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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## The 'Science' of Prayer

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SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ MAY 8, 2022

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Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. <sup>14</sup>Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup>Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.

<sup>16</sup>Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.

James 5:13-16 (NLT)

### A Quest for Knowledge

We're going to talk this morning about what I have entitled "**The 'Science' of Prayer.**" "Science" comes from the ancient term for "knowing," and we will be using it in the true and original meaning of the word. I will define science as "the human quest for knowledge."

In our own time we have been blessed beyond measure by the results of centuries of people exploring and seeking to understand the mysteries of the universe, the natural world around us, and the human body. Without doubt science has brought us blessings. Many of us are alive today, or are enjoying a far better quality of life, because

of what scientists have learned and developed. Modern life affords us so many tools and comforts that would not exist without our relentless searching for knowledge.

But, unfortunately, the truths we have uncovered can inadvertently become god-like and absolute to us. People tiptoe very close today towards making an idol of science, the thing that we worship. This is a mistake, a heresy. The actual reality is that human beings **do not** know everything and **cannot** know everything. Our knowledge, because of our limits, is always going to be partial. The professional scientists with the greatest integrity and humility openly admit that just as there are things we know and are confident about, so there are also many things we don't know. Whenever a person claims that they have something all figured out, or have everything under control, we are rightly suspicious. Whenever someone claims that "the Science is settled," they are not speaking as a true scientist but as a salesman trying to promote something (or else they are a politician, which is basically the same thing as a salesman). True science is never meant to be "settled" in any final sense, because there are always things we can never know, and things we don't yet know but need to be open to discovering. Our conclusions must always be tentative and open to more data and more learning.

### **The Human Experience of Prayer**

In the dimension of the spirit (that invisible but very real component of life which the so-called "natural sciences" are most unable to measure and understand), we encounter a universal human experience called prayer. People for thousands of years have practiced it in various forms. It is foundational to the Bible, indisputably a key component of the life of the Greatest Man who ever lived (who openly stated that it was essential to His success), and commended repeatedly to every Christian. But what can we know about prayer? And what can we **not** know about it? What are its persistent mysteries? And what tentative hypotheses—like those formed by every biochemist who begins experimenting with a new drug—can we form as we do our personal experiments and trials?

Prayer is the mental (and at times verbal) activity of human beings seeking to communicate with an invisible, super-human spiritual being or force. Christian prayer is consciously and intentionally addressed to the God revealed on every page of the Bible, who is in three dimensions or “persons” but a single unity. The Christian God knows everything, is everywhere equally, is not bound by time or space, and can understand people no matter what language they speak or think. The Bible is insistent that this God’s intentions towards mankind are compassionate, not hostile. It also insists that God desires and intends for us to direct prayers to Him, and that His purpose is to have a personal relationship with us. The pages of Scripture are littered with prayers people have prayed as examples to us, along with many clear and direct teachings and exhortations for each of us to learn to pray by doing it.

### **Dimensions of Christian Prayer**

There are a number of different forms of Christian prayer. We find many eloquent examples in the Book of Psalms that focus on **praise** to God for who He is and all His amazing, admirable and incomprehensible qualities. (Those prayers were often accompanied by music to form beautiful hymns.) Closely related to prayers of praise are prayers of **thanksgiving**, specifically acknowledging God as the source of our blessings and expressing our gratitude to Him. There are heart-tugging prayers of **confession**, as people who realize they have disobeyed God’s righteous and correct commandments “come clean” about what they’ve done and ask His forgiveness. There are personal prayers of **surrender**, consciously yielding our will to God’s will and His priorities for us. And probably the most common form of prayer is what I will call **petition**, which is asking God for help in our own personal needs and situations.

The prayer that many of us have memorized, and that we say together almost every time we meet, is called “The Lord’s Prayer.” It is the template Jesus gave His disciples in response to their request, “Lord, teach us how to pray.” The words provide a basic outline or framework of the different types of prayer, and they are meant to be

added to and personalized. Notice what we prayed when we addressed these words to God a few minutes ago:

- 1) We **praised** Him, beginning with the opening address, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed (or holy and honorable) is your name.” Then we returned to praise at the end, the closing: “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.”
- 2) We prayed our personal **surrender** to God when we said, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” (By clear implication, when I say that and mean it, I am choosing to follow God’s will rather than my own.)
- 3) We **confessed** and asked His forgiveness (“forgive us our debts—or trespasses or sins—as we forgive our debtors”).
- 4) And we offered prayers of **petition** for our personal needs in the present (“give us this day our daily bread”) and the future (“lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil”).

There is one other type of prayer, the one I will concentrate on for our final moments together. It is called **Intercessory Prayer** (or Intercession). It means praying on behalf of other people and their needs. To intercede means to step into a gap to represent one person to another. A defense attorney intercedes for their client, pleading their case in court. Interceding in prayer for someone we love is a natural and even spontaneous impulse. It is a privilege to do so. It is even urged upon us in the passage we read from the book of James a few minutes ago: “Pray for each other,” we are told.

