

**Series:** “Basic Prayer”

**Title:** Lesson 7 - “Praying for Others”

**Text:** Job 42:10

There are many passages of Scripture that often strike me with a sense of wonder. One of them is found in the last chapter of Job. After all that the Bible said about the man’s suffering, he found relief in the last few verses of the book bearing his name. What amazes me about Job’s story is the breaking point at which his experience turned. In Job 42:10 we read, “After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD restored his fortunes and doubled his previous possessions.” That one detail from Job story makes me stop in my proverbial tracks. It gives witness to the power of a special type of prayer.

When we study the Bible, we find that there are many types of prayers. Consider Paul’s words in 1 Timothy 2:1-2 and Philippians 4:6–7. Just as there are many types of human conversations (joking, small talk, intimate matters, confrontations, and more), there are also many types of divine conversations. When we pray, we can talk to God through praise, requests, supplication, and more. One special type of prayer is that of intercession.

What is intercessory prayer? Quite simply, it is the act of praying for another. The mode of prayer is important. As Job’s experience gives evidence, it has great power to not just change others; it can also change us.

Intercessory prayer is commanded to us by God in 1 Timothy 2:1–2 and Philippians 4:6. It is logical that we pray for others, because of the way in which God has made us. Think about how we have been made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27). The way we have been made teaches us that we are designed to relate to God and to relate to others. All of this is reflected through Jesus’ Great Commandment, that commandment wherein He taught us to love the Lord and to love others (Matthew 22:37–40).

If relating to others and loving others is a critical part of our nature, doesn’t it stand to reason that we should pray for others? Yes it does. Intercessory prayer should be an abiding practice of those who really live up to the image of God. It should adorn the lives of those who fulfill the Great Commandment. When we commit to this type of praying, we will receive a blessing from it. Let’s consider five fundamental truths related to this important type of prayer.

## **THE PRECEDENT OF INTERCESSION**

Intercessory prayer starts with the person of Jesus. He is our means of intercession. In fact, His entire life and ministry could be defined by the subject, since He came to Earth to serve as an advocate between God and man. Such was demonstrated at the cross. Matthew described Jesus’ death by saying, “Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and gave up his spirit.

Suddenly, the curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom, the earth quaked, and the rocks were split” (Matthew 27:50-51). The tearing of the sanctuary’s curtain was significant. The garment separated the inner-court of the Jewish temple from the most holy place, a place known as “the holy of holies.” Exodus 26:31-35 described the nature and requirements of the curtain. Common were

restricted from entering the holiest place, since it was the place in which the Lord dwelled.

Only priests could enter the holy place, but special requirements were given. The only time one could enter the holy of holies was on the annual Day of Atonement. The Lord told Moses, "Tell your brother Aaron that he may not come whenever he wants into the holy place behind the curtain in front of the mercy seat on the ark or else he will die, because I appear in the cloud above the mercy seat" (Leviticus 16:2). Even for Aaron, special precautions were required. The Lord shared precise methods for entering into His presence in Leviticus 16:3-34.

At Calvary, such requirements were abolished. The veil that separated men and women from God was abolished. Jesus' work on the cross paved a way into His holy presence. We have the privilege of interceding because Jesus interceded on our behalf.

After paying for our sins, Jesus was raised. He then spent forty days on Earth, proving that He was alive and teaching His disciples (Acts 1:3). When that time was finished, He left Earth for heaven. The book of Acts says, "...he was taken up as they were watching, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9). In going into heaven, Jesus took a position in the presence of God. The book of Hebrews says, "After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3).

When John received a vision of heaven in the book of Revelation, he saw Jesus. He described our Lord as "...one like a slaughtered lamb standing in the midst of the throne..." (Revelation 5:6). All of these things point to a significant part of Jesus' work on our behalf. At the cross, He served as a go-between for us, but even now He advocates on our behalf. The author of Hebrews said, "Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, since he always lives to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

Jesus interceded for us. His entire ministry was centered on doing something on our behalf. He lived the life we could not live and paid for sins for which we could not atone. We are righteous because He was righteous. We have life because He suffered and died for us. The promise of a future resurrection is ours because Jesus was raised.

What do all these things have to do with intercessory prayer? Everything. Intercession starts here. We can pray for others because of what Jesus did for us. He set a precedent for intercession. Continual access to God is ours because of the cross. Shouldn't the mode of Jesus' ministry compel us to pray for others?

