

This Is Your Brain on Prayer
James 5:13-20

Years 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, and says, “This is your brain on drugs.”

Finally, he looks at the camera and asks, “Any questions?”

More recently, researchers have found that THC — the psychoactive compound in marijuana — can disrupt focus, memory, decision-making, and motivation for about 24 hours. An instructor in psychology at Harvard’s medical school told The New York Times on October 29, 2014 that “we can see these structural effects in the brain,” and the effects may be longer lasting than previously thought.

When this instructor looked at the brain scans of 20 pot smokers, ages 18 to 25, she didn’t see a fried egg on her computer screen. But she did see evidence of structural differences in two regions of the brain. Not a good sign.

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

But how about what 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.” 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 December 2014, “You can see it’s all red here when the person is just at rest, but you see 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's quiet and calming, like a pastel, taupe, or mauve.

Such changes cause Newberg to believe that prayer has the power to heal. He suggests that “by doing these practices, you can cause a lot of different changes all the way throughout the body, which could have a healing effect.”

Back in the first century, James had the same belief. “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.”

Prayer is powerful, says James. Powerful and effective.

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.”

Dr. Sloan has a point, but here's 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 into 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. “It is not going to cure somebody of heart disease. 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.”

So how does prayer actually work? What makes it powerful and effective?

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 writes to his fellow Christians, “The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.” Prayer does not 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 convictions. 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 doesn't change the heart and mind of God, but it can change our own human heart and mind.

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 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.

And since part of the healing process for many of us is going 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."

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.

People who pray for serenity, courage, and wisdom will find their prayers answered, and will be given the help they need. 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 the inability to act 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." 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 delays the inevitable.

But this does not mean that we should not pray for the Lord to save us, raise us up and forgive our sins.

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 with the people around us. Prayer is powerful and effective because it gives us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can and wisdom to know the difference.

Prayer also gives us the opportunity to confess our sins and receive forgiveness, freeing us from the guilt and regret that can eat us up like a cancer.

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 a fried egg. Instead, it's a person who is healed and made whole. Saved, raised, and forgiven. Amen