

09-27-09

James 5:13-20

Introduction

I don't want to assume that all of you have heard the name "Tony Campolo"...but just in case you haven't, Tony is a well-known Christian preacher and professor and writer. More than that, however, he's an excellent story-teller...and in one of my favorite 'Campolo stories,' Tony describes a time that he delivered a series of lectures for the 'religious emphasis' week at a small college in the Midwest.

- At the end of the second night, an older woman—obviously not a member of the student body—came down the aisle, carrying a child in her arms. The boy was crippled...and he had braces on his legs...and when the two of them reached the altar, Tony asked, "Ma'am...what can I do for you?"
- And her response, which—I think it would be fair to say—caught Tony by surprise, was this: "God told me to come. You're supposed to heal my son."

Now one of the great things about Campolo's stories is the way he makes little side comments that 'let you in on' what he's thinking or feeling. So when Tony tells the story, he usually adds: "I didn't know how to handle that. It seems to me that if God told her to come, the least He could have done was to tell me she was coming."

- Thankfully, of course, that's not the way he replied. Instead, he told the woman, "Lady...I'm sorry. I don't have the gift of healing. The Bible says there are a variety of gifts...and mine is teaching...not healing."

But the woman—who simply knew that God had told her to come—wouldn't go back to her seat. So it didn't take long before some of the students started to giggle...and Tony started to worry that the situation would get out of control. But right about that time, the chaplain of the college walked down to the altar and said, "You need some help, Doc?"

- Well, Tony heaved a sigh of relief and said, "You bet"—at which point the chaplain announced to the student body: "Those of you who don't believe that this child is going to be healed tonight...please leave the auditorium. Not even Jesus could perform miracles surrounded by unbelief."

Tony says he watched as almost everyone got up to leave...everyone except a group of five Pentecostal kids who were already swaying back and forth and raising their hands...and the chaplain sent one of those students to the kitchen to get some oil. A little confused, Tony asked, "Oil? What kind of oil?"

- And the chaplain said, "Cooking oil, I guess." "Cooking oil?! Are you kidding?" Tony replied.
- "Look," said the chaplain. "The Bible says that if somebody needs healing, the elders of the church should get together, anoint them with oil and pray over them. And so—unless you've got any better ideas—that's exactly what we're gonna do."

So Tony tells how they stood in a circle around the boy and his mother...and he started to pray one of those 'token prayers'—saying all the right things, but not really believing that anything would happen. But right in the middle of this prayer, he says he stopped...because he felt something. And he writes about the experience: "It was an epiphany of the presence of God. It is an awesome thing to stand in the presence of the Almighty...and I didn't know how to react. So I removed my hand...and felt terribly ashamed."

There was no 'miracle of healing' that night...at least, nothing that anyone could detect. But three years later, Tony was speaking at a church in the same region. And after the service a woman came up and asked, "Do you remember me?" And he said, "I do. You're the woman whose son we prayed for. How is he?"

- And she said, "See for yourself," and as she stepped aside, there was her son: standing straight and tall... with no braces...and no crutches.
- Tony says he didn't know what to think...so he just blurted out: "But how did this happen?"
- And she said, "Don't you remember? We prayed."ⁱ

Transition

I want us to talk about prayer this morning...partly because the book of James talks about prayer (and if you've been here this month and if you've been paying attention, you may realize that we've been walking through portions of the book of James). But even more, I want us to talk about prayer because—in a deeply significant way—prayer is the most important thing in our lives.

- After all, we are made to live in relationship with God. And within that relationship, we find purpose and strength and joy and love for one another...but outside that relationship, we die: we die spiritually...we die emotionally...we die relationally. And if we remain outside that relationship: ultimately, we die physically.
- And really, once you strip away all the trappings—once you get beyond the questions we have about 'how prayer works' or 'when we should pray' or 'what we should say when we pray'—once you boil it all down, prayer is simply the act of being in that relationship. One preacher I heard put it like this: Prayer is keeping company with God.ⁱⁱ

Now having said all that, I need to confess right up front that I don't feel particularly qualified to teach about prayer. Don't get me wrong; I pray. And I suppose that the nature of my work has given me a chance to do a little extra study on the subject. But most days...my prayer life still falls way short of what I wish it could be.

