

Prayer Partnering with God, Jms. 5:13-18

Does Prayer Make a Difference? #6

◇ **Intro:** (video of wailing wall in Jerusalem...) In the summer of '07 when Sandi and I were in Jerusalem, we had an opportunity to get near the Temple, particularly the Western Wall where many go to pray, as is it the part of the original temple still standing. (show pics) There is a famous Segula (Torah mystical recipe) that a person who goes to the Western Wall for 40 consecutive days to pray for 1 request, will have that request answered. For generations, Jews in Jerusalem have traditionally made this pilgrimage to pray for marriage, healing, children, income and many other heartfelt requests. There is also a long-standing tradition of donating to have a pious Jew pray in your place, since not everyone is able to make such a journey. (on the web you sign up for anywhere from \$90-\$1800 for prayer to be said on your behalf).

◇ Richard Mouw tells a story about a tourist who observes a devout Jewish man praying at the Western (Wailing) Wall in Jerusalem. The Jew rocks back and forth with closed eyes, beating his breast, sometimes raising his hands. When he finishes, the tourist asks, "What do you pray for?"

◇ I pray for righteousness. I pray for the health of my family. I pray for peace in the world, especially Jerusalem."

◇ Are these prayers effective?

◇ "It's like talking to a WALL!"

◇ Does prayer do anything or not? That's the question we're looking at today.

First lets review: So far in this series we've pondered...

◇ 1) A view from Above: prayer shows us that compared to creation, we are insignificant in size, yet most significant in the heart of God.

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- ◇ 2) Why Pray? We pray to relate to God, to line up the scope of our lives with the vision of what God is saying and doing which leads to joy and understanding of life.
- ◇ 3) How to Pray: it's not so much patterns or formulas as speaking what's in your heart, humbly, and hopefully.
- ◇ Today, a most mystifying question; who are we that we should actually affect history, or alter the activity or heart of God by our words? Is it all a mind game to make our psyches feel better as we traverse this planet? Or does prayer really change anything?
- ◇ **1. In all things God is the first actor. He is sovereign.**
- ◇ **A.** In Reformed theology we recognize that biblical theme of God's sovereignty: that is, that he reigns mightily, that all things are under his control, that even our believing depends on his gift of faith. For example:
 - ◇ *"In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will," Ephesians 1:11, NIV.*
- ◇ God's sovereign foreknowledge is also evident in the area of prayer.
 - ◇ *"And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." Matthew 6:7, 8, NIV.*
- ◇ The sovereignty of God is the theme of what's been called the 5 points of Calvinism (Canons of Dort). The point of a theology of sovereignty is that of our security, and comfort is in a love that is not dependent on our performance, but on his initiating and completing grace.
- ◇ **B.** But sovereignty raises some apprehensions as well:
 - ◇ Origen, a first century theologian, wrote: "First, if God foreknows what will come to be and if it must happen, then prayer is in vain. Second, if

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everything happens according to God's will and if what he wills is fixed and none of the things he wills can be changed, then prayer is in vain."

◇ We might read verses like Mt.6:8 and ask, "Why pray if God already knows?"

Ok, so it changes me, I learn to relate to God, to see him at work, to hear him speak to me and guide me. That's all good. But as far a *petitionary* prayer goes, I might as well skip any requests. God will do what God will do. Still, right after Mt. 6:8 Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer pattern, which teaches us to pray requests. These are petitions, prayers of request for change. So in a miraculously stunning discovery we see that

◇ **2. In many things God includes me in his activity.** A sovereign God does not rule out agency of tiny human creatures in the happenings of his creation.

◇ **A.** The stark reality of the biblical account, while constantly affirming the first movement of God, and his complete control over all things, also pictures the effect of human conversation with God, and its resultant consequence on events of history. For instance,

◇ Abraham sparred with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra until God spared Lot and his family.

◇ Moses prayed for his people when God was about to destroy Israel in the wilderness and start over with Moses' family instead. Scripture says God changed his mind.

◇ Daniel prayed and very hungry lions did not eat him.

◇ Rack, Shak, and Benny prayed in a furnace, and fire did not burn them up.

◇ Elijah prayed and it didn't rain in the land of Israel for 3 years! In fact James speaks of it in our text.

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◇ Everywhere we read about a God who's will is sovereign, who decided things before he created water or protons. And everywhere we read that humans actually alter history. How can this be?

◇ **B.** Some ask, "Why do we need to pray if God already knows?" We might as well ask, why eat if God already knows we need it? Why get dressed? If God intends for us to be dressed won't we become dressed without having to do anything?

