

Beyond Prayer Requests

By Wayne Jacobsen

“I don’t think I can pray that way for you.”

You’d thought I’d just cussed by the way the mouths around the table soundlessly fell open. The woman who had just asked us to pray that God would keep her teenage daughter from moving in with her boyfriend was perhaps the most shocked of all.

My home group had just finished dinner together and sharing about our lives from the past week. With obvious distress, Kris had told of her daughter’s plan to move in with her boyfriend that weekend.

I’ve got to warn you now that I have a low tolerance for prayer requests I don’t think God will answer. They breed a fatalistic attitude about prayer: Let’s hurl up a request and hope for the best. Mostly I’ve kept that to myself at times like this, but had grown increasingly uncomfortable with my silence.

Once they all caught their breath, I explained. “I think all of us here can understand why you want God to stop her from doing that, and if anyone here feels that’s what God wants, you’re free to pray that way. I’m wondering, however, that if we do so we will be asking God violate someone’s will and I think that is more to do with witchcraft than prayer.”

I could see Kris was about to lose it in frustration or anger so I hurried on. “What I would pray is that God would reveal himself to your daughter and let her see clearly the choice she is making. And I would pray that God will show you how to trust him and love your daughter even if she makes the stupidest mistake of her young life.”

I had hardly finished with Kris blurted out through her tears, “That’s exactly what I need.” We gathered around her and what could have been an innocuous exercise in prayer became a marvelous discovery of how God works in difficult situations.

Prayer Traps

Most of the time when prayer requests are offered in a meeting I feel trapped by the exercise. Usually they come at the end when people are tired. A host of requests are made, then one person or a handful of people offer quick prayers until they are all covered. We don’t even seem to be too concerned in the ensuing days whether God does what we asked of him. Sometimes he just says no, we say shrugging our shoulders in resignation.

My son at five years of age woke me up to this. We were reading John 15 one morning for a family devotion when he suddenly blurted out, “That’s not true!” I had just read the verse about God giving us whatever we ask of him. After a brief conversation about what he meant he was already aware that most of what we prayed for, as a family didn’t happen. The last thing I wanted my children to think about prayer is that it is only wishful thinking and not a vital connection to the Lord of the universe.

That's why I'm not comfortable praying for things that I'm not convinced are in synch with God's heart. While the exercise of prayer itself may offer some comfort for the moment, I'm afraid they teach us to try to use God like a genie in a bottle. My "warning lights" go off whenever the following requests are made:

The trivial: Let's pray God heal our stubbed toe or give us a rain-free day for the church picnic. I know those things seem important, but are we really to move heaven and earth to ensure we can have a picnic when farmers around us might desperately need the rain? I know God cares about every little thing, but caring and changing it to conform to our whims are entirely different things. I don't want my requests to trivialize the awesome gift of prayer.

The selfish: "My brother's unit just got called up to go to the Gulf War. Let's pray that he won't have to go." While I can understand the emotion behind the request, it is still misplaced. If he's in the military why shouldn't he go? Do we expect only unbelievers to risk their lives on the battlefield?

The impossible: I know all things are possible for God, but as with Kris' request I think we're spitting into the wind if we think God will make other people act against their will.

The redundant: How many times have we prayed for Aunt Josie's arthritis or for Johnny's salvation? If we're making the same request over and over again without any recognizable change, maybe God has something else in mind.

The manipulative: Not all prayer requests are directed at God. Sometimes they are just a way to tell the group something they're afraid to come out and say. We're usually more diplomatic than Charissa was one day praying in our home group. She was only four years old but knew what she wanted. "Jesus, would you help Bob and Laurie learn how to spank their children so I don't have to get hit when I come here." I'll admit it worked here, but I don't think prayer was intended to send subtle (or not so subtle) messages to the faithful.

I've come to regard prayer not so much as to how I get God to do what I want, but a process by which I can discover what God is doing in the circumstances of my life. Those are the prayers God always answers and by involving us he transforms us in the process. Here are seven things a group can do to revitalize its ministry in prayer to each other. These don't have to be a formalized process that take five minutes apiece, but can provide a simple process people can think through when they pray for each other.

1. Pray in small teams.

I don't know why we think we have a better chance of getting prayers answered if more people are in on it. Like many of you I receive prayer requests on the internet begging me to pray for people I don't know about needs I'm not involved in. It seems that some of us believe God has a tote board next to his throne and when the prayer count gets to a certain level we have a better chance of him answering. I do understand why desperate people will try anything even if it has only a small chance of success, but Jesus made it quite clear that prayer works best when two or three fervent believers focus on it, rather than enlisting large numbers of uninvolved people.

Smaller groups give us time to process someone's struggle and help identify God's work, rather than being constrained to pray toward a specific end. Even home-sized groups can be too big for

this kind of prayer. I have always found it more effective to break down in groups of two or three where people really know each other and give them the time to explore the situation together.

2. Relate the situation not your request.

Instead of asking that your brother not be sent to the Gulf War, share that you're fearful for your brother's safety now that his unit has been called into action. The first doesn't give people many options. Even if they think your request is a bit selfish, they will mostly go along so as not to offend you. The second allows people the option of praying for your brother or for your fear in a variety of ways.

