

“ORA ET LABORA”
James 5:13-20

Our text this morning is to be found on the side of your compost bin. If you live within the boundary of Lichfield District Council (as most of you here do), you will have been provided with a brown compost bin and a black rubbish bin, too. I wonder if you’ve ever read it. Life gets a bit boring from time to time in the Hayter household, so I am often reduced to bringing excitement to my evening by reading bits of municipal furniture. On the side of the compost bin you will find three words in Latin – in fact, you’ll find them anywhere there’s the old LDC crest. The words on the crest were presumably chosen by our city fathers at some point in the past to bring an air of gravitas to the life of their fellow citizens – and if you write them in Latin they become even more impressive. (It’s now been replaced by a whizzy logo, of course, which you will probably find on your blue recycling bin.)

Those words are – for those of you who have never noticed – “*Ora et labora*”. (The motto “*Salve Magna Parens* is the *city* crest, for those of you who are even now engaged in pedantry.) Those words mean “*Pray and work*”. The point of that motto is really the message that underlies the whole of James’ letter, from which we read a few moments ago – just praying, just adhering to the outward signs of Christian faith isn’t enough on its own: you need to do something as well. Prayer, as I’m sure we don’t need reminding, is an intrinsic part of the Christian’s experience, it is communicating with God as we seek to deepen our relationship with him by talking with him, listening to him, cultivating a constant awareness of his presence. We’re going to be looking at what God might be saying to us through *Isaiah 56* in a couple of weeks’ time, part of which is the call to be a “house of prayer”, so this leads into that to some extent. And if we take prayer seriously, it can become a very dangerous activity, because God answers prayer – and not always in the way we really expect.

Some of you here will have heard me tell this story before, so apologies to you. The church I was part of in London was one of those churches where a couple of families had held sway for many a long year. One of the families was, in fact, descended from the original pastor, and over the years they had intermarried and, basically, ran the church as a kind of fiefdom. In the early 1980s, the church began to grow and many people felt the mission of the church was being held back by these people – and two in particular: the Sunday School Superintendent, a man in his 70s whom I will call Ken, and his elderly cousin, the Church Secretary, whom I will call George. Those who were wanting to see things begin to happen in the church prayed that God would remove any obstacles to his will being done, and that week Ken died. The prayer continued and the next week George died. One or two people were very wary after that if they knew that any of this group had been praying for them! But from then on the growth of the church, both in numbers and maturity, was phenomenal.

So, if we pray, we need also to engage in action ourselves. If you ever listen to the prayers that are led from the front here, you will know that we sometimes pray that we will be helped to see where we can be part of the answer to our own prayers. We cannot always simply pray and then sit back waiting for things to happen. For example, if we are facing exams, it's only right that we ask for God's help in preparing for and sitting those exams – but it doesn't mean that we then sit back and refuse to do any revision because God will get us through. If we are unwell, we pray for healing, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't go to the doctor as well. Prayer and action are fully interwoven, but there is a sense, too, that prayer is action.

That Latin tag, "*Ora et labora*", is only slightly different from a Latin phrase that was much used in the early church: "*Orare est laborare*". I won't go into the ins and outs of the grammar this morning, but that latter phrase means "*To pray is to work*". P T Forsyth, a great Congregational theologian of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, wrote this in his book *The Soul of Prayer*: "*Prayer is not mere wishing. It is asking – with a will ... It is energy. Orare est laborare. We turn to an active Giver; therefore we go into action.*" "*To pray is to work*" – prayer works! Look how James puts it in the words we've just read: "*The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective*". Prayer works: it is an exercise of faith. In praying we are doing, we are getting involved in things. And that's what this last section of James's letter is all about. It's not about healing; it's not about techniques; it's not about eldership, or confession, or anointing. It's about prayer, about sticking at it – like the farmer waiting for harvest – about believing that it works, about demonstrating your faith in action through prayer.

