

God, Life, and Everything "Prayer Shaming"

So many topics and so little time. Just in the last week or so, there's been a letter to the editor complaining about my column criticizing those who blame or seem to blame all Islam for terror (I've written a response, but it'll have to wait a few weeks); Jerry Falwell, Jr.'s call for students at Liberty University to carry weapons as defense against Muslims; the cartoon of Santa being arrested for Identity theft, and of course, Advent. With the rash of religion-based topics in the news these days, I really need a daily column to get it all in!

But I'll focus this week one that is pretty basic. Prayer.

In the wake of the past couple of mass shootings (by "mass shooting" I understand a situation in which four or more people are shot by one party), there has been a frustrated criticism of politicians and Facebook posts that say, "Our thoughts and prayers are with [name of victim community]."

The New York Daily News ran a loud front page headline last Thursday that read: "God Isn't Fixing This."

What's behind this "Prayer Shaming" as the criticism has been dubbed? Do people no longer believe in prayer? Should we no longer pray for victims of violence?

Actually, I believe the criticism is more nuanced. I believe it has nothing to do with whether or not critics believe in the efficacy of prayer. In fact, I know several folks who pray regularly yet have taken part in this very public critique on it.

Most of those who complain about all those "thoughts and prayers" are not criticizing prayer. They are criticizing empty gestures.

It is, after all, easy to say, "I'll pray for you." It requires more commitment to do something. These "Thoughts and Prayers," especially coming from a politician who has no intention of doing anything to decrease gun violence, sound hollow, insincere.

They remind me of the Epistle of James. You may remember the apostle writing about faith versus works: What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?..." (James 2:14-16, NIV translation)

You could rework that to read: What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he will pray for you but doesn't put that prayer into action. If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "I'll pray for you," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?"

Don't get me wrong. I believe prayer is necessary. It's just not enough. To stop at prayer is not to be faithful to the prayer.

But first, perhaps we ought to consider what prayer is. The simplest answer is, it's being with God. It is talking with God but more importantly, it is listening to God. We believe that in praying, we come closer to knowing God and, ultimately, knowing God's will. We believe when we pray, we come closer to others, as well. And we believe we become empowered to do God's will.

Prayer, then, is all about how we will live in this world. What it is not meant to be is an empty gesture. It is not meant to be that thing you say when someone is suffering and you don't know what to say. It is not meant to be what we use to justify inaction. It leads to action.

In the case of gun violence, which virtually everyone agrees is a bad thing even if they agree on nothing else, to say one is praying for victims but to do nothing about it (regardless of what you think will reduce gun violence), is not to follow through, to not take that offer of prayer seriously.

From my point of view, praying is essential. That's how we can sit in God's presence. That's how we can put into proper perspective the trials and tribulations of life. That's how we can understand our obligations to each other. More importantly, that's how we can gain the strength and courage to do what God would have us do.

So pray!

Pray for the victims of violence.

Pray for the end of such violence.

Pray for your part in the conversation and the actions that we as a society will have to take if we are not to fall into our own self-destructive chaos.

But if you pray - be prepared for the consequences.