

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Prayer with Arms Wide Open

James 5:13-20

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The book of James comes to its conclusion emphasizing the importance of prayer in every aspect of our lives, in suffering, in joy, in sickness, for ourselves and for others. In every situation, in every aspect of life, take it to the Lord in prayer.

This is not how you would think the book of James would end. James spends four and a half chapters pointing in a very different direction. “Faith without works is dead.” “Show me your faith, and I’ll show you my works.” For four chapters, this book emphasizes that Christians must actually do something to be followers of Jesus. Faith is to be activated, to be practiced. Faith isn’t just a matter of your intellectual beliefs, or a commitment you made back when you were 8 years old, or a warm feeling you have. All those are good things, but without works—without living your life in imitation of Christ, your faith is like it’s dead. Over all these centuries, James has served as a reminder to Christians of what we must do. And it’s been an encouragement to Christians, that when they think their faith is dead, sometimes, just getting up and practicing your faith brings it back to life.

The other day, our dog made a huge ruckus in the backyard. I, of course was assigned to go out and see what the problem was in the night. So, I took my flashlight, whose batteries were dead. Then I took a second flashlight, whose batteries were also dead, so I took my phone and went into the backyard to see what was going on behind the big bush against the fence. The bark clearly told me, as one who knows to listen for such things, that this was our dog who had encountered and in fact, trapped, some other creature. Some other beloved creature of our Lord was back there with my mangy mutt. A couple of whimpers and a growl, and the noise was over. My dog emerged with a big ol’ possum in its mouth. My wife loves possums, especially ones that are dead. Right? Wrong.

So, I knew it was assigned to me to resolve this problem. Long story short, I was able to use a persuader to get my dog to abandon his prize. At which point I had a new problem to solve: which I did by trapping the possum in a non-graceful way into a net and hauled him out into a part of the yard where I knew the dog couldn’t get it to be dealt with the following morning. I put it in a part of the yard where I knew she wouldn’t go if she happened to wander into the yard for her morning prayers or devotions or something. I knew I could come to that part of the yard, ahead of her, and solve this problem. And I did. I took a bag and a shovel and traped out early in the morning to the part of the yard that held within it the dead creature—only to find as I arrived where I had deposited my dog’s glorious prize, that creature was gone with no trace.

Now I pretty well man-handled this thing the night before, not to mention it had been in my dog’s grasp. But then I remembered: that’s why they call it ‘playing possum.’ And I’m thinking that it wasn’t a coyote that came and stole it away. I’m thinking that thing, the whole time it

was in my dog's mouth, the whole time it was being man-handled by me, the whole time it was in the net that I carried just a couple of feet from my face, that thing was actually alive...playing itself.

Somewhere in there is a model for some Christian faith that's playing dead even though it's not really dead. And James calls that person who has faith as if it's dead to get up and walk. A resurrection call that James gives to us. "Faith without works is dead," James says, it's like a possum that's just laying there. Get up. Walk.

James is full of these kinds of admonitions. Particularly in how Christians relate to the poor. You're laying there like a possum. Get up and do something. Get up and walk. Care for your community, care for those around you. Get up and do something—the whole book of James points in this direction.

Now the thing is, you wouldn't expect a book like this, with a message like this to end on prayer, yet it does. Here in these last few verses: in every circumstance, suffering and joy, sickness and health, riches and poverty, isolation and community, pray. We all need to hear that encouragement, too, don't we? Many of our prayer lives are like our possum laying there, limp and inert on the ground, and need to be roused. It can be very easy to slip into a kind of bifurcated world of faith and work---the kind that James wants to bring together.

Faith and Work. We may think it's possible to live separated lives, but the reality is that our lives are unitive wholes. Who we are is who we are whether we think we're doing faith or we think we're doing works. We are simply one being, we are never two. Not even Christ was two distinct beings. His human nature and his divine nature were united together as one. If Christ, human and divine is one, how do you think you live as two, made as you are in God's image? We are one, even if it seems like we're being torn apart.

We may need to hear faith without works is dead; we definitely need to hear work without prayer is deadly. I admit get a little jaded about bumper stickers that advertise things like "The Power of Prayer" or "Prayer works: try it". Prayer is not something that works if just do it right, like it's a safe-cracking device or a life-saving device. Prayer isn't transactional like that—like if we just put a coin in a slot, what we want comes out the bottom. Yet prayer can save our lives. Prayer can save our lives from the despair and ruin that comes from dividing life into two spheres of faith and work. Scripture says to pray without ceasing. We're called to a prayer-filled, prayer-infused life in every circumstance and in every challenge.

Into every life comes highs and lows, just the kinds of life experiences we are to bring to God in prayer.

All of it. All of us.

Even the created world around us gives witness to the unity of our lives before God, if we have eyes to see.

In 2018, my dad took me and two cousins on a road trip out west. That trip took us into the barren heart of Death Valley National Park. (Yep, there's a Howell vacation for you.) There's a

reason why the National Park service doesn't use pictures of Death Valley to promote its existence. Furnace Creek in the valley is the lowest place in North America, 190' below sea level. It's also the hottest. In 1913, temperatures were recorded at 134 degrees. On the day we were there, I have a picture of me by the sign that read 126 degrees. It was pretty warm. There used to be a road race that began in Death Valley. Runners would have to land their feet on the white stripe in the road otherwise the soles of their shoes would melt on the black pavement. The road race Badwater 135 started in Death Valley and ended at the peak of Mt. Whitney. We didn't run it, but drove our car from Death Valley to the base of the mountain. From there we put on packs and hiked to a camp, and then the next morning trudged up to the summit. The summit of Whitney is the tallest peak in the lower 48 states. From the lowest to the highest. And at the top it's cold, windy. It can snow any day of the year. We have a picture of a beautiful scene, that 15 minutes later was shrouded with cloud cover and we had to scramble off the peak because a storm was rolling in.

