*THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ON PRAYER*

James 5:13-20

September 26, 2021

Some time ago, the Partnership for a Drug-Free America launched an anti-narcotics campaign with a simple, but compelling, television ad. A man holds up an egg and says, “This is your brain.”

Then he motions to a frying pan and says, “This is drugs.”

He cracks open the egg, fries the contents (it fries quickly with lots of bubbling), and he says, “This is your brain on drugs. Any questions?”

What we smoke, eat, and drink can clearly have an effect on our brain. No surprise there.

But how about when we pray? What happens to a brain on prayer?

In his letter to a group of Christians outside of Palestine, James calls for prayer when people are suffering, cheerful, and sick, promising that “the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (v. 16). James is convinced that prayer can have a significant effect on our brain, body, heart and soul – in bad times and good. And today, medical researchers are finally catching up with him.

Dr. Andrew Newberg of Thomas Jefferson Hospital in Philadelphia has been studying the effect of prayer on the brain for more than 20 years. He injects radioactive dye into people, and then looks for changes in their heads when they pray. He does not claim that prayer is a cure-all, but he believes that it can be every bit as important as science in helping patients to heal.

Pointing to a computer screen that showed brain activity, Newberg said to NBC News back in 2014, “You can see it’s all red here when the person is just at rest, but you see how it turns into these yellow colors when she’s actually doing prayer.”

Without prayer, your brain is red – a hot and inflammatory color -- and with prayer, your brain is yellow. Well, that’s not such a great color, either. You’d think that the praying brain would display a color that quiet and calming, like blue or green. But you and I know that the color display is arbitrary. The point is that it *is different* with prayer.

When I was a hospital chaplain, my Dad (who was a cardiologist) sent me an article from the Journal of the American Medical Association about a study made at University of California School of Medicine on prayer and heart patients. The study was conducted such that some patients would have people praying for them. And the control group didn’t have people praying for them.

The prayed-for patients had a significantly higher, faster recovery rate, with significantly less redevelopment of problems, or of complications than the control group.

Prayer works! Scientifically proven.

Back in the first century, James had the same belief [without benefit—or complication of—scientific studies.] “Are any among you sick?” he asked his fellow Christians. “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. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven” (vv. 14-15).

Prayer is powerful, says James. Powerful and effective (v. 16).

Of course, not everyone believes this. Dr. Richard Sloan, the author of a book called *Blind Faith: The Unholy Alliance of Religion and Medicine*, agrees that the brain is going to change during prayer, but he sees no proof that these changes lead to healing. “Your brain changes when you eat chocolate,” he says. “There’s nothing special about showing brain changes when people pray.”

Sure, says Sloan, religion can provide comfort to believers during times of stress. But he warns that we shouldn’t treat religion “like some sort of cosmic vending machine in which you can deposit a coin to get a health benefit.

Yeah, but . . . . Heres’ the funny thing: Almost nobody treats religion like a cosmic vending machine. The vast majority of Christians agree with Dr Newberg, the one who injected radioactive dye in to people and studied their brains as they prayed. He believes that medicine and prayer should work hand in hand.

Prayer is “not a cure for cancer,” he says. (And I say, ‘But just maybe it is.’) “It’s not going to cure somebody of heart disease.” (No? Look at the UC Berkeley prayer study.) Dr Newberg goes on: “We can’t tell people to pray in order to get better—that doesn’t really make sense. The reason that it works is because it is part of the person’s belief system.” Yup. And there you have it.

The power of prayer is not that it changes disease, but that it changes us – the people who pray. When Dr. Newberg studied a group of Franciscan nuns who joined together in meditative prayer, he discovered that the area of the brain associated with the sense of self began to “shut down.” He saw that in this type of prayer “you become connected to God. You become connected to the world. Your self sort of goes away.”

Connection to God. Connection to the world around you. Loss of self. That’s real change, and true healing. As James says to his fellow Christians, “The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up” (v. 15). Prayer doesn’t always lead to a cure, but it saves the sick by raising them into the presence of God.

Prayer changes the people who pray, making them more peaceful, accepting, and aligned with their Christian faith. Your brain on prayer may not kill cancer cells, or convince God to cure you of your heart disease, but it might make you better able to face and to overcome your health challenges.

Fundamentally, prayer changes your heart and mind so that it’s more aligned with the heart of and mind of God, more receptive to what God wants to do with your life and for the world around you.

One of the most well-known modern prayers is the Serenity Prayer, central to the recovery from addiction being achieved in thousands of 12-step groups: *“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”*

Notice that God is not asked in this prayer to heal anyone miraculously. Instead, God Is being asked to give serenity, courage, and wisdom to people so that they can become well, and live life more fully. . . closer-in to God’s will for them, huh?

And since part of the healing process for many of us is going to have to include forgiveness, there needs to be an opportunity for honest confession and pardon. This is why the letter of James says, “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (v. 16).

Confession. Forgiveness. Prayer for others. Healing. Each has a role to play in the prayer of faith which saves the sick. The Serenity Prayer is recited in 12-step groups across our country and throughout the world, and the result has been sobriety for millions of people. In each of these groups, the Serenity Prayer is said in order to change the hearts and minds of people, not God.

God already wants these things for you, you see?

People who pray for serenity, courage, and wisdom will find their prayers answered, and will be given the help they need.

[And as an aside, those big, intractable things like peace between nations and people groups, divisions in our own country, freedom from poverty, and the warming of the earth’s climate, and even natural disasters like earthquake, fire, and flooding . . . I think God already has a plan and an intention for good about those. Our asking for serenity and courage and wisdom, may just put you and me into that plan so that we don’t block God’s working.]

People who pray for serenity, courage, and wisdom will find the resources they need, and the way may indeed be miraculously made plain. Eileen Flanagan, who has written a book on the Serenity Prayer called *The Wisdom to Know the Difference*, quotes a study which found that wise people “are able to step outside themselves and assess a troubling situation with calm reflection. They recast a crisis as a problem to be addressed, a puzzle to be solved. They take action in situations they can control, and accept the inability to do so when matters are outside their control.”

Prayer helps us to step outside ourselves, assess troubling situations, and take action when we can. But it also helps us to accept our inability when situations are outside our control. Prayer aligns us with the will of God for healing and wholeness in human life, even when we are facing a terminal illness.

Remember, “the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven” (v. 15). Each of us will die of something, eventually. It could be cancer or heart disease or a bad accident. Good health and physical fitness only delay what’s inevitable.

But this does not mean that we shouldn’t pray for the Lord to save us, raise us up, and forgive our sins . . . or to pray for the Lord to save another, raise him or her up, and forgive their sins, either.

Listen to this: prayer can heal us, even when it doesn’t cure us of our illness. It changes our brains and it changes the rest of us as well, turning us into people who get outside of ourselves to form deeper connections with God and and a closer love for the people around us. Prayer is powerful and effective for wisdom, for courage, and serenity. It is also effective in bringing human beings closer to each other and drawing the bonds around us closer to our God.

So let’s re-imagine the old anti-drug commercial. “This is your brain,” says the man. “This is prayer.” Put the two together, and the result is not bubbly, burned fried egg. Instead, it’s a person who is healed and made whole: saved, raised, and forgiven.

Any questions?

Amen.