wider power or value. It can also be tempting to speak in these terms for it is less likely to offend those who do not accept our faith or believe in any god. A modern world is glad to see us reduce prayer to mere psychology and a personal thing, but James wants nothing to do with this. Having introduced the matter of prayer as a personal exchange with God, he takes the matter to the next level.

Beyond being an individual's emotional expression, James then tells us that it is a **path to wholeness**, and this **for the whole community of faith**. First, we are told to pray for the sick. *Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.* Illness activates a most basic prayer instinct in all of us. We realize our vulnerability and call out to God for restored health and strength. James says "amen!" to this crying out for healing. Some may hear James' call to prayer for the sick and question the effectiveness of such prayer, recalling unanswered prayers for healing, and how shall we respond? My first thought is how many times that we have called out from beds of serious illness, and here we are—restored and back into the routines of daily life! How many times have we been in genuine danger and have cried out to God for mercy, and have had that prayer answered, only to then move on with life, giving little thought and lasting praise to God for such a mighty deliverance? We become possessed of an ungrateful spirit. After being healed and brought through a difficult time we rush back to the familiar and comfortable routines of life with little thought of God's grace in our lives. Those who pay attention see James 5:14 played out countless times, yet to many, the elders praying, and one being raised up to health seems a strange and exotic event. Think again.

Note also that James is now speaking of corporate prayer. We are to *gather* for prayer. This is why Sunday morning worship is so important. Most moderns see no problem with doing Zoom Church or catching the morning message at some later and more convenient time via YouTube. These technologies can be of great benefit and have

been lifesavers through this pandemic and for the shut-in, but think again. There is real power when God's people gather. James is describing an actual physical gathering for prayer, for there is power when God's people gather. The prayer chain is helpful as we can pray for special needs when we are apart, but our great longing should be to return to the Lord's House for family prayer. For this there is no true substitute!

All of us have been immeasurably blessed by numerous answered prayers for health and healing, yet we still cannot escape the basic question of unanswered prayer. We have all experienced the people of God praying for one who has not been healed but has instead been taken by illness. What can we say to these painful experiences? I recently had a discussion with a heart-broken man who had lost his 55-year-old son to COVID early in the pandemic, and I believe that God gave me grace for a difficult conversation. He told of being at a recent Christian gathering where some people at his table were speaking with great enthusiasm of how God delivered their family from a terrible attack of the virus. My friend chose to keep silent, but inside there burned a question: "Were the prayers for my son not good enough?" He was feeling little enthusiasm for the practice of healing prayer. While my friend was feeling hurt, he was still open to a word of hope, and so I offered as best a response as I could.

I mentioned that we have all experienced dozens or more healing prayers which have been answered, but our natural ingratitude and the busyness of life often blind us to God's goodness in our lives. But with this came the frank admission that prayers are not always answered, and when one we truly love is taken from us or seriously harmed, no amount of earlier answered prayers can explain away that pain. Prayer is a mystery, and Christ came, not to explain or resolve that painfully frustrating confusion of unanswered prayer, but to experience it himself! He prayed constantly, and by that prayer his ministry received great power. But not all Jesus' prayers were answered. It was his most fervent prayer which went unanswered as he pleaded for God to spare him from going to the cross. God had other plans, and that plan involved Jesus' suffering and dying. The suffering and loss made sense just days later. We usually spend a lifetime waiting for understanding. In the meantime, we look to Christ and trust that our prayers are not in vain.

We pray for healing, but we also know that God's desires do not always align with ours, and this can make for difficult encounters. I gladly tell of my grandson's birth and God's answered prayers. I have no idea how he even survived, let alone now being perfectly healthy and happy. And as I tell my joyous story I can be sure that not far away is someone who has experienced unimaginable heartbreak around the time of a birth. Unanswered prayer is a great and troubling mystery, yet we continue to pray for the ill, and know that Christ is with us in joyous answers to prayers and in times of heartbreaking loss.

James exhorts us to pray for healing, and in this exhortation, he slips in another dimension of prayer. Let us pray for forgiveness. *And anyone who has committed sins*

will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. Forgiveness is another need which naturally draws us to prayer. How many times a day do I say, “O Lord, what have I done now? Won’t you forgive me!” We find James mingling the need for physical healing and forgiveness as if they are one in the same thing. One might say that James, writing from an ancient pre-scientific perspective, was confusing physical and emotional/spiritual ailments. In modern times we take great care to separate the two, but then there are moderns who can see the wisdom in James’ first-century “confusion.” The doctors have suspected for many years that physical problems can cause spiritual problems, and vice versa. The same can be said of physical health helping one’s spirit stay healthy and vice versa. If James was confused, then let us all become confused like him and join in ongoing prayer for each other’s physical and spiritual health!

