SCIENCE HAS NO MEASURE FOR STRENGTH OF PRAYER:

Prayer doesn't work. That's what some atheists are saying about the largest and most careful study of intercessory prayer ever done.

Prayer works. That's what everyone else knows in their hearts, regardless of whether they can prove it or not.

What would Jesus do? He would probably laugh at the controversy, then rebuke the authors of the study to "render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's."

I agree with the bachelor from Nazareth on this one. Objective reality and spiritual reality exist on different mental planets. Using a scientific study to measure the efficacy of prayer is like trying to use a thermometer -- rectal, oral, eardrum or otherwise -- to measure someone's mood. The research design won't work.

I am not criticizing the $2.4 million dollar study funded by the esteemed John Templeton Foundation, published by the American Heart Journal and reported in Chronicle of Higher Education on April 14. But all it proved was that two weeks of prayer by total strangers for anonymous hospital patients who were miles away had no effect on the likelihood of complications from heart bypass surgery. This tightly prescribed conclusion, however, says nothing about other circumstances.

The medical population consisted of 1,802 individual patients from a half-dozen academic medical centers. The praying population consisted of volunteers from two Catholic and one Protestant church who were randomly assigned to patients. Neither the givers of prayers nor the receivers knew each other.

Three groups were evaluated. Approximately one third (597) of the patients received no prayer at all, despite being told they might. The next third (604) received prayers, but were uncertain if it was occurring. The last third (601) also received prayers, and were certain it was occurring. Those who were uncertain they were being prayed for had close to the same frequency of post-surgical complications regardless of whether they were actually being prayed for (52 percent) or were not being prayed for (51 percent). Counterintuitively, the group that was prayed for and knew this was happening fared the worst, with 59 percent having complications. The basic conclusion of the study was that intercessor prayer "had a neutral effect."

I did my own study of prayer as a child. The memorable prayer of my youth, clinically speaking, had a compelling measurable effect in scaring me out of my wits and giving me insomnia: "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake. I pray the lord my soul to take."

Night after night, I was afraid to get into my pajamas for fear that I would not be able to ride my bike the next day or throw snowballs at my brother. In my circumstances, this particular prayer was 100 percent effective at giving me a bad attitude at the end of the day. I'm not suggesting this was a case of "mind over matter" such as levitation, communicating with the dead or bending spoons. I'm just saying that this prayer did work, though not as my parents intended.

Prayer also works when the psychological placebo effect operates. By concentrating on hopeful, positive outcomes, people can improve their chances of recovering from an illness, making a basketball free-throw, guessing the right answer on a test or getting out of a dangerous situation. It was a positive attitude that brought the train in "The Little Engine That Could" up the mountain. The
placebo effect also works at a distance. Unlike the study described above in which strangers prayed for strangers, knowing that a loved one is praying on your behalf may give you the slight edge you need to get through a rough patch.

For me, prayer is any private mental moment taken for non-analytical thinking, and for positive purposes. I use prayer to help me get through the writing of each column.

What you don't know is that I just tried to influence your thinking with a prayer, rather than a sentence. Did you feel it? Did it work?

I guess we'll never know.

But I do know one thing. You made it to the bottom of my column.

Gotcha!