Prayer: Good Heart Medicine

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In recent years a number of U.S. health care providers have begun to examine the beneficial effects of religion for physically and mentally ill patients. Their studies tend to indicate that an individual's religious beliefs can positively affect physical healing or decrease depression in ways that transcend standard medical practices. Some of the specific health benefits which have been associated with individuals who regularly attend worship services, study the Bible, and pray include lower blood pressure, higher levels of immune system proteins, fewer complications in illnesses, and improved mental health.¹

As more studies are performed, many physicians are beginning to acknowledge that prayer and faith can indeed be significant factors in a patient's recovery process. At least five major medical schools have even gone as far as to include courses in spirituality and healing in their programs.²
On the one hand, a believer's reaction to this information could be rather ho-hum. Prayer for the sick is a common practice in churches and often accounts for a majority of the requests mentioned in a typical prayer service. On the other hand, someone might question the results of these findings, based on personal experiences in which a loved one or friend continues to struggle with an illness or perhaps has even passed away in spite of many fervent prayers for that person's healing. There may be other readers who would question the efficacy of prayer in any instance. After all, they reason, God is sovereign and will do as He pleases with an individual's life. Or perhaps they're thinking that God shouldn't be bothered with our "trivial" requests (the infamous "pray for Aunt Martha's ingrown toenail" type of requests). Or we may want to pray but are unsure what might be God's will in a given situation. Is prayer still "good medicine" in those cases too? I would suggest that it can be, depending on what transpires in the heart of the pray-er during such times. This is true not just in our approach toward prayers for healing, but also in our beliefs about petitionary prayer in general.

As we struggle with the content and intent of our prayers, we can turn to Scripture for some clear instruction in this vital area of our lives. In Luke 11 we find three illustrations given by Jesus Himself that can encourage us to pray and help us align our prayers with God's purposes.

Luke 11:2-4 (cf. Matt. 6:9-13), commonly referred to as the Lord's Prayer, gives us a model for our own prayers. The content of this prayer demonstrates a balance between worship and petition, between seeking God's face and God's hand. The first part of the prayer calls upon us to align ourselves with God's care for us and His designs for the world: He is "our Father," but also the One who is to be revered by all ("hallowed be your name"), especially His children, and the One to whom we humbly submit ("Your kingdom come"). As we take these truths to heart, we begin to move beyond the small circle of our own existence into the all-encompassing circle of God's power and control over His creation, and our prayers become more in tune with His will and purposes.

Once we have expressed our worship, the second half of this prayer invites us to bring our own personal needs before the Father: our daily bread (i.e., the basic necessities of life), forgiveness, and deliverance or protection. We have complete freedom to express our needs to God, based on the model Jesus gives us in this passage.

Luke 11 not only gives us a model for the content of our prayers, but also the right direction for the intent of our prayers. In verses 9-10 Jesus instructs us to keep on asking, seeking, and knocking, assured that our prayers will be heard. We are encouraged to be persistent in prayer, not because we need to wear God down to get what we want (as we will see in the next illustration), but perhaps because our persistence (or lack thereof) can identify in our own thinking what is truly important to us.

Let's examine Jesus' parable of the importunate friend in verses 5-8 as an illustration of God's
willingness to hear and answer prayer:

Then He said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.’

Then the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs” (NIV).

Understanding the cultural context of this story will help make its true significance more clear to us. First of all, in Middle Eastern cultures, hospitality was and is considered a very important personal responsibility. The would-be host's need for bread was perfectly normal since, in that time, bread was baked and consumed daily. Furthermore, in a typical one-room peasant home, a family would normally make their bed together on a floor mat. And finally, in a small peasant village with houses built close together, any commotion in one house would be quickly known by one and all, thus causing the requirements for hospitality in the one home to become a concern for the whole village.

Another key for understanding this story, according to Bible scholar Joel Green, is the meaning of the Greek word anaideia, translated as “boldness” or “persistence.” A better translation for this term would be “avoidance of shame,” or positively, “maintenance of honor.” In this story, the friend will indeed arise and help his neighbor because to fail to do so would be to act dishonorably toward his neighbor. And the would-be host can boldly ask for help from his friend, based on the honor inherent in the relationship with him.

As Jesus’ listeners would have understood it, the opening of Jesus’ story (“Suppose one of you...”) could be paraphrased as the hypothetical question “Can you imagine...?”, for which the implied answer is “Of course not!” Specifically, in this case, the hypothetical question is “Can you imagine a friend who refuses to assist you in undertaking to provide hospitality at the arrival of an unexpected friend?” Jesus’ listeners would understand that for a neighbor to refuse to help a friend would be a ridiculous notion. Therefore, this story is not meant to equate God with a neighbor who grudgingly gets up to help his friend. Quite the contrary: in a much greater degree than that illustrated by the people in Jesus’ story, God is disposed to respond to our prayers for the sake of His honor. At the same time, we can approach Him boldly because...
of the relationship we have with Him. As Green points out, Jesus' illustration teaches us that, "because God will arise and act on behalf of those in need, [we] ought to bring [our] requests to him."7

Jesus goes on in verses 11-13 to give another illustration to help us understand the intent of prayer. He asks His listeners, "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Wait a minute, someone might be thinking, that's nice that God wants to give the Holy Spirit, but right now I need money to pay the bills or relief from this ailment I've had for such a long time. Again, this is an instance in which our intentions in prayer may not align with God's. Often we focus on urgent requests (and rightly so, as the Lord's Prayer affirms), but we may be actually shortchanging ourselves by asking God for a quick fix to an unpleasant or uncomfortable situation. We can ask for deliverance from a problem or healing from an illness, but by doing so we may miss a greater blessing God has in store. God is more concerned with our eternal welfare, as evidenced by the (continued on page 13)
offering of the Holy Spirit in answer to our requests. Remember that the Holy Spirit is the Comforter, the One who comes alongside us and indwells us, gives us guidance and understanding of the Scriptures, intercedes for us in prayer, and expresses our deepest prayers before the Father.

In arguing from the lesser to the greater, Jesus is saying that just as earthly parents would not intentionally give a harmful gift to a child (human failings notwithstanding), our heavenly Father will always give us only good and perfect gifts.

God wants us to bring our requests before Him—anything, any time, any place. But we need to do so with a heart of submission and with the trust and confidence that we can leave the ultimate answer with Him. When we feel that our prayers haven’t been answered in accordance with our desires or even at all, we need to recognize that, at best, we are “seeing through a glass darkly.” As P.T. Forsyth reminds us, “we shall come one day to a heaven where we shall gratefully know that God’s great refusals were sometimes the answers to our truest prayer.”

What peace this mind-set can give to our hearts!

While doctors may acknowledge that in some unidentifiable way prayer brings health benefits, the believer who prays in harmony with God’s purposes knows why prayer helps—not only because God may choose to answer our requests for healing, but also because, regardless of the outcome, prayer allows our hearts to rest confidant of God’s care and concern for us. And that is excellent heart medicine!

Endnotes
7 Green, p. 449.