

THE ESSENCE AND TRUE PURPOSE OF PRAYER

God forgive us when we denigrate the act of prayer.

Lord have mercy on us when we misrepresent prayer and turn it into something it was never intended to be.

It's one of the reasons why I don't like to watch certain televangelists. You know what I'm talking about, right? A prayer line number flashes on the bottom of the TV screen with the subtext, "Operators are standing by!" Then you see a close-up of a preacher/healer who has an intense, strained look on his or her face that in any other context would cause you to think he or she was constipated; but in this case it's supposed to demonstrate sincerity and inspiration.

And then this person says something like, "God has told me there's someone watching who is having financial trouble. A man was in a serious car accident and has terrible back pain. A woman is suffering from cancer." And as the televangelist raises the stakes of the severity of need, you know what's coming. "Call our operators now and I will pray for you personally. And if you send in a contribution of \$1,000, I'll send you a prayer cloth that I laid my hands on and will bring you relief from financial worries and heal all your illnesses."

Forgive us, dear God, for those times when we have denigrated prayer.

A blind man was once interviewed on Public Radio. He talked about his experiences and challenges as a child who had been born without sight. His grandmother took him to many revival meetings, where preachers claimed they had God's healing power at their fingertips. Every time a new faith healer laid hands on him and they prayed together for his sight, he hoped that this time God would listen.

But God never took away his blindness, and every time the healing session failed he blamed himself. "If I had just had enough faith, God would have healed me. If I were less of a sinner, God would have listened to my prayer. If I had just prayed correctly, God would have given me sight. If I'd had more people praying for me, or if I had prayed longer and harder, God would have performed a miracle on my behalf."

Lord have mercy on us when we misrepresent prayer and make it into a spectacle, or into a test of faith that we're more than likely going to lose. Forgive us, God, for transforming the act of prayer into yet one more reason to

flagellate ourselves and blame ourselves and drive us to doubt that we're worthy of God's love.

How many times have we turned the act of prayer, offered up to the God of glory and mystery, into something like addressing Santa Claus, M.D., the heavenly specialist in all human need and disease. But it doesn't take many visits to the hospital, or to the funeral home—and usually it takes just a single visit to a nursing home or a children's intensive care unit—to learn that prayer isn't a cure-all for what ails us. Prayer isn't a magical, mystical remedy for sickness, suffering and death. If that was what prayer is all about, the Israelites would never have been enslaved in Egypt; the Jerusalem Temple would never have been destroyed; Jesus wouldn't have been crucified; the Holocaust wouldn't have occurred; and the two towers of the World Trade Center would still be standing and the almost three thousand people who died in that terrorist attack would still be alive.

If prayer was the key to being cured, no one would ever be confined to a wheelchair. No one would ever die from a heart attack or a massive stroke. Our loved ones who passed away might still be alive. And no infant would ever be stillborn. There would be no Alzheimer's Disease, leukemia, arthritis, AIDs, drug addiction and drug overdoses, or school shootings. Heck there wouldn't even be allergies or the common cold!

But, of course, those things do exist in our world. They're all too real. We wish they weren't, but they are. Faithful people throughout the history of the world, and throughout the history of Christianity and the church, have prayed for the sick and the suffering. We do that right here in this church every Sunday morning. But many of those people we pray for, who are good and worthy human beings, still have to live with their illness and the pain it brings them and their families. And some of those people die from their illnesses. So I think it's best if we simply face the truth head on and acknowledge that praying for the sick and the suffering doesn't have as much to do with physically curing them as we'd like to think.

If prayer isn't primarily about physical healing and curing illnesses, what is it about? The author of the letter of James wrote, "Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. . . . Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up."

That certainly sounds like prayer is about curing physical sickness, doesn't it? But notice what comes next. "If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you

may be healed.” When James wrote about praying for the sick, he was referring to spiritual sickness. When he wrote about confessing sins and praying for healing for one another, he proclaimed that those who sinned will be healed.

Now, some of us might think that James got it wrong. Isn't it supposed to be that we're saved from sin? Maybe James was just sloppy and simply chose the wrong words. But then again, maybe James was intentionally choosing those words to make a point. His point being, praying for our physical needs and our spiritual needs both seek the very same goal: healing. The thing is, we tend to focus on the healing of our bodies, while James is focusing on the healing of our souls.

Prayer isn't just about being fixed physically; rather, it's about making us whole, physically, emotionally and spiritually. To pray is to take anything and everything that's broken and concerns us in all areas of our lives, and bring them before the One who cares for us in all ways: physically, emotionally and spiritually. Prayer offers us wholeness by putting everything in its proper perspective—that is, it places everything in relation to God.

