

What Should I Pray For?

Last Sunday after the Epiphany – February 17/18, 2007

Sermon Background Study

Matthew 7:7-11

⁷“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ¹⁰Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? ¹¹If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Romans 8:26-28 (The Message)

Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God’s Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don’t know how or what to pray, it doesn’t matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That’s why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.

The question for today is straightforward: What do we pray for? It’s the answers that are surprising.

Last week, we looked at the first of our two most asked questions about prayer: Do my prayers really make a difference? Today, the question before us is: What do I pray for? Some asked questions like this one: “How can I pray for my own insignificant needs when there is so much suffering and injustice in the world?” Others wanted to know more about intercessory prayer: “How do I pray for other people?”

My heart’s desire

Today’s passage from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew reminds us that the heart of prayer is the request. Prayer begins with expressing our heart’s desire to God. Plainly, simply, without any self-censoring.

Sometimes I find myself posturing before God. I know what is on my heart and mind, but I hesitate to voice it, sensing that my simple request is too mundane, even unchristian. Yet Jesus urges us toward a childlike trust in God, voicing to God our desires. Hungry? Ask for food. Thirsty? Ask for a drink. Anxious? Ask for peace. Ill? Ask for healing. God knows my heart’s desire better than I do, so why hold back? There is simply no point in worrying that my prayers reveal my true heart.

But, you might ask, aren’t we then giving in to our self-centeredness? If we always pray as children, then the answer is yes. Children are driven by self-focus. I’ve raised three boys and I learned that one of the biggest and most important challenges was helping them to outgrow their self-centeredness.

As we grow in Christian maturity, we still take our heart’s desires to God, but we find that it is our hearts that are changing. It is as if our heart’s desires become more closely aligned with the desires of God’s heart. Our requests change. And for many, prayer becomes less a list of petitions and more a time of companionship.

Taking it all to God

The book of psalms is a prayer book. In it we find “joys and concerns.” We hear prayers of thanksgiving and praise. But by Eugene Peterson’s count, two-thirds of the psalms are laments, prayers taken to God when it hurts.

A Prayer of St. Augustine

“Lord, I seek you with all my heart, with all the strength you have given me. I long to understand that which I believe.

You are my only hope; please listen to me. Do not let my weariness lessen my desire to find you, to see your face.

You created me in order to find you; you gave me strength to seek you. My strength and my weakness are in your hands; preserve my strength and help my weakness. Where you have already opened the door, let me come in; where it is shut, open at my knocking.

Let me always remember you, love you, meditate upon you, and pray to you, until you restore me to your perfect pattern.”

One of the most influential Christian theologians, Augustine (AD 354 - 430) became a Christian when he was 32 years old, having lived a life of great excess. For 35 years, he devoted his enormous abilities to the defense of the faith. His autobiographical *Confessions* is still widely read and is one of the classic expressions of Christian spirituality. Augustine was a bishop in Hippo, a city in North Africa.

I wrote a few weeks ago of our family's joy when we learned that our daughter-in-law was pregnant. God heard lots from my happy heart on that day. But not long after, we learned that Courtney and Matt had lost the baby. God heard from me about that too. All my sorrow, concern, sadness, and even anger were heaped on God. Did you ever get angry and then take it out on the nearest loved one available? Sometimes I think that is how it is with God. All my bundled feelings and thoughts were directed at God. And God took them. God can take it all.

Even a quick trip through the psalms reveal that the psalmists took it all to God. If they were angry with God, they told him so. If they were thankful, the same. They poured their joys to God, as well as their pain. God knows your heart better than you do. Pray out your whole heart. Hold nothing back.

For others

Praying for others is usually called intercessory prayer. But I don't much like the term. In all other contexts, to intercede is, according to Merriam-Webster, "to intervene between parties with a view to reconciling differences." When I pray for another person, I'm not trying to mediate or intervene. I'm merely stepping within the relationship between God and that person. Not to mediate but to love.

