

The Two Voices of Prayer

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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James 5:13-16

Early in my ministry, I became interested in the daily prayer practices of the early church. I spent some time studying what people call the prayer offices. I read many articles and books on prayer. I read about the prayer practices of the Benedictines and I even went to some monasteries to pray the hours with the brothers. As I sifted through all the books and articles, I noticed that there is a divide in the way Christian people write about and think about prayer. I would go as far as to say that there are two camps with opposing prayer philosophies. These two camps rarely seem to mix. What do these two camps look like? On the one side you have the prayer as communion camp. On the other side you have the prayer as power camp. On the one side people talk about prayer as a way of gaining communion with God and submitting to his will. On the other side people talk about prayer as a power source, as a way of getting things and changing things and moving mountains. On the one side you have the contemplative types learning to rest in God and to be quiet. On the other hand you have the Prayer Warriors using their prayer to defeat the devil.

You can see this divide clearly if you look at the titles of new books on prayer. Go to a bookstore, go to Amazon, and look at the titles of books on prayer and you will find two very different sorts of books. Listen to this list of titles: “The Daniel Prayer: prayer that moves heaven and changes nations.” “Prayer Warriors: Powerful prayer points for victorious Christian Living from the Bible”. “Prayer to Move your Mountains: Powerful prayer for the Spirit Filled Life”. All these titles come down on one end of the divide. They all focus on prayer’s power. They all talk about prayer like it is the way to make things happen, a way to change things, a way to get God to act for you. On the other hand listen to the titles of these other books on prayer. Notice how they focus more on Prayer as communion with God: “Prayer: Finding the Heart’s true Home”, “Centered Living: The way of Centering Prayer”, “Space for God”, “Prayer: Experiencing Awe and intimacy with God”. It’s quite a different sounding list isn’t it? Increasingly it seems that Christians are divided in the way they look at prayer. They’re either communion people or they’re power people.

If you want a visual way to think of the differences think of it this way. The power people think of prayer like a water tower. In the tower is stored up the water of God’s blessing - blessing he longs to bestow upon his people, blessing that is available to us. When we pray, it is like we open the spigot on the water tower and the divine blessings are released. They flow out and water a dry world. When we fail to pray we miss a tremendous source of blessing because prayer is our opportunity to release this life giving water into the world. The communion people on the other hand think of prayer as getting into a river. God is like a river and prayer is the way we get out of ourselves and our self-centered little world and let ourselves down into the river of his grace and let that river carry us along. In the first case it is primarily God who is moved as a result of prayer - the water comes down out of the tower as a result of our prayer. In the second case it is primarily we who are changed by prayer. Our position moves. The water stays on its steady course and we learn to submit to its flow.

I’m trying to be as objective and as fair as possible as I describe both sides of this divide, but in the interest of full disclosure I think that I should tell you where my instincts lie in this

prayer debate. Many of you probably suspect it already - I'm more a communion guy. When I pray God is the gracious river, and I'm trying to submit to His ways. This is my default prayer instinct. But this is me speaking not the Lord. This is my personal instinct, it is not the testimony of Scripture. Because when the Bible speaks about prayer, things get really complicated. The Bible offers solid support for both views of prayer.

James 5 supports the power perspective. James is telling the church that prayer has power. 'If someone is sick have the elders of the church come and pray over the person; have them anoint the person and the sick person will be (not might be) made well. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.' In the face of failed attempts at healing, people have tried to explain this passage away, but it is pretty clear that it says prayer is powerful and can heal people. This passage isn't the only support the power perspective can muster. John 14:14 Jesus says, "You may ask for anything in my name and I will give it to you." Matthew 21:22 "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer" These teaching passages are further supported by many Bible stories of people who prayed earnestly for something and had that prayer answered. Without any question these passages seem to say that prayer moves God to action. Prayer powerfully changes things. It supports the water tower view of prayer.

