

BECOMING IN PRAYER

Intercessory Prayer

This discussion complements the February 5, 2023 sermon on “Reflective Prayer” at Meadowbrook Church and we recommend that sermon as a starting point.

Read Together

Right now, we have real needs and real burdens for others. Some of us are anxious about the future, with uncertainty about our jobs, our retirement accounts, or being able to pay for our basic needs. We have friends and loved ones walking through suffering; sickness, job loss, grief at the loss of a loved one, and much more. We long for our friends and family to know Jesus. We carry significant burdens for our loved ones, our church family, and our friends and neighbors.

Jesus also cared deeply for His disciples. In John 17, He knows that He is about to leave them and that they will face incredible pressure and suffering as they carry out the mission He has for them in a hostile world. So, what does He do with this burden? Jesus fervently prays to His Father and intercedes for them in prayer. He prays for their greatest need in the wake of His departure, that His Father would “keep them” and that they would be one as He is one with His Father.

The future of His disciples, and by extension His church, depended upon Jesus’s intercession for them. But didn’t the Father know that’s what they needed without Jesus praying for it? Yes. Yet the Father used Jesus’ intercession for them as the means through which He would act. It’s not a stretch to say that God’s “keeping” the disciples depended on Jesus’ intercession for them. Even today, Jesus is interceding for us before the Father (Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:34); not merely as a symbolic gesture, but as the primary means through which the Father works to provide for us.

When we become like Jesus, our intercessor, we will do what he did and intercede for others. We don’t intercede in the exact way Jesus does, for we are not the “Great High Priest,” but we are called specifically to pray for others. James commands Christians to “pray for one another, that you may be healed.” (James 5:16) And Paul tells Timothy that “intercessions” must be made for all men (1 Tim. 2:1). When we intercede for others, we are being formed in the way of our great Intercessor, Jesus.

The 18th century theologian John Wesley wrote, “God does nothing but in answer to prayer.” While this statement could seem to overplay our power, it instead reveals how God graciously desires to work through the means of our prayers to accomplish His work. God doesn’t have to work through our prayer, but in His grace, he does. He chooses to involve us in His action in the world. Prayer is the primary way we participate.

So, how do we intercede for others in prayer? Intercessory prayer begins with the posture of our heart. We must first yield our wills and relinquish control to our good Father. To this end, we must stop and listen to God before we start interceding for others. Richard Foster writes, “Listening to the Lord is the first thing, the second thing, and the third thing necessary for successful intercession. Listening to God is the necessary prelude to intercession. The prayer of guidance constantly precedes and surrounds the prayer of faith.” (Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 39) Just as Jesus prayed, “Let your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” before asking for daily bread; so we must also listen and ask the Father to align our hearts with His so that we know what to ask for.

Ruth Haley Barton helps us understand what this looks like in practice. She writes:

“Intercessory prayer is not primarily about believing we know what someone else needs and then trying to tell God what the answer is. It is not about wrestling some result from God. Intercessory prayer is more about recognizing that we do not know how to pray for others--or ourselves for that matter--but the Holy Spirit knows. Since we understand that the Holy Spirit is already interceding for us before the throne of grace, we can bring a name or need, express it simply and in the silence experience our own groaning and Holy Spirit’s groaning for that person. We can listen for the prayer that is already being prayed for that person before the throne of grace, and without struggling hard to put things into words, we can enter into God’s caring love for that person and wait with them and for them in God’s presence. This is a wonderful way to release our burdens to God at the end of the workday.” (Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 74)

We intercede for others, not because we know exactly what they need, but because we know that the Holy Spirit knows and we join with Him in praying for them. Rather than seeking to control the outcome through our prayer, true intercessory prayer actually helps us give up control to our loving Father. When you are burdened for the need of a friend, you can intercede for them rather than attempting to fix their situation through your well-worded prayer. If you’re burdened for the hard heartedness of your child, you can intercede for them and give up control to the Father, knowing that He knows exactly what they need.

With this posture, there’s no magic way to pray for others. Once we have relinquished control and acknowledged that only Jesus knows what they need, we are invited to bring our requests and burdens to our Father.

