

Pray for One Another

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Sermon Series: One Anothering

James 5:13-16

Prayer puts us in the place of greatest spiritual potential.

I used to frequent Camden Yards to watch major league baseball. One evening, my son, Andrew, and I went to see the Baltimore Orioles play the Cleveland Indians. Traffic was significantly lighter than usual, so we arrived at the ballpark early. It was well before game time, so Andrew suggested we try our hand at getting a few autographs. There were hoards of people near the Orioles' dugout, so we camped out by the Indians' dugout. Andrew, who was a high school freshman at the time, situated himself next to the field where the opposing team emerged from the dugout to stretch and play catch.

Kenny Lofton, the Indians' center fielder, finished his warm-ups and sauntered over to the stands to sign a few autographs. He scribbled his name on a few and began to walk away. Andrew was next in line for an autograph when Kenny broke it off. Andrew couldn't let the moment go by. He reached into his pocket, whipped out a piece of paper and shouted, "Kenny, would you sign my Algebra quiz?" Kenny stopped dead in his tracks, wheeled around and smiled broadly: "Sure kid, I'll sign your Algebra quiz!" Not only did Andrew get Kenny's autograph, but I was able to see his Algebra quiz, which was another topic of conversation that evening!

When it comes to getting autographs, we must put ourselves in the place of greatest potential. If we want to experience God, we must put ourselves in the place of greatest potential. Prayer puts us in the place of greatest spiritual potential.

For the last two months, our sermons have focused on various one another passages in the New Testament. We have come to the last in a series of one another references, the Biblical injunction to "pray for one another" (James 5:16). Before I talk about this one another focus, perhaps a few words on the subject of prayer are in order.

We access God through prayer. Watchman Nee writes, "Our prayers lay the track down on which God's power can come. Like a mighty locomotive, God's power is irresistible, but it cannot reach us without the rails."

We talk with God through prayer. Like the air we breathe, prayer is indispensable to our souls. In the words of the Puritan colonist William Bradford, "Prayer is the Christian's vital breath, the Christian's native air."

But some of you will tell me that you don't know what to say when you pray. You're afraid you won't use the right words. Don't worry—God can decode our prayers.

Prayer doesn't change God, prayer changes us.

We not only talk with God, God talks with us. Some of you may be wondering, does God really talk to people?

In an episode of *The X-Files*, agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully are discussing a prison chaplain, who claims God speaks directly to him. When Mulder expresses skepticism that such a thing could ever happen, Scully asks, "Don't you think God can talk with people?" Mulder replies, "God is just a spectator. He only reads the box scores."

I can think of four ways God speaks to me. First, God speaks to my conscience. I identify with Elijah, who encounters God's presence as "a still, small voice" (1 Kings 19:12). Second, God speaks to me through Scripture. That's why it's called "God's Word." Third, God speaks through my experiences. God confirms me in the right and troubles me in the wrong. Fourth, God speaks to me through people. Other people mediate God's Word to me.

We ask God in prayer to change our circumstances, while God uses our circumstances to change us. Prayer doesn't change God, prayer changes us. C.S. Lewis likens prayer to fishing offshore in a boat: "If I cast my fishing line into the sea and snag the shoreline, do I pull the shore to me or me to the shore?" Prayer doesn't pull God our way, prayer pulls us God's way.

God doesn't need prayer in quite the same way we need it. I don't confess my sins in order to

inform God of what I've done. God is already fully cognizant of my misdeeds. Even before confession is on my lips, God knows it altogether. God doesn't need our confession, we're the ones who need it!

Some of you may be cynical about prayer. I prayed for someone's health to improve or a certain job to break my way, but nothing happened. So what good is prayer?

God answers prayer in ways we don't expect. Jesus experienced unexpected answers to prayer. Philip Yancey reminds us, "When Jesus prayed to the one who could save him from death, he did not receive that salvation; instead he got the salvation of the world."

There's so much more to be said about prayer. For help in your personal prayer life, I direct you to on-line prayer devotionals such as *Guideposts*, *Upper Room*, *Sacred Space* or *My Utmost for His Highest*. I want to utilize the balance of our time today to think about prayer in relationship to one another.

The Bible directs us to pray for one another. Sometimes we glibly say to one another, "I'll pray for you." Let's take the Scriptural injunction seriously to pray for one another.

The letter of James supplies us with instructions about how to pray for one another. In verses 14-15, we are directed to pray for people's bodies: "Are any of you sick? They should call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of

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the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make sick people well; the Lord will raise them up.” We are likewise instructed in verses 15-16 to pray for people’s souls: “If any have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

These verses direct us to pray for the full spectrum of people’s needs—for their souls as well as their bodies. Just as our bodies need physical healing, so our souls need spiritual mending.

So, why is it that the only thing we pray about is people’s health? In virtually every gathering for prayer I’ve ever been associated with—in this or any other church—the only thing we pray for is physical health. Don’t get me wrong, it’s certainly biblical to pray for sick people. But when was the last time someone stood and asked prayer for someone’s soul? When was the last time we prayed for a person’s salvation?

Paul’s letters reveal the things that occupy his prayer life. He prays that God will grant people wisdom, that the eyes of their hearts will be opened, that they would become bold in sharing their faith, that they would be able to discern what is best and lead a life worthy of his calling.

I’m not at all convinced God places the same premium on earthly longevity that we do. God looks at life through the lens of eternity. What God desires most for people is salvation, that we be brought back into union and

wholeness with God. The central story line of the Bible does not concern physical health; its primary focus is the salvation which God offers to us through Jesus Christ. Health is manifold blessing, to be sure, but salvation is a far greater treasure.

I’ve been praying for some people for years without any appreciable change in their circumstances. I find great solace in knowing St. Augustine’s mother, Monica, prayed for 35 years before her wayward son opened his heart to Jesus Christ. One of the virtues of prayer is persistence.

Jesus intends this church to be a house of prayer. Jesus drove the fraudulent moneychangers out of the temple with a whip and the prophet’s words ringing in people’s ears: “My house will be called a house of prayer for all people. But you have made it a den of robbers” (Mark 2:17). We are not merely a house of do-gooders or religious-benefactors, we are a house of prayers.

It’s not enough to hear a sermon or read a book on prayer. We learn to play the piano, not by reading a book or listening to a lecture, but by practicing. Growth in prayer comes through practicing prayer together. We are initiating one another groups in this church to help us pray and support one another. May God help us break out of our self-imposed exile from each other, drop our guard and pray about the things that really matter in our lives.

You may be hesitant to join a small group, cautious that someone

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will ask you to pray out loud. Some of you would drop dead if someone ever asked you to pray out loud in the company of other people. You can let other people do the praying, if you want. I know one woman in a prayer group who writes out her prayers beforehand to help her find the right words for prayer. Pray as you can, not as you can't.

Prayer is personal but not necessarily private. Most Biblical prayers are corporate in nature. Take the Lord's Prayer which Jesus taught his disciples. Jesus didn't pray My Father, but Our Father, not give me but give us; not forgive me but forgive us, not lead me but lead us, not deliver me but deliver us.

One of the liabilities, I suppose, of public prayers is thinking, "I can't pray like that." Let me reassure you, pastors pray differently in formal worship gatherings than we do in intimate settings, where prayer is more conversational.

I have seven questions for your self-reflection on prayer. These questions might serve as a spiritual audit on your prayer life:

Do I pray?

Do I regard myself
as too busy to pray?

Do I pray for the things
that concern my life?

Do I pray about the things
that worry and make me
anxious?

Do I pray for other people?

Do I pray with other people?

Do I allot time for prayer
proportional to the time
I devote to recreation?

