

## *Four Thoughts about Prayer*

A Sermon on James 5:13-20 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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As I spend more years as a follower of Jesus, I notice that the basic instructions of being a disciple are most important. The challenge is whether we are able to follow the instructions given to us as disciples. This is true for all of us, including people who have devoted their lives to being 'religious professionals' like me. Jesus' instructions are not especially complicated, they are just difficult for us.

Consider the practice of prayer. In today's passage from the letter of James, the practice of prayer is introduced with a series of questions. *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....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.*

I agree with the idea that prayer is powerful and effective, but I'm not sure James' instructions about prayer are the most helpful ideas for us as we try to learn more about prayer. For those who are sick, suffering, or grieving James seems to be saying, "Just try harder, or perhaps call the experts in to pray some special prayers." In some situations, these directions don't seem to be helpful, and in other cases they seem to be almost cruel.

I have been listening to prayers, and thinking about prayer, and practicing prayer for 60 years. Here are four things I have learned about prayer.

The first thing I learned is that prayer is self-reflective. In order for prayer to be powerful and effective, I have to pay attention to what I am doing and thinking. Life is not about me, but if I am going to make any progress in the practice of prayer I have to pay attention to what I am doing and thinking. Prayer is about paying attention to you are doing and thinking, for the purpose of letting go of yourself. Spending time alone in prayer sometimes appears to be selfish, but prayer is not selfish because prayer is ultimately about letting go of yourself. Prayer is about paying attention to what you are doing and thinking in order to turn away from yourself, and towards God.

This leads to the second thing I have learned. For Christians, returning to God, or turning towards God, is the activity that everything else is based on. Prayer is the activity of returning to God, but I have learned that finding the way I will return to God is not always easy or obvious.

The way of return that works for one person might not work for another person. One of my friends just opens the prayer book and reads the Morning Prayer liturgy every day. That's what works for them. It doesn't work for me. I can open the prayer book and read the prayers. I say it doesn't work for me, because I've tried this many times and I notice I don't feel any closer to God's way of doing things at the end.

This is the part you and I get stuck on. You and I know we need to return to God's way of doing things, but the process of returning to God through prayer is a little bit different for every person. One person goes into their room, closes the door and sits down in their chair. Another person returns to God when he is walking through the park.

Some people return to God through music. Jim Potts played a piece of music by Johann Sebastian Bach before our worship service, 'Deck Thyself, My Soul With Gladness'. Beginning around the age of 15 I realized that every time I heard the first few notes of this particular piece of organ music, I felt myself returning to God. For some of us, music is like the doorway to prayer.

No matter how you engage in this activity of returning to God you will need to be intentional about it. Your particular way of turning toward God is the setting for your prayers, it is not the content of your prayers. It is like a doorway. The woman who turns toward God when she picks up her knitting needles has not necessarily begun to pray, but she has moved herself into the place where she can pray.

So the second thing I have learned about prayer is that we have to do some searching to find the place or activity that acts like a doorway for our return to God. Your prayer place might be a physical place, or it might be a physical activity, or it might be a place of engagement for your mind and your spirit like art or music. Since you are here for worship, I trust that worship at St. Paul's might be like a doorway for you to return to God. But once a week is not sufficient. I encourage you to find a place or activity that serves as the doorway that allows you to return to God seven days a week.

The third thing I learned about prayer is about the way prayer works. You might have heard me mention this idea from CS Lewis two weeks ago. Prayer doesn't change God, prayer changes us. I would add, prayer doesn't change other people, prayer changes me.

Prayer is not saying magic words to coax God to change something that is out of our control. Prayer is us, getting ourselves to a place where we will be changed by God's grace. When someone we love is very sick, or at the point of death, it's tempting to think someone could say some magic words, and their physical condition would suddenly be changed.

Prayer doesn't work that way. Prayer is not an incantation. That doesn't mean we shouldn't pray for healing. We pray for healing for ourselves or for others because we understand our spiritual health is deeply connected with our physical health. If I am sick, I pray for a spiritual change in myself that might bring physical healing.

This idea about prayer is about accepting what things are under our control and what things are not under our control. I am in control of my actions. I can change my thoughts and even my feelings through the activity of prayer. I am not in control of other people. I am not in control of diseases and the weather and other global events. From what I can tell, when people talk about prayer, they often get these ideas completely backwards.

To take one of the most common and tragic examples, every day in America many people are killed by guns. When there is an especially notable shooting you may notice some leaders talk about praying for the victims and their families. From my perspective, I think some of the people in these situations seem to be approaching prayer in a way that is backwards. It doesn't seem to be working.

We should be doing everything we can to support the families of those who have died, but in order for prayer to be truly helpful for solving the epidemic of gun violence, all the leaders rushing to the microphones and talking about prayer would need to pray that something inside them would be changed so that they would do something to bring the epidemic of gun violence to an end. The only way all of these well publicized calls for prayer will work is if the people making them are praying that they would be changed by God's love. Prayer doesn't change God and prayer doesn't change other people. My prayers have the power to change me. Your prayers have the power to change something inside of you. That's the way prayer works.

The last thing I have learned about prayer is connected to the first three ideas. You and I are blessed with many gifts and abilities, but we are also fundamentally weak and prone to wander. In other words, we are very often making enormous mistakes. This means that most of us have to do little things to support ourselves as we pray in order for prayer to be powerful and effective.

We have to practice. We have to try different ways of praying. When our way of praying doesn't seem to lead to our hearts being more loving, we need to try something different. We are fundamentally weak and prone to wander. If your way of praying seems really hard, or you keep finding excuse to not pray, you probably need to try some new ways or new things to support yourself as a person who prays.

It can take years to find a way to pray that really works for you. I've been working at finding good ways to pray most of the past 60 years. So far I have found exactly three ways that work for me. That is, I have found three ways to pray where, at the end of my prayers, I almost always feel like I have moved closer to God's way of doing things. And remember, it's my job to pray.

All of this might come a lot easier for you than for me, but for me, I have to find little ways to support my activity of prayer. In my most common way of prayer I use a little cheat sheet. It has about ten short sentences on it. The first sentence is: "You are God, I am dust." One of the sentences in the middle of my cheat sheet is "Thank you for the people you have given me." The ten sentences are like topic headings for my daily prayers.

So if you are struggling with finding a way to pray that works for you, don't give up and please don't judge yourself harshly. When it comes to following God's way, we are like little children attempting to do something that is not easy for us, which is to be people who love others. Be patient with yourself, and don't give up. Devote this time to yourself, to your actions and thoughts and feelings, in order to let go of yourself. Strive to find the place or activity that is the doorway for you to return to God who forgives you and loves you.