

Thoughts & Prayers...Do they matter? Pleasant Plains 2-25-2018PM NICK ANGEL

- ***READ James 5:13-20*** It is a scene that we have seen far too often in recent memory. There is a horrible tragedy that takes place. People are hurt or even worse killed. Property is damaged or lost beyond repair. Regardless of the issue, the statements in response are usually quite similar. Whether it be a politician, other persons of influence, or just your regular Joe...time and time again you will see something along the lines of, *"Our hearts break for those affected, and our thoughts and prayers will be with them as they deal with this loss."*
 - On the surface, these types of statements seem harmless and even sincere and heartfelt. In fact, in doing so, we are doing exactly what our text we just read encourages us to do. However, there is a segment of our society that views these types of statements with a great amount of vitriol. In fact, they would respond to such statements with statements of their own saying, *"Your thoughts and prayers are worthless. You might as well do nothing. They do not matter."* The question is...are they right? Do our thoughts and prayers not matter in the grand scheme of things? Do they do no good?
 - A preacher friend, Tommy Peeler, recently posted a few thoughts about this question on Facebook, and his words really struck me because we might even allow ourselves to get into the mindset that prayers just don't have much power. With all of the evil and hurt in this world, we might begin to believe that our prayers aren't doing much good at all. Are we right in thinking this way, or should we have that type of mindset reexamined within ourselves? Let's take a few minutes, this evening, to think along these lines. In his post, Tommy gave a laundry list of amazing things that were accomplished through prayer, and I'd like to begin by looking at a few of those examples to establish that prayer does matter, and here is how we can know that to be the case. Then I'd like to build upon some of his thoughts by making two additional observations concerning whether or not our thoughts and prayers actually matter.
- I. **They matter because amazing things were accomplished because of the prayer of righteous people.**
- A. **Because of the prayers of different individuals...**
1. **People's lives were spared.** In **Genesis 18 & 19**, we find the pleads of Abraham to God being the key factor in Lot and his family having the opportunity to live even though their city of dwelling was about to be utterly destroyed.
 2. **Nations were spared.** God was at His wit's end with the obstinate and rebellious people of Israel, and He was just on the verge of completely wiping them out. However, because of the prayers of Moses on their behalf, God spared them and allowed them to continue on. (**Exodus 32**)
 3. **Battles were won.** In **II Chronicles 13 & 14**, we twice find men praying to God that He would strengthen them to be victorious in battle. Because of their prayers, Abijah overcame Jeroboam, and Asa and Judah were able to defeat Zerah and the Ethiopians.
 4. **The weather was changed.** Back in our text of **James 5:17,18**, we find James references the story of when Elijah the prophet prayed that the rain would cease, and it did for three and a half years until he prayed that it would return. (**I Kings 17 & 18**)
 5. **Women became pregnant.** There are numerous occurrences of this in Scripture, but I will note two specific instances. In **Genesis 25:21**, we read of Isaac praying specifically that his wife, Rebekah, would come to bare a child and she did. Then in **I Samuel 1:10-20**, we read of Hannah being heart broken and pleading with God that she would become pregnant. She would do so, and soon after Samuel the great prophet would be born because of her pleas to God.
 6. **The hearts of rulers were changed.** In the book of Nehemiah, we find the book's namesake having become very distressed over the current state of Jerusalem and her walls. He spends much of **Nehemiah 1** praying to God for the opportunity for him to be able to go back and rebuild the walls. This was important because he would have to get King Artaxerxes to change his mind about Jerusalem since he was the one who had originally commanded that the building of the city be stopped. (**Ezra 4:7-23**) Because of Nehemiah's prayers, the king relented.

- B. Just because we see these amazing things taking place doesn't mean that our prayers work the same way as rubbing a magic genie's bottle.
1. These are just some examples of people's prayers being answered in an affirmative way by our God, but that doesn't mean that every prayer was answered in such a way. The Apostle Paul prayed three times that his thorn in the flesh might be removed, but that never happened as far as we can tell. **(II Corinthians 12:7-10)** Jesus Himself prayed that He might be spared from the horrible things that He was about to suffer at the hands of the Jewish people, but we know that He still suffered at the hands of godless men. **(Mark 14:36)**
 2. These men would certainly fit the bill for the men that are described for us in **James 5:16**. We wouldn't say that Paul or Jesus were any less righteous than Elijah would we? Of course not! But then how can we say that *"The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much?"* (NASB) How can we say, *"The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect."* (CSB) when the desired end result isn't seen? I believe this can still be true when we consider that the great accomplishment or powerful effect isn't always seen in the result, but it can be seen in the fact that we go to God when our backs are against the wall. Sure the prayers are shown to matter when we get the desired result, but what about those times when that doesn't happen. How can they matter then?

