

SERMON TITLE: "Renewing Our Resolutions: Prayers"  
SERMON TEXT: James 5:13-18  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: January 2, 2022, at First UMC

## **INTRODUCTION**

Well, here we are, at the start of a new year. Have you made your New Year's resolutions yet? Are you ready to lose 10 pounds, start exercising again, and balance your budget? I know. Some of us think New Year's resolutions are pointless because we'll probably abandon them by March, or February, or next week. But there really is something about getting a new calendar that allows us to start fresh and begin again. This New Year's opportunity can launch us into making changes that we may have been thinking about for a long time, but just needed a little extra motivation to get going. While one university study "found that 23% of people quit working on their resolution just two weeks into the new year,"<sup>1</sup> another study shows that "those who set New Year's resolutions are 10 times more likely to actually change their behavior than people who don't make these yearly goals."<sup>2</sup> So, with the powerful benefits of what researchers call "the fresh start effect,"<sup>2</sup> I hope we can make some positive improvements to our lives in the coming weeks and months.

Along with the physical, financial, and relational health resolutions we may have been considering, in these first five weeks of the New Year, I'm also going to ask us to commit ourselves to improving our spiritual health. Ever since the time of John Wesley in the 1700s, it's been customary for Methodist people to renew their spiritual covenant at the start of a new year. So, each Sunday in January, we're going to focus our attention on one of the vows persons make when they join the United Methodist Church. Throughout this month, I will challenge you and me to renew our resolve to participate faithfully in the ministries of our church by our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Today we begin with prayers.

## **1—WHY DO WE PRAY?**

Like the author of James, United Methodists believe that we should be a praying people. We believe that we should pray because, as James says in chapter five, verse 16, the prayer of a righteous person “is powerful and effective.” Prayer connects our limited, frail, sick, suffering, and sinful humanity to divine goodness and strength—bringing about positive results. Our lives are improved by prayer as we relax in the arms of a loving and capable God. With our stress reduced, our blood pressure and other bio-physical measures improve. With our anxieties eased, we are less likely to behave in unhealthy ways, such as overeating and other kinds of substance abuse. With a strong sense that we are intimately connected to a divine power for good in the world, we’re more likely to believe that the human things we do—like exercise, education, and hard work—will actually help us.

It’s quite natural to pray when we’re experiencing troubles, but that certainly isn’t the only time we should go to God in prayer. When we’re feeling cheerful and healthy, prayer is an opportunity to rejoice in God’s goodness and give thanks, which bolsters our spirits even more. Prayer is also a way for us to care for others who are in need. As we sense God at work in our own personal lives, we recognize many ways that God might be able to help our family members, friends, and people we don’t even know around the world. We express care for those persons when we lift up positive hopes and requests to God on their behalf. And, of course, as we focus our minds on those loving and helpful ideas, our own well-being is improved too. Why do we pray? We pray because it’s good for us and for others!

## **2—HOW DO WE PRAY?**

Having established why we should resolve to pray, we can now look at how to pray. James chapter five gives us a number of ideas. James suggests the effectiveness of both praying alone and praying with a group of supportive and faithful people. In verse 13, we see the instruction that we should sing our prayer as songs of praise. In verse 16, we see the guidance that we should confess our sins to

one another as a type of prayer. James also mentions anointing someone with oil as a kind of healing prayer.

I would add to that list some other methods of praying. We can pray with our eyes shut or open, with our hands clasped or our arms folded. We can pray standing up, sitting down, lying down, kneeling down, or upside down. We can pray while we're walking, running, or biking. We can pray while we're fishing, vacuuming, or shoveling snow. We can read prayers from a book, we can speak our own prayers on the spur of the moment, or we can write prayers in a journal. We can pray for our family and friends while talking with them on the phone or in a card or letter that we send. We can light a candle to focus our prayers. One of the most fervent prayers I ever prayed happened while I was driving my car through the wide open spaces of Wyoming with my gas gauge on empty. When I finally came to a gas station, I was never so happy to pay exorbitant prices and pray my thanks to God!

