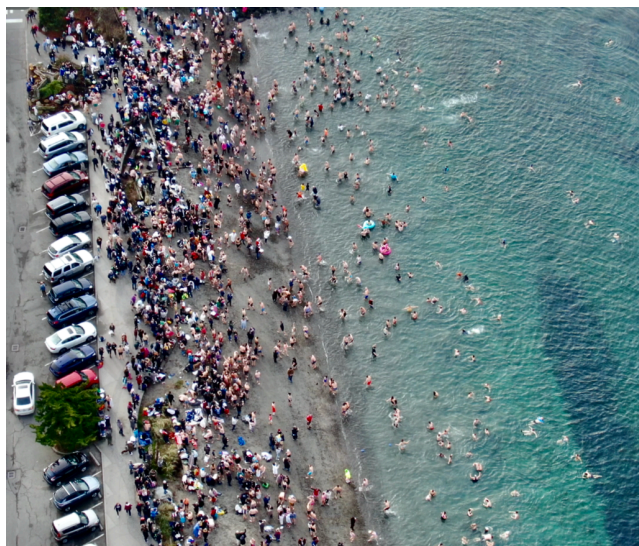


Going Deeper, Part One
Pastor Matt Messner
James 5:13-18
21 Days of Prayer and Fasting Kick Off
Communion
January 7, 2023

Introduction

Happy New Year! This is the first Sunday of 2024!

Many people, across the world, began the year with a Polar Plunge.
Or a Polar Bear plunge. There were events in Edmonds, Golden Gardens, and all around the Puget Sound.



How many of you did it? Was it amazing?

Some go further than just an annual event on the New Year, and they meet up every week to jump in the Sound. Perhaps some of you are Puget Sound Plungers.

Others go for the daily personal ice bath in the back yard.

This has become a thing! It's not my thing, but I do admit, that yesterday I swam in Lake Washington. I like the "immersion" experience. It feels great:

Your body's first reaction to a plunge in chilly water is the "cold shock" response. Your heart rate jumps. Stress hormones spike. You gasp suddenly, and may hyperventilate.

Your reward if you stay in long enough to survive these initial excruciating moments? You start

to shiver. Don't stay in for too long though...in the Puget Sound you could die within an hour.

To the uninitiated, it may not be obvious why the practice of cold plunging has attracted a huge following in recent years.

But those who've embraced the cold water craze — be that in a frigid lake, the ocean, or an ice bath in their backyard — frequently describe powerful, even transformative effects on their state of mind and sense of wellbeing.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/12/31/1222344187/want-a-polar-bear-plunge-on-new-years-day-heres-a-deep-dive-on-cold-water-dips>

Participants claim many benefits: Euphoria, stress reduction, fat reduction, better sleep, decrease inflammation, improve circulation, an instant hit of dopamine and adrenaline.

Here at New Life Church at the start of 2024, I am calling you to take another kind of plunge: to go deeper, not into ice cold water, but deeper into your relationship with God.

It takes intentionality to deepen one's relationship with God. It may at times seem crazy, counterintuitive, and at times it will be uncomfortable, but the end result will be personal transformation and spiritual breakthrough.

Deepening your relationship with God is like deepening any relationship. It takes time, experience and investment.

You may have shallow friends who spend some time with you but don't really care about you or know you. Your relationship is transactional, or strictly related to your job.

But then hopefully have some deep friends, who have seen you through your best times, and your worst times. In the deepest of relationships there is ongoing connection, communication, and there is no need to pretend. Last week on New Year's Eve we got together with some friends...in our old house...it was so refreshing! We had lived together, worked together, played and prayed together, over the years.

Relationships with God are meant to grow as well. How do we get there with God?

Over the next few weeks, we will be studying the things that we can do to spend quality or focused time with God, that will deepen that relationship.

Furthermore, tomorrow we begin 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting, and I want to talk to you about how you can participate in this powerful time. Fasting and prayer are called traditionally called "spiritual disciplines".

