

SERMON: Sept 30, 2018 We Send Our Prayers...
TEXT: James 5:13-20
SUBJECT: The power of prayer
THEME: Prayer is always to be coupled with action
PURPOSE: To encourage involvement with where God is working today.

“Our thoughts and prayers are with you...”

Every few months, it seems that we hear this. After the latest shooting, after the latest hurricane, after any tragic event, we keep hearing this refrain –

“Our thoughts and prayers are with you.”

This is not a bad sentiment, because we want it to mean, “We care about you and what happens to you.” Often we say it when we don’t know what else to do.

But is it enough? Does just stopping to have a moment of silent meditation change anything?

This is what we are looking at in our scripture today. We know from the fact that this passage comes from the book of James that this is not going to be an easy subject! I get the feeling that if James was given a choice between a nice way to say something and a harsh way to say it, he would go with the harsh!

James doesn’t back down from controversy, and lays things out there pretty straight, even when it makes us uncomfortable. So what would James say about “our thoughts and prayers are with you”?

I have many friends that I communicate with on Facebook and throughout the internet, and we don’t always agree on everything. I like it that way. I don’t believe it’s healthy to surround myself with only the people that already agree with what I already believe. If I’m doing that, then I’m not going out into the world to make a difference. I’m just setting myself up to stagnate.

Some of my friends have challenged this phrase of “our thoughts and prayers are with you.” They say, “We don’t need more thoughts and prayers; we need something to change!”

I think of one of my favorite Charlie Brown cartoons –



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What just happened there?

(TAKE ANSWERS)

Did anything change about Snoopy's situation?

What else, other than offering warm wishes, could they have done?

This is where we are with our scripture today. I want for us to read this with James' point of view that ***prayer without action is pointless, dangerous, and hypocritical.***

So let's dig in –

There are four persons named “James” that we find in the New Testament, and we aren't exactly sure who this one was. It is unlikely that this is the same James who was one of Jesus' disciples; it is more likely that this was actually the younger brother of Jesus, who may have even been the one who rebuked Him when His brothers came out to see Him in Mark chapter 3.

But after Jesus' death and resurrection, James became a believer and was a leader in the Church. And what we find in the book of James is a strong Jewish understanding of faith and an uncompromising insistence that faith and action must always go together.

Let's look at what James is saying – we pick this up in chapter 5, where James is talking about dealing with day-to-day problems:

5:13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.

5:14 Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

5:15 The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

Now, at first that sounds like a spiritual response to a physical question – “Are you sick? Then start praying”.

But when we look at it closer, we can see that James was actually talking about something else!

What is this?



https://cdn.pixabay.com/photo/2017/08/10/14/40/aloe-vera-2623317_960_720.jpg

What do you use it for?

Treating sunburn! (or other kinds of burns or irritations!)

The juice inside is very soothing for minor burns and things like that. (Just cut off the spines first!) But it is spread on the burn to aid in healing.

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Oils like this from plants were commonly used as medicines to help with the healing process. Either put directly on the skin or layered with bandages, the oil helped to seal the wound against infection and to keep it from drying out.

So “anointing someone with oil” wasn’t just a mystical spell that religious people would do that would magically cause healing; it was medicine itself! Its was about actually doing something for the person, not just praying over them and expecting God to miraculously make something happen!

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I’m not discounting miracles here, because I know they do happen, but James wasn’t talking about that! When he said to gather the elders and have them pray over the person and anoint them with oil, he meant to surround them with emotional AND physical support! Give them medicine!

God has given us brains, and He has given us many plants and animals that have healing properties. (Ever hear of chicken soup?)

There are plants that we are finding in the Amazon that have healing properties that are just astounding – but at the same time, we are in danger of losing them forever because of deforestation and strip mining. It could be that God has given us a cure for cancer in a plant somewhere down in Venezuela that we might lose because we didn’t take care of the earth like He told us to back in Genesis!

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So James was not just telling us to pray over people, but to offer them real help, too. It's the combination of both – the emotional and the physical – that James says is effective.

Let's put it like this – when people come by the church here needing help, we want to help them. Let's say that someone comes in and has a late utilities payment. Their water is about to be cut off.

We can just pay the bill for them, but if we don't address what got them there in the first place, what's going to happen next month?

They will most likely be back again, asking for help again.

So just paying off the bill for them each month isn't really helping the situation. If we truly love them, we will want to start working with them to educate them on how they can start making the right choices to become self-sufficient.