## **THE PRIORITY OF INTERCESSION**

Jesus is our means of intercession, but He is our model as well. One of the most comforting realities related to prayer is the fact that Jesus prayed for us. John's gospel gives an account of such things. In John 17, we read about what is often called Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer." The prayer contained two sections: 1) A prayer for the original twelve disciples (John 17:6-19); 2) A prayer for all who would come to faith through the ministry of the disciples (John 17:20-26).

How remarkable is it to think that Jesus actually prayed for us? Consider the following words from his prayer on our behalf:

I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in me through their word. May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me, so that they may be made completely one, that the world may know you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me (John 17:20-23).

There is rich theological truth in our Lord's prayer for us. We can learn much about the Trinity, church unity, our role in evangelism, and more. Though such concepts are wonderful to consider, it is not the purpose of our study to focus on such things. For now, let's simply note that Jesus prayed for us. He was an intercessor.

Our Lord's model teaches us that intercession should be a priority. Our prayers should not be directed to self alone. They should contain requests and supplications for others. The names and needs of people should mark our time with the Lord.

Paul understood these realities. He upheld the importance of intercessory prayer in his writings. When instructing Timothy, a young preacher protégée, he said, "First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all those who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good, and it pleases God our Savior" (1 Timothy 2:1-3). Notice from the apostles' words that intercessory prayer is focused on a wide scope of people — governmental leaders ("kings"), church leaders ("those who are in authority"), and others. In addition, take note of his use of the word "everyone." The term indicates there is no limit to who we can pray for. Anyone is a prospect for intercession. None is beyond the bounds of being prayed for.

Learn from the life of Jesus. He set an example. Prayers for others should be a regular part of our private worship. Concerning intercession, Charles Spurgeon once said, "Earnest longings for the good of those around us show that we are beginning to take our right position towards our fellow men, and are no longer living as if we were ourselves the sole end and aim of our own existence."<sup>1</sup> Do you intercede? If not, your prayer life doesn't reflect that of Jesus.

## **THE PERSON OF INTERCESSION**

When it comes to the task of intercession, believers are not alone. They have a guide by their side in the person of the Holy Spirit. Though they sometimes may not know what to say, the Spirit helps in ways unseen. Paul spoke of these realities in his letter to the Romans. He said, "In the same way the Spirit also helps us in our weakness, because we do not know what to pray for as we should, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us, with inexpressible groanings" (Romans 8:26).

What should we make of Paul's words? What were the "inexpressible groanings" of which he spoke? It is important to first consider what the apostle meant by "weakness." The term was used in the ancient world to speak of bodily ailments or

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<sup>1</sup> Spurgeon, C.H. *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 1880; 26. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 2005), 27.

sicknesses. It sometimes spoke of physical inability or weakness. It depicted any sort of physical inadequacy or incapacity.<sup>2</sup>

Paul used the term figuratively to speak of our natural impotence or weakness in prayer.<sup>3</sup> Because we are finite humans, we are limited in our ability to pray. Apart from God, we are nothing but physical frames incapable of any interaction with God. At regeneration (John 3:3), however, the Holy Spirit of God invades our human constitution (Galatians 3:2). With the indwelling of His presence, we gain the potential to interact with God. We mentioned these things in our first chapter, as we talked about the Spirit's role in prayer.

Paul's point in Romans 8:26 was to provide a measure of detail concerning how the Spirit functions in our prayers. He said the Third Person "intercedes for us." The language portrayed the Spirit appealing to God on behalf of God's people. The plain meaning is that though we struggle to pray at times, the Holy Spirit is always helping, making appeals on our behalf before the Heavenly Father.

Despite this simple reality, a debate swirls around the exact meaning of what we read in Romans 8:26-27. In particular, many wonder what exactly is meant by Paul's reference to "inexpressible groanings." Some have promoted what is known as a "private prayer language." The doctrine maintains that the Spirit can move God's children to speak in an unknown tongue during times of fervent prayer. Though one may not know what to say, the Holy Spirit enlivens the person to speak in a heavenly language.

A close look at the meaning of terms in the text will reveal a different and more helpful meaning. The word translated "groanings" is one that simply referred to a sigh.<sup>4</sup> Paul's intent was to speak of an utterance from the human mouth that is sometimes imperceptible or difficult to hear. He qualified the nature of the sighs the Spirit generates by calling them "inexpressible." The term describes that which could not be explained with words.<sup>5</sup>

What was Paul's point? Did he mean to promote a secret prayer language that involves speaking in tongues? No. Such a doctrine is found nowhere else in Scripture. It seems instead that he only meant to emphasize the way in which the Spirit helps us in unseen, imperceptible, indistinguishable ways. Those who advocate for a private prayer language actually go against the meaning of Paul's words. He intended to say the Spirit helps our prayers in ways we can't see or observe.

