

## Prayerful Thoughts About "Thoughts and Prayers"

*You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves... My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can't save anyone, can it? Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. What if one of you said, "Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!"? What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs? In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity. (James 1:22; 2:14-17, CEB)*

In the wake of the most recent school shooting tragedy that took place in Parkland, Florida yesterday on Valentine's Day, I've seen a recurring theme show up in various social media outlets. That theme is that people are fed up with hearing about people's "thoughts and prayers." I've actually seen the phrase "thoughts and prayers" crossed out and replaced with more action-oriented words, as if "thoughts and prayers" did not matter at all. What I'm observing is that large numbers of people have come to the conclusion that "thoughts and prayers" make absolutely no impact on the world around us, and that we ought to stop offering those words in the wake of any tragedy.

As a believer in Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray regularly and intentionally for the needs of the world, this sentiment pains my heart, for I know that prayer has great power, beyond what we can do on our own. And yet, I can understand the feeling of deep frustration behind their message. It seems that far too many of us have been content with sending our "thoughts and prayers" without becoming the answer to our own prayers. At the very least, I think what people are hoping for is that "thoughts and prayers" would actually lead to some form of meaningful action. When they don't see that happen, then prayer and the church are seen as irrelevant, or worse, uncaring to the world.

Friends, I believe that prayer has great power. I've seen it change people's lives and circumstances. And we should never abandon it. Prayer is what connects us to God. It's our lifeline to the Creator and Sustainer. But, one of the most impactful parts of prayer is that **prayer has the power to change us**. Let me say that again in case you read it too fast - **Prayer Changes Us!** Yes, I'm talking about you and me, the ones who pray.

And so, prayer should often lead us to take action. We should pray like it all depends on God, but work hard like it all depends on us. As James says, "*faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity.*" You may have heard that verse translated, "*Faith without works is dead.*" Either way speaks clearly to us, doesn't it?

In the Methodist movement, John Wesley held two seemingly contrasting ideas in balanced tension - the need for **works of piety** (personal practices such as prayer, fasting, and searching the Scriptures) and **works of mercy** (which include addressing the social issues of the day, such as poverty, disease, and lack of education). I am reminded that it is important to practice **both** of these things in our faith - internal and external signs of our faith. It's a **both/and** kind of thing, not an **either/or**.

We need to be people of prayer, so that **when** we take action, we do so in alignment with the ways of Jesus. We don't want to just run off and do our own thing all of the time. We actually need to know what the kingdom of God looks like so that we can help Jesus answer the prayer, "Thy will be done on earth **as it is in heaven.**"

And at the same time, we need to be people of action, using our faith to make a difference in the world, right here, right now. We can't truly be people of compassion without stepping up and doing something about the needs we see around us. And, yes, the needs are many, so that's why we need to work together.

It's particularly frustrating to see the same kind of tragedy (such as mass shootings with large numbers of casualties) take place over and over and over again, and not see much being done about it, especially when such tragedies seem to be preventable, at least to some degree. Why shouldn't we step back and ask ourselves questions like: "What does Jesus think about the availability of AR-15 semi-automatic rifles in our nation?" and "Is there something we should do differently to prevent their use against innocent civilians?"

So, if your "thoughts and prayers" are prompting you to:

- Send financial gifts to help people reeling after a natural disaster, do it!
- Go to help people rebuild their lives after that natural disaster, do it!
- Volunteer to mentor at-risk teens at school so that they know the love of God and others in their lives, do it!
- Be a positive presence in the lives of people on the margins of society, do it!
- Contact your legislators to insist that changes be made to laws which could help prevent mass shootings, do it!

Let's let our "thoughts and prayers" guide us to take meaningful action in Jesus' name!

Lenten Blessings in Christ,

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