- I wrestle with theological questions. I struggle to 'keep my focus' in prayer. I long to pray with greater power—to feel the Spirit praying through me and to see the evidence of God answering my prayers.
- So I can't really share with you today some summary of 'lessons I've learned' about prayer. Instead, I just want to highlight some of the truths that James passes along.ⁱⁱⁱ And along with that, I want to offer us a chance to order our lives around those truths...to be obedient to the Bible's invitation to pray. (But more on that in a minute.) For now, let's begin by noting that James wants us to know that...

Prayer is the best possible response to every circumstance of life.

Did you listen as our scripture lesson was read?

- "Is anyone among you in trouble?" Does that ring a bell for anyone here today? Anybody facing pressures at work...or conflicts in your family...or problems with finances...or worries about any one of a thousand different challenges (big and small) that come our way—day after day after day? Well James says: "Let them pray."
- "Is anyone happy?" Is there anybody here who felt good when you got out of bed this morning...or somebody who's thankful for having food to eat and clothes to wear and a home to live in? Is anyone grateful for the grace that's been given to us in Christ Jesus...and glad for the chance to worship Him? Are any of us aware—that when you get right down to it—we are richly, unendingly, enormously blessed? James says: "Let them sing songs of praise."
- "Is anyone among you sick?" Is anybody fighting illness...waiting for healing...hoping for wholeness in the face of the countless dysfunctions that strike our bodies and our relationships and our souls? James says: "Let them call the elders of the church to pray..."

Now I don't know about you, but I'm usually pretty good about praying in those circumstances. If I'm sick or in trouble, you know I'll be praying (although—when I stop and think about it—it's probably more accurate to say that I pray when I'm really sick...or in big-time trouble. For a lot of my smaller discomforts, I tend to live like I can handle 'em on my own.)

- I do give God thanks and praise, particularly when something good happens—an unexpected blessing...or an answer to prayer...or the successful completion of a project. (But...there's a lot of good that comes my way that I don't acknowledge. It's not that I'm ungrateful...I'm just busy.)

Of course, when you get right down to it, I don't think that James is trying to burden us with some kind of 'spiritual to-do' list: "Prayed when sick—v. Prayed when blessed—v." Instead, he's pointing us toward the deeper reality that pulses through every page of God's Word: the reality that 'all of life' is the stuff of prayer.

- Philippians tells us: “Don’t be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition (with thanksgiving) present your requests to God” (4:6).
- 1st Thessalonians teaches: “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (5:16-18).
- 1st Peter reminds us: “Cast all your cares upon Him...because He cares for you” (5:7).

And isn’t that the point? It’s not that God wants us to pray because it’s our ‘religious duty’ and when we do it, we earn trophies for our ‘spiritual shelf.’

- God wants us to pray because He loves us...because everything in our lives (little things and big things...joys and heartaches...even the routine, everyday, ‘normal’ things)...all of it matters to Him. And he wants to partner with us so that all those things can become the building blocks of His glory in our lives.
- Prayer is the best possible response to every circumstance of life...and that’s part of what James wants us to know. Now in addition, James wants us to know that...

Prayer is a group effort.

In our scripture lesson, he says that believers are to call upon leaders of the church to pray with them. He says that we’re to pray for each other...and to confess our sins to each other. Of course, none of that should come as a big surprise. After all, we do a fair amount of ‘group praying’ in church: we pray the Lord’s Prayer in worship...we publish a Prayer List that we can use to pray for each other...and I know for a fact that many of you use that list consistently to lift up the needs of your brothers and sisters in Christ.

But what I want us to see—is that this about more than ‘strength in numbers.’ Naturally, when we’re facing some kind of difficulty (we’re out of work...or battling cancer...or trying to save our marriage)—it’s good to know that we’ve got more people praying for us. That’s encouraging...and it gives us confidence—the peace of mind that comes from knowing that we’re not alone.