So what do we make of the apostle's teaching? How can his words help us in prayer? Quite simply, they teach us we should have faith that the Spirit will assist us in praying. Though we may sometimes feel ineffective, and though we sometimes may feel like we don't have the right words, we can be assured that the Spirit carries our prayers into the presence of God. Though our physical frames are weak, the Holy Spirit powerfully enables us to connect with God.

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<sup>2</sup> Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

<sup>3</sup> Zodhiates, [CD-Rom].

<sup>4</sup> Zodhiates, [CD-Rom].

<sup>5</sup> Zodhiates, [CD-Rom].

Remember this. Every time you pray, the Spirit prays for you. In ways unseen and unperceived, He takes your requests before the Father. Even when you stumble and stammer, God still hears. You may feel weak and insignificant, but your Heavenly Father is listening. The Spirit is always near to help you as you pray! As you intercede, know that you have one interceding for you!

### **A PATTERN FOR INTERCESSION**

During my high school and college years, I worked in the restaurant industry. I started out as a busboy, cleaning off tables and doing dishes. Eventually I worked up to the position of server. I enjoyed that work much better, as tip money made my wages a lot more profitable. However, I did have one major problem with my new line of work. I found it hard to talk to customers.

My struggle became such an issue that my boss eventually confronted me. He told me, "Patrick, you really need to work on your people skills. You've got to get better at talking to people. If you don't make needed changes, we have to move you to another position." I really liked waiting tables, so I was highly motivated to change. I went to work, and I acquired needed skills.

One of the things that helped me most was a pre-generated list of talking points. When I approached a table, I was prepared with a customary greeting. I then used a list of a few questions as an icebreaker. After having made everyone more comfortable, I then began to describe our features or special entrées of the day. At that point, I was normally comfortable enough to take an order, answer questions, and engage in any small talk that might arise. A plan for talking to customers helps save my job!

When it comes to intercessory prayer, many struggle with the matter for a multitude of reasons. Some don't prioritize time. Others greatly struggle because they don't know what to say. They don't have much of a problem praying for their needs and desires, but praying for others is another matter altogether. Is there anything we can learn to help us in this regard? What does Scripture say about intercessory prayer? Let me share a few tips from the Bible that can help us in this area.

### **Pray Scripture**

First, I would recommend praying the actual words of Scripture. We have already talked about this in our study, and we will talk about it again before our study concludes. One of the surefire ways of developing a strong prayer life is to use God's Word. Open up your Bible and read a passage of scripture as a prayer to God. Some are afraid of this approach, thinking that it is a little bit too stiff or rigid. They fear formalism and legalism. They believe that prayers that aren't "from the heart" are somehow not meaningful or impressive to God.

Indeed, this method can be empty and hollow. Many people recite prayers like "the Lord's Prayer" (Matthew 6:9–13) out of a motive formalism. They don't give much thought to what they say and they merely utter empty phrases in a cold and mechanical fashion. We want to avoid such ritualistic approaches to prayer.

At the same time, however, we must realize there is power in praying the words of the Bible. This is true, because Scripture expresses the will of God. When we pray its words, we can rest assured we are praying in accordance with what God wants. For this reason, I recommend praying Scripture. When you don't know what to pray for

another, simply open your Bible. Find a passage that is relevant and recite the words from your soul to the Heavenly Father. Stay focused and keep a correct posture before Him. He will hear and He will answer.

As you commit to this type of praying, I recommend a few approaches. First of all, use some of the prayer lists Paul provided. See passages like Ephesians 1:17-19 and 3:14-19; Philippians 1:9-11, and Colossians 1:9-12. At times, I simply open my Bible to such prayers and pray them over my friends, family members, and loved ones.

Another approach is to use some of the virtues list in scripture. Think about the fruits of the spirit in Galatians 5:22–23. Or, consider the beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-10. There are many other such lists in scripture. By praying that people will develop the virtues you find in these lists, you can rest assured you are praying God's will for their lives. God will be honored and others will be edified through such praying.

Another way you can use Scripture is by praying some of the great teachings of the Bible for others. Think about passages like the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37–40) or the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). Sometimes I like to recite such teachings in my prayer times on behalf of others. If you read the Bible long enough, certain teachings will naturally stick in your head. As you pray for others, use such things as ammunition for intercession. When I pray for my children, I often find myself saying things like, "Lord, give them an undivided heart to fear your name. Teach them to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow you. Let them know what it means to make your word a lamp to their feet and a light onto their path." In praying for my children, I simply pray many of the great teachings of the Bible.

