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Title: A Faith That Works: Powerful Prayer

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Text: [James 5:13-20](#)

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A Faith That Works: Powerful Prayer

Prayer may very well be the thing that we struggle with most when it comes to faith. Barbara Brown Taylor is a noted preacher and teacher, and she says this about prayer in her book *An Altar in the World*.

"I am a failure at prayer. When someone asks me about my prayer life, my mind starts scrambling to find ways to hide my problem. I try to find smart things to say about prayer. Or I ask them about their prayer life. I'd rather show people my bank statement than have to talk about my prayer life."

She concludes her thoughts with this powerful statement: *"To say I love God but I do not pray much is like saying I love life but I do not breathe much."*

If you struggle with prayer, you are in good company. I find it to be one of the most difficult, if not the most difficult parts of a faith that works, to get right. And yet, it may very well be the most important. Prayer may not change God, but it certainly changes us.

Today we are finishing our series, *A Faith that Works*, looking at the book of James. We've been seeking to find a faith that makes sense, a faith that makes a difference, AND a faith where we are not merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word also.

When it comes to prayer, James knows that it is important. But the book also does something with prayer that other places in the Bible don't necessarily do. James places prayer not just as a personal act, but as a communal act. He does not know what it means to be spiritual but not religious. That's a term we use to describe when we are seeking to be a person of faith but have no desire to be a part of a religious community.

James would have struggled with this idea. It would have been strange to him that one could be a person of faith outside of a religious community. At the end of his letter, he makes two points:

- Prayer is most effective and meaningful not when it is believed or understood, but when it is practiced.
- Prayer for others is powerful and is one of the main ways to mend broken human relationships.

"Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 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. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 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." James 5:13-16 NRSV

This week, I pulled one of my favorite books off my shelf, a book called *Children's Letters to God*, which captures letters and prayers that children have written to God. A few I want to share today:

Joyce says, "Thank you God for the baby brothers, but what I prayed for was a puppy."

Larry says, "Dear God, Maybe Cain and Abel would not have hated each other so much if they each had their own room. It works for me and my brother."

Norma says, "Dear God, I just need to know, did you mean for the giraffe to look that way or was it an accident?"

Donny says, "Is Rev. Coe a friend of yours, or do you just know him through business?"

And finally, Nan says, "Dear God, I bet it's hard for you to love all the people in the world. There are only four people in our family, and I can't do it."

One of the things you will notice in these prayers is that they are honest. These kids understand the point that prayer is most meaningful not when it is understood or even believed, but when it is practiced. Prayer is powerful when we pray honestly.

I wonder how many of us are wanting a more meaningful prayer life but are waiting for the right time, or the right plan, or even the right words to come

along before we get started or if we are merely afraid of being honest before God? We don't want to be too vulnerable, even with God.

One of my favorite older movies from the 80s is the movie called *The Apostle* starring Robert Duvall. He plays a traveling evangelist named Sonny with a bit of a checkered past. One night he is in his mother's house upstairs stampeding around and kicking furniture. It's so loud that the next-door neighbor calls to complain about the noise. "Sounds like you have a madman over there." Sonny's mother smiles and says into the phone, "Ever since he was a little boy Sonny has been talking to God. Sometimes he talks and sometimes he yells. Tonight, he is yelling."

I love that scene because it illustrates that prayer does not have to be polished. There is no correct way to pray. We can talk and yes, we can even yell at God because God can handle it. But we do have to present ourselves before God.

Because prayer does not change God, rather prayer changes us, but we cannot be changed unless we are willing, to be honest with ourselves and with God.

We should understand the prayer of the righteous that is powerful and effective, as the prayer of the honest, the prayer of one who is willing to present themselves before God in an authentic way.

"Prayer is not asking for what you think you want but asking to be changed in ways you can't imagine." -- Kathleen Norris

If prayer moves us from one place to another, then we must be honest with God and honest with ourselves.

This moves us to James' second point about prayer. If we are to be honest with God and honest with ourselves, we most likely cannot do it alone. We need to be a part of a community where powerful prayer is part of the community's life.

We believe in praying for one another. We believe in praying for our community, for our country, and the world.

Part of the experience of being a part of Geist Christian Church is that if you have a need or a joy, people here will pray for you. We are indeed a prayerful community. In some ways, when we hear these words from James, they form a good idea of what church life is to look like:

Are any among you suffering? Are any cheerful? Is anyone sick? The answers are brief but clear: pray, sing, call for the elders of the church. This piece of church life is so important to James that it's the only time he mentions the word church.

At each monthly Elders meeting, the Elders of the church pray over the list of people for whom they have received prayer requests. This past Monday, it was a long list, as it is most months. It occurred to me that the main reason it so long is that many have shared a prayer concern or joy. Not only offering that prayer to God, but also to the church at large. Believing that, even though the how of prayer may be a mystery, the why of prayer matters. Believing that people praying for others can and does make a difference.

There was a man named Joe who has a pastor, who was part of a group of inpatients at a hospital. He had an addiction that he struggled with, struggled with, wrestled with. He lived guilt-ridden, pushed away everyone around him as he tried to hide this addiction. He finally couldn't take it anymore and checked himself into a hospital. Part of his treatment was to go to this group twice a week of other patients struggling with addiction. One morning the nurse told the group leader that Joe wasn't coming. He had a relapse the night before and was in bad shape. The group leader went to talk to Joe, a person who as a pastor had carried mat after mat for others yet had always been hesitant to let someone else carry his mat for him. The therapist told him it was time to let someone carry his mat for him. He invited him to speak in the group, Nothing. Finally, the group leader asked Joe to look up, to look up and look into the eyes of the group around him, those who had similar struggles, those who knew the power of having someone carry their mat for them.

Joe began to speak- Joe realized that for the first time in his life he did not need to be alone with his pain, with his brokenness, that which had paralyzed and crippled his soul for so long.

At that moment, a man who had spent a good portion of his life teaching and sharing grace, finally, finally experienced it for himself.

When a community prays for someone, it allows each to experience God's grace in a new and often, even more powerful way

"Prayer is not a means of removing the unknown and predictable elements in life, but rather a way of including the unknown and unpredictable in the outworking of the grace of God in our lives" -- Phillip Yancey

In a faith that works, prayer is important. Prayer is crucial.

Today, I'm not going to ask you about your prayer life, but I will offer this: Start from wherever you find yourself today. Continue from wherever you find yourself today.

Prayer is most effective and meaningful not when it is believed or understood, but when it is practiced.

Know that you are not alone. Prayer for others is powerful and is one of the main ways to mend broken human relationships. People are praying for you and people are praying with you.

Now let us pray together.