

Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People sermon series
The Practice of Prayer - James 5:13-16
Jan. 24, 2021
Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

Today we're continuing our sermon series called "Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People." As we embark on this new year, many of us may be trying to put into place new behaviors that will help us become more fit or better money managers or, dare I say it, more faithful Christians! To accomplish that, we'll commit to more consistency in our worship attendance (even virtually) or more time spent reading scripture or praying. But usually by this time in the year, we've fallen back into old patterns of not doing those things, at least not as often as we feel we should.

Well, I'm here to let you off the hook. We often set our expectations too high and then feel the guilt of not meeting them, which leads us to abandon any efforts to grow closer to God. But the point of any spiritual discipline is not to get better at something. I mean, really, how do you become a better Scripture reader or prayer? The point of a spiritual discipline is to open yourself to what God is saying to you and doing in your life. It's not like crossing a finish line, but opening a window to let the sunlight in.

That's how we can view today's practice, which is prayer. This may seem completely played out to you. We get it, we get it, we need to pray more! Well, maybe, but my goal today is not necessarily to get you to pray more, but to help you understand what you're doing when you pray. If we're going to believe James's words that the prayer of a righteous person (believe it or not, that means you) is powerful and effective, then we should probably be paying more attention to when and how we pray.

Notice how James weaves prayer into the rhythm of everyday life. He says if you are you suffering, you should pray. He says if you are cheerful, you should sing, which is simply prayer set to music. Are you sick? Are you celebrating? Are you angry? Are you just blah? You should pray. Rather than seeing prayer as a lifeline only to be used in emergencies, James says prayer should be a natural part of our everyday life. Henri Nouwen calls prayer "the breath of Christian existence."

And yet, we have trouble committing to such regularity in prayer. Why is that? Maybe it's because we feel we're not good enough at praying. Whenever I'm in a group and we're about to eat, someone will say, "Let's have a blessing" and then all eyes turn to me. Why? Because I'm the professional! As if my prayers somehow have a better chance of making it to God's ears because I wear a robe on Sundays. When most people are asked to offer a prayer, the response I usually hear is something like, "Well, I'm not really good at this kind of thing, but I'll give it a shot." And yet their prayers are beautiful, much better than what I would have said.

Maybe we don't take time to pray because we feel like we don't have the time, because we feel like a truly effective prayer has to have all the right ingredients to work. There was one Jewish prayer which actually began with sixteen different adjectives attached to the name of God. Do you remember how in college you would try to stretch a five-page term paper into a 10-page term paper by using a lot of really, really, really, really big words? Maybe that's what we feel like we have to do in order for our prayer to count.

Maybe, if we want to be really honest, it's because prayer feels like – can I say this? – a waste of time. We have to-do lists and emails to answer, so how can we justify spending precious time in which nothing is accomplished? We are a results-oriented society, and too often

our time spent in prayer yields no tangible benefit. And, really, is anyone really listening? We don't know for sure, do we? Does prayer even work?

I think we sometimes focus too much on the results and not enough on the process and the presence. Our prayer time is not about sitting on God's knee and giving God our spiritual wish list. Prayer is about developing a relationship with God. Phillip Yancey wrote, "Prayer includes moments of ecstasy and dullness, mindless distraction and acute concentration, flashes of joy and bouts of irritation. In other words, it's like all our other relationships." We pray because that's how we build our relationship with God.

But that takes time, doesn't it, just like building any kind of relationship takes time. Prayer is simply a relationship between two people, one of whom happens to be God. And without a flesh-and-blood conversation partner, that relationship can often feel one-sided. A tourist bus visiting Jerusalem makes a stop at the Wailing Wall, one of the world's most famous sites for prayer. One of the tourists sees a devout Jew on his knees in front of the site, rocking back and forth, beating his chest, raising his hands. When he finishes, the tourist asks him, "What were you praying for?" The Jew answers, "I pray for righteousness. I pray for the health of my family. I pray for peace in the world." The tourist asks, "Are these prayers effective?" The Jew responds, "It's like talking to a wall."

Yeah, it is. Sometimes during my prayer time I get a sense of peace, other times I get impatient. Sometimes I get clarity on a decision, and other times I get bored. Sometimes I'm reminded of God's love for me, and other times I wonder if God is even listening. Yancey said, "We wonder when we pray if God is really present. It might be fair for God to ask, when we pray, if WE are really present."

I believe we seriously undersell the magnitude of what can happen when we pray. We are tempted to easily dismiss it as a fruitless exercise or to mentally check out and we forget that when we pray we are doing nothing less than talking directly with the Creator of the universe. Karl Barth wrote, "To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world." 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. So why do we find it so hard to work into the rhythm of our everyday life?

The only way we can become more effective prayers is to pray. We don't have to pray eloquently; we only have to pray faithfully. The quality of prayers cannot be judged by length or vocabulary or rhyme scheme. God is not checking Dictionary.com to make sure you parsed your verbs correctly. Martin Luther said, "The fewer the words, the better the prayer." And author Anne Lamott wrote, "The two best prayers I know are 'help me, help me, help me' and 'thank you, thank you, thank you'."

During the course of our day, we have the opportunity to turn the focus from ourselves and our lives to God, to put God at the center of what we say and do. This can be a simple pause in the midst of the day to give a word of thanks. James says to pray when we're in trouble, when we're happy, when we're sick. It doesn't matter the situation, there's always a reason to pray. To give thanks for making it home safely. To ask God to comfort a loved one who is struggling. To lift up people in other countries. To praise God for our families. Or, simply to say thank you for God's continuing presence.

Therefore, the practice of prayer shouldn't be something you have to add to your already-busy lives. It should be seen as a natural interpretation of what already happens in your life. To practice prayer, you don't necessarily have to stop what you're doing. "Sorry, can I interrupt your story for second? I have to go pray. Be right back!" One of my wise ministry colleagues

told me once, “The conversation is the prayer.” What if, in the course of a conversation, you said a prayer in your head for the person with whom you’re talking? Not a long, eloquent prayer. In fact, it could be just a name. “God, be with this person.”

So, today I want to challenge you to worry less about how much you pray or don’t pray, and then to simply see your life as a prayer, an ongoing conversation with God. Let your conversations be prayers. Let your interactions be prayers. Let your stoplight thoughts and your pleas for peace and your worry about the world be your prayers. Let your petitions and your celebrations and your dreams and your fears be your prayers. You don’t have to get on your knees or start with sixteen adjectives for God. Just pray, “God, it’s me, here’s what’s on my mind.”

If we only focus on the answers to our prayers, we’ll often be disappointed, because while I believe God answers all prayers, sometimes that answer is “no” or, even worse, “not yet.” But no matter what the answer is, we can only develop ears to hear it if we are in regular conversation with God. We practice talking with God so that we can practice listening to God, which is an important part of prayer. If we’re doing all the talking, God can’t get a word in. Practicing prayer is not a monologue; it’s a conversation with God about what we’re doing together.

We pray because we believe in something and Someone greater than this world has to offer. We pray because we actually believe God can do what the Bible says God can do. We pray because it makes a difference. We pray because Jesus prayed, constantly and fervently. We don’t pray in order to master the art of prayer; we pray to acknowledge that we are not on this journey of life alone, that Jesus Christ, who showed us how to pray, now prays for us and with us. And because of that, simple pleas like “help me” and plain words like “thank you” are good enough prayers. Thanks be to God.