

Life is Prayer
September 26, 2021

James 5:13-20 (The Message)

13-15 Are you hurting? Pray. Do you feel great? Sing. Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master. Believing-prayer will heal you, and Jesus will put you on your feet. And if you've sinned, you'll be forgiven—healed inside and out.

16-18 Make this your common practice: Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed. The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with. Elijah, for instance, human just like us, prayed hard that it wouldn't rain, and it didn't—not a drop for three and a half years. Then he prayed that it would rain, and it did. The showers came and everything started growing again.

19-20 My dear friends, if you know people who have wandered off from God's truth, don't write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God.

Once there was a monastery in the woods that had fallen upon hard times. In the past it had been a thriving community that was well known and respected throughout the region, but over the last generation the monks had died one by one and there were no new vocations to replace them. Besides this, the monks did not seem to be as friendly to each other. Something just wasn't right. The Father Abbot was quite concerned about the future of his monastery, now consisting of himself and three brothers and, thus, he sought counsel from the local rabbi who was known to be a great sage. The abbot went to the rabbi and asked him if he had any advice on what to do to save his monastery. The rabbi felt at a loss and said that he, too, worried about his own congregation; people were too busy and simply were not coming to the synagogue any longer. The two commiserated together and read the Torah. As the abbot was getting ready to return home the rabbi looked at him and said, "One in your home is the Messiah." The abbot walked home puzzled as to what the rabbi's words meant.

When he arrived at the monastery the monks asked the abbot what he had learned. He responded that the rabbi had given him no concrete advice, but he had said in cryptic language, "One in your home is the Messiah." Over the next days and weeks, the monks pondered what this might mean. Was it possible that one of them was the Messiah? If that was the case, then most certainly it was Father Abbot. He had been the leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, it might be Brother Thomas, for he is a holy man and full of light. Certainly, it could not be Brother Eldred. He is old, crotchety, and often mean-spirited, but he always seems to be right, no matter what the situation or question. The rabbi could not have meant Brother Phillip. He is very passive — a real nobody, but one must admit that he is always there when someone needs assistance.

As they continued to contemplate this question, the old monks began to treat each other with great respect, on the off chance that the one with whom they were dealing really was the Messiah. They again began to live the gospel message. The monastery was a much more prayerful place once again.

Because the monastery was in a beautiful portion of the forest it was common during the spring, summer, and fall months for families to come and have picnics on the grounds. During this period people who came seemed to sense the new spirit of respect and love that was present at the monastery. The people returned often and one day a young man came to the Father Abbot and asked if he could join the community. Soon others inquired and joined and, thus, after several years the vibrant community at the monastery was again restored because the wisdom of the rabbi had transformed hearts. The monks had once again started to live their lives according to the Golden Rule.

The monks in the monastery “relearned” / were reminded of the need to treat their brothers with respect, kindness and compassion. They were converted to an understanding that prayer must be a way of life. Prayer is vocal, but it must also be action. It must be the way we live our daily lives. Saint James, as he concludes his epistle, a letter based on action, that is being doers of the word, makes this point abundantly clear.

Prayer, one's daily communication with God, is a staple of all organized religion and a central tenet to the Judeo-Christian tradition of which we are all members. In the Hebrew Scriptures there are numerous examples of various kinds of prayer that are used to invoke God to act. In Numbers 21:7 the Israelites ask Moses to save them, "Pray to the Lord to take the serpents from us." More positively, Ezra calls the Hebrews to "pray for the life of the king and his children" (Ezra 6:10). Jeremiah wrote to the Jews in exile telling them, "Pray to the Lord on its [the city of Babylon's] behalf" (Jeremiah 29:7). King Zedekiah asked Jeremiah, "Please pray for us to the Lord our God" (Jeremiah 29:7). The book of Psalms is filled with prayers of praise to God. The psalmist writes, "You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him" (Psalm 22:23). Psalm 148, familiar to many, begins: "Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him all his host! Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the Lord."

The New Testament is equally filled with references to the importance of prayer. It is clear that Jesus was a man of great prayer; it was the center of his life. Many times, Jesus went off by himself to an isolated spot to pray to God,¹ sometimes spending the whole evening in prayer. Jesus encouraged his friends to pray. He took Peter, James, and John up on a mountain to pray and there he was transfigured before them². After the Last Supper, Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, and he told these same three apostles to pray as well³. When Jesus' hour had come, he prayed for those who would be left behind; he never forgot his friends⁴.

Besides being a man of prayer, Jesus also instructed his followers on how to pray. He taught his disciples that prayer was a private matter; it was not to be used to make others think you are important. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others ... Whenever you

¹ Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46; Luke 6:12

² Luke 9:28-36

³ Mark 14:32-42

⁴ John 17:1-26

pray, go to your room and shut the door and pray to God in secret."⁵ Jesus then went on to tell his friends the multiplication of words was not important, rather a more simple approach is best. Then he taught them the Lord's Prayer, which for many, if not all of us, was the first prayer we ever learned.

Jesus' disciples took his instructions on prayer and through their evangelistic zeal spread the practice to all lands and people. While it was clear from Jesus' practice, Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, made explicit a fundamental tenet of prayer: "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints."⁶ In his Letter to the Colossians he put it this way, "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving."⁷ Paul in essence was telling his fledgling Christian communities that they must make prayer a way of life. In today's scripture reading, James makes this same important point.

