

“Survey Said: Prayer Power”
James 5:13-18 (19-20); Mark 1:35-37

As some of you may be aware, this has been a ‘pretty busy’ week for your pastor. Two memorial services to plan and prepare for. Which included several meetings with friends/family to prepare for those services. Two ‘regular’ worship services to plan, both individually and with worship leaders. Visits to both nursing homes and hospitals. Planning for both the upcoming stewardship season and the sermon series for October. And this is to say nothing of emails, text messages, FB Messenger, and... even some ‘old-fashioned’ *phone calls*! AND, oh yes... there is that whole ‘sermon’ thing... I think that it was safe to say that I exceeded that ‘2-hour work week’ for preachers... well, at least this past week...

It was in the midst of this busy time that I had a brief conversation with one of our church members. In sharing with this ‘fellow member of the priesthood’ my full schedule, I did do something that most of us... pastors included... have a hard time doing: asked someone to pray for ME! I can’t speak for you, but I think that its usually pretty easy to ask prayers for *someone else*, but for *ourselves*? Now THAT’s another matter...

And it was this person’s response that I found most remark-able. Or should I say, ‘WORTHY’ of a remark. And that response was not merely that he/she would pray for me. Though they probably did. And while I am paraphrasing here... heck, I can hardly remember what happened a few *minutes* ago, let alone a few DAYS ago... here’s the gist of what was said to me:

“I know that you put a lot of effort into your messages... that you want them to be worded just right. But we all know you here. And we love you. So maybe you don’t need to put as much time as you would normally into your sermon. Just speak from your heart...”

Gee, imagine that. A sermon that is less concerned about the ‘thought’ and more about the ‘HEART!’ I recently read an article that said that the ‘margin of error’ in missing

heaven is about 18 inches... the distance from your head to your heart. It's kind of like trying to define the word "LOVE" – words may fail us. Emotion will not. Knowing *about* God is NOT the same as Knowing God. True faith is much more than a mental exercise... but one about 18 inches lower...

AND SO, as we consider today these passages from James and Jesus ... with an assist from Mark... I'm going to borrow a line from our middle daughter, who will preface a seemingly 'off-the-wall' statement with the term "Random thoughts of Christine." Today you will hear some 'Random thoughts of Chan.' But just like the topic for today, may we ALL know that it's not really about the **words** of the **speaker**... but the **work** of the **Spirit**. Today, may we ALL grow in our appreciation of the gift God gives to us of "**Prayer Power.**"

As we first consider the words from James... if we actually LOOK in the Bible... we see that this 'pericope' (you know, that fancy seminary word for a passage, which is spelled like 'periscope,' without the 'S' .. 'S' as in 'Savior')... ANYWAY, this 'pericope' comes at the very END of the book. These closing verses are considered to be James' efforts to address, according to one commentary, '**harmonious living amongst believers.**' Gee, imagine that: a church leader who is concerned about church members *getting along with one another*. Hmm... not HERE of course... ☺

ANYWAY, by virtue of its placement at the very end of the book, James obviously believes it to be of 'penultimate' importance... kinda like that closing sermon illustration I spoke of last week... that the church place a high value on **PRAYER**. And he would be in pretty good company... in Matthew's Gospel, our Lord Jesus is quoted as saying, "***The Scriptures declare, 'My Temple will be called a house of prayer,'***" (Matthew 21:13) A statement that Jesus, in turn, quoted from the prophet Isaiah. (We probably should NOT overlook the last part of that quote. Do you recall it? "***...but you have turned it into a den of thieves!***" Just sayin'...)

As for our efforts to ensure that we keep our places of worship a 'house of prayer,' I would lift up this quote from our historic "*Westminster Confession of Faith*" : "***Prayer, with thanksgiving, being one special part of religious worship, is by God required of all mankind;***

*and that it may be accepted, it is to be made in the **name** of the **Son**, by the help of the **Spirit**, according to His will, with **understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance.**" (WCF, 21:3)*

Prayer is a vitally important, 'instrumental' (as in an 'instrument' that is 'music' to God's ears) part of our worship...and **required** by God. That when we pray, we don't do it merely by our own devices and clever word crafting (fingers pointing back at the pastor!)... but in the NAME of **Jesus, God the Son**... by the HELP of our **Advocate, God the Spirit**. NOT by our own will, but 'according to God's will'... with "**understanding, reverence, humility** (there's that word again), **fervency** (urgency, passion), **faith, love, and perseverance.**"

As we seek to grow in our '**understanding**' of the importance of prayer, and what James has to say in 'enlightening' our 'understanding,' it seemed to me that there were several different elements, or types, of prayer. Different occasions for the singular response of prayer. He spoke of times of **praise**, when we were cheerful. Times of **confession** for sins committed. Times of **gratitude** for answered prayers. Times to **lift up one another** in times of suffering. James' 'laundry list' of ways to be 'washed by the Spirit' reminded me of an old acronym many of you may be familiar with... one that helps us to remember the different 'occasions for the singular response of prayer': **ACTS**. (You know... as the 'ACTS' of the Apostles. YOU!) Prayers of **Adoration**... **Confession**... **Thanksgiving**... and **Supplication**.

And just as our lives of worship here should permeate our everyday lives out there, so too should our prayers in **community** be an example for our prayers in **solitude**. Just as there is an 'order of worship' that guides our 'fellowship' times as the body of Christ, so too should that apply to our 'fellowship' as individual believers. In our daily practices of our Christian faith, how much time do we spend in...

