

Power of Prayer **James 5:13-20**

A temporary Sunday School teacher was struggling to open a combination lock on a supply cabinet. She had been told the combination, but couldn't quite remember it. Finally, she went to the pastor's study and asked for help. The pastor came into the room and began to turn the dial. After the first two numbers he paused and stared blankly for a moment. Finally he looked serenely heavenward and his lips moved silently as if talking to God for guidance. Then he looked back at the lock, quickly turned to the final number, and opened the lock. The teacher was amazed. "I'm in awe at your faith, pastor," she said. The pastor answered, "Oh! It's really nothing, The number is taped to the ceiling."¹

We, Christians, believe in the power of prayer. That's why we share our prayer concerns each Sunday and pray for each other. Today's scripture reading reminds us of the power of prayer.

"Are any among you suffering? They should pray... 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." (vs 13-14)

With faith, we should pray. We should pray for the sick and the sinner. We should pray for healing and redemption for ourselves and our neighbors. But have you ever struggled with whether prayer really works? As a pastor, I pray for my congregation members and prayer concerns I receive. But I also realize that our prayers are not always answered in the way we want. My previous church had an animal blessing day on the first Sunday of September. This was a very strange concept for me, but I did my best. I laid my hand on dogs, cats, or pictures of cats, and even a lizard. After one of these services, a church member told me that she once raised a fancy rat as a pet for many years. [ppt] She brought this animal friend to an animal blessing event. It received a blessing and it died the next day. She told me she thought the rat was just too old, but as a pastor, I didn't want the same thing happening to any other animal companions, so I prayed harder that year.

If you take prayer seriously, it is inevitable that you have to face difficult questions about prayer. Does prayer work? Is it right for me to ask God for particular outcomes, when God knows what is best and right? Since God knows everything, are words necessary at all? If you are really serious about prayer, you must have also experienced God's silence or unresponsiveness. Sometimes, our prayer is answered in a miraculous way. But sometimes, our non-selfish and sincere prayer for others may not be answered in the way we hoped. We often hunger for some evidence that God hears our prayers. I am with you. But we need to remember that the primary purpose of prayer is not about getting what we want.

Prayer as a waking up to the presence of God.

In her book, *an Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor differentiates between prayer, singular, and prayers, plural. She has said, [ppt] "prayer is more than saying set prayers at set times. Prayer,... is waking up to the presence of God no matter where I am or what I am doing. Prayer is happening, and it is not necessarily something that I am doing. God is happening, and I am lucky enough to know that I am in the Midst."² She defines prayer as the practice of being present to God.

¹ From Clean Christen Jokes.

² Barbara N. Taylor, *An Altar in the world*, 178.

We, Christians, believe in the omnipresence of God. There is no place or time from which God is absent. God is never absent. While God is everywhere and always with us, we often do not feel God's presence because we do not attend to God. For instance, how many of you listen to the radio? I know Warren Cole listens the radio. David Vacchina listens the radio. You can listen to music or the news through it when you tune in to a certain channel. When you turn off the radio, you cannot hear the music but that doesn't mean that the radio station stops sending out music. A radio wave still carries music or news through the air whether we tune in to it or not. Similarly, God is always with us, whether we tune in to God or not.

Our mind is often distracted by many things and we often forget God's presence. Prayer is like intentionally tuning into the presence of God in our lives. If we wake up to the presence of God, walking can be prayer. Sunbathing at the beach can be a kind of prayer. When we fully experience God's divine presence in our friends, talking with our friends can be prayer. When we wake up to the presence of God, even biting into a tomato from Warren's garden can be a kind of prayer. We can surely offer this kind of prayer and there is no doubt that this deep encounter with God can change us.

Pray for Miracles of Healing

Of course, we still wonder if prayer is powerful and effective and actually heals the sick. I believe you may have personal experiences of healing through prayer. But at the same time, we also experience that some of our prayers seems unanswered. Can prayer heal stage four lung cancer? Can our sincere prayer heal down syndrome? We have been raised in a scientific age so we know that some genetic diseases are incurable. Can we or should we pray for healing even if there seems to be virtually zero chance of healing? Yes. We can and we should because prayer is the only and proper act of faith in this situation.

In her book, Barbara Brown Taylor shared her friend's story. Her friend was a highly educated and brilliant person and taught in a large university. But his wife was ill and dying. And he did everything in his power to ease her suffering. One afternoon, she listened to his prayer, pleading with God to do something to work a miracle that would save his wife. When the time was right, she asked her friend about his prayer.

He asked her back, "so you want to know whether I really believe that God will intervene like that? You wonder if I am really that naïve?" Then, he answered, "honestly, I don't think it through, not now. I tell God what I want. I'm not smart enough or strong enough to do anything else, and besides there's no time. So I tell God what I want and I trust God to sort it out." His answer was very honest. Like a child, he asked God for what he wanted and trusted God. That's why we pray. We pray because we trust God. Effectiveness is not the reason we pray, but we pray because we cannot solve the problem so we asked God whom we trust. So bring your prayer concerns to God, no matter what struggles you have. Bring it to God and pray together because we trust God. God hears our prayers.

But our job is for Miracles of Hospitality

On rare occasions, we hear about someone getting well, despite the predications to the contrary. We call it a miracle. Do you believe that the prayer of faith will miraculously heal the sick? Do we have to pray for miracles? James seems to think... that is what we should pray for always. Pray for and hope for and expect God's miracle. Why not hope for a miracle?

Yes, we should pray for miracles but our understanding of miracles needs to be extended. Miracles not only relate to this life, but also to eternal life. So we pray for the miracles that bring

us to our true home, the kin-dom of God. When we read today's text closely, we realize James doesn't say that the prayer of faith will heal the sick. "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven."(vs 15) James said, "the prayer of faith will SAVE the sick." Salvation is bigger than healing.

In the ancient world, sickness was often understood as God's punishment or caused by an evil spirit. So those who were sick were shunned or quarantined and set aside from the community. Maybe the situation has not changed that much even today. We don't want those people around, those sinners, those unhealthy ones, both mentally and physically. James was trying to break those tendencies in the church by saying "even the sick are worth our prayer, worth our time. They should call the elders of the church; they should call on the community to come and be with them, anoint them, lay hands on them."³ By praying for and laying hands on those who are sick, we include them into God's community. This is a miracle of hospitality. We are not called to miracles of healing, but for miracles of hospitality that save the sick and even dying.

I bet you know Mother Teresa. What did she do in India? She served the poor and the sick. She founded a hospice "Home for Sick and Dying." She brought those who are sick and dying on the street to the home and they received medical attention and the opportunity to die with dignity. Would Mother Teresa pray for those who were sick and dying? Of course! She did! Did her prayer heal the sick and dying? Some of them might be healed but some of them still died. But I believe her prayer of faith saved all of them. Whether they were healed or not, all of them experienced the miracles of hospitality at the last moment of their lives. And all of them were saved.

My friends, God's salvation is bigger than bodily healing. Our job is not the miracles of healing but that of hospitality. Prayer is the most hospitable act we can provide for others. If you know someone who is ill, pray for them. Bring your prayer concerns to the church and, the Asbury family! Pray for them. God will work miracles of healing through your acts of prayer and hospitality. Amen.

³ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/doers-of-the-word/eighteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/eighteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-b-preaching-notes>