The lowest to the highest; the highest to the lowest is not so far away from one another. And that's true in life too. The highest and the lowest are not so far away. Into every life there are peaks and valleys, lush green beauty, and the furnaces--the crucibles in which we are tested. For a time, it may feel like you'll be in one or the other forever, but likely, like most people, like the author of Psalm 23, life's journey if you walk it long enough, will take you up and down and around the mountain and in and out of some dark valleys.

There's a spirituality in Christianity related to deserts and mountains. Beldon Lane talks about it in his book, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*. He says the gift of fierce landscapes is that they don't care about you—that's the gift. You are small. They are big. You are vulnerable. They don't care if you're vulnerable. When we think we're the center of all creation or that our desires must be met for the world to keep spinning, the mountain doesn't care if you reach the summit. It will go on mountain-ing whether you do the work or not. Sometimes it's nice to not be in charge. Creation has a way of reminding us we're not in charge; we're not always even in charge of ourselves. And Beldon is right, I think.

At the rim of the Grand Canyon, the canyon doesn't care that you're there or if you walk away or if you fall in. You can pour all your tears and all your regrets over the side, and you won't exhaust its depths. You won't fill it up. It's big enough for you. Deep enough to take your pain.

There's not much you can do as an individual to make it better or make it worse. Teddy Roosevelt felt that same awe when he stood on the rim for the first time and said to all who were listening, "Leave it alone. You cannot improve this." One wonders what he thought humans might do that would even leave a mark on it. We're so small, and it's so, uh, *grand*. But he could see in his imagination what he couldn't see yet with his eyes—that any attempts to improve it would only end up desecrating it.

Humans may not be able to improve it, but we sure can affect it. We can fly helicopters through it disrupting its austere silence; we can build trolleys down into it and back out. We can leave trash strewn all through it. We can trample its unique vegetation. We can build a uranium mine too near it. Any one of us individually may not be able to affect the canyon, but if we put our

minds to it humans can do a lot. One thing we apparently can do and have done is build a dam at the head of the canyon, slowing the flow of the river through it. And then we can affect the climate all around the world diminishing snow pack and runoff so the lake behind the dam starts to dry up. This year, Lake Powell is at 30% capacity, the lowest it has been since it was built. They're running out of water, not just for the canyon below the dam, but for the people and the critters and the farms all over the west. The west's landscape is trending more toward the fierceness and furnace of Death Valley than it is any sort of life in Eden. It's not just fierce, it's becoming degraded.

If we want to pray for the sick as James calls us. . .if we want to pray for those who are suffering, let us also pray, alongside our work, for those communities and landscapes suffering most acutely from our degradation of Creation. I truly believe this prayer is a gift that Christians have to offer to the worldwide, international, inter-faith work to care for endangered, devalued, and degraded landscapes. At the heart of it all isn't just work and work and more begrudging, guilt driven work to save the planet, but a renewed spirituality, bathed in prayer and in hope and in joy in God.

Wendell Berry, the Kentucky Baptist farmer believes there are no unholy places in the world, just sacred places and desecrated spaces. If we are to have a spirituality that encompasses the beauty of the earth and our spirituality can encompass the travails and suffering of the earth, the life and witness of St. Francis may show us the way. Francis shows us a way, not just in childlike wonder at the beauty of Creation, but in his posture of humility, of compassion toward the world. Francis relinquished all his possessions and became desperately poor, and yet, he wasn't concerned primarily with material poverty but with the posture of poverty which he taught was Christ crucified. Christ on the cross, who had relinquished everything, even his own life, now before us with arms, outstretched to receive all who come.

St. Bonaventure, one of Francis' followers, taught that arms wide open is the posture of prayer. We may pray with hands folded and head bowed, or maybe if we're really crazy, with arms uplifted and head raised. St. Bonaventure suggested this: prayer with arms wide open, or at least open hands. Life with arms with open, or at least open hands toward your neighbor, toward God. When you do, you realize this posture of prayer and this posture of life is vulnerable. There's no suit of armor here. You are open to the world, to your neighbor, to God. And your hands are not grasping to possess and to control, and they're not shaped like fists to defend and to win. They are open to share and to welcome. It's a posture of hospitality. A person who lives like this also probably lives with open eyes too, and they see the 'other.' And, truth be told, it's hard to live or pray with open arms with a scowl on your face. Try it. It's kind of hard to live very long with a furrowed brow if your heart is open.

Open armed prayer mirrors Jesus on the cross. It's one way of remembering "Take up your cross and follow me." And so, if we can imagine this posture, we can imagine our outstretched hands meeting the outstretched hands of Christ, gently touching the outstretched hands of Christ. Together, this forms a circle of unity and love, sacrifice, and redemption, suffering, and resurrection. Can you see this? Can you imagine this? If so, prayer is what happens within that circle that is made. Prayer is what happens in the circle of community with Christ crucified and

resurrected. All of prayer is the space that is that circle that is made. To that space, that sacred space, you bring all the suffering and sickness you know, you bring all the joy and pleasure you have. This space is enough for the highest peaks and lowest valleys. You are open now. You are open before and intimate with Christ. You bring forward your sin. Nothing is hidden. There is no shame. With arms stretched open, there's nowhere to hide and nothing to hide. All is here at the cross.

We discover then that the artificial lines that carve our lives up are softened, smudged out. Where does faith end and work begin? It's all brought into one. The former rifts are drawn upward into unceasing prayer, in unity, in restored holiness and wholeness, in oneness, in love and life in Christ. Here at the cross, we learn again that our faith and our work in prayer comes alive. May it be so for us.

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