I remember when my friend Ellen's husband Tom was dying from cancer. Because Tom needed her at home, Ellen took a leave from her job. Over the weeks before Tom died, hospice workers came in and out of their house. But, because they didn't have any family members close by, Ellen and Tom were mostly isolated. So Ellen used her social network to gain the support she needed. Ellen regularly posted on Facebook how things were going. This was nearly a decade ago, and it seemed odd to me then for anyone to put so much personal detail in an online forum like that. But, in sharing so freely, Ellen gave her friends an easy way to respond and offer support and prayers. Not all of us would choose to do things the same way, but—for Ellen and Tom—that Facebook connection was a powerful means of seeking and benefitting from prayers that were desperately needed.

Prayers are important, and there are many ways for United Methodists to pray.

### **3—IN WHAT ATTITUDE AND EXPECTATION SHOULD WE PRAY?**

After we figure out why and how to pray, we might also wonder in what attitude we should pray. James 5 definitely leans toward high expectations. Verse 15 says, "The prayer of faith will save the sick,

and the Lord will raise them up.” Verse 16 says that “the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” And verses 17 and 18 give the example of Elijah’s successful prayers. James tells us that, even though Elijah “was a human being like us,” he was able to stop and start the rain with his prayers.

These verses lead us to an attitude of expectation that our prayers will be heard and answered. And that’s great. Prayer is a spiritual discipline of hopefulness. Prayer is a practice based on positive thinking. Many of us recall the verse where Jesus says, “For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (MT 7:8). We also remember Jesus saying, if parents give good gifts to their children, how much more will God “give good things to those who ask!” (MT 7:11).

But that doesn’t mean we should enter into prayer with an attitude of entitlement, like a spoiled brat demanding things from God. In earlier verses of James 5, the author writes that we should be patient and endure. In James, chapter four, the author warns against asking wrongly for things that are only worldly pleasures. He indicates that “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” And James adds that, instead of assuming we know how things should and will happen, we should seek and accept the will of the Lord.

Prayer is often a great mystery to us. I’m sure everyone here has, at some time or another, prayed for an outcome and wondered why God didn’t make that seemingly good thing happen. Our sense of failure in prayer has caused us to doubt our faith, our motives, our wisdom, and our worthiness. Sometimes the lack of results in prayer has caused us, or others we know, to doubt God’s very existence. I guess that’s why it’s so important for us to have the right kind of attitude and expectations in regard to prayer. The point of prayer is not to make us frustrated to the point of losing our faith. The point of prayer is to help us deal with the challenges of life. Prayer is for the purpose of giving us hope. If our attitude and expectations of prayer are reasonable, we will find our prayers to be effective.

## **CONCLUSION**

When I read the news this week about the terrible flooding in Brazil, I was reminded of the story of the guy up on the roof of his house. I know you've heard this story before, probably many times, but it bears repeating again. So, the guy is up on the roof of his house because of a flood. As the flood waters rose, the man began praying that God would rescue him. When the water was up to the top of his porch, his neighbor came by in his rowboat and offered to help him get to high ground. But the man declined, saying, "No, I have faith that *God* will rescue me." After the increasing water forced the man to climb higher on his roof, a high speed rescue boat came by and offered to help him get to safety. But again the man declined, saying, "I prayed for *God* to save me." As the floodwaters continued to rise and the man was now clinging to his chimney, a helicopter flew overhead. The search and rescue team dropped a rope ladder and hollered for the man to climb up. But he refused, yelling back, "No, I have faith that *God* will rescue me." Eventually, the flood overcame him, and the man died. He went to heaven, and there he confronted God. "Lord, I prayed to you with great faith. Why didn't you save me?" And God answered, "I sent you two boats and a helicopter, didn't I?"

I don't think that guy could have been a United Methodist because we United Methodists are practical folks who understand that God often uses other people to answer our prayers. We United Methodists also understand that the purpose of prayer is to bring us comfort, courage, and hope—which it does best when we come to prayer humbly, seeking God's wisdom and will over our own. We engage in this spiritual practice in solitude, in groups, and in just about every imaginable way because we believe that prayer is powerful and effective. We believe that our prayers improve our lives and the lives of other people. And that's why it makes sense at the beginning of 2022 for us to renew our resolution. Let's participate faithfully in prayers.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.inc.com/amy-morin/7-tips-to-make-sure-you-actually-keep-your-new-years-resolution-this-time.html>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.verywellmind.com/how-to-keep-your-new-years-resolutions-2795719?print>