A spiritual discipline is not a way to get brownie points with God. It is not a gaggle of spiritual maturity. It is not unpleasant. A discipline is an activity that we engage in that disrupts the

natural or normal routine, and empowers us to grow.

Discipline is a large part of discipleship. A disciple is a learner and we learn through spiritual disciplines.

Define: **Spiritual Disciplines: Any activity that can help me gain the power to live life as Jesus taught and modeled it.** (There is no limit to this list...what works for you? Are you willing to try new things?)

Richard Foster calls Spiritual Disciplines *"the door to liberation"*

Discipline means freedom to face life with confidence.

Discipline gives us the freedom to know God's direction in our lives.

Discipline allows us to have fun without guilt.

Discipline sets us free to make the most of life.

Discipline is our part of the combination of human effort and heavenly help, both of which are important for discipleship.

Last week I talked to you about growing deeper in your relationship with Jesus. For the next few weeks, we are going to give you some tools that will help you get there.

We will begin with a the topic of prayer and then I will briefly talk to you about fasting.

Prayer is the key to deepening a relationship with God. Prayer is meant to be the atmosphere in which we live, in relationship with God.

Prayer is the mightiest weapon that God has put at our disposal.

Prayer is the most underutilized resource that we have for life.

Prayer is the key to unlocking the gifts of God's provision, healing and wisdom.

Prayer is the way we find victory in the unseen battles of life.

Prayer moves the heart of God and results in the in-breaking of God's rule and reign in our lives.

Turn with me to James 5:

James 5:13-18

¹³ Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

¹⁷ Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. (NIV)

This passage answers several questions about prayer:

James 5

I. When should we pray?

This is a good question...Many people pray when they are in big trouble...

¹³ Is any one among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick?

When are you most likely to pray? I am most likely to pray when I am in trouble.

Life is full of troubles.

Recently I was driving in dense fog....(I prayed)

In November...prayed when my granddaughter had a seizure...etc.

- **When we are in trouble:**

Are you facing trouble right now? Trouble with money? As we face trouble, may the Lord find us on our knees. Do you need a place to live? Did you just suffer a big break up? Etc.

If we are likely to pray when we're in trouble, when are we least likely to pray? When everything is going good and when we can handle things ourselves. This verse tells us to remember to pray...

- **When we are happy:** Not just during the bad times or the times of trouble.
 - Let "thank you Jesus" be an instinctive (automatic) to happy times and blessings. Prayer is not just a 911 call. It is a call to make when life is good.
- **When we are sick:** a little or a lot. Don't wait for someone to offer to pray for you. We have had a lot of sickness in our family during the past two months, and it has increased my prayer life. This verse encourages us to take the initiative. We must make room for God's healing in our lives. Sometimes it happens. Sometimes it doesn't. But that is up to God.

To summarize James 5:13-14:

Pray in all situations

For this reason, I believe planned prayer and spontaneous prayer are both important. I have a daily prayer list that I work through every morning, but then I also aim to live with a constant awareness of God's presence that makes ongoing prayer a natural reaction to life.

You may be wondering, "How do I pray?" If you are uncomfortable praying publicly, let me encourage you that prayer is a skill that is easy to develop. Here is what this passage says to

do:

II. **How should we pray?**

Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith...

Be proactive by seeking out others who will pray with you.

You don't have to pray alone.

- **Pray with others**

- Involving another person is an act of faith. This is not easy for people...
- Agreeing prayer is powerful: Matthew 18:19-20 ¹⁹ "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."
- Have a prayer partner (friend or a spouse). Pray with your children, every night.

Yesterday, after our men's breakfast, I found someone to pray for me, because I needed it.

Notice also that this passage says to:

- **Pray with anointing oil**

- Why? Well, Jesus sent out His disciples and they did this. There is nothing magical about the oil. It doesn't matter if you use a drop or a bottle, or if you put it on someone's head or their hair. It doesn't matter if it is common olive oil or "anointing oil from the Holy Land with frankincense and myrrh). Anointing with oil is a way to use a physical symbol as a declaration that: "God is the healer", not the person praying for you. It is a way of pointing towards God's presence and power. It is a powerful symbolic reminder that the Holy Spirit is here.

