



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### *FAITH BROUGHT TO LIFE SERIES:*

### THE POWER OF PRAYER

*by Steve Bringardner*

~ Scripture: James 5:13-18 ~

#### INTRODUCTION

The Book of James was written to Christians. (i.e.: people who already have a relationship with God) about how their faith should be lived out in their lives. He writes about how they can grow and mature in their walk with Christ. He gets into some very practical areas, such as:

- How we should talk
- How wisdom should work in our lives
- How we should go about resolving quarrels and fights
- How we should deal with money and materialism
- How we can endure suffering and hardships

Now he wraps it all up in a final challenge to be growing in PRAYER. Few other issues could be more essential or vital. Yet we struggle with this one more than we should. I don't know what your experience with prayer has been, but my guess is. . .

1. There may have been times when you have seen some marvelous answers to prayer. . .perhaps even some remarkable and miraculous events taking place because you prayed: people whose lives have been turned around, relationships that have been restored, healing (physical or emotional) that has taken place. . .*maybe over the course of time.*
2. There may have been times when you have prayed and coincidences have happened—but you weren't sure whether it was the result of your prayer or just circumstances coming together.
3. There may have been times when you have prayed faithfully and earnestly and have gotten other people to pray with or for you, yet things have not work out like you hoped: health issues have not been resolved, people have died, businesses have failed, marriages have broken apart, relationships have been wounded.
4. There may also be this case I don't like to mention: someone asks you to pray. . .you forget. . .they come back and say: "*You must've prayed, things are much better!*"

PRAYER! Such a mystery. I'll be honest with you, I don't know much about how it works. I have some of the same questions you do:

- Does my praying make any difference?

- How much of a role does faith play?
- What does God want from me when I pray?

James has some very practical things to say about prayer. Let's let him teach us about it this a.m. from **James 5:13-18**. . .

<sup>13</sup>Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup>Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup>And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup>Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

<sup>17</sup>Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. <sup>18</sup>Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

## I. THE PRIORITY OF PRAYER

It goes without saying that prayer should be a priority for us. If you have a relationship with God, how can you not communicate with Him? Communication is vital in any relationship.

James covers all the bases. . .

### (A) **“If you are in trouble, pray” James says in v. 13**

- When things aren't going very well in our lives . . . PRAY!
- When we get backed into a corner . . . PRAY!
- When we try to work out some issue (at work, at home) . . . PRAY!
- When we've got an appointment with the doctor because something “unknown” is going on . . . PRAY!

James says to these Christians. (who were under persecution, remember?): *If you get in trouble, PRAY!* Those things that worry you. . .trouble you. . .make you anxious: PRAY about those things.

*“Cast all your anxiety on him for he cares for you”* says Peter [**I Peter 5:7**]

*“Why worry when you can pray?”* somebody has said. Most of the time we flip that around to: *“Why pray when I can stay up half the night worrying”*.

STORY: I heard about a guy who said to his friend, “I have taken care of my issue with worry. It is no longer a problem for me.” “Oh? How did you do it?” “I hired someone to do all of my worrying. I give him a list of things each week I normally worry about and he worries for me. I don't have to care about it.” “Man, that is great. But how much does it cost you?” “About \$1000 a week.” “How in the world are you going to pay for it?” “That's his worry now!” □

- ### (B) **“If anyone is happy, let him sing songs of praise” [also v. 13].** If things are going well for you, PRAY!

It is not always easy for us to keep coming before God when things are going smoothly.

Self-sufficiency is a huge problem in our prayer life. Most of us don't pray because we think we can handle most things by ourselves. "I can take care of it; I can manage." Every now & then I ask God to nudge things into place for me.

Too bad, because "PRIDE" and "SELF-SUFFICIENCY" should never keep us from prayer.

**(C) "If anyone is suffering, he should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord" [v. 14].**

If you are suffering (i.e.: facing some kind of physical affliction, more than the minor irritations & troubles of daily life), then PRAY and get others to pray with you. Get the leaders of the church—the elders, pastors, "prayer warriors"—together to pray with you and anoint you with oil.

Not that the OIL is some mystical or magical thing. But it was thought to have some medicinal function in that day and age. GALEN, a physician, described it as "the best of all remedies for paralysis". So, James is prescribing prayer AND medicine—not one to the exclusion of the other.

Prayer should be a priority, James is saying. It is coming before the Lord and baring your heart to him and letting him know what is going on in your life. It's not *the emergency room type* OR *the shopping list type* OR *the whiners type of prayer*. . .but honestly seeking the Lord and asking him to be active in your life. If you want to grow in your faith. . .if you want to mature, develop, become more Christ-like, then prayer is going to have to be a priority.

## II. THE POWER OF PRAYER

You know the old saying, "*Prayer changes things*". I wonder, do we believe that this morning? Do we really believe that our praying impacts God, circumstances and history? Does it make any difference that we pray? Or do we water it down and say: "*God changes me (or my perception of things). But whether I pray or not, everything's going to turn out the same.*"

I want to declare to you this morning that Scripture is very adamant on this point: PRAYER DOES MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE WAY THINGS TURN OUT.

**(A) James offers an example in vv. 17-18. . .**

Elijah prayed and it didn't rain for 3½ years. Then he prayed again and the heavens were opened. He talked to God and raised from the dead a widow's son. He listened to God and challenged 400 false prophets by asking God to bring fire from heaven.

And prayer doesn't change things?