Practically, it may be helpful to write down what you pray so that you can look back and see how God has answered these prayers. This is also a great opportunity to show your love for others. Ask your friends and family how you can pray for them and then pray for them. Don't just say you're going to pray for them, but stop and pray for them in that moment and then write down their need so that you can continue to pray for them.

In the following individual exercise, we'll practice this using "prayer cards" as a tool for reminding ourselves to intercede for others. At the end of the day, practicing intercessory prayer will require discipline and we can't wait until we feel like doing it to pray. Richard Foster writes, "We must never wait until we feel like praying before we pray for others. Prayer is like any other work; we may not feel like working, but once we have been at it for a bit, we begin to feel like working." (Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 45) When we intercede for others, we are formed to become more like our great Intercessor, Jesus. And God loves to use our intercession to work in powerful ways.

Community Discussion Questions

1. John Wesley said, "God does nothing but in answer to prayer." Is that hard for you to hear? Why do you think that is? Does your prayer practice line up with this?
2. Some of us may be more inclined toward listening to God in "contemplative prayer" (the kind of prayer we practiced in "silence & solitude") and some more towards bringing requests in "intercessory prayer." If you are inclined more towards one, why do you think that is? How might God be calling you to grow in praying like Jesus?
3. Do you wish you prayed more for others, but somehow don't seem to do it? If so, why do you think that is?
4. How can our "intercessory prayer" and requests actually be a way we avoid true intimacy with God (through praying for others and their needs instead of yourself) and seek to control God? How would you know if that's your motivation?
5. Have you ever seen God answer your prayers for others in amazing ways? What happened?

Close your time highlighting the at-home individual practice and encourage everyone to try this at home this week. This is probably the most important part of the growth process. Just "learning" about prayer won't produce change in us...we have to practice reflective prayer as a way of attaching ourselves to Jesus.

At-Home Individual Practice

For this practice, you will need about 15-20 minutes in a quiet space where you can focus. Settle into a comfortable spot, minimize distractions (phone in airplane mode), and set a timer.

Start by inviting the Holy Spirit to come and teach you how to pray. Something like this: “Holy Spirit, help me know who to pray for and how to pray for them. You know what I need and what others need, help me to listen to You as I pray.”

Spend a few minutes in silence. Spend a few moments “being with” the Father. Breathe in and breathe out, paying attention to your breath and praying with each inhale, “My Father” and with each exhale, “You are always near.”

Pray through the first part of the Lord’s Prayer:

- Father, let your name be set apart and worshipped.
- Father, let your kingdom come, let your will be done here and now as it is in heaven.

Ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind a specific person or circumstance He wants you to pray about. Ask Him how He wants you to pray and what He wants you to ask for. If you already have a circumstance or person you’re burdened for, it’s good to start there. God may have given you that burden already so that you would pray for them. Remember, your goal is not to control the situation or fix it, but to trust that only God is in control and to entrust the person or circumstance to Him.

Pray with confidence and boldness according to what the Spirit has shown you. You don’t need to be “wordy.” Sometimes, our wordiness in intercessory prayer can be our attempt to fix things or control them. Pray with faith and expectation, but pray knowing that the Spirit already knows what they need more than you. Ask God to increase your faith. Pray with expectation that God uses your prayers to work in powerful ways.

Add to your prayer card* or in an “intercession journal” whatever the Spirit has led you to pray for so that you can pause to pray throughout your day for this. Continue to stop and pray during the day. You might even consider setting an alarm on your phone for a specific time every day to pray for these requests.

Don’t forget to stop and thank God when He answers prayer. Celebrate God’s salvation and provision. Make sure to share with others what God has done and give Him glory! Keep a journal (analog or digital) of how God has answered prayer. This will strengthen your faith in the future as you look back on how God has worked.

**Prayer Cards: Many of us will find it most helpful to have a physical card we keep in a pocket, on a mirror, or in our car. Simple 3x5 cards work really well. Start a fresh card every week and find a rhythm that will help you stop and pay attention to these requests throughout your day. This can also be done through an application on your phone like Reminders or Evernote or in a recurring calendar reminder where you can update notes.*