- But I think we have to be careful about over-simplifying what is ultimately a great mystery. I’m not sure we can say that ‘bigger numbers’ necessarily translate into ‘bigger effectiveness.’ In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus said, “If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven” (18:19). And on the flip side, we can have everybody we know praying for us...and that doesn’t guarantee that God’s answer will be “Yes.” God’s answer could be “Wait.” God’s answer could be “No.”

No, I’m inclined to think that when James teaches us that prayer is a group effort, he’s reminding us that prayer (just like all of the Christian life) may be a very personal thing...but it is never a private thing. Yes, we pray ‘on our own’...and yes, we respond to God ‘on our own.’ But if we’re going to be biblical about it, we never stay ‘on our own.’ Instead, we’re meant to united...called to be one (just as Jesus and His Father are one)...invited to be ‘knit together’ into one great Body of Christ—one Temple in which God can dwell through His Spirit.

- That’s why “The Great Commandment” isn’t just one commandment, but two: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength...and love your neighbor as yourself.
- That’s why the psalms tell us that God “inhabits the praise of His people” (Ps. 22:3)
- That’s why Jesus—immediately after he says that when two of us agree about what we ask for, God will do it—goes on to say, “For where two or three are gathered in my name...there I am in the midst of them” (Mt. 18:20). The issue isn’t the number of people we have praying. The issue is the presence of Christ with us (and in us and through us) and that makes all the difference.

And so, when we pray for one another...and when we pray with one another—when we confess our sins to one another—it’s not just that we get more people praying about some specific request. It’s that we become more completely the church that God intended us to be:

- a family of faith where people can be open about their joy and success and about their weakness and sin...followers of Jesus who really do love and support one another...a community of believers upon whom the Spirit can fall in tongues of flame because we truly are 'all in one accord.'
- James wants us to know: Prayer is a group effort. But one more thing: James wants us to know that...

Prayer makes a difference.

You heard that in our scripture lesson, didn't you? "The prayer offered in faith will make them well; the Lord will raise them up." (5:15) "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." (5:16) I believe that. I believe that our Father in Heaven (to use the words of one of my favorite biblical benedictions) is able to do "exceeding abundantly" beyond all that we ask or imagine.

- And yet, I struggle to believe it, too. I struggle because it seems almost too good to be true—that the course of history and the path of the universe can change simply because we ask God to change them.

I struggle because—even if such promises seem possible for 'prayer warriors' and 'giants of faith'—they don't always seem possible for me. After all, I know my prayer life. I know how many times my heart is colder than I want it to be...and my prayers more 'routine' than they should be. I know how frequently I get distracted. I know how often I bounce back and forth between trusting and questioning...sometimes even in the same prayer.

- Of course, James tries to help. He hold up the example of Elijah, who—as James says—was man (a regular guy) just like we are. And when Elijah prayed that it wouldn't rain...it didn't rain for three and a half years. And the implication is: If he can do it, so can we. (But that's kind of an intimidating example. So I'll be honest...I don't know.)

But most of all, I struggle...because for every miraculous story...in which an unexpected gift solves the financial crisis...or the marriage gets mended...or the disease gets cured...there are other stories—in which the family ...files for bankruptcy...and the divorce happens anyway...and the loved one dies. And in those stories, our prayers—if they get answered at all—certainly don't get answered in the way we hoped they would.

- But one thing I appreciate about James is that doesn't allow us to sit around—wringing our hands and debating all the theological details. Maybe he knows that if we wait to pray until we understand how and why prayer works...we'll never pray at all. Maybe that's why, in the end, his advice is: Just do it.
- Are you in trouble? Pray. Are you happy? Praise. Are you sick? Call the elders...and let them anoint you and pray over you...and the prayer offered in faith will bring healing.