Using prayer only as an attempt to receive physical cures, which is very common, can become an attempt to manipulate God into doing our will. But to put our illness, our suffering, our needs, our desires, our concerns and even our joys in the hands of God and give them over to God's will and God's purposes helps us realize that all those things are under the control of our Creator, the One we know as, and whom we call, Almighty, All-Knowing, All-loving, Ever-present and Eternal.

In the midst of our pain, disease, strife and despair, we can experience peace and healing knowing that God is in charge of our troubles and pain; and we can be comforted by understanding that nothing we face, nothing we experience, nothing we fear, wrestle with and are burdened by, not even death, is larger or more powerful than God.

O. Wesley Allen, Jr. an assistant professor at the Lexington Theological Seminary, wrote of an experience he'd had when he was studying for the ministry.

“When I was nineteen years old, I became a student pastor of a tiny church in Alabama that had been without a pastor for a couple of months. I, of course, knew very little about ministry or theology at age nineteen. I had moved into the parsonage on Saturday, and preached my first sermon as the church's part-time pastor on Sunday. And when I went into my office after class on Monday, there was a note taped to the back door of the parsonage from the Baptist pastor down the road, whom I hadn't yet met. He wrote that he had been visiting a member of my congregation while there was no pastor, but now

that I had arrived he would step aside. So on Tuesday after class, I went to the hospital to visit that parishioner, a man named Ollie.

“When I got to the hospital I found out that Ollie was having open-heart surgery . . . at that very moment. A receptionist pointed out the family to me. I went over, introduced myself to his wife and daughter, and we began to talk about Ollie and his ongoing heart problems. We hadn’t been talking very long when the surgeon called the family into a private conference room. I started to excuse myself so they could have some privacy, but they wanted their pastor with them. I had only been their pastor for twenty minutes.

“The surgeon explained that the procedure went well and Ollie was doing fine, but because of the extent of heart damage, he wasn’t sure about his long-term prognosis. After the family asked some questions, Ollie’s daughter asked if they could see him. The surgeon said that they would have to wait until he was out of recovery. But then, before I could blink, he added that the minister could go into the recovery room to pray over him. The family asked if I would, and I did.

“I walked into the recovery room and found an old, withered man with an iodine-stained torso, multiple tubes running from each arm, and a rough, wheezing sound coming from the tube in his throat. I took his hand and prayed. I prayed with all my heart that God might make Ollie better. I visited Ollie in the Intensive Care Unit several times a week for the next six weeks. He could never speak to me because of that tube in his throat. The family always told me they thought he was getting better, but the nurses always said there had been no significant change. I always ended each visit by praying that God would make Ollie better.

“One day I arrived at the ICU and none of the family was in the waiting room and there was no nurse at the desk. It had been a long day at school and I was ready to get home. So instead of waiting for a nurse to give me the okay to go into the cubical, I decided to just go on over. I entered the cubical and I was surprised to find him sitting up on the opposite side of the bed. I had never seen Ollie out of bed, so this seemed to me a great sign of improvement.

“My cheerleader pastor’s voice kicked in as I headed around the bed to greet him. I told him how good he looked. But when I came closer I realized he was sitting on one of those portable toilets. I was extremely embarrassed, for both him and me. “I started to back out and opened my mouth to apologize and say that I would step out into the waiting room and give him some privacy; but he reached out and grabbed my hand before I could get the words out.

“I think Ollie was afraid I was leaving and wasn’t coming back, and he

wasn't going to have that. He looked into my eyes, and in a moment of silent, piercing honesty the man let me know that he was going to die soon. And then he did something I'll never forget. Sitting on a portable toilet, naked from his waist down, he clung to my hand as tightly as a man who had been in ICU for six weeks could, and he bowed his head.

"I gently squeezed his hand back, and I bowed my head, and I prayed. I prayed with all my heart. But this time I didn't pray that God might make Ollie better. I prayed that God might bless him and make him whole."

And that is the essence and purpose of a prayer that's offered in faith. Not so much to ask God to cure us when we're broken by sickness, but to ask God to heal us and make us whole in our physical, emotional and spiritual brokenness, and to give us enough strength and courage to be able to walk through whatever shadowy, threatening valley we're traveling through, with God close by our side.

The Lord will hear such a prayer and respond to it, my friends. Because, as the letter of James declares, ". . . the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other" Not so much that we might be physically cured, but so that we may be healed and made whole in body, mind and spirit."

Thanks be to God. Amen.