

SERMON TITLE: "Formulas, Freedom, and Faith"

TEXT: Psalm 124; James 5:13-20

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

DATE: September 30, 2012/18th Sunday After Pentecost

This past week, I came across a very interesting article on a website for inter-religious dialogue called "The Atheist Prayer Experiment."

The idea was conceived by Justin Brierley, a Christian radio host from the UK, and is based on the paper by Oxford philosopher Tim Mawson titled *Praying to Stop Being an Atheist*. In it Mawson argues that, on balance, it is in the interests of those atheists who don't think it's absolutely impossible that there's a God to investigate the issue of whether or not he exists by 'the experimental method'—trying to ask him.

Of course, prayer might be difficult for an atheist, so the experimenters offered some advice:

[T]he prayer should be kept as open as possible, e.g., rather than 'God of Christianity; if you're out there, turn this water into wine for me', 'God, if you're out there, reveal yourself to me' would be better.

We only ask that anyone taking part commits themselves to finding a quiet meditative 'space' and praying there for two to three minutes each day as earnestly as they can for any God that there might be to reveal himself/herself/itself to him or her, and that he or she remains as open as possible to ways in which that prayer could be answered.

I read this article with a mixture of curiosity and dismissiveness.

I was intrigued because it's a different approach than the usual ones of argumentation and debate. Telling an atheist to pray and see what happens is creative (and bold!).

In addition, it seems to resonate with commands found throughout the Bible:

Hebrews 11:6—And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that **he rewards those who earnestly seek him**.

Jeremiah 29:13—You will seek me **and find me** when you seek me with all your heart.

The consistent message from God seems to be, if you are looking for me—*really looking*—you will find me.

And yet.

The experiment also seems like a bit of a made-for-the-internet gimmick. This suspicion has been borne out in my brief forays into comments by some of the atheists who are blogging through their participation in this experiment.

There is plenty of sarcasm, plenty of mocking, plenty of “isn’t this stupid?!”

I don’t get a sense that there is much openness to discovery. It seems like those on both sides of the experiment already know what their conclusions will be. The Christians are sure that God will make himself known, the atheists are sure that it’s all a silly game useful for a laugh—and a lot of web traffic—but not much more.

We shall see.

But the experiment got me thinking—specifically, about the view of prayer it presents.

In the experiment, prayer is seen as a kind of test. If the right actions are performed, God is obliged to respond. Both Christians and atheists seem to be in agreement here.

If x , then y .

God is seen as conceived of as a variable in an experiment—one part of a predictable formula that can be counted on to produce predictable results.

And, while there are isolated passages in Scripture that could be taken to support this view (Gideon and his fleece in the book of Judges, for example), I think we have to ask ourselves if this is the best way to think about God and prayer in the life of faith.

Our texts today speak of the healing and the protection of God. They are texts that seem, at first glance, to support a view of prayer as a formula.

In our NT text, James puts it bluntly: “Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make them well.”

A bit later: “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”

It sounds pretty straightforward. If you are righteous and if you pray, then you (or the one you are praying for will be healed." End of story.

If x, then y.

Many people have interpreted this passage this way. Many people *still* interpret this passage in this way.

Many of you have seen this personally.

Many have heard stories about people who had prayed and prayed and prayed for a loved one to be made well and, yet the desired result did not come about.

What then?

Did we not have enough faith? Did we not pray hard enough? Was there unconfessed sin in someone's life?

The end result is that those who are already dealing with the pain of a loved one who was not made well or with the grief of death must **also** deal with guilt and blame being piled on in addition.

Guilt, blame... And a horribly skewed picture of God.

Do we really want to say that God has his hand on the tap of blessing and healing, and is just waiting for us to produce the right combination of faith/righteousness or to summon the right people (elders) or use the right tools (oil), etc, in order to unlock the right result from God's hand?

Is that who we think God is? Does God need to be *convinced* to heal? Does God need to be *talked into* blessing his people?

Like the prophets of Baal in the story of Elijah, must we yell louder, dance more frantically, or pray harder to rouse a sleeping God who is not paying attention (1 Kings 18:16-39)?

Is this how we think God works?

In Psalm 124, rather than an *explanation* of prayer we have an *example* of prayer.

David asks: If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, what would have become of us? Our enemies would have swallowed us up!

It is a song of praise for deliverance from a difficult situation.

Of course, we get very nervous about “God is on our side” language today, don’t we? We see far too many claiming that God is on their side, far too many victories chalked up as evidence that God has validated our cause.

We are hesitant to use this language—and perhaps quite rightly so.

It is surely good to exercise caution in claiming that our causes are God’s causes.

This is as true when it comes to political and moral causes as it is when we are talking about healing.

We ought to be very hesitant to assume that our desires are a mirror image of God’s desires—even when we are quite convinced that our desires are good!

But whatever our hesitations around the language of Psalm 124, we seem to be faced with the same picture as that of James 5.

Walking with God leads to a life of deliverance from hardship. If God hadn’t been on our side, then we would have been finished.

If x , then y .

What can we learn from this?

I think the first thing we have to say that the broad narrative of Scripture is quite clear that a relationship with God, a life of faith, and the practice of prayer cannot be reduced to a formula.