### **"How Can I Pray for You?"**

There is another way you can strengthen your intercession. On top of using passages of Scripture, ask people how you can pray for them. I have a good friend who is a missionary in the Far East. He is on my prayer list and I am on his. Whenever we have opportunity to talk, he rarely fails to ask me, "How can I pray for you?" I think such an inquiry should be heard often amongst believers. If we want to know how to best pray for another, we should simply ask that person.

Consider the example of Paul. He was often specific, as we've already seen, in listing out the prayers he prayed for others. The contents of his prayers was likely based on things he had heard from his churches. On top of this, he sometimes mentioned his own priorities. Consider 1 Thessalonians 3:1–2. In that passage, the apostle asked for prayer by saying, "In addition, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not all have faith."

Learn a lesson from Paul. If you don't know how to pray for another person, ask that person, "How can I pray for you?" Be ready to make a list. Take that list to your prayer closet. If you work at it a little, your skill and strength in intercession will develop.

### **A PROMISE FOR INTERCESSION**

I will never forget some of my first experiences with intercessory prayer. I was in college, and I felt a burden to pray for a few friends and a couple of family members. Not seeing much fruit of Christ in their lives, I committed to regularly lift them up to the Lord. It's amazing of how my private times of intercession seemed to bring about a

result. I believe my prayers had an effect on those I prayed for, but they also changed me. In time, I witnessed what seemed to be visible fruit from my commitment to a newfound spiritual discipline.

As we conclude our discussion on this topic, it is important to focus on God's promises concerning the power of prayer. Throughout history, we can read of the mighty results that came about because of people's willingness to pray. Stories from ones like George Mueller, John Wesley, R.A. Torrey, and others bear witness to the transformational affect of prayer. Those who practice regular intercession can give testimony as well.

### **Power in Prayer**

But we are not left to history and experience alone if we want to know about the power of prayer. Scripture is replete with promises concerning these matters. Consider the words of 1 John 5:14 — "This is the confidence we have before him: If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." Remember James' description of Elijah's prayers — "Elijah was a human being as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the land" (James 5:17). God's Word is clear. When we pray in accordance with God's will, and with a reliance on His Holy Spirit, God will respond. Prayer is a pathway to unleashing the presence, provision, and power of God into our lives. Are you praying?

### **Faith is Key**

Sometimes we can feel as if prayer is a waste of time. As the old saying goes, the heavens feel as if they are brass. We don't seem to have the words to say, and all we do seems like an exercise in futility. Is there any help in such times?

As it is with many things in the Christian life, faith is the remedy to such struggles. Remember, the entire Christian life is really a journey in which we trust God (Romans 1:17). Remember also that Jesus taught prayer is fundamentally an act of faith (Luke 18:8).

In what ways do we need to have faith when it comes to prayer? How can trust and reliance on God help us? The answer is simple. In order to be strong in intercessory prayer, and all other types of prayer, we need to cultivate a reliance on God. We need to develop a trust that He will hear and respond. We must learn the secret of believing prayer.

There is a passage of Scripture that has often helped me in regard to these things. It's found in the book of Revelation. John told of the way in which he was teleported into the heavenly realm. He was an eyewitness to the very manifest presence of God. Around the unapproachable light of God's glory, he saw many things. He beheld angels, saints from the Old Testament and New Testament alike, and the person of Jesus. He also saw the Holy Spirit as a flame before the throne of God.

John mentioned another feature in God's presence that is often overlooked. In particular, he spoke of the way in which he saw angels pouring out bowls of incense before the Lord. He then gave the meaning of his metaphor. He explained that the incense represented the prayers of God's people.

Don't overlook the beautiful picture of what John saw. As you read, Jesus is standing in the presence of God. The souls of departed saints are there as well.

Angels and the Holy Spirit stand before the throne. But there is something else in the presence of God as well. As the saints of God pray here on earth, their prayers ascend into the heavenly realm. Right now, in the third heaven, prayers of the saints are going into the ears of God.

Such things should motivate us to pray. Knowing that God is ready to listen, we should be compelled to offer up supplications and intercessions. But such things should strengthen our faith as well. When we are tempted to quit, we should remember that there is a God who is listening. Every time we pray, our prayers ascend before His throne. We have confidence He loves us and we have confidence He hears us. He will mightily answer and respond. Let us pray! Intercession works!