

conditioned by our western civilization not to have faith but to trust our science? There might be something there. Could it be that God in God's compassion and love provides such miracle in other places where they do not have access to the care we have in the developed world? This remains a mystery. Here is what we know. Miracles, as we define this word, do happen but not as often as the other scenario.

However, in our text the miracle involves the gift of community, medicine and prayer. The promise is for healing that is physical and spiritual. Here is my question for us today. Why do we see physical healing as a greater miracle than spiritual healing or salvation? Which is the greatest act? Which can only God do? Jesus said to a cripple man lying on a mat your sins are forgiven. When asked who can forgive sins? Jesus said as proof that his sins were forgiven take up your mat and walk. The physical miracle was secondary to the true miracle and that was forgiveness of sin. What comparison in Jesus' life is His spitting on some mud and touching someone's eyes compared to His suffering, death and resurrection to rescue us from the eternal consequences of sin? When we think about it, there really is no comparison.

So, James is reminding us that prayer is our natural response to the events of life but also that prayer has its place in our lives together. Prayer is one of the ways we share in life together. We come to each other; we pray for each other, we walk with God with each other. Prayer has its important place in the community of faith. It has healing power physically and always spiritually.

James also reminds us that prayer is powerful and effective. Prayer causes things to happen. James reminds us that the great prophet Elijah was a man just like us, but his prayers made a difference. How can our prayers make a difference?

They can be a blessing to others. Offering to pray for someone encourages them, supports them, and lets them know they are loved. Prayer can change us. When we pray it changes how we look at others and it changes how we look at the world. It also changes how we view God. Prayer can get our priorities in line with God.

Phillip Yancey speaks of going to Russia in 1991 and meeting with KGB officers and praying for them. The leader of the group told the Christians that they needed them because they needed to learn repentance. They prayed together and then the leader of the KGB officers distributed 2 million copies of the New Testament to Russian troops. Yancey comments that during the whole

Cold War he never prayed once for Russian leaders. He just simply saw them as enemies. I never took one time to see them through the eyes of Jesus.

Jesus said pray for those who persecute you. Pray for your enemies. Why? Well it does change how we see them that is for sure, but it also can change situations, institutions, cultures, nations and this world. Prayer is effective and powerful.

Prayer changes how we view God. When we pray, we are saying in a very simple way "I am not forgotten by God. God loves me. God cares for me. God is able." Jesus who is God prayed to the Father while he walked this earth. He prayed for power over temptation. He prayed for his followers. He prayed for strength to be obedient to God's call upon His life. When Jesus' disciples asked Him to teach them to pray like He prayed, Jesus started that prayer with these simple but powerful words. When you pray... pray Our Father. Prayer changes our view of God. God is not a distant being. God is our ever present, benevolent, intimate and loving parent.

Are you having trouble? ... Pray. Are you happy? ... Rejoice and pray? Are you sick? ...Pray. Are you confronted with the need of forgiveness? ...Pray.

Joseph Scriven was a man who faced the pain of loss in this world. His first fiancé died in a tragic drowning accident the day before the wedding. He sailed to Canada to start a new life. Fell in love again only for his second love Eliza to grow ill and die before they could marry. Joseph would spend the rest of his life alone, but would devote himself as a pastor. He would spend his life giving all that he had to the kingdom's work. When his mother became ill back in his native Ireland he could not afford to go and be with her, so he wrote this poem as a word of encouragement that later was put to music and has encouraged many a follower of Jesus.

What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit, OH, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer!

Let Us Pray!



Let Us Pray

James 5:13-20

In order to stand on your feet and fight the enemy, you need to get on your knees and pray" are the words of the character Miss Clara from this end of the summer's popular movie "The War Room." The war room in the movie refers to a prayer closet where Miss Clara learned and practiced the power of prayer in her life and the life of others. The movie is a reminder of the power of prayer in our own lives and in the lives of others. It is a reminder of the responsibility and privilege it is to "take it to the Lord in prayer." The movie begs the question that if you were to have today all that you prayed for yesterday just what would you possess? That question causes us to reflect on the importance of our practice of prayer and the priorities of what we might pray to receive.

Prayer is something of a mystery and yet also something that is universal in nature. In his book on prayer, "Prayer Does It Make a Difference", Phillip Yancey reminds us that every faith has some form of prayer. Tribes and people in the remotest of places far from the major religions in our world can be found in some sort of prayer activity. Thomas Merton comments that "Prayer is an expression of who we are... we are living incompleteness. We are a gap, an emptiness that calls for fulfillment."

We recognize in our very depths that we need prayer and yet, we must admit that sometimes prayer is very hard. It might be hard due to what we see as time constraints. It might be hard because it seems too mysterious to us. It might be hard because the demands of life cause us to place prayer on a low place of priority. In his book, "Too Busy Not To Pray", Bill Hybels reminds us of our tendency to want to "Rev" the engine more and more everyday and never take time to just idle. The truth is many times we see prayer as inactivity.