Adoration. In the opening verse, James asks, "**Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.**" (James 5:13) In the same way that our worship services open up with 'cheerful songs of praise,' so too should our DAY begin with joy and praise of Almighty God. 'God, you have given me another day to make a difference for YOU. You have given me

another day to breathe in the air, look at your wonderful creation, put a smile on another person's face, ponder your love for me.' Whether you can sing a lick or not, maybe you could 'hum a few bars' of the opening words of one of our church's classic hymns of faith:

"Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation. All my soul praise Him for He is my strength and salvation. All ye who hear, now to His temple draw near. Join me in glad adoration." Each day you should start out with joyful adoration for the God who gives you strength. I still remember the closing words of the host of a children's show when I was growing up in Baton Rouge... Buckskin Bill. *"You're never completely dressed until you put on a smile."*

And speaking of God's "temple,"... read "church"... a type of prayer we can often associate with entering a place of worship is that of ...

CONFESSION. James gives much attention to the importance of lifting up prayers for forgiveness. He implores us to ***"Confess your sins to one another."*** (5:16) He assures us that as a result of ***"prayers of faith...anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven."*** (5:15) Even as we praise Almighty God in 'glad adoration,' the *greatness* of the 'King of creation' can remind us of how *small* we can be. A good and perfect God stands in stark contrast to how 'IM-perfect' and 'bad' we can be. If there is any among us who could deny their own failures before an UN-failing God, well... there in itself lies the problem...

What I would lift up before you concerning the need to confess our sins, though, is not simply our personal, private transgressions. But also, our 'inter-connectedness.' Did you catch that little phrase after ***"confess your sins...to one another"***? How easy is THAT? It's one thing to humbly confess your transgressions before GOD. But to another human being? And yet, there may be NOTHING you could do to more powerfully demonstrate the humility embodied by Christ than to humble yourself before another person. To confess how you have hurt them... or another person. As we open up the wound of hurt we have inflicted on another, we allow the healing balm of God's mercy to enter in.. to BOTH of us. To paraphrase earlier words of James, *'humble yourself in the sight of ONE ANOTHER, and GOD will lift you up.'*

We should also not overlook the blessing that WE who are open to the humble confession of another will experience. As we provide for another that 'safe place' in which to bare their souls... particularly about the way that they may have wronged you, or someone else... we have the opportunity to allow 'God to enter in' and bring that power of healing only He can do. As you and I encourage a hurting brother or sister to open up to God's forgiveness, remember those words of James: ***"you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering from the truth will save the sinner's soul from death and cover a multitude of sins."*** (5:20) And we are ALL 'sinners' who 'wander from the truth'...with a 'multitude of sins'...

The forgiveness that we, broken sinners that we are, experience through confession is just one of the reason we should pray with **THANKSGIVING**. Now, while James may not specifically refer to 'giving thanks,' I believe it yet permeates this whole passage: We lift up praises to God out of gratitude. For God's mercy and forgiveness we must certainly give thanks. For the healing and comfort from suffering that only God can bring, we should be truly thankful. Our prayer life should always cultivate an 'attitude of gratitude' for God's blessing, as we seek to obey Paul's exhortation to the church in Thessalonica... and Lake Charles and Welsh:

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thess. 5:16-18)

And finally... saving the 'best' for last (?)... we are to lift up to God our prayers of **SUPPLICATION**. 'Supplication.' Now THERE'S a word we don't use very often. Simply put, it is to 'ask humbly.' 'To intercede', or 'go between' ourselves and God. AKA 'Intercessory prayer.' Do you want to know how to BEST have someone '**feel the love**' that you have for them? Tell them that you PRAYED for their pain, and to a holy God who is the only true source of relief from that pain and suffering. As you witness to your willingness to PRAY for others, you are a living testimony to the truth of James' words: ***"The prayer of faith will heal the sick... the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."*** (James 5:15-16)

And, my fellow sinners, let us know that as we humbly come before a righteous God with our prayers, we too are made 'righteous.'

I would leave you with this encouragement about your personal life of prayer. In the past I have been asked to pray for a certain situation because, as a minister, 'you have a direct line.' And I would always be quick to tell them, 'thanks, but you have the same line that I do.' In considering the miraculous power of Elijah's prayers, we should remember what James said: **"Elijah was a human just like us."** (5:17) Let us follow after the very human example of Jesus of how to pray: **"in the morning... in the darkness... in solitude..."** Know that as you and I seek after the mighty 'ACTS' of God... through our prayers of Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication'... the efficacy of our prayers has absolutely nothing to do with our **intellect** or our **eloquence**. That the distance of faith traveled by our prayers begins at about 18 inches... from our **head** to our **heart**. It is there... in our hearts... that we first, and best, experience the TRUE '**prayer power**.' And may all God's 'prayer warriors' say, AMEN!

CHARGE & BENEDICTION

When Jesus' **disciples couldn't find Jesus**, they were **distressed**. And when they DID find him... in **prayer**... they seemingly 'chastised' him, saying **"Everybody is looking for you."** This ancient experience reminds me of its eternal truth:

Everybody is looking for **something**. That 'something' should be Jesus. And when they don't find him, they can get distressed. Like those disciples, may we experience God's comfort and peace as we too 'find Jesus in prayer.' In Paul's words: **⁶Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;** **⁷and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."** (Philippians 4:6-7)