As we step back from the passage and take a look at these verses as a whole, we see God’s calling us to be joined together as a mutually supportive community of prayer. This is why we gather each week to confess our sins, hear the Good News of forgiveness and then to rejoice together. We make special efforts in praying for one another as we hear of particular ailments and physical challenges, but it appears that we are being called to something even greater. Let us simply pray for each other’s health and wellbeing, spiritually and physically, on an ongoing basis! Here we see an invitation to become a community of wholeness and wellness. Jesus promised that as we follow him, we will experience the abundant life, or life to the full as others translate it (John 10:10). James is giving us some instruction as to how this promise becomes a reality in the Church. I suppose I could call my whole life story and walk with God a demonstration of such a caring and supportive community of prayer.

James begins by presenting prayer as an outpouring of our hearts and spirits to God, and then expands his teaching by explaining prayer as a community work of advancing wholeness and wellness. Here again, there are those who will try to reduce prayer to only a psychological phenomenon, with this latter illustration of prayer being on a group level. Finally, James makes it clear. **Prayer changes things.** *The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth yielded its harvest.* While Elijah was hailed as the greatest of the prophets, James makes it clear that he was in most ways just like us. I love the King James rendering of the passage—*a man subject to like passions as we are.* His powerful ability to control the weather was not due to his being special in any way. He simply prayed, and he prayed with great energy. As we study Elijah, we find one who dealt with serious depression, so it is clear that he knew human weakness all too well. But he could pray, and so can we. He pleaded with God and God listened, and the answer was much more than asking God to change our attitudes. Real physical change came about because of prayer.

We all have prayer stories to tell. I love to recall my time in Youngstown, Ohio during the eighties when Sunday afternoons were filled with radio spots from all kinds of eastern European Church groups. Once as I was driving about, I found myself hearing a preacher on “The Serbian Hour” railing against the Berlin Wall and the communist powers which presently oppressed that nation. It is with some embarrassment that I confess some amusement with the message. While I deeply appreciated his sentiments it all seemed naïve, for I knew that the Berlin Wall would be around forever. O me of little faith! What brought down the Berlin Wall? Many have pointed to prayer services in those tense days in 1989 and on the night of its fall. These were dangerous days which could have easily become violent, but instead the wall which would never come down, came down peacefully. Years of prayers were answered. We all have stories of health crises and surviving physical injury or near injury. I constantly speak of God’s plan for my life and how I can look back to see God’s gracious hand guiding and rescuing me innumerable times.

But for every deliverance and answered prayer that I would celebrate, there is someone who will step forward with an alternate explanation which leaves God and our petitions out of the picture completely. Did Elijah need to pray? If God was going to judge wayward Israel, He didn’t need Elijah’s prayers to do it. But God did call upon Elijah and delighted to let him “press the buttons” that would send the drought into motion. And again, there are the persistent questions of unanswered prayer. James offers three teachings on prayer, and one might expect that his varying approaches to the topic would dissipate the mystery, but it appears that the mystery is here to stay. In fact, the more we examine and practice prayer the more mysterious it all becomes. It all defies our understanding and explanation, but we also know that it has such power. And when prayer frustrates us and we do not find the results we have desired, we look to our Savior who knew those exact same frustrations yet prayed all the more!

We moderns need to reconsider mystery. Prayer may defy a full definition and explanation, for it is a great mystery, but that is okay. We would all do well to recall a wonderful and overlooked Hebrew word that can help us in this matter. We all know the Hebrew word *amen*. It means that something is solid and true, and so we commonly repeat it as an affirmation. We know the word *alleluia*, and as the song reminds us it means *praise the Lord*. A Hebrew word we very much need to consider is *manna*, the name given the bread which came from heaven and fed the Israelites in their forty-year wilderness journey. The Lord promised them this bread, they found it on the ground in the morning and once they entered the Promised Land God stopped sending it. So what does manna mean? One might expect it to be a Hebrew term for bread or heavenly gift, but this is not so. Manna means *what is it?* (Exodus 16:13-15), and that seems a very appropriate name for such a mysterious gift. There are all sorts of theories as to the nature of this bread. In the end it is all a mystery. And to call it a mystery does not reduce it to something imaginary. It was very real food

which fed many people for many years. So it is with prayer. It is a mystery, but it is not something silly or imaginary. Our prayers have sustained us and empowered us over the years in ways which we can hardly imagine. Our prayers have changed things. Prayer is very mysterious but is also very real!

To try to understand prayer—to qualify and quantify it—is an impossibility. We must instead recognize it for the mystery that it is and know that it is a *powerful* mystery. May we join with the witness of our Savior whose many and fervent prayers truly changed things.