3. Try to look at the situation from God's perspective.

Before jumping in to request what you want, pause and think what God might want. Most of our prayer requests fit what we think is best and often run counter to what is actually doing. I love how Peter and John responded to the Pharisees threats that they stop sharing about Jesus face punishment. Certainly they were frightened, but when they gathered later with other believers to pray, they didn't pray what would be easiest for them. They could have prayed God would convert the Pharisees the next day or wipe them from the face of the earth. However, they didn't see either of those options as fitting God's work in history nor the example of Jesus. Instead, they prayed for boldness to continue to do what God asked even when they know they might well be beaten, imprisoned or executed for it.

Ask God to reveal to you what he is doing in the situation you're praying about and pause long enough to let him bring thoughts to mind. One of the things I most appreciated about the *Experiencing God* curriculum of Henry Blackaby is that it invited us to trust that God can show us what he is doing in each situation we're involved in. Amazingly, however, I know many people who've been through that study who still see prayer as our way to shape God, instead of his way to shape us. A group of two or three can easily talk together for a moment to see if anyone has a specific insight about how they could pray for the person or the situation.

4. Let your prayers flow from trust.

Fear is the death of prayer because it is the opposite of trust. Most of my prayers even into my early 40's were driven by my anxieties and fears. I've realized something in this process. What most enhances my relationship with Jesus is my ability to trust him, no matter what circumstance I'm in. He rarely answered those prayers that ask him to fix my circumstances so that I will need to trust him less. His desire has always been that I would trust him more. Prayers that arise out of our security in his love and our confidence in his nature will always be the most effective. So, when I'm fearful or praying for others who are, I've learned to pray first for my fear, and for a fuller revelation of God's love for me in the midst of my circumstance before the specific outcome I might want.

5. Don't assess blame.

It is easy to think God will answer our prayers if we are good enough. Those who think that way find it easy to blame the person in need when the answer doesn't come that you expect. I watched my brother die of Multiple Sclerosis just three days shy of his 49th birthday. We had prayed for him often over the 12 years he battled the disease. Convinced God's only desire would be to heal him,

we were frustrated when his MS worsened. Thinking there must be something he was doing wrong to keep God from healing him we started probing weaknesses in his life. What a horrible thing for anyone, much less someone in need, to endure that kind of scrutiny!

One group praying for an infertile woman thought that the reason she wasn't getting pregnant is because her husband wasn't close enough to God to be a good enough father. As they prayed for him they unwittingly sowed seeds of resentment toward him in his wife's heart. If God wasn't giving her a baby until he got his act together, then it was his fault. She blamed him, tried to manipulate him to change and by the time she came to see me she was incredibly frustrated. I told her I think they had missed the point. None of us qualify for God's gifts. If God waited until everyone was ready to have a baby, no one would ever have a baby. I don't know all that was going on in that situation, but four months after we prayed together in my office, she called to tell me she was pregnant.

Blaming people for unanswered prayer puts the focus in the person instead of on God. It's a normal reaction. When I took flying lessons as a young man, I was amazed at how often pilots speculated on 'pilot error' whenever they heard about a plane crash. It wasn't that they hated their fellow pilots, it was that none of them wanted to believe that if they did everything the way it was supposed to be done they would be crash-proof. I think many believers feel the same way. We don't like to think that catastrophic things can happen to devout believers. But instead of allowing us to support each other in times of crisis, such thinking distances ourselves from others at the time they most need us.

6. Make sure you're in agreement.

If something specific comes to mind that you think God might want you to pray, ask the person you're praying for if that sounds right to them. I learned this among a group of believers in Australia when I noted that when people prayed for me they always asked permission first. When I asked why, they told me that they had come to recognize that praying for people was the easiest way to manipulate them. Even if the one they were praying for didn't agree with the prayer, they felt pressure to pretend they did.

By asking permission they accomplished two things. First, they had a chance to share insights and see what God might be saying. Second, it gave them the freedom to pray when they agreed. If the person being prayed for didn't agree with the request, they would set it aside and see what else others might have on their hearts. Often, they said, two or three weeks after someone had declined to be prayed for in a certain way, they would return convinced that they had made a mistake. Now they could pray together in the power of agreement.

7. Follow up.

Nothing expresses our concern to someone in need more than following up with a phone call a few days later to see how they are doing and what might have happened as a result of our prayers. I'm convinced we do little of this because we have so little hope that our prayers will affect much and don't like to be reminded. But if the goal is to zero in on what God is doing and see him accomplish his will in our circumstances, then our initial prayer only begins the process.

If nothing has happened since, we can ask God for wisdom. Is he doing something else in this situation than we thought? Is he teaching us to persevere in what we started? Staying in the

process until something is resolved will not only be a blessing in that instance, but will train us for future opportunities in prayer.

Of course, Philippians 4:6 invites us to make any request we want of God, but it does not tell us to expect him to answer them the way we want. Scripture and life experience make clear that he is not our fairy godmother, who will wave his magic wand and conform every circumstance to our whim. Real prayer is the process of getting involved with someone's need, praying as best we understand his work and then staying in the situation until we see his work resolved.

It is a risk to learn to do that well especially as people pray for each other, but it can lead to some incredible prayers. I love the prayer that one of Henri Nouwen's spiritual directors prayed over him:

"May all your expectations be frustrated. May all your plans be thwarted. May all of your desires be withered into nothingness that you may experience the powerlessness and poverty of a child and sing and dance in the love of God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit."

While I don't recommend praying that for someone you don't know well, here is someone who understood God's heart in prayer. Teaching people to move beyond their own agenda to touch the heart and passion of God will be a challenge, but they will make your prayer times far more effective and compelling.

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