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### **Prayer: Does it Work?**

Prayer has been in the news lately. A study released in July by Duke University was reported by the *Daily Press* under this headline: "Prayer's effect on health called nil by Duke study." It began, "Praying for someone who is ill and preparing to undergo a risky medical procedure appears to have no effect on the patient's future health. That's the finding of one of the largest scientific investigations of the power of prayer conducted to date."

As a Christian who believes in the power of prayer, I was struck by this negative finding. Has prayer really been found to be useless? Like many newspaper readers, often I read only the headline and lead paragraph of an article. This one, though, I read through all the way. What I found there led me to look in about a dozen other major newspapers to see if they emphasized the same thing in their reports. They all did.

I say "emphasized," because in spite of the way the reports began, saying that prayer had no effect, a different and contrary message appeared as one read through the articles. The details showed that prayer had not been discredited at all.

In the Duke study, a large number of patients undergoing cardiac procedures were selected without their knowledge to be in one of two groups. One group received prayer as directed by the researchers, the other did not. (There was also another variable studied, which I'm leaving out here for simplicity's sake.) The group that was prayed for came out no better than the group that was not. Thus the conclusion that prayer had no effect.

This seems clear on the face of it, until one looks at how the research was done. Those who did the praying were a mix of Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists. If there is any possible difference between the effects of the four ways of praying, the study did not address it.

Scientists quoted in various articles pointed out other problems with the results. Medical research studies monitor dosages very carefully, but as one scientist asked, "how do you define a 'dose' of prayer?" Good medical studies control the other treatments a patient receives, but there was no attempt in this case (how could there be?) to monitor or control prayers that were prayed by patients' family or friends. The scientists simply had no way of knowing how much prayer each patient received, or what kind of prayer. These are major, even fatal research weaknesses.

This leads to a conclusion and a couple of questions. The conclusion was stated by the lead researcher: "Mitchell Krucoff, the Duke University cardiologist who led the study, says the research . . . was not intended to provide a definitive answer to the question of whether prayer works." Nor did it provide such an answer. Headlines that described prayer's effects as "nil" were misleading. We know nothing more about prayer's effectiveness now than we did before the study.

The first question I ask about this is, why was it reported as it was? I'm not speaking just of the *Daily Press*. The dozen or so major papers I checked via the Internet all emphasized the same negative "findings." Readers who (as is common) read only the headlines and first paragraphs would have gained an entirely false view. Only at the source--the Duke University press release--was the story told without misleading emphases. It would be irresponsible to speculate here on the reasons for this kind of reporting, but one cannot help but wonder.

The second question is the really important one: Does prayer work?

I doubt a scientific study could be designed to give a definitive answer to the question. My professional training is in a branch of social science called Industrial and Organizational Psychology. If I did research on a group of people, allowing one highly influential participant to affect all the others in uncontrolled ways, I would be laughed out of the academy. You can't let one person overrun a whole group and call it scientific research.

So it is with prayer research: if there's any reality to prayer at all, then one Person, God, has total control of the results, and we can't control Him. Now, He might cooperate with the research, allowing prayers to be answered, which would confirm the reality of prayer. If we saw no results from prayer, though, we would have two possible explanations: either prayer is not real, or God decided not to cooperate. There would be no scientific way to know which was the case. The reality of prayer cannot be scientifically disproved.

So again we ask, does prayer work? I've discussed this with skeptics who think it's pretty tricky to say that science could prove the reality of prayer, but could never disprove it. I understand their point. That's the way it is, though. There will be more attempts to do research on prayer, I'm sure, and we'll need to interpret them with due caution.

In the meantime, this I know: a great many people who have tried prayer know it works. I can point to many, many prayer answers over the years. Some of them could be called miraculous; for example, through prayer I was instantaneously healed of chronic bronchitis.

Prayer is not just for getting things we want from God, though; in fact, that's not its main point at all. God doesn't need us to tell Him what we need, He knows already. The primary purpose of prayer is to communicate with Him, to build and develop a love relationship with Him. The knowledge of God is new territory for each believer to explore. As Richard Foster wrote in his

modern classic, *Celebration of Discipline*, "Prayer . . . . is original research in unexplored territory." It's how we deepen our own discoveries of God.

Those of us who know this are going to keep right on praying.

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