I've always doubted that there is what Philip Yancey¹ calls a prayer calculation, that 100 people praying for a person's recovery increases the "prayer pressure" on God above a certain threshold. None of us loves that person as much as God loves. Yet, there are enough examples of group prayer in the Bible that there must be some shared effect.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a German Lutheran pastor who publicly opposed the Nazis from 1933 until his execution. In 1943 he was implicated in a plot to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer was jailed by the Nazis and later hung.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
"condemned to death"

O Lord God,
Great is the misery that has come upon me.
My cares overwhelm me: I am at a loss.
O God, comfort and help me.
Give me strength to bear what you send,
And do not let fear rule over me.
As a loving Father, take care of my loved ones,
My wife and children.

O merciful God,
Forgive all the sins I have committed
Against you and against my fellow men.
I put my trust in your grace,
And commit my life wholly into your hands.
Do with me as is best for you,
For that will be best for me too.
Whether I live or die, I am with you,
And you are with me.
Lord, I wait for your salvation
And for your kingdom.

Perhaps, rather than a matter of calculus, it is more like this. When we pray for others, by name or collectively (e.g., Sally and the world's poor), we step within the love that God has for them. Our own hearts are enlarged and in some mysterious way, the person is strengthened and comforted by the prayers of others. Perhaps all relationships, even these wispy prayer relationships, are the true building blocks of God's creation. All I do know is that Yancey and I share the same experience, praying for others grows our own compassion as we try to see these persons as God sees them and love them as God loves them.

What I don't know and can't express

One of the great comforts to pray-ers is the knowledge that the Holy Spirit knows our hearts better than we do and articulates the prayers that we are unable to voice and even those we of which we are unaware. God, in the person of the Spirit, lifts up our heart's desire even when we don't know what it is.

The Holy Spirit is God's empowering presence with and within the believing community and each believer. The fact of the Spirit's arrival and work is both the

down payment on God's certain future and its guarantee. The fact that the Spirit holds together both present and future, means that our prayers, aided by the Spirit, are a foretaste of what is to come. Prayers are a window into a world put right, a world in which our hearts' desires are fully aligned with God's. You may sometimes feel completely "unaligned" when you pray, but trust that God is helping you, a bit like a wise counselor who helps you to understand and express your true thoughts and feelings – and knows you well even when you can't.

In the end, the only way to become a better pray-er is to pray. You can start small. Just five minutes of a focused mind and heart is a challenge for many of us. Even in prayer, it is about training, not merely trying.

¹A member of our congregation told me this week of her own powerful encounter with Philip Yancey's book, *Prayer: Does it make any difference?* She shared how much it had meant to her as she battled illness. So much so that she has prayerfully passed sixteen copies on to others. If you want to read and reflect on prayer after this too-brief series, I hope that you will pick up a copy of Yancey's book. He is always honest and thoughtful.

Reading With Heart & Mind

February 18 - 24

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions or thoughts that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday Exodus 33:12-23 Moses intercedes again and God promises that his presence will go with the Israelites. There is much in these chapters about the dramatic presence of God. How is God present with you? Is it ever dramatic?</p>	<p>Monday Exodus 34:1-9 Moses makes two new tablets after smashing the first set. God claims to abound in steadfast love and faithfulness. Is this your own experience with God? Have there been times when it seemed to you that God was not faithful?</p>
<p>Tuesday Exodus 25:10-22 God gives Moses the instructions for building the ark of the covenant. God tells him that it is above the top of the ark that God will meet him. Think of this as the place where heaven and earth met. Where does God meet you?</p>	<p>Wednesday 40:16-38 Moses sets up the tent called the Tabernacle and places the ark behind the screen. God's glory filled the tabernacle. What do you imagine this looked like to the Israelites? Why does the book end here?</p>
<p>Thursday John 1:1-18 The Word becomes flesh. What are three main themes that John wants us to grasp in this prologue to his gospel?</p>	<p>Friday John 1:19-33 John the Baptist offers his testimony to Jesus. Such testimony plays a big part in John's gospel, for the overarching question is: "Who is Jesus?" How would you respond to someone who asked you that question? What do you think John means when he calls Jesus the Lamb of God? Why has the Lamb of God come?</p>
<p>Saturday John 1:35-51 How do these men respond to their encounter with Jesus? Who offers testimony here? What do you make of Jesus' response in v. 51? You might check Genesis 28:12 and Daniel 7:13-14.</p>	