1. AN EXHORTATION

James kicks off these two paragraphs by saying, effectively, "Prayer works – why not prove it?" This letter of James, whatever else it may be saying, has this as its underlying message. He introduces it in 1:5,6. Are you having a hard time? Get on and pray about it – go on, give it a try. Is everything going great at the moment? Tell God and thank him for it – go on, give it a try. Are you ill, or weary or worn out (that's what the word translated "*sick*" means in v15)? Ask for some prayer – go on, give it a try. Prayer is there for every circumstance, every situation. That's the clear message of vv13,14a. Yes, of course there will be problems for you as Christians – there's plenty to convince you of that in this letter – but God's there to help, and he will.

How about you? Have you tried praying? Are your channels of communication with God open all the time? Why not try praying first, before you go to the doctor, the counsellor, the bank manager, the union rep? Yes, go to them by all means, but go to them with the knowledge that God's involved too. You've

heard about prayer many times here: most of you will have heard a great deal about it at other times, in other places. You'll have read books about it. Well, get on and try it – try it at all times and in all circumstances. It works. Look, says James, here's an example, a specific situation where you might want to put it into practice.

2. AN EXAMPLE

If you're ill, call the church leaders round – or go to see them – and get them to pray. Now, as we've said before, this isn't about a healing ministry. It isn't about technique. There are all kinds of things that have been written about how James describes it here – what kind of oil to use, what James means by "*praying over*", whether the sick person should call the elders round (in which case there is no mandate for so-called "healing services" anyway), and so on. I don't honestly think those things matter. The point is that you should get some people to pray with you. Elders are reckoned to be mature and fairly spiritual people, so they're a good place to start – and if they want to use a bit of olive oil to make it seem a bit more real, more tangible, then all well and good. But you cannot build on these verses a theology of healing. You cannot use them as a basis for "extreme unction" – which is the Roman Catholic ritual preparing someone for death: this about restoring people to life, not telling them there's no more hope for them, for goodness' sake!

Now there are a couple of things here it might be worth noting. The way *v15* is put together seems to suggest that when James writes of "*the prayer offered in faith*", he's not making any point about elders and the way they pray, but he's focussing on the results of praying in faith. This cannot be taken as a justification for those rather pastorally inept people who believe that if someone's not healed, it's because they or the people praying for them haven't got enough faith.

Unfortunately, though, James does say that it "*will make the sick person well; it will raise him up.*" That seems a bit black and white, really: there's not a lot of room for manoeuvre. But I'm sure James must have been as aware as many of us are that when we pray for people they are not always healed. It's great when they are – and it comes as an answer to prayer in which we can rejoice. But what's going on when healing doesn't appear to take place? Is the prayer not working? Is our faith not strong enough? Alec Motyer, along with many others, has some helpful things to say about this verse. He says in his commentary on these verses that "*Prayer is a commitment to the will of God, and all true prayer exercises its truest faith in patiently waiting to see what he has determined to do.*"

You see, there are many of these quite stark pronouncement about prayer in the Bible. Look, for example, at *Matthew 18:19* – “*If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.*” Or at *John 14:14* – “*You may ask me for anything in my name and I will do it.*” That’s Jesus talking. Surely he’s not trying to hoodwink us or give us false hopes, is he? Surely we’re not all such faithless and thoroughly sinful people that our prayers cannot be answered? Well, these promises are intended to bring us to prayer with real confidence, they speak of a God who can actually do all things, who is so generous that he will withhold nothing from us that is good, who is listening to every prayer we pray. But one thing these promises do not encourage or allow is that we should pray with the stubborn insistence that we have got it right, that our will must be done. This is Alec Motyer again:

“If the promises really meant that we always got what we asked, as soon as we asked it, and in the measure in which we asked, we would speedily stop praying and our friends would petition us to stop praying for them. What an intolerable burden such praying would impose on our frail wisdom! And what a weight of unhelpful and mischievous answers to prayer we should pull down on our own heads, and on the heads of those who were unfortunate enough to figure on our prayer lists!”