An Act of Prayer

I believe that every single one of us here this morning needs healing of one kind or another. That's nothing to be ashamed of...because we all get bruised and broken by life sometimes. Of course, our specific struggles may be different from the ones the person next to us is facing. We may have health problems while they have relationship troubles. We may have financial burdens while they have worries about their kids. But regardless of the specific need, James advice is the same: "Pray."

- And like the chaplain in Tony Campolo's story suggested, "Unless you've got any better ideas, that's what we're gonna do."

In just a moment, our choir is going to sing an anthem. It's titled, "Pray for the People," and if you listen to the words, I think you'll understand immediately why it's so appropriate for this morning. But when the song is over, the music is going to keep playing.

- As it does, some of our leaders are going to come to the altar. They'll stand in groups of two across the front of the sanctuary. And as you desire to do so, you are invited to come forward and let them pray with you and over you for your healing.

- If you like, you can tell them where you most need that healing. You can say, “Pray for my health” or “Pray for my worry” or “Pray for my relationship.” But you don’t have to say anything. The goal is not to learn your secrets but to pray for you in some meaningful way.
- If you like, each pair of deacons will have a small vial of oil...and in obedience to God’s Word, they’ll anoint you...by making the sign of the cross on the back of your hand. [But again, that’s up to you.]

Of course, you don’t have to come forward. You can pray—right where you are—for yourself and for others. But isn’t this part of the point? Prayer is a group effort...and it’s only when we acknowledge our need for each other...that the Body of Christ can do its work...and healing can begin.

So please listen as the choir sings...and then please come...as we respond in obedience to the invitation of our Lord.

- [Choir Sings. Followed by Act of Prayer as described above.]

Conclusion

We started this message with a Tony Campolo story, and if you’ll give me just a moment more, I want to end with one, too.^{iv} Tony tells about another time that he spoke in a church...and while he was there he had the opportunity to pray with a woman who had cancer. The following week, he got a call from her husband, who reminded him about the prayer. And Tony says—that for a moment—he prepared to rejoice in a miracle. But the man continued, “I wanted to let you know that she passed away last night.” And all Tony knew to say was, “I’m so sorry...”

- But the man said, “Don’t be. When she came into that church on Sunday, she was filled with anger. She knew the end was coming, and she hated God for it. She was furious that this all-powerful God wouldn’t take away her sickness and heal her. So she would lie in bed and curse God...and the more her anger grew, the more miserable she was to everybody around her. It was an awful thing to be in her presence.
- But after you prayed for her, peace came. Tony, the last three days have been the best days of our lives. We’ve sung. We’ve laughed. We’ve read the Bible. We prayed. They’ve been wonderful days...and I called to thank you for laying your hands on her and praying for healing.
- “And then,” Tony says, “that husband said something incredibly profound. He said, ‘She may not have been cured, but she was healed.’”

My brothers and sisters, I don’t know what you’ve prayed about in these last few minutes. I do believe that God hears those prayers...and I believe that He answers. But in addition to those things that I believe, I know this: I know—that unless Jesus returns in the meantime—all of us will come to the end of our earthly life. Sooner or later, each of us will encounter an illness or an injury for which there will be no cure.

- But there can still be healing. Because when we place our faith in Jesus, healing comes. Salvation comes...maybe not always to our bodies here and now...but definitely to our souls (and our emotions and our relationships). And one day, even our bodies (broken and sick and frail though they are) will share in that healing...when God remakes us and gives us the gift of life in a world made new.

This morning...that healing can be yours. Jesus said, “I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full” and the gospel declares that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

- Won’t you call on him today? Won’t you let His healing begin? Come and receive the gift of life as we sing together our hymn of response: My Faith Looks Up to Thee (410)

ⁱ Adapted from *It’s Friday, But Sunday’s Coming*, by Tony Campolo.

ⁱⁱ Mike Breaux, from his sermon “Why Pray?” delivered at Willow Creek Community Church on 3/11/2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ The basic structure for the remarks that follow comes from “The Basics of Prayer,” a sermon by Steve May (http://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/article_print.html?id=31870)

^{iv} Adapted from Tony Campolo, “*Year of Jubilee*,” *Preaching Today* #212.