But now here's the problem. The Bible also tells us that God is all-knowing and that he is good. 'God is light and in him is no darkness at all'. He's good. 'Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely'. He's all knowing. And so the question is, if God is all good and all knowing, what is the point of petitioning him with our prayers? Since he's all knowing we can be sure that he knows all our concerns and desires. So, why do we pretend like we need to inform him? And since he's all good we can be sure that he wants to give us what we need. It's not like we have to convince him to be kind to us or badger him into action; he desires the good for his children. The communion people point to what Jesus says in Matthew 6 – the passage I read earlier in the service: "*Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*" And so, they say, the appropriate prayer for this sort of God is "Thy Will be Done." This is the kind of prayer Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, isn't it? "*If it's possible take this cup away from me, but not my will but your will be done.*" That's submission. That's getting in the river. That's prayer centered more communion than power.

So even the Bible seems to support the two sides of prayer. So... to whom do we listen? Which one of these is the real vision of prayer? The answer of course is both. Both ways of looking at prayer are true. We need both kind of prayer at the same time. It is true that God knows our prayers before we say them. It is also true that saying these prayers makes a difference. It is true that our prayer moves us. It is also true that our prayer moves God. It is one of those paradoxes of faith that perplex us people. Kind of like the paradox of faith and works hinted at in sentences like: "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you." These paradoxes of faith are really important. They are not meant to be solved, as if we could dissect all of God's mysteries and turn them into a formula, these paradoxes to faith are signs that we have come to the edge of human understanding. They are irreducible. When we arrive at a paradox, it's like we've been walking the path of understanding and we've come to the end of the path. Before us stretches the mystery of God, mountains upon mountains, stretching off into the infinite distance. In a place like that it's arrogant and misguided to say, "I can explain all this!" In a place the appropriate thing to do is sing a hymn and fall to your knees in praise.

More than ever, today's church needs to hold onto both sides of this prayer paradox. Choosing one side or the other as a kind of camp will impoverish our prayer life. Churches that

only talk about prayer as power are really missing something. Churches that only talk about prayer as communion are really missing something. For those of us inclined towards a communion view of prayer, we need to remember James 5 and its associated passages. We must not think that our sort of prayer is higher and purer and that the other prayer is crude and primitive. God does change things. And while it may be hard or even impossible to figure out the physics of this change, it happens. Both Scripture and experience can attest to the fact that God answers prayer. Taken too far, the communion approach to prayer, with its thinking of God like a river, runs the risk of making God impersonal and passive. It begins to sound more like an eastern view of God where the goal of prayer and meditation is to lose yourself in the ocean of God. You are a drop and your identity is subsumed in the great ocean of being. The Bible's view of God is way more relational and personal than that.

On the other hand, those inclined toward a power view of prayer must remember that prayer is submission to God before it is asking for anything. There is a reason the Lord's Prayer begins with 'Thy will be done' and 'hallowed be your name' before it gets to 'Give us this day our Daily bread.' It is especially important that the power group not get fixated on technique. Many of the power prayer books are in love with technique. They are in love with the word 'how.' What happens is some church or some ministry or some individual has a remarkable answer to prayer in their life. They spend time praying and God does something wonderful. They are healed, their church grows, and obstacles are overcome. And in the glow of answered prayer they write a book which tells everyone how they did it. "Here's how I prayed, here's when I prayed, here's how often I prayed". Pray like me, use my technique and you can make prayer work for you." We must remember that when prayer is answered, it is always answered because of God's grace and not because of our technique. Our prayers may move God, but they do not control Him. To think that your prayer technique can make the Lord of Heaven and earth execute your to-do list is seriously misguided.

God is not looking for perfect technique from us. His only desire is that, in one way or another, we do pray. He just wants his children to talk to him. Whether that's the formal poetry of a psalm or the off the cuff ramblings of a child. Whether it's Pentecostal ecstasy or an Anglican collect. Whether it's the hoe-hum dinner prayer your father rambled through every night or an anxious cry to God in the middle of the night. The technique is not important. What is important is that all God's children bring their praises and their petitions to him. What is important is that all God's children turn their faces towards their Father.

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