(If you’ve ever seen the film *Bruce Almighty*, you’ll know what that could mean in practice!) If you look back to v13 of *John 14* (just before the verse quoted earlier) you’ll see that there the essence of prayer is that demonstrated by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest and execution – “*Not my will, but yours, O Lord, be done.*” That’s clearly included in the Lord’s Prayer, too.

“*The prayer offered in faith*” is the prayer that rests trustfully in the will of a sovereign, faithful and loving God. Neither the sick person, nor the elders, nor anyone else, is there to insist that his or her will be done. The object of it is to put the person within the total security of the unchangeable and unchangeably gracious will of God. Now, I don’t think that’s a cop-out. I think James has put this here to demonstrate one of the situations in which we are to pray – and to pray with real faith that God’s will might be done.

But prayer for other people – nor, indeed, for ourselves – is not the sole prerogative of the elders, nor should it be confined to times of illness. I’m sure I don’t need to make that point to you this morning. Nor did James really need to make it to his readers. Nevertheless he follows his exhortation to pray, and his example of prayer, with an encouragement for pray-ers.

3. AN ENCOURAGEMENT

James has written about elders, about praying in faith, about the prayer of a righteous man. That could seem a bit too awesome, really: we might be tempted to give up on the assumption that we could never

really meet the necessary criteria. Then James mentions Elijah. Oh, no! Another giant of the Bible we can never really emulate. But James goes out of his way to add that Elijah was “*a man like us*”. If you look through his story some time (it’s in the books of *Kings* in the Old Testament), you’ll see that he made the same mistakes as we do, he messed up in all kinds of ways. There was nothing terribly special about him in that sense. And we are “*righteous*” people, too, because of what Jesus has done for us by dying on the cross.

And this fellow human being got on and prayed. The translation we used today says he “*prayed earnestly*”. In other versions it says things like “*he prayed fervently*”. The actual Greek words used are literally translated as “*with prayer he prayed*”. Now, just a few words about language to help you see what’s going on here. Different languages and cultures use different ways of emphasising things. English tends to add an adverb, like “*earnestly*” or “*fervently*”. In Hebrew, saying the same thing twice adds emphasis or intensity, so “*with prayer he prayed*” does what an adverb in English might do. Do you see what’s happening? Now, some of you will be ahead of the game and will be thinking, “But James wrote in Greek, not Hebrew.” Exactly! And when something like this is written in Greek, it doesn’t emphasise the kind of praying that Elijah did, but the very fact that he prayed. So, rather than the translation we have here, it would be better rendered something like this: “Elijah was just an ordinary person really, but he jolly well got on and prayed.” The point James is making is not that Elijah prayed fervently, but that he prayed at all. And his prayer accomplished something – because he ***prayed***. Not because he was Elijah. Not because he prayed ***fervently***. Simply because he prayed. He wanted to see God’s will done, so he told him about it. You see, as someone wrote in a comment on this verse, “*Prayer is a thing of power, simplicity and confidence. Its inherent power is great and, when prayer is exercised, its effective power is released.*” “*Orare est laborare.*” To pray is to work. Prayer works. When you pray, things happen. Elijah prayed: God acted. You can pray: God will act. But, of course, you need to pray expectantly, not because God won’t answer otherwise, but so that you’ll have your eyes open to recognise the answers when they arrive.

So get on and pray. Get on and communicate with God. Talk to him. Listen to him. Wherever you are, whatever you’re doing, whether things are going well or you’re in the pits – pray. Be encouraged in your prayer. Keep looking for answers. Don’t be afraid to ask for prayer. Pray with other people and build each other up. Pray on your own and draw nearer to God – pray. God wants to encourage you as he did James and his readers, as he did Elijah. Go on – give it a try!

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Questions for discussion

1. Do you find praying easy? Share some of your own thoughts on how and why you pray.
2. "Prayer is there for every circumstance, every situation." Is that true? Why/why not?
3. How do you cope with the biblical promises that prayer will heal or that God will give you what you ask – when that doesn't seem to happen? Are we lacking in faith? Is God misleading us?
4. What might it take for a church to be recognised as "A house of prayer"? What might we need to do at Wade Street Church?