

Someone Is Praying for You John 17:6-19

Hardly a day goes by that I do not hear someone ask for prayer. The requests are simple: "Please keep me in prayer"; "Put my mother on your prayer list"; "My friend John is having diagnostic tests next week, remember him in prayer." You hear these requests as often as I. When we sense a particular need in our own lives or in the lives of family members and friends, we instinctively pray and ask others to pray for us. Even the most skeptical person, when life closes in, will request prayer.

I have never heard anyone refuse this request. Our immediate response is, "Of course, I will pray for you." Often we offer prayer without the request. We might call or write a note to a person who is experiencing a loss or an illness and say, "You are in my thoughts and prayers." Occasionally it occurs to me that we have to be careful not to take prayer requests from others or our assurances of prayer too lightly. Do we remember actually to pray for the other person or is our promise no more than part of a polite exchange?

Prayer for others is called intercessory prayer. Most of us are more familiar with what is called petition. Asking God to meet our personal needs or to give us his blessing is the approach to prayer that comes most naturally. Because we are usually preoccupied with ourselves that's about as far as we get. Guilt sometimes makes us think we ought to thank God for blessings so we hastily add a thank-you before we say, "in Jesus' name, Amen." Remembering to pray for others requires a little more effort and thought.

Practicing intercessory prayer is a way of showing love. It is a priestly ministry. To "intercede" for someone is to make entreaty in that person's behalf. It is an opportunity rich with blessing. The Bible has some beautiful examples of intercessory prayer. During the time Moses was on Mount Sinai praying, the Israelites erected a golden calf, danced around it, and worshiped a god they

could see. When Moses returned to the camp, he denounced the people and sternly rebuked Aaron for complicity in the evil act. However, Moses told the people that he would intercede for them. He went back up the mountain and prayed to the Lord, "If you will forgive them, forgive; but if not, blot out my name, I pray, from the book which you have written" (Ex. 32:32). When Samuel installed Saul as king over the tribes of Israel, he expressed his concern and his task as prophet and priest: "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you. I shall show you what is right and good: to revere the Lord and worship him faithfully with all your heart; for consider what great things he has done for you" (I Sam. 12:23-24). When Paul wrote in Romans about his deep desire for his fellow Jews to see the love of God shown in Jesus the Christ, he described his prayers for them and added, "I would even pray to be an outcast myself, cut off from Christ, if it would help my brothers, my kinsmen by natural descent" (9:3).

Both the desire to have someone pray in our behalf and the desire to pray for another person lie deep in our hearts. Intercessory prayer seems to offer many blessings. Why do we sometimes take it lightly or offer such prayers in a casual manner? I think there are some rather hard questions that we want to ask. Does prayer for another person cause God to change the outcome of a particular situation? Does intercessory prayer affect the person for whom we pray? Does it make any difference to us? Until you deal with questions such as these you are apt to give too little value to this type of prayer.

First, does intercessory prayer change God's mind or action in any way? I can raise that question, but I certainly cannot answer it. I rarely pray for any specific outcome. When I offer a prayer for someone else, I commit that person to God's keeping and I ask that God's love and grace, since they are already present, be recognized. I might pray for a person's healing, but healing for me means wholeness and completeness. As Jesus instructed us in the Disciples' Prayer, we pray that "Thy will be done." Is a situation ever changed because I

have prayed about it? I don't know, but I feel a lot more confident about things with prayer than without.

Second, does intercessory prayer affect the person for whom we pray? Absolutely! Those for whom we pray are transformed. I offer two examples, one from fiction and one from fact. You probably saw the play or the movie version of *Beauty and Beast*. It's a touching child's story about what can actually happen. A beautiful young girl falls in love with an ogre. Beauty does not love the Beast because he is beautiful; she makes him beautiful by loving him. The Beast undergoes a complete change because he is loved. That someone else knows you are praying for him enables him to persevere or to change.

Now, an actual testimonial. A well-known and well-liked church musician from Grand Rapids, Michigan died after a seven-year struggle with ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease. On the first anniversary of his death, his widow sent a letter of gratitude to friends at her church. She described the power of their love and support. She listed their many kindnesses. Finally, she wrote: "And how you prayed!!! Day after day, month after month, even year after year. Those prayers buoyed us up, lifted us through particularly hard places, gave us strength that would have been humanly impossible to have, and helped us reach out on our own for God's resources. Someday we'll understand why Norm's perfect healing did not take place here. But we do know why he was with us much longer and in much better condition than is common for an ALS victim. Love is not s strong enough word to tell you how we feel about you!" (Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, pp. 244-245.)

Third question, does intercessory prayer do anything to or for us? If you don't even consider the first two issues, the value to us of praying for others is overwhelming. Intercessory prayer keeps others on our minds. Whether you keep a written prayer list, maintain a mental awareness of persons you pray for, or simply utter a prayer at the moment a request is made, that other person is fixed in your heart. When that happens, you discover that you are alert to

opportunities to help or to be an agent of God's work in the situation. You think of things that the other person might like or things you can do to make a difference. Then you notice that you are thinking and acting outside yourself. What a blessing that it! George Buttrick used to recommend that we begin intercessory prayer by praying for our enemies. That, he said, gets bitterness out of our systems and lifts our concerns out of the narrowness of our own lives and fits us for action in a broken and needy world.

Prayer does not have to be a formal exercise. There is no technique to follow or formula to learn. We pray with our thoughts as well as our words, with our attitudes as well as our pronouncements. Have you ever noticed how uplifting it is to find yourself thinking about how you can bless someone else? Intercessory prayer is a blessing for anyone who practices it.

But still we want to know that others are praying for us. That's really where I began. Please know that at all times and in all situations someone is praying for you! You and I are always in the center of the prayers of Jesus. Today's text from the seventeenth chapter of John's Gospel deeply intrigues me. In the upper room, according to John, Jesus gave lessons and encouragement to his followers. Then he prayed for them. That's not too surprising on the surface; you would expect Jesus to commit the disciples to God's care. What appeals to me is this line: "It is not for these alone that I pray, but for those also who through their words put their faith in me." That's us! We are on Jesus' prayer list!

Don't miss the point. Don't think of Jesus as one between us and God pleading on our behalf. That's not the picture. Jesus came to reveal the heart and the grace of God. That means that, in Jesus' view, God's attitude toward us is like a prayer. Paul says in his letters that the Spirit intercedes for us. It's the same message. God himself looks on us in prayer.

And for what does Jesus pray? He prays for our care: “Protect them by the power of your name.” And he prays for our growth in faith and in love: “Consecrate them by the truth.” What this passage says is that God cares and cares deeply about our welfare and our maturity in love. Someone is always praying for us.

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