◇ Well, God could arrange things so that we suck nutrients from the dirt through our toes like tree roots; or so that knowledge develops like instinct as we age, without talking, study or books; or so that we grew thick fur in the winters like other animals. But he has not arranged things this way. God chose a style of governing the human race that includes a partnership with human agency and choice.

◇ God has ordained that clothing would hold in warmth of the skin.

◇ God has ordained that our bodies and spirits should live in time and space only through the process of putting substances into our mouths which we call food.

◇ God could heal all the sick in an instant, but he delegates other humans to do it. Jesus could have walked through Canaan with the Midas touch and turned all things to wonderful. Instead he chose 12 men to carry on where he left off.

◇ God has ordained that certain things should come into fruition in the course of human life, when words come out of our mouths directed toward his ears. We call that Prayer. The sovereign God chooses to include us.

◇ Prayer is a designated instrument for releasing God's power into our world, as real and natural as any other power God may use. Anyone can see that he allows us to cause numerous things, every day, in the course of history.

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- ◇ One boy gets a broken arm because his older brother was “teaching him how to fly”.
- ◇ An economy falters because a great crowd of people spend money they don't have which scares a vast number of other investors.
- ◇ A goldfish dies because a small boy tries to bounce it.
- ◇ A daughter grows up with healthy personal outlook and confidence because her father praised her, nurtured her, and spoke about the deep things of God with her as she grew.
- ◇ A boy grows up lonely for his father's love because his father valued sports, and this boy was better at things like engineering and math. We affect the world! Humans have a privileged position.
- ◇ Think of it like a Broadway play. The author has written the story, and is directing the production. He speaks with the actors, guides them. Certain limits are set. But the actors are allowed to make choices too. Their personality comes in. And every foot print on the stage is not painted out for them. They must, may, walk about the stage and interact.
- ◇ Think of it like a band following the conductor, or a praise team following the author of the song. The writer wrote the melody. He chose the chord progression. He envisioned dynamic changes, when a chorus should follow, etc. The praise team sings it within parameters. Still, the drummer can throw in a fill, or... beat an unchanging relentless pattern. The guitar plays a riff as it moves from one chord to another, or... it does nothing more than obey the technical note on the page. One of the singers starts to clap or... stands like a statue. You see, the song is the song, but because of the human agency the music can be inspiring or just there.
- ◇ People cause things in the world all the time. This does not rule out the sovereignty of God. It is a means he ordained. He allows us a part in the great play.

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- ◇ Barth (20th C theologian, reformer) said of God, “He is not deaf, he listens; more than that, he acts. He does not act in the same way whether we pray or not. Prayer exerts an influence upon God’s action, even upon his existence. That is what the word ‘answered’ means.” ...” The fact that God yields to man’s petitions, changing his intentions in response to man’s prayer, is not a sign of weakness. He himself in the glory of his majesty and power has so willed it.”
- ◇ Helmut Thielicke (German pastor during WW2) “God is doing nothing less than offering to his praying church a part in the government of the world.” p.149
- ◇ **3. Therefore (Conclusion)**
- ◇ The Bible speaks of a God who moves with us, enabling us to move in harmony with him, to learn to dance in time with his steps.
- ◇ A. Therefore, be about the work of God, also through prayer!
 - ◇ *“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.” Ephesians 6:18-20, NIV.*
- ◇ Never stop praying. Pretend you are on the phone with God and all other things of the day are “calls waiting”. Attend to them, but each time you’re done go back to finish your conversation with God.
- ◇ Yancy summarizes it brilliantly in his book on this topic.
 - ◇ “I do not control the action; that is a pagan concept of prayer, putting the gods to work by my incantations or rituals. I am not controlled by the action; that is a Hindu concept of prayer in which I slump passively into the

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impersonal and fated will of gods and goddesses. I enter into the action begun by another, my creating and saving Lord, and find myself participating in the results of the action. I neither do it, nor have it done to me; I will to participate in what is willed. -p.114

◇ **B.** Do you understand what this means? You friend, can be friend of God! Say it to yourself. "I am a friend of God." He invites my life to interact, to intersect together with his! That's what the reality of prayer tells us. It is why he sent his son to die and rise for the forgiveness of my chosen sinning. He wants me, not a robot, but a person with a heart and a choosing mind, to chose and interact eternally with him. To live...with him. You must go out of here in awe of such a truth. Be in awe that the command to prayer is an invitation to interact with the course of eternity.