

DOES MY PRAYER REALLY AFFECT OTHERS?

SECOND IN SERIES ON QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK ABOUT PRAYER

SEPTEMBER 15, 1985

LUKE 18:1-8

A small Kentucky town had two churches and one whiskey distillery. Members of both churches complained that the distillery gave the community a bad image. Besides this, the owner of the distillery was an atheist. The church members tried to shut down the distillery but were unsuccessful, so they decided to hold a joint Saturday night prayer meeting. They would ask God to intervene. Saturday night came, and they prayed. During the prayer meeting, a terrible electrical storm raged. To the delight of the church members, lightning struck the distillery, and it burned to the ground. Next morning, the sermons in both churches were on "The Power of Prayer." Fire insurance adjusters promptly notified the distillery owner they would not pay for his damages as the fire was caused by an "act of God." The distillery owner then sued the church members, claiming they had conspired with God to destroy his building. At the trial the church members pled, "Not guilty," claiming that they did not start the fire. The judge observed, "I find this case quite perplexing. Here we have an insurance company and an atheist distillery owner who believe in the power of prayer, but not the church members!"

Perhaps it is not that unusual to find Christians who pray but are not really convinced of the power of their prayer. When you pray, do you really expect much to happen? Many have serious questions about prayer. Since God is not a person like I am, how do I communicate with God? How do I pray to a Spirit or a Process? Have you asked yourself that question or the question about intercessory prayer: Does my prayer really affect others? Can prayer really change things? Some admit they can see prayer changing the one praying--making him more loving, causing her to reach out to the one for whom she is praying, but can prayer really touch the cancer, or the hurt, or the problem?

Another question often asked is: Does God really need my prayer? Certainly God knows everything and already loves the other person, and wants to bless him/her, so why does God need my prayer? How about the question: Can I tell God what to do? Is it not presumptuous of me to tell God what to do?

This morning our topic is intercessory prayer. Let's look at these questions, beginning with: does my prayer really affect others?

First, we are interconnected. Our neighbor's need is our need as well. We are both in need. As I said last week, we pray prayers of invocation and petition because we need God. We need a personal, living, dynamic relationship with God. We are not alone in our need. All humankind stands in need; therefore, we pray prayers of intercession for our neighbors. Ted Jennings in his article, "Prayer: The Call for God" (Christian Century, April 15, 1981, pg. 412), writes:

In this act we give voice to the cry of our world for God...We do this because we know that what we need at heart is no different from the need of our neighbor and our world, and because we know we can never get what we need alone or apart from our neighbor's crying and

groaning. For what we need is not the salvation of our own soul but the new heaven and new earth, the reign and rule of God. So the neighbor's need is our need as well. The One to whom I turn in prayer is not only my Father but our Father.

We are interconnected through needs we have in common with one another, and we are interconnected through our minds. John Magee in his book, Reality and Prayer (pg. 147), writes: "We are apparently in touch telepathically with other minds all the time, even when we are unaware of it. Furthermore, such contact is unaffected by space." We all know people who have special connections with loved ones. They seem to know what the other is thinking, or when something goes wrong. They awaken in the middle of the night and go to the phone because they feel something has happened. Have you had the experience of telephoning someone and being told, "Oh, I was just thinking of you," or, "I just knew that was you on the phone." Somehow, your minds telegraphed each other and beat the telephone. We are interconnected.

Not only are we interconnected with one another through our minds, but we affect one another. We transmit energy to one another. Herbert Puryear in The Edgar Cayce Primer, writes: "All subconscious minds are in contact with one another; and with every thought we think about another, we are either sending helpful or harmful energies to that individual." Frank Laubach in Prayer: The Mightiest Force in the World (pg. 111), says, "Every thought we think is helping or harming other people." Consider radio or television waves that are carrying messages to be picked up by receivers. Evidently you and I also transmit waves that are unconsciously, and sometimes consciously, picked up by other people. Maybe we have bad days when too much negative energy comes our way! Think of the hazards of driving in traffic. If you could only hear what others in their cars are saying about you and your driving, you might get very upset! Maybe you can hear; perhaps one of the reasons we get nervous and tense in dense traffic is that our subconscious minds are receiving unfriendly messages. Perhaps this is what Paul meant when he told us to put on the armor of God. We need shields to ward off negative energy! We are interconnected.

