

That's Not in the Bible Sermon Series
I'm Praying for You
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Today we conclude our sermon series on Christian statements that aren't in the Bible. During this series we've taken a look at several statements that Christians often say to see whether the sayings are theologically sound and helpful to the intended recipient. The statements we have examined are: Everything happens for a reason; Hate the sin, love the sinner; God helps those who help themselves; God doesn't give us more than we can handle; money is the root of all evil; God has a plan for you; and There, but for the grace of God, go I. If you've missed any of these and want to hear or read them, you can go to the Worship tab on our church website.

We conclude today with the cliché which, out of all of them, is probably said most often: I'm praying for you. This is something we say all the time and in a variety of situations. Because I knew I was preaching on this statement this week, I paid closer attention to how often I said it. Ten different times this past week I said, typed, or texted this statement to someone. Post any kind of bad news on Facebook and you will get a litany of responses with some variation of this statement "Prayers going up!" "Holding you in my prayers." It is THE universal Christian response to any difficult situation.

So why am I preaching on it? Why is it on the list of Christian clichés? With several of the other statements at which we've looked, we've concluded that saying them may be more harmful than helpful because they paint God into a corner by implicitly making God the cause of bad things that happen or creating a spiritual buffer zone between the speaker and the object of the cliché. So, does that mean we shouldn't say this to people?

Not at all! Misrepresenting God is not an issue with this statement. In fact, God isn't even mentioned. The actor in this statement is not God, but the speaker. And that's why "I'm praying for you" made the list. This statement carries with it a promise on the part of the speaker to do something for the listener, something that I think most of us may take for granted. When we are faced with a situation where we don't know the right thing to say, we will often default to this statement, turning it into the spiritual equivalent of "We should do lunch sometime" or "I'll call you." The potential problem with "I'm praying for you" isn't in the statement itself; it's whether or not the speaker will actually follow through on the promise.

I remember sitting with the family of a deceased church member several years ago after he died. They were telling all kinds of stories about him reminiscing, reliving the good times. Then it got quiet, and one of his children said, "But one thing Dad could do was he could pray. He was old school, using 'Thy' and 'Thou.' And he was LOUD. Dad prayed like he meant it." I can't think of a higher compliment that could be given. Would that someone say of us, "When they pray, they MEAN it."

I think we underestimate the power of prayer. We have lost our understanding of the magnitude of what we're doing when we pray. In the time before Jesus, Jews didn't usually pray directly to God. They would go to the temple and make sacrifices and petitions, and the priests would take those into the Holy of Holies, a small room in the interior part of the temple where God was thought to reside. The priests were the only ones allowed in the Holy of Holies, and they could only enter it once a year. When Jesus died on the cross, one of the things that happened is that the curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple was torn in two, symbolizing that the death and resurrection of Jesus bridges the gap between God and us.

We no longer need an intermediary to pray to God. Through Jesus, we ourselves can go into the Holy of Holies with our prayers and petitions. In essence, when we pray, we are communicating directly with the Creator of the Cosmos, the Almighty God.

Prayer is a spiritual power tool. Jesus says in Mark's gospel that if we have faith, we can pray that a mountain be thrown into the sea and it will happen. James tells us that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. So why do we often treat it as if it's simply something to check off our spiritual to-do list? I was having lunch with someone the other day and when our food arrived, we kind of did that dance of shuffling our silverware and moving things around on our plates, waiting to see if one of us was going to offer a blessing. Finally, he looked at me and said, "OK, preacher, fire it up so we can get to eating." How many times do we mumble a half-hearted blessing with a forkful of food already on its way to our mouths?

That's often how we look at prayer, right? The perfunctory blessing before a meal, the stale litany before bed, the repetitive recitation of the Lord's prayer each Sunday. Because prayer is such an essential part of a Christian's life, we can easily forget the power and importance of what we're doing, simply stumbling our way through the words on autopilot. I was reminded of this when I watched the movie, "The Campaign." Will Farrell and Zach Galifianakis are political adversaries running for office. In one of the debates, Zach questions Will's fake religiosity and challenges him to say the Lord's Prayer right there on the spot. Farrell hems and haws a bit, then agrees. He says "Please bow your heads and turn off all recording devices," and then he prays, "Our Father, Art, who is up in Heaven. Aloe Vera be thy name. Thy kingdom... come... the magic kingdom. Give us this day our daily... pizza. And let us digest it. Forgive us, forgive our passes we forget sometimes. And lead us not into the Temptations for we are tired of their music and dancing. And deliver us from evil with your sword and mighty falcon. Forever and ever and ever. Amen." That's funny, right? Everybody knows the Lord's prayer. But do we say it like we mean what we're saying?

It's important for us to pause right now and acknowledge that when we say we are going to pray for someone, we better know what we're committing to do. We're promising them that will we lift their name up to God, that will we speak their names directly to the One who is the Creator of us all. We are saying that we will include them in our most intimate moments with God, interceding with God on their behalf, asking God to be with them, to comfort them and heal them, to remind them they are loved. If we promise something so powerful to someone and then don't follow through, we are devaluing the act itself and not taking seriously the fact that prayer can make a difference.

And it does, doesn't it? If you've ever been on the receiving end of prayers, you know. When I was lying in a hospital bed in 2001 waiting for what would be my MS diagnosis, I knew people were praying for me, and I felt it, I was uplifted. When I knew I was being prayed for, I had this sense of peace and the strength to persevere. I can't explain to you the mechanics of how, but prayer does make a difference.

Maybe that lack of a concrete explanation is what keeps us from following through on our promise. James tells us that "the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well," which could lead us to think that when a person doesn't get better after prayer, either something is wrong with the person doing the praying or God isn't really who James says God is. What if I offer to pray for this person's situation and it doesn't get better? Does that mean God has failed? That my faith isn't strong enough?

That's not what we want when we pray. We want a God who does what we ask, for ourselves and for others. But notice James doesn't say these prayers will cure the sick person.

James says it will make them well, and there are a lot of ways to be made well other than physically. Our faith can be made well, our relationships can be made well, our souls can be made well. The gift of prayer isn't meant to be used to make "or else" demands on God. Instead, it's a way for us to connect with God, to reach out beyond ourselves to lift up someone else. God created us to be in relationship with others, and we live out that calling when we include others in our prayers.

Saying "I'm praying for you" not only invokes the power of prayer, but it also invokes the power of our connection to each other. Think about how you feel when someone tells you they are praying for you. When that happens to me, I feel loved, cared for, remembered. The irony is that I feel that way regardless of whether or not the other person will follow through. I don't know if they will or not. So if we can make someone feel better by offering to pray for them, how much more can we help but actually doing what we have promised?

Our prayer doesn't have to be eloquent. It certainly doesn't have to be long-winded. God's not going to stop you in the middle of it because you used the wrong verb tense. Our prayer for others can be something as simple as saying their name over and over again, saying as we breathe in "I pray for..." and as we breathe out, their name. We don't have to know all the details of their struggle, we don't have to know their whole names, we don't even have to know what we're actually praying for. Paul tells us in Romans that when our prayers are incomplete, the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. The Spirit bridges the gap, filling in the holes and fixing the grammatical errors, but that only works if we make the effort.

This coming week, pay attention to how often you hear, "I'm praying for you" or something like it. Pay attention to how often you say it. And then pause to reflect on the power of what has just been said. Someone has just committed to taking this person's name straight to the ear of God. That's too important of a promise not to honor. People are counting on us to be their advocate, to speak their name in the presence of the Almighty. Don't take that lightly. Don't use this statement as a default response when you don't know what else to say. Say it, and then pray like you mean it. For the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.