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What about the other side? What if we just say, "Oh, that's terrible; we'll pray for you," but don't pay the bill?

They will most likely have their water cut off!

So it's the combination of that spiritual/emotional support AND the physical/earthly help that is needed!

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James says here that we don't just have physical problems, they have a spiritual dimension. And we don't just have spiritual problems; they come out in physical ways.

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5:14 Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

5:15 The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

Notice that he doesn't necessarily say that they will live, but that they will be saved! The Lord will raise them up, and sins will be forgiven!

Whenever I'm in a situation where someone wants me to pray for healing, I want to make sure that we pray for what is really best. I was talking with someone just recently who had lost a dear family member, and they were saying that at the end they were not praying for her healing, but for her peace and a safe passage.

It is not God's will that I live here on this earth for the next 150 years! This earth is nice, but it's not heaven! So many times when we are praying for somebody's healing, we really aren't praying for them, but for ourselves!

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I know that sounds harsh, but blame James today, because he started it! I know that I am just as likely to pray selfish prayers as everybody else, because I don't want to lose my parents, or my wife, or my children, or anyone close to me! When they are in pain and struggle, I want for God to make it stop!

But it is not God's will that we stay on this earth forever. We are here for a time, to love and hurt, to laugh and to cry, to feel pain and to find joy. We are here to discover that God loves us, and that He has a path for us to follow to find hope that goes beyond this earth. That hope is Jesus Christ.

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James is pretty harsh with prayer. He says to do it, but never to do it just by itself. Prayer is powerful, and there are some things that it seems that we can do nothing about.

But even in those situations, pray and ask God to make you aware of what you can do, and when.

James goes on to say,

5:16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

Why is confession so important? Do the things that happen to us internally have any effect on what is happening to us externally?

Where do heart attacks, sleeplessness, and ulcers come from?

They come from worry! Okay, they can come from other places, too – but we have to admit that our emotional state has a great deal of influence over our physical health!

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Years ago I read an article from the chief of surgery at a major hospital who said, "Half of my patients could go home tomorrow if they understood forgiveness."

That is a pretty bold statement for a scientific doctor to make! But he understood that what goes on inside of us affects the outside of us. Much of our own healing has to do directly with how willing we are to forgive others.

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Let me shift gears just a little bit here and talk about our community. At our Wednesday afternoon Bible study we got to talking about the attitude and mentality of Marco Island, and one of the things that one of the group said was,

"We have many people here who have succeeded in life, and are now enjoying their 'whatevers', and yet they still have problems. And they need to realize that the result of prayer and doing things for others and for themselves is the best medicine."

What do you think about that? We're supposed to be the glorious playground of retirement, where you can finally sit back and enjoy everything that life has to offer –

-but do you find that everyone who retires here is happy? If they have everything that the world has to offer – money, sun, a nice home, golf, fishing – why are so many people still so unhappy?

They try to mask it with parties and drinking and busy-ness and buying new cars, but I completely believe that ***a life lived without God is not worth living!***

We can have everything that the world has to offer, and still feel empty. That's because God created an emptiness inside of us that can only be filled with Him! It's a "God-shaped hole" that only God fits in, and nothing else will ever satisfy.

As we leave church today, I want for you to consider something: maybe this sermon was for you. Maybe there was something you needed to hear about healing that God gave just for you today.

But I also want for you to consider that maybe something you heard or felt here today was meant for somebody else. There will be somebody that you meet later this week who desperately needed to hear something from the message here this morning, but they weren't here to hear it.

That's where you come in. The Gospel always comes to us on the way to someone else. You were here to catch the Spirit here this morning, but now God is telling you to take it out to someone else who was not present.

To make it easier on you, my wife Kim has started making a one-page discussion sheet of the sermons so that you can take one with you when you leave, so that you can have an opportunity to share it with whomever God puts in your path.

At our previous churches we have had small groups use these, Sunday school classes, sometimes just one or two people meeting together at the coffee shop and going over it together later in the week. We've talked about going out into the community instead of waiting for them to come to us; maybe this is the way that God is going to use to start letting the people around us know that He loves them.

Feel free to take one with you today, and see what use God has for it and for you. You might want to get together with a neighbor in your kitchen and say, "Our pastor was saying some crazy stuff this past Sunday, would you mind looking at this with me and helping me to make some sense of it?"

What kind of difference can we make in this world? Yes, we need to pray, but prayer always needs to be backed with some kind of action. I'm interested to hear how God will be pushing you and nudging you to put feet to your prayers this coming week!