

“The Prescription is Prayer”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

September 29, 2024

¹³Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Are 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. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore 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. ¹⁷Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

¹⁹My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, ²⁰you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:13-20)

As a longtime fan of Saturday Night Live, I am excited that the 50th season began last night. Building up to the premiere, NBC ran promos that included some of the most popular and enduring sketches from the show, and I was not at all surprised that, included in those promos, was one of my favorites of all time. It features Christopher Walken as a music producer for the band Blue Oyster Cult, and Will Ferrell, who passionately plays an unorthodox instrument for the band. About ten years ago, I bonded with a member of the church I was serving over our mutual respect for that sketch, and for Christmas that year he gave me a very thoughtful gift. I still keep it in my office. *[show the cowbell]* I want to make sure Douglas knows that, if we have any music that requires a cowbell, I've got it covered.

But those of you who know the sketch might remember that the highlight was Christopher Walken delivering the memorable line, "I've got a fever, and the only prescription is more cowbell!"

In a similar way, the evangelist James was prescribing something specific for the early church. For people who were suffering, people who were sick, people who were burdened by guilt or shame, the prescription was the same. The prescription he gives is prayer. At the beginning of his letter, James has already written that, if anyone *"is lacking in wisdom,"* they should *"ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you."*¹ And in this passage, James describes yet another therapeutic benefit of prayer. Prayer does not only lead us to greater wisdom, it also has the power to assuage the pains and ills that plague us. *"Are any among you suffering?"* James asks. Then *"they should pray."*

The Greek word translated here as "suffering" literally means "bad pathos," or something that evokes pity or sadness. That certainly includes disease, sickness, or bodily pain, but it can also mean any negative experience or feeling that might be weighing us

¹ James 1:5.



down: grief, depression, family friction, financial distress, loneliness. Whatever our specific fever or ailment might be, the prescription James writes for us is prayer.

So, what might that mean for us here at Larchmont Avenue Church? How can we put the therapeutic benefits of prayer to work in our own lives, and in the life of this congregation? Four things come immediately to mind:

1. The first thing we can do is to **confess our sin**. If you participate in worship regularly, either in person or via livestream, you are already doing this part regularly. We did this just moments ago in our corporate “Prayer of Confession.” And we pray these prayers regularly for two basic reasons: (1) scripture makes it clear that sin is an illness, and (2) confession is the best medicine for the disease we have.

Now, as I say this, you might be saying to yourself, “I don’t feel sick. I actually feel pretty good. I’m basically a good person. I’ve got things under control. I don’t need any help.” Scripture, however, rejects that kind of self-diagnosis. The Bible makes it clear that we are all sick, that we are all polluted by sin, and nobody says it more clearly than Paul in Romans: *“There is no one who is righteous, not even one,”* Paul writes. *“There is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one.”*²

Old Testament writers acknowledge the same sickness. For example in Psalm 38 the poet confesses, *“There is no soundness in my flesh... there is no health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; they weigh like a burden too heavy for me. My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness.”*³

Fortunately, there is a treatment. As the words of the famous hymn say, “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.” That balm is prayer. *“The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up,”* James writes. *“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.”* So, the first thing we can do is to offer consistently our prayers of confession, which “heal the sin-sick soul.”

2. The second thing we can do is to **be willing to ask for help**. Admittedly, we don’t do this easily. We don’t like to make ourselves vulnerable. I know it can be hard. But I have said this before, and I will say it again. This is one of the things you have said you want more of in the life of the church. The Mission Study from 2020 includes this statement: “We aspire to be... a haven in times of need. In this success-driven world, we desire a place where we feel safe sharing our failures as well as our successes.” Your words, not mine.

And again, “In an affluent suburb where great focus is placed upon success, we desire a senior pastor capable of building a faith community in which we are willing to air our human frailties and struggles as easily as we share our joys.” That’s what you said you wanted, and that is what you got. As your senior pastor, I am saying to you, “Let’s do it. Let’s go for it.”

But that means that you all have to be willing to not only share good news, but also share bad news. We have to trust one another enough to air out and share the difficult, scary things. *“Are any among you sick?”* James asks. Then *“they should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them.”* Don’t suffer in stoic silence. Call in some backup. Call a pastor. Call an elder. Call a deacon. Look to your right or left – call one of them and

² Romans 3:10-12.

³ Psalm 38:3-5.

ask them to support you with prayer and encouragement. Whatever your ailment, the prescription is prayer, and we are surrounded with a great cloud of witnesses, people who are ready to offer their prayers to help you and support you.

3. The next thing we have to do is to **believe that our prayers are effective.** “*The prayer of faith will save the sick,*” James says. “*The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.*” James clearly believes in the power and potency of prayer.

On the other hand, most of us know from experience that not every request we bring to God in prayer is answered exactly how we hope it will be answered. Some are, but not all of them. But that does not mean that “prayer doesn’t work.” It just means that prayer is not a vending machine. We don’t drop a prayer in the slot and then press a button to pick a result. Nor is God a genie in a bottle, waiting around for us to make our wishes.

Whenever I feel myself slipping into that kind of misunderstanding, I try to remember the lesson of Paul, who told the Philippians not to “*worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*”⁴ Note that Paul does not say “Make your requests to God, and God will give you exactly what you ask.” When we pray we are not promised certain results. But we are promised God’s presence, God’s compassion, and God’s peace. Those are the effects of effective prayer. Our prayers are effective in bringing us into relationship with the living God. Our prayers are effective when we humbly recognize that we are in no position to make demands of God. Our prayers are effective when we trust that the omnipotent, omniscient God of heaven and earth is on our side.

Start with humility. Engage God with honesty and hope. Leave room for the miracle. That is the prayer of faith, and it is always effective.

4. The fourth and final thing we need to do in our prayer life here at Larchmont Avenue Church is **Practice! Practice! Practice!** Just like the punchline from that hackneyed old joke about Carnegie Hall... how do we become a healthier, more prayerful community where we bring our pains and weaknesses to God? We practice!

And here is one way that we can practice. Every time we gather for a committee meeting, for a shared meal, for a time of study, or service, or fellowship, we either begin or conclude that meeting with prayer. Interestingly, this is something that is constitutionally required for our session. Under the *Book of Order*, ruling elders are required to begin and end each meeting with prayer. The deacons do this as well. But a lot of meetings in our church do not include any prayer. This is something we can do something about. And— fair warning here... I am going to be leaning on our officers – our elders, deacons, and trustees – to lead this charge.

Think about it this way: every group or committee in our church that is working to meet a need, rising to a challenge, trying to care for people in our community who need help – can remember think about what James tells us: anyone who needs wisdom, anyone who needs help, “*They should pray,*” because it is good medicine.

I know that this will not be comfortable for some of you. Some of you may even think it’s a little crazy. But in the months to come I’ll be ringing the bell, because here in this place we are seeking healing and wholeness... we are trying to be a haven for people in good

⁴ Philippians 4:6-7.

times and bad... we are trying to be humble and hopeful in our relationship with God... but we need practice.

In short, "We've got a fever, and the only prescription is more prayer!"

Amen.