**(B) Look at Exodus 32. . .**

The people had turned away from the Lord. They had made a molten calf and worshipped it. God said to Moses, "*I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people.*" And He set about to destroy them. But Moses interceded and reasoned with God: "*Why does your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth.'*" And he begged God to turn from His fierce anger and recall His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to make their descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and give them all this land as their

inheritance forever. “Then the Lord **changed His Mind** about the harm He said He would do to His people.”

There’s nothing that will paralyze your prayer life quicker than to buy into the belief that your prayers really don’t make a difference. . .they really don’t change anything. . .God is going to do what God’s going to do no matter what you do or say. That relegates prayer to a sort of run-through-the-motions thing to make you feel a little better, a little closer to God.

(C) **There’s another Old Testament scene in II Kings 20. . .**

It has to do with King Hezekiah—a great king who had a close relationship with God. He was a bold reformer who “cleaned house”, destroying pagan altars, idols and shrines. But he contracted an illness. And his friend, the prophet Isaiah, had come with a word from God that he was going to die. With that, he did exactly what Moses had done: he cried out to God and wept bitterly. He reasoned with God: “Remember, O Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.” Before Isaiah had left the king’s quarters, the word of the Lord came to him: “Go back and tell Hezekiah, the leader of my people... I have heard your prayer and seen your tears. I will heal you three days from now. I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city for my sake and for the sake of my servant David.”

But, you say, these were the prayers of super-saints. Well, they were the prayers of righteous men. Isn’t that what our text says: “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” [v. 16].

➤ RIGHTEOUS means being right with God. . .all sins forgiven. . .nothing separating you from God.

I get the impression that the dramatic answers to prayer we read about in Moses’ & Hezekiah’s & Elijah’s lives had something to do with how close they walked with God. Maybe we need to follow suit and get a little more serious about our relationship with Him!

Yet not every prayer is answered the way we want it to be. Not every request my children ask of me is granted.

**Let me ask you:** How many of you have prayed faithfully for someone (and you know others have too) that they might be restored to health OR their marriage might be put back together OR that there might be some major change in their life. . .but it didn’t happen? [Indicate by raising hands]

That has been my experience a lot of times, too.

So, how do we reconcile these experiences with our key verse this morning: “the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up” [v. 15, bold mine]. How do I reconcile this verse with a number of other verses in Scripture where faithful people prayed and what they wanted didn’t happen?

- **David**, a man after God’s own heart, prayed that his son would be healed; instead his son died.
- **Paul** prayed God would remove an issue in his life—“a thorn in my flesh”—but it didn’t happen.
- **Jesus** in the garden prayed for the Father to remove the cup of suffering (crucifixion) from him; yet God did not choose to do that.

Let’s remember that GOD HEALS, FAITH DOESN’T. All our prayers are subject to God’s will. And because His ways are higher than our ways AND His thoughts are higher than our thoughts, we do not know the greater plan He has in mind (at least all of it). We tend to limit God to our finite way of thinking and our

finite world. . .when in reality God's Kingdom extends way beyond what we experience in the "here and now". And that's why "ultimate healing" may not occur this side of the grave (hard as that is to hear).

God is sovereign! He has clearly invited us to make our case, but then leave the results to Him. We need to leave the *specifics* and the *timing* in His hands.

And, we need to pray regardless of the outcome, because it makes us dependent on Him. We need God no matter what happens: if there's a turnaround OR if a turnaround fails to occur.

I cannot tell you why God works at times. . .yet at other times He seems not to be attentive to our concerns. We live with a certain amount of ambiguity here, because prayer is a mystery. What I can tell you this morning is that our problem is not a shortage of faith; our problem is our under-

utilization of prayer. Prayer is "powerful and effective". What's so amazing is that we "*drink so sparingly from so great a reservoir*" [Clarence Jordan].

**WHY PRAY?** Because prayer changes things.

It changes us.

It effects the way God deals with us.

It has an impact on the outcome of things.

Your prayers will actually shape history.

**THAT'S THE POWER OF PRAYER!**

C. S. Lewis has a wonderful way of illustrating this: Think of a play in which the scene and the general outline of the story is fixed by the author. But certain details are left for the actors to improvise. In a good play, there's a dance between the written script and the creativity and individuality each actor brings to their part.

God has given us the opportunity to impact and mold history—through prayer. What you & I do. . . how we behave. . .how we play our part has a huge effect on how things play out.

## CONCLUSION

Bottom line: Whether we understand it fully or not, our prayers are part of God's healing process. We need to take praying more seriously.

No one is alone in the Body of Christ. Part of God's design for the Church is that we should be able to count on others for support and prayer. Toward that end, I would like to ask:

- ➤ All Ministry Units (e.g.: cells, teams, Ad Council) to see to it that taking care of one another is part of your mission.

- All Small Groups to pray for one another regularly and be "pastors" to one another.

Of course, the Elders (i.e.: the pastors) are always on call to respond to a crisis or emergency and provide pastoral care on any level.

The whole church tries to stay alert to those going through an illness or difficult time. That's why we have the two *Prayer Chains* and *Sweet Hour of Prayer* and now the *Men's Prayer Breakfast*—to pray for the needs of all our members.

- Will you spend some time this week in prayer? Just a few minutes (if this is something new to you)?
  - Would you spend some time in the morning or evening reading some Scripture and reflecting on what God is saying to you through it?
  - Would you covenant to identify 2-3 issues that James has raised for you that you can begin to bring before the Lord in prayer?
  - If reading the Word and spending time in prayer have not been in your routine, would you consider getting into a small group where the members help one another develop these holy habits? [Pastor Matt & I can help you with that one.]

### BENEDICTION

May you know that God is at work even if you can't see it or fully understand it.

Go now, and trust His heart until you can see clearly His hand!