A young pastor was shadowing a seasoned pastor one day and they had been to breakfast and to visit the hospitals and then to the office. Once they entered the office the seasoned pastor took off his coat and hung it over his chair. He then went over and knelt down beside his desk. The young pastor asked what are we

doing now? The seasoned pastor replied, "It is time to go to work... it is time to pray." The seasoned pastor did not see prayer as inactivity but essential activity. This is true for pastors, but also for all of us who would follow Jesus. We find Jesus setting the example for us to pray. Jesus' prayer life was so evident and important to Him that His own disciples took notice and said to Him "Lord, teach us to pray."

Prayer is essential and it is natural. In fact, a gallop poll reveals that more Americans will pray this week than exercise, drive a car, or go to work. It is reported that 3 out of 4 Americans say they pray everyday. Yet, we would admit that prayer does not come easy for some. As one writer puts it "for some prayer is as natural as breathing and for others it is intense effort and concentration.

N.T. Wright comments in his Biblical Studies Class that when studying any book you should read the beginning and the end. The beginning and the end of any book will give you insight into what is in between. We could say that about the Bible although it is made up of many books. As a whole, it begins with God and creation and it ends with God and a new creation. That tells you a lot about what God is doing in between Genesis and Revelation. Here in James, the letter begins with an encouragement to persevere in trials. It ends with a call to prayer. To a church that was suffering and struggling James' last words are to pray. James was reminding them that they were not alone and they were God's people. No matter what might fill their lives, prayer should accompany their lives.

James reminds us that a prayer is the natural response to all of life for those who follow Jesus. James writes, Is anyone in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is anyone sick? He should call the elders for the purpose of prayer. Whatever the circumstance of life, prayer is the proper response.

One of the reasons we fail to pray is our own misunderstanding of where we stand with God. Some of us feel as though we do not matter to God. Our view of ourselves is too small. If you



have ever gone on the Internet and looked at pictures from outer space, you will begin to feel very small very quickly. When we travel to far away places and we see faces of people who look different from us or we watch a newscast and see multitudes of people, we are reminded of our place of smallness in this world and universe. Sometimes when we hear the number 7.3 billion people on this earth, we are overwhelmed with our insignificance. How can God care for me? Why should God care for me? Surely God just set this enterprise into motion and has left us to ourselves or at the most God intervenes in major moments, but not in my life.

The Psalmist asked that question.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
What is man that you are mindful of Him?
And the Son of man that you care for Him?
Yet you have made Him a little lower than the heavenly beings
And crowned Him with glory and honor.

Many of us have a view that God is too big and we are too small for God to care for us. So why pray?

Some of us have the other view that keeps us from prayer and that is a view that is completely consumed with self. This view of life says I am in control and I am completely capable of handling life without help. This is how the Psalms 14 begins "The fool says in his heart there is no God." When we become convinced that we are the center of the universe and everything revolves around me, we lose perspective of who we are and our need for God. Sometimes it is the view from above that we are insignificant, so why pray and other times it is the view that we are all that is significant, so why pray?

To these mistaken views of life, James reminds us that the natural response to every moment of life is prayer. When we are in trouble we are to pray. The word trouble is the word for suffering. Not necessarily physical sickness, but suffering the sake of the gospel or suffering from the troubles that we face in life. The response to trouble according to James is to turn to God in prayer. There does seem to be a natural response to crisis and trouble that turns us to God. However, there also seems to be a tendency for crisis and trouble to turn us from God.

Some of us when faced with trouble and suffering turn to God and then there is also the truth that trouble can drive a wedge between God and us. As surely as some turn to God others turn from God in times of trouble. James reminds us that trouble is the time to pray.

In the same manner, James says when you are happy lift songs of praise. In moments of happiness turn to God. The term happy here is the term for cheer. It is an emotional term. It is not that deeper word of joy or well-being. It is simply those moments of happiness

that come in life. It is that prolonged moment of belly laughter. It is the moment when we see our child for the first time, or we are reunited with loved ones whom we miss desperately. It is a moment with some good friends around a dinner table. It is that fleeting moment when a child's laughter or a teen's excitement causes us to say God is good. James says in those moments of happiness let us give praise and sing. The term means to enter into spiritual ecstasy with all of our faculties in order. In other words, we intentionally rejoice because of happiness.

When we are sick we are to turn to prayer. If we notice the one who is sick is the one who is to call the elders to come and pray. We will explore the prayer of healing in just a moment, but for now let us just acknowledge that James says in sickness we turn to prayer. Sickness has a way maybe beyond any other experience of making us feel isolated and forgotten. Sickness, more than any other experience, can make us become consumed with self to the point we think of nothing or no one besides self. In that moment James says "call on some others, don't go it alone, and pray.

We are to turn to prayer in our sinfulness. James instructs us to confess our sins one to another and pray for each other that you might be healed. There is only one remedy for our sinfulness and that is forgiveness from God. It is prayer that opens up the very floodgate of God's mercy and love that will wash away our sin and give to us forgiveness.

James is reminding us that we are to live life as a life of prayer. This is what Paul is speaking of when he instructs us to "pray continually." Prayer is the proper response to life.