The God of the Bible is not a genie in a bottle who, if the bottle is rubbed correctly, will magically appear, duty-bound to grant our wishes.

Many people think of God in precisely this way.

But this is not our God. **The God of the Bible is radically free.**

God is not constrained by some external principle to respond to human behaviour.

Yahweh revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush: I am who I am (Exodus 3:14).

In other words, I am not necessarily who you think I am, nor will I always act as you think I should act.

I am not predictable like a formula, and I cannot be controlled by human efforts.

So many of the deities in the ancient world were thought to be able to be manipulated, whether to produce rain or fertility or anything else their worshipers desired (Asherah, Baal, etc).

This gave rise to all kinds of superstition and bizarre rituals in attempts to get the deity to produce the desired effects.

Israel was constantly struggling with the temptation to chase after these idols that claimed to promise more predictable results.

But this was not Israel's God. This was not the God of covenantal relationship. A relationship, by definition, is not a formula but, at its best, a process of learning, discovery, and the deepening and expanding of love and trust.

James knew this very well. James knew that God was not a vending machine.

We need only look at the paragraph preceding our text this morning to see this.

⁷ Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸ You too, be patient and stand firm...

¹⁰ Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

It makes very little sense for James to encourage patience and perseverance in the face of suffering if he thinks that the correct kind of prayer will always produce healing.

David also knew this.

The same David who thanked God for being on his side in Psalm 124 was the David who penned these words in Psalm 13:

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts

and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?
³ Look on me and answer, Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death.

Like James, David was not naïve. David was well acquainted with unanswered prayer. He knew that prayer and the life of faith was not a formula.

You may be wondering about the image that has been on the wall throughout the sermon. It is, of course, an image of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane—a painting by French post-impressionist Paul Gauguin around 125 years ago.

I wanted to have it in front of us as we reflected on prayer and formulas and faith, because I think that it is very important for us, whenever we are thinking about complex issues of faith, to always come back to the person and work of Jesus.

When we are thinking about perseverance and unanswered prayer, we need look no further than Jesus himself who, in the Garden of Gethsemane, prayed these well-known words:

“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

Even Jesus’ prayers were not answered as he apparently wished.

It seems to me that those who claim that the prayer of the righteous is *always* answered have a fairly large problem here.

So, we’ve seen that for James, for David, and for Jesus himself, there are no guarantees of “success” when it comes to prayer. We’ve seen that prayer is not about formulas crafted to engineer the right results.

So what?

This might reassure us a bit, it might make us scratch our heads a little less at passages like James 5, but really, this isn’t anything that most of us don’t already know.

Most of us know, through personal experience, that prayer is not a formula, that healings cannot be conjured by the correct rituals, that God is not predictable in the ways that we might prefer.

What do passages like James 5 and Psalm 124 teach us, then? What can we take from these texts beyond a call to interpret these alongside other passages from the Bible that paint a deeper, more complex picture?

Well, I think it is here that we return to our theme of wisdom.

How do we live wisely, how do we *pray* wisely in this complex world?

Well, at the risk of putting it ridiculously simply, I think the message from our texts today is that **a wise life—a life well-lived—is a life where the full range of human experience is consistently and determinedly brought before God in prayer.**

James is a book about behaviour not doctrine. It is fundamentally practical, focusing on what Christians are to DO as opposed to what they are supposed to THINK.

In context, this passage probably isn't concerned with pronouncing once and for all about the efficiency of prayer; it is, rather, simply a call to pray.

Are you sick? Then pray. Full stop.

Have you made it through a trial? Have you had a narrow escape? Then pray. Thank God. Don't be embarrassed or ashamed to express gratitude to God for the good things in your life!

And when things don't go your way?

Like James, like David, like Jesus, keep praying, keep going, persevere, keep trusting.

When things are good, when we see evidence of healing, of deliverance, of rescue, and when we see none of these things. When, like David, we cry out, "Where are you, God?! Why are you hiding? Why are my prayers going unanswered?!"

Even, then, keep praying.

Like the persistent widow Jesus refers to in Luke 18, who refuses to stop pleading for justice.

Like Job (who we will be looking at throughout October) who kept pouring out his grief to God despite being in truly desperate straits and having no idea why.

Like the heroes of faith in the book of Hebrews 11:

¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.

Like Jesus himself, who was honest about his need and his desire before the Father, but who nonetheless located these in the broader context of the will and the purposes of God.

The life of faith is always one in which we only see in part, only know in part, only receive in part.

We don't know why some are healed and some are not, why some are delivered from calamity and some must walk through it. We simply don't know.

The life of faith, the life of prayer is not a formula where doing the right things, saying the right things, guarantees the right results.

It is a life of following the way, the truth, and the life, confident that Jesus knows better than we do, and that he can be trusted even when we don't understand.

To know this, to *live* this, is to be wise.

Perhaps part of what it means to say, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" is simply to acknowledge that God is God, that we are not, and that we will nonetheless live and pray honestly about what we need, about what we want, and about what we hope for in a complex world.

May God help us to live wisely and to pray wisely, in good times, and in bad. When our prayers are answered exactly as we hope, and when the heavens seem silent.

May God help us to echo the words of David, written at the conclusion of his lament:

But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
⁶I will sing the Lord's praise,
for he has been good to me.

Amen.