- **Pray "in the name of the Lord"**

This is the way of identifying who is really at work in answering the prayer. Access to healing comes through Jesus. Jesus is "the healer". (What Foursquare believes). You don't need to go and find a "faith healer". Jesus is just as present here today as He will be at an event with a famous evangelist and a lot of hype.

- **Pray in faith**

- Hebrews 11:1 "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." NIV 1984
- Faith is confidence in God
 - Often I am believing for a slow and natural answer to prayer but this verse is implying a fast and supernatural healing.
 - How often do you pray, because it is the right thing to do, but without the actual expectation of an answer?

III. **Why should we pray? (Results of prayer)**

"...will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."

- **We should pray to be healed**

- Physically. Healing of sickness...
Example (testimony of healing)Leticia Hurdle noted that a tumor near her eye that has been present for 6 years is no longer there according to an MRI.

She had been taking medication that sometimes caused nausea for this and when our church family became aware of this tumor that could eventually cause blindness, we prayed and the faithfulness of God is recognized.

- Emotionally. Healing is often a process. "My God shall supply all of my needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

- **We should pray to be forgiven**

- Some have taught that verse 16 is a formula for healing. "Confess and you'll be healed. Don't confess, and you'll stay sick." Some take it even further: "If you're sick, it's because of sin in your life." These pious people will one day get a wake-up call when they're sick.
- It is true that sin has its destructive consequences. Stop poisoning yourself and you'll stop being sick. You'll become healthier. Hold onto unforgiveness and bitterness and you'll be sick. Non-Christians understand this. So, confess and be healed.
- Still, you will get older. Confession of sin will not stop that process. If you avoid accidents, you will eventually die of some kind of "natural" sickness. But you will not die defeated. You will not die "in sin". You will be sick and you will physically die in righteousness. On the other hand you will never die spiritually, in Christ. He will walk with you through your illnesses. He is on your side. He is the healer, not the punisher. He is your friend, not your enemy. Don't let any fools shame you into thinking God is punishing you for some un-confessed sin you cannot think of.

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. *Who is righteous? What is "righteous"?* Righteous means that a person is in right relationship with God. Jesus is "the righteous one" and He gives us His righteousness as a gift of His grace. You are righteous if you are in right relationship with God.

- **Pray because prayer is powerful**

- Matthew 17:20 Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

- **Prayer is effective**

How powerful? How effective?

Effective enough to heal. The example here shows that prayer is effective enough to change nature. All things are possible.

- Heidi's accident
- Again, and again.

Praying is always part of the solution.

Praying is always the right choice.

Praying is a difference maker. "When I pray coincidences happen. When I don't, they don't."
Answered prayers are not coincidences.

Respond to any situation that you face, with prayer, and your life will be blessed for the better.

21 Days of Prayer and Fasting Card

- Just a note regarding fasting....I share this with you because I have had many people ask about this. And the resources don't give clear guidelines. Fasting is found in the Bible in the Old and New Testaments. It was practiced by Jesus, and his disciples, and in the early church.

In fasting we abstain from our ordinary food to some significant degree and for some significant length of time.

Fasting is not done to impress God or merit favor, nor because there is anything wrong with food. Rather, it is done that we may consciously experience the direct sustenance of God to our body and our whole person.

There are many, many kinds of fasts. Basically, fasting is simply doing without food but that doesn't tell you how much food or for how long and so on. So, there are many, many ways. For example, there is a fast, which simply doesn't have any meat or dessert. I have heard of half days fasts, from 7 p.m. until 7 a.m. I have heard of people fasting from solids, or from meat, or from a meal a day. Some people will fast from things that clutter their time or their thoughts: social media, TV, or constant music. If you have a medical condition, or are on medication, be careful about how a disrupted diet may effect your meds.

Whatever fast you do, instead of eating, take some time to worship. Use a journal to note your experience, the Bible passages you read, what you felt God say and how you felt physically.

You have a plan? Respond by making a commitment to the 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting.

Communion

- Conclude with ministry time including worship and prayer