Since James' message in his epistle has been centered about action, it is totally appropriate that he closes his letter with an exhortation to make prayer, in word and action, a way of life. James begins by speaking of the more traditional forms of vocal and mental prayer. He asks those who suffer and those who exult to pray. One must pray in petition to God and, as James says, such prayer will save the sick person. Next, he says that the cheerful should give praise and thanksgiving to God. We should never forget the source of our sustenance. James then moves to a more active understanding of prayer. He first says that we should pray for one another. We can verbalize and more mentally pray for our family and friends, but we can also act on their behalf. If prayer is communicating with God, there can be no better way than to demonstrate by action what one wishes or hopes for another. James uses the example of Elijah to demonstrate the power and effectiveness of prayer, in word and action. Clearly, James wants his readers to know and practice the idea that prayer is essential; it must become an integral part of our everyday lives. We must broaden our often-narrow understanding of prayer to include an active response.

When people think of prayer, generally, as we have said, they are referring to verbal or mental communication with God. Certainly, this is the most common idea. We converse with God in five general ways: petition, intercession, praise, thanksgiving, and confession. Christians call upon God in prayers of petition and intercession when they need something. We may pray for something in our personal lives, the life of a family member or friend, or more broadly for a group of people, a nation, or even the world. We call upon God to intercede; we say with the psalmist: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."⁸ People must praise God daily. We should wish to praise the one who has provided everything, who is the source of the goodness and peace we seek and generally enjoy, and the one who challenges us to move forward and continue walking the Christian road toward holiness. When we gather in our churches on Sunday morning we pray in praise as a community. Many Christians find great fellowship through charismatic prayer of praise in the Spirit.

We must pray to God in thanksgiving. As a nation, we annually set aside the last Thursday in November to give thanks for the many blessings we share. However, our daily prayer must be one of thanksgiving. We

⁵ Matthew 6:5-6

⁶ Ephesians 6:18

⁷ Colossians 4:3

⁸ Psalm 46:1

seldom think to thank God for our lives, the beauty of the day and creation, and even the challenges that come our way.

Lastly, we must also pray for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus specifically calls for this in the Lord's Prayer and so does James today. We are all sinners and thus in need of God's healing touch. We should never be too proud to admit that we are wrong and have failed.

While we generally think of prayer as a mental or verbal exercise, such a view is far too narrow. We must see our lives as a prayer. If prayer is communication with God, all that we do and say, even think, is a prayer. Thus, our lives of action must echo the fivefold process of mental and verbal prayer. If we petition God to act, for ourselves or others, are we willing to act as well? We cannot passively stand still as the world races by. That is precisely the problem that was at the monastery; no one was willing to take responsibility; nobody acted. If we want God to act for us, we must be willing to act, to do our share, to lift our portion of the load. Our church and our community reflect our words and actions. God will always do God's part, but too often we expect God to do it alone. The Lord has given each one of us many talents and opportunities to act. We should not disappoint God.

Sometimes we call upon God to intercede, to act for justice and righteousness for others. We pray for God to intercede, but what are we willing to do; what intercession can we make? Can we march for justice and human rights? Can we stand in solidarity with the poor and marginalized peoples in our world? Can we lobby our elected officials to act for others? Can we work to change things and make our world a better place? We might not be able to effect systemic change, but a powerful call to action challenges us, "Think globally, but act locally."

If we truly wish to praise God, how do we show it; how is it manifest? If we wish to praise God, should we not be more actively involved in our church, the community that binds us together as a family, namely the people of God? Are we willing to challenge others in their duty to praise God? Do we praise God by standing up for what we know is right, that is what God says and not the world?

We must thank God with actions as well. It is very easy to say, "Thank you," but much harder to go out of our way in some gesture of thanksgiving. When God acts as we hope, we often give thanks and praise in return. But does our thanksgiving end with a word and a nod of the head? What can we actively do to demonstrate our thanks? Writing a thank-you note to God is a start, but we can do better. We must actively work on God's behalf in our world. Do we consider giving thanks to God when the response we receive from our prayer of petition or intercession is not what we expect or does not come in the timely manner we want or even demand? Do we only give thanks for "positive" results? Is it possible to give thanks to God under these unexpected circumstances, confident that God's answer may be the proper one after all?

The ease of saying, "Thank you," is also found in the curt expression, "I am sorry." Although it may take some courage to express sorrow and admit guilt, can't we do more? What can we do to demonstrate contrition to others for the ways we have hurt them? If we have wronged another, can we make amends? If we have failed someone by omission, can we work harder to assist their needs in the future? Can we show God that we have turned over a new leaf, a new chapter in our lives? Realizing that we have done wrong, can we demonstrate clearly and forcefully a better way to live?

The monks in the monastery learned through the wisdom of the rabbi that their lives needed to mirror the one whom they worshiped; they had to become like the Messiah. Jesus' whole life, every word and action, was a prayer. James today presents us with the message to make our lives a prayer. The apostle's missive is consistent with the whole of his letter, the need to be doers of the word and not simply listen. We are challenged to transform every action of our lives into a prayer, communicating to God our desire to be his disciples. Let us, therefore, resolve today to be doers, active participants in God's life. The game of life is not won by sitting on the sidelines; we must actively participate. Let us do so by living our lives as a prayer that will help build the kingdom of God today and each day of our lives.

AMEN