

Medical Study Questions the Power of Prayer How Should Christians Respond?

A recent headline in the *New York Times* declared: “Long-Awaited Medical Study Questions the Power of Prayer.” The story, originating with Associated Press and reported by major news outlets everywhere, said this work was the largest study of its kind. Involving more than 1,800 heart bypass patients in six medical centers for almost ten years, the *Times* report called it “the most scientifically rigorous investigation of whether prayer can heal illness.” The result? Researchers found not only that an organized, specific prayer effort for the patients had no effect on their recovery, but also that patients who knew people were praying for them actually had a slightly higher rate of complications.

Does this cast doubt on the effectiveness of prayer? Is prayer a waste of your time?

Anyone who seeks a prayer life guided by Scripture should not take this study seriously. The fatal flaw in this research is the assumption that prayer can be successfully evaluated by white-coated people with notepads using test tubes, Petri dishes, and algorithms.

As they tried to press prayer into a scientifically measurable form, the researchers turned it into something other than biblical prayer. For instance, the intercessors were told that while they might otherwise pray as they wanted for each anonymous patient, a particular phrase had to be prayed in every prayer, exactly as given by the scientists. Also, the prayers were to be offered only for a two-week period. Specific medical results had to be recognized, and within a thirty-day window. Moreover, only medical results were considered. That prayer might be answered dramatically, but in ways other than the researchers were tabulating, was meaningless and irrelevant in this study.

Scientific investigations of prayer always fail to recognize that prayer is based upon a relationship, a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And relationships cannot properly be evaluated by scientific methods.

Imagine scientists attempting to quantify a father’s love for a child based upon the percentage of the child’s requests that the father granted. If the child received what if asked for 51% of the time, would that prove that making requests of the father “worked”? How about 49%? Who determines the minimum percentage necessary for successful asking? And what if the child made unwise requests, causing the percentage to fall precipitously? Would that be evidence disproving the effectiveness of asking? What if the child was asking for something while in disobedience to the father? What if the child was asking of someone who was not even his father?

The scientists apparently presumed that if prayer indeed “works,” then the prayers of everyone in the three groups who were asked to pray would be answered because they were members of churches or religious communities. Such presumption, however, divorces prayer from the Gospel of Christ which establishes the relationship between any individual and a prayer-hearing God. These scientists—and, for that matter, most other folks—do not realize that prayers are not heard because of people’s religious activities or church membership, but because of what Jesus has done through His life, death, and resurrection (John 14:6; Hebrews 10:19-22). And the Bible makes plain that only those who come to God in prayer through Jesus can expect to have their prayers heard. Not even “the most scientifically rigorous investigation” can isolate and evaluate prayer apart from the dynamics of this spiritual relationship upon which prayer is predicated.

Jesus Himself gives us another reason to be skeptical of efforts to subject the supernatural to the researcher’s computer or the scientist’s microscope. In His temptation experience, Jesus quoted from the Old Testament to Satan and said, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test” (Matthew 4:7). This means it is wrong for the creature to ever say “Prove it!” to his Creator. God has provided ample evidence of His existence, character, and power for us to believe Him and love Him. In light of His abundant self-revelation to us through creation, Christ, and the Bible, we should not challenge God or imply that we need more proof before we can trust and obey Him. And while Jesus was not referring to scientific evaluations of prayer, such studies push very close to putting God to the test.

Finally, it really doesn't matter what studies like these conclude. Whether science seems to support the effectiveness of prayer or to contradict it (and studies have supported, and will continue to support, both sides), Christians do not govern their prayer lives according to the latest scientific experiments. We pray because we have come to know God through Jesus Christ. His Spirit gives us the desire to pray (“Abba! Father!”, Gal. 4:6), creating in us a new heavenward orientation that’s expressed in frequent communication with our Father. Moreover, we pray because God commands us to pray, and we do not submit the will of God for scientific approval. True Christians will “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17), whether secular research thinks it beneficial or not.

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