### **What Happens in Intercessory Prayer?**

As we take on the task of seeking to be amateur “scientists” of prayer, searching for knowledge about it, we should at the outset lay on the table our questions and the things that puzzle us. Here is what we wonder: What happens when we pray for another person? Do we in some way persuade or bribe or manipulate God into doing something He would not otherwise do? Does He not already know every-

thing about the situation or person before we tell Him? What is the point of intercessory prayer?

Let me identify (1) what I **know** without a doubt, (2) what I **think** is true (based on my own experiences) but admit I don't know completely, and (3) what I **don't know** (and will still struggle with). Then I'll attempt some final conclusions.

Here's what I am **confident** to say about intercessory prayer. I know that my Lord wants me to pray for you and the other people in my life. He has told me that is His desire for me. It is a natural expression of my faith. To the extent that I have been molded into a follower of Jesus, I will follow His direction and His example in being a person of prayer. I also know that when I pray for others it has a positive impact on me. I grow closer to God, and I sense a closer connection with those for whom I am praying. I also know that this lifetime is short, and eternity is very long, and so the things of the spirit and the things of eternity are far more important than the temporal and passing events and problems of this world. So, when I pray for you, I know that what matters most is not your health, your wealth, your challenges and problems, or even your life, but your eternal life.

Here is what I **believe to be true**, with reasons for believing but without 100% knowledge. I know of many people who have had dramatic, seemingly-unexplainable things happen to them that seem to be direct answers to prayers. I have read of studies and experiments that seem to point to prayer making a profound difference. In one case a hospital in the San Francisco area took a control group of cardiac patients, assigned half of them to some prayer groups in local churches who were committed to praying by name and consistently for those patients, while the other half of patients were not explicitly prayed for. The statistical difference was surprising: the prayed-for patients did substantially better over the course of a year. I can't perfectly explain it, but I'm not surprised by it. I also believe (and have been told repeatedly) that people who are prayed for can feel or sense the love and support of others and the presence of God.

I also have come to believe that those authors and preachers who try to peddle what I'll call a "vending machine" approach to prayer are misleading people. Intercessory prayers are not granted or denied according to anything we've done. We don't deposit our prayers and make our selection. God is God and we can't control Him. But perhaps He puts it in my heart and yours to pray for someone precisely because He has decided to answer those prayers (for healing, deliverance, or whatever).

And here is what I **don't know**. I can't now explain, and probably never will be able to as long as I'm on this earth with my limited perspective, why God chooses to answer some prayers the way I hope and desire but not others. Why isn't everyone healed? I guess if everyone could always be healed every single time, none of us would ever die—and therefore we would never experience eternal life. But clearly, even if a person is healed 10 or 50 times during their earthly days by God's grace and intervention, eventually a prayer for healing will not be answered. Yet until I can see all of that person's life, and all the rest of the complex drama of earth from God's perspective, I will remain puzzled.

### **Living as People of Prayer**

Let's consider how to live as people of prayer. Although I don't know for certain what God will choose to do in any given situation, I have opted to try to live a disciplined prayer life out of love and obedience to my Savior Jesus. And part of that discipline of prayer is that I will intercede for other people. There are some people who are such an intimate part of my life that I pray for them all the time. There are others I put temporarily on my prayer list because I know they are going through a particular problem or need. And then there are those I hear about but in the course of routine life I forget, because my memory is not that good. So, I have tried to learn the discipline of spontaneous or impromptu prayers: When I think of a person or hear of a need, I mentally pause and say to God: "Lord, be with that person; touch them; bless them in some way; I put them in Your loving hands."

We've talked about the "science" of prayer. We humbly admit that none of us are experts. None of us have it all figured out. But prayer is a part of life, an essential part of walking by faith. We are blessed to have among us some people who have developed a deep heart for that specialized form of prayer called intercession. Yet it is something in which we can **all** do our part.

Occasionally an artist grasps a portion of spiritual truth and is enabled to express it effectively—albeit always imperfectly. Some might say that Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" came very close to capturing the heavenly worship of God performed by angels around his throne. Some might say that Rembrandt's painting of the "Return of the Prodigal Son" came very close to capturing the essence of the love of God for sinners like us.

And I will say that in the unique American art form of film, there is a movie that—while not perfect—comes close to capturing the essence of the spirit of intercessory prayer.

I speak of none other than Frank Capra's 1946 classic "It's a Wonderful Life." The film's true theme is the power of prayer. Do you recall how it begins? It begins with prayers by the hundreds being lifted up to God on behalf of George Bailey. It ends with God answering those prayers: intervening in George's life (by means of Clarence, the angel who hasn't earned his wings) to convince him to not commit suicide, and at the same time intervening in the entire town of Bedford Falls to prompt them to give generously to financially rescue him. I don't care if some sophisticated critics have labeled it "corny" or "trite" or "schmaltzy." That film may have captured truth about the unseen eternal world that none of the modern Hollywood films with their violence, sex, political correctness, and meaninglessness could ever approach.

The Apostle James said it best: "The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results." Therefore, "pray for each other." ■