Jane, a character in Thornton Wilder's play "Our Town", gets a letter addressed to her farm, town, country, state and then the envelop continues "the United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; The Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God." Now that is one accurate GPS!

There is something about turning to God in prayer that locates us. We are not so small that God does not care for us. We are not the center of the world that we do not need God. Prayer is that daily locator. It is that moment when we are reminded we really are in the "mind of God." God cares for us and we need God... pray.

James reminds us that prayer is not only about us, but about others as well. James instructs the one who is sick to call upon the elders and have them come and anoint the sick person with oil and pray over them. Sickness in James' day, much like our day, had the possibility to truly alter one's life in every way. With sickness came in many situations loneliness. Many times the sick were quarantined as the only way of preventing the illness from spreading. The idea that the elders of the church were to go where you were not supposed to go is

revolutionary in this passage. Today, sickness can create an aching loneliness. When our routine is altered and we find ourselves homebound or having to avoid certain situations. Sickness can create loneliness.

In the early church, sickness would mean not working and for many that was the difference between being poor and destitute and homeless. This would be especially tragic for the men whose families relied on them. Thus, whole families could become estranged from the community and destitute. It does not take a lot of research. In fact, it takes in many cases a conversation to discover that at the root or at least a factor of many who are impoverished and desperate in our own nation has physical sickness as a part of their story.

Instead of sickness becoming a wedge in the community, sickness was an opportunity for community. The one who is sick calls for help. They are not going to go alone. The elders of the church, the leaders who had the most to lose, were to go to the one who was sick and get up close and personal. They were to touch them, anoint them with oil. The words "pray over them" some believe is a reference to actually laying upon the one who is sick like Elijah did with the widow's son.

Let us explore the elements that are mentioned in this prayer process with the one who is sick and the elders. First, there is the power of community. James is instructing the one who is in need to summons the elders and the elders to go. In both cases there is the instruction to eliminate the loneliness. There is the gift of community, which in many instances is healing in and of itself. I never ceased to be amazed to hear members of our congregation give testimony of the gift of community when they are sick. They know they are loved.

There is the presence of medicine. The oil that is mentioned was a form of medicine in James and Jesus' day. The anointing of oil, thought to have special medicinal purposes, is offered as part of this time of community prayer. It is Dr. Charles Swindoll that suggests the anointing of oil was our equivalent of prayer and medicine. The use of oil as a healing anointment is found in the Old and New Testament.

There is the power of prayer. This prayer is the prayer for healing. It is the prayer of the people. What I think is important in the description of the process is the release of one's self to God and to others in the moment of sickness. It is an opening up to the healing of God and of community.

James says that when this is done there is a healing and James describes this in two ways. First, they are healed

but the word for healing also means to be saved. There seems to be a double meaning. In fact, tied into this healing of the body is the forgiveness of sins. So, what we find is a healing that is more than just physical. In addition, we are told that the Lord will raise them up. Again it is a double meaning. It can mean raise them up to health physical, but it also can refer to being raised in the resurrection. So, again James uses a term that can mean both and or one or the other.

We might say well then James is hedging his language. Does it mean physical or spiritual healing? The answer of course is yes... it means healing, as God deems best for us. Sometimes physical... always spiritual.

JAMES IS REMINDING US THAT WE ARE TO LIVE LIFE AS A LIFE OF PRAYER. THIS IS WHAT PAUL IS SPEAKING OF WHEN HE INSTRUCTS US TO "PRAY CONTINUALLY." PRAYER IS THE PROPER RESPONSE TO LIFE.

First of all, we know scientifically that spiritual well being and prayer can play a vital part in physical health. Numerous studies show that religious people:

- Have stronger marriages.
- Have healthier lifestyles.
- Cope better with stress.
- Recover quicker from depression.
- Live longer and happier lives.
- Have some protection from disease.
- Have stronger immune systems.
- Have fewer expensive hospital services.

Some scientific studies believe these are not miracles as we might think of miracles, but the power of what is referred to as pneumopsychosomatic power that God has given the body. In other words, God wires us to heal ourselves and when we attend to our spirit it enables healing in many ways.

However, when we speak of healing as the result of prayer most of the time we are speaking of healing that has no real scientific basis. It is truly a miracle in the sense there is no natural explanation. So as people of faith, what are we to say about this prayer for healing?

I want you to hear me say miracles do happen. There are some things that are beyond explanation. God intervenes and something miraculous happens. However, the reason they are called miracles is that they are not ordinary. There is no doubt that it happens. There is also no doubt that many people of faith pray and have faith and do not receive healing of their physical bodies here in this life. We must be reminded that there are certain laws of the universe that God has placed in creation and our bodies are subject to those laws. There is no medicine that can stop the aging process completely. Our bodies are not meant for eternity. We might be healed of something, but we will die of something else. Lazarus was raised from the dead, but he did die later. We might ask why it seems more miracles are seen in places like Africa and South America and poorer parts of the world. Is it simply because they have faith and we do not? Is it that we are