II. They matter because our prayers show our faith and trust in God.

- A. Throughout the Bible, we see the most faithful men and women constitutently turning to God often and particularly in times of great need or distress.
1. Think again to the circumstances of the people we just looked at. Lives were hanging in the balance. Evil men had to be put in their place. Women were desperate for children, and God's holy city was in shambles. People saw and felt these issues, and they knew exactly where it was that they ought to turn. They knew they had to turn to God.
 2. In turning to God, these people exemplified a mindset that all of the faithful ought to have. *"My God is greater and more powerful than any problem that this life can throw at me."* This is the type of mindset that these people we look to as examples lived with. It is the mindset that we see in David as he fled from his son Absalom, and it was his mindset as he wrote **Psalms 3**.
- B. This type of mindset isn't the norm for man, but instead we see others continually turning to other sources of "help" in times of crisis or need.
1. *"Your prayers are empty and worthless!"* shouts the naysayer who sees our efforts in prayer as being a waste of breath or time. *"While you're busy with your superstition and magic 8-ball, I'm going to go do something that actually matters! I'm going to go petition the government for change!"* These individuals would mock us for our trust in God, and yet they would turn around and put their faith and trust in mere fallible man!
 2. Why do they think many of these tragedies occur to begin with?! They occur because of broken man. They occur because men are sick with selfishness and sin. They hate their fellow man and they do evil things. So instead of turning to a holy God who will do all things well, they would turn to broken men who often only think for themselves. These people need to get their heads out of the sand and put their trust in God.
 3. Truly did the Psalmist write when he said, *"It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes."* **(Psalm 118:8,9)** Those who trust in fallible man will only ever find themselves being let down. Our faith and trust must be in God, and that faith and trust is shown when we offer up prayers to Him when the worst of life comes at us. He alone is our refuge and strength in times of trouble.

III. Yes, our prayers matter, but they must be accompanied by actions when we have opportunity.

A. The crux of the issue with many seems to lie in the fact that they see a lot of talking and not a lot of doing from those offering up thoughts and prayers.

1. It cannot be denied that there are some, maybe even many, who see a tragedy and think that their job is done by simply offering up a prayer or quick thought for those affected. These are the types of people that give the rest of us disciples a difficult row to hoe because they think that faith is seen only in believing that God can do something.
2. However, we recognize from places such as **James 2:14-26** that, yes, our Lord expects for us to be a people who trust in Him, but He also expects for us to be a people of action. James asks what good it is for us to see a brother in need and we simply offer up a thought and prayer for him that he be filled. James says this type of approach is worthless, and that we ought to be a people who are willing to be that instrument that God can use to accomplish the helping of this man.
3. Notice in our opening text that James says that it isn't the guy that just prays for the sinner that does great work, but it is he who prays and is active in seeking to turn the sinner from his wicked ways. (**James 2:19,20**) Surely we recognize that we must be more than just a thoughtful and prayerful people. We must be a people who are looking for ways to be God's instruments of righteousness and good works to get things done for His glory.

B. So what are we doing to act upon our prayers?

1. Many of the issues that we often offer up thoughts and prayers for can be helped by a few things.
 - a) Firstly, we can be people who are letting the light of Christ shine in our lives. Our Christ-like character can go a long way in showing people the better way of Jesus. Life is just better with Him as our guide, and people will see that if we will simply let that light shine. (**Matthew 5:13-16**)
 - b) Secondly, we can raise our kids to be better than what we often see out of people in this world. Our children are the present and the future of our society. If we want for things to get better then it begins with us as parents raising our children and giving them every opportunity to be better than what the world often shows itself to be.
 - c) Lastly, we can remember the golden rule, and we can truly consider how we would want others to treat us and then allow that to determine how we will treat other people. If we would truly love others as we want to be loved then we wouldn't see much of the hatred and strife that is currently present in our world. (**Mark 12:30,31 & Philippians 2:3-5**)
2. Now, this isn't to say that these things should be done to the neglect of our prayers to God. On the contrary, these things ought to go hand in hand with our prayers. We ought to be praying that God would help us to accomplish these things in our lives. He can and He will help that to be the case if we would trust and work with Him as our foundation.

The sad reality is that we live in a truly toxic environment, at times. We, as godly people, want to show our faith and trust in God, and yet we are often mocked and ridiculed for such a thing. However, may we not allow the naysayers to gain footing in our minds. May we be fully committed to God as our salvation and source of strength, and may we always show our faith and trust in Him by being people who pray and work without ceasing. I'm thankful for prayer, the things it accomplishes, and the faith and trust within us that it shows, and I hope you are, too. Let's show our appreciation by closing in a word of prayer.

PRAYER Jehovah God...Our Shield, Our Rock, Our Salvation...we come before Your throne of might and power with hearts overflowing with gratitude for the ability to approach You in this way. You are a great God, and we are a people most undeserving. Thank You for loving us, and giving us this avenue of prayer. May we always, in times of plenty and in times of need, show our faith and trust in you through constant prayer. May our hearts be strengthened in times of distress by Your mighty hand, and may we overcome the evil of this world to Your glory and praise. We ask that You would be with us throughout this coming week. Help us to shine our lights and to love others as ourselves. Help us to be the change that we desire. May we lead others to Your Son. It is in His holy name we pray...amen.