Secondly, intercessory prayer is the act of directing positive energy to others. I defined prayer last week as the act of communicating with God--talking and listening. Intercessory prayer is the act of communicating with God on behalf of others. Intercessory prayer is the act of offering your spirit--your energy--to God for God's use in reaching and blessing others.

In other words, prayer is, first of all, getting in touch with God who is Spirit or Energy. God is not a human person as we are. Paul Tillich calls God the Ground of Being. The process theologians--for example, John Cobb at Claremont School of Theology--call God the Process by which all things are created and redeemed. Morton Kelsey calls God the Ultimate Reality. Jesus called God "Spirit." Prayer is the act of opening your spirit to God's spirit. Intercessory prayer is the offering of your spirit--your energy--so that God may combine energies to reach another person. Magee writes (pg. 147),

The problem of intercession, we now see, is not to make some connection with the person for whom we would pray, but to hallow and use the channels already there. We need not persuade a remote God to change the circumstances or character of another who is also remote. We need rather to unblock those deep channels

of interconnection and let the eternal life flow in continuous streams of living water. Intercessory prayer helps free the channels, removing the obstacles, breaking through the resistance so that God may touch and heal.

This understanding of intercessory prayer helps answer the question: Does God really need my prayer? John Magee answers (pg. 154), Suppose a mother were to say, "My child is desperately ill, but I need not pray because I know that God wills health for him." Is it not as foolish to administer medicine without prayer as to offer prayers without medicine? Are they not both means of cooperation with the will of God in the given situation? We do not understand all the laws which operate in this mysterious universe, but there is apparently one which applies to the achievement of every great good. It was formulated by St. Augustine: "Without God we cannot; without us God will not."

Intercessory prayer, therefore, is a cooperative effort with God on behalf of others. Your prayer really does affect others.

Intercessory prayer, furthermore, not only directs your energy to someone else, but directs the Energy called God as well. We ask: Can we tell God what to do? Is it not presumptuous of me to tell God what to do? It may be presumptuous of us but, within the confines and the audacity of faith, that is exactly what we do in prayer. We mere mortals presume to influence the Creator of the Universe. Ted Jennings says it this way (pg. 410-411),

The basis for this prayer is God's promise. Our prayer is the audacious cry out of our godlessness for God, really God, to come to us. The basis for this audacity, this demand, is that God has promised himself to us, and promised us to himself. The character of prayer, then, is this: that we hold God to his word. We insist that God be true to himself, that God be God. God's word of promise is the basis for what Calvin called the presumptuousness of prayer...More recently Jacques Ellul has rightly spoken of prayer as "combat with God."

Jesus taught us to engage in combat with God through prayer. Jesus taught us to make demands of God, to assert ourselves in prayer to God. Our Gospel lesson this morning is a parable taught by Jesus to encourage his disciples to pray. He told of the widow who badgered the judge, pleading for her rights. Finally the judge heard her and granted her her rights because, he said, "If I don't, she will keep on coming and finally wear me out!" And Jesus concluded, "Will God not judge in favor of his own people who cry to him day and night for help? Will he be slow to help them?" In other words, yes, it is presumptuous of us to ask God to meet our need or someone else's need; but, because God is our God through the covenant, because God loves us, he will hear us and respond. Take it to the Lord in prayer. That is your right and privilege.

Does my prayer really affect others? Yes, because we are interconnected and because intercessory prayer is the directing of positive energy to others. A third observation needs to be made. Pray for your neighbor responsibly.

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Pray for your neighbor's need and not for your own agenda. You have no right to substitute your desire or what you think is right for your neighbor's need. General prayer for one's well being is always suitable. "Lord, keep him safe." "God, protect her, love her." But, specific prayers to meet specific needs should be in response to a request. Also, it is always appropriate to ask, "May I pray for you?" When they request prayer or agree to prayer, then ask, "For what shall I pray?" Pray in accord with your neighbor's need. Pray responsibly.

Prayer is a mighty force. Prayer is dealing with spirit, with energy that can move mountains. Martin Luther was a bold man, even in prayer. Luther's great friend and assistant, Frederick Myconius, became sick and was expected to die within a short time. With a trembling hand, he wrote a loving farewell note to Luther. Luther received the letter and instantly sent back a reply: "I command you in the name of God to live because I still have need of you in the work of reforming the church..The Lord will never let me hear that you are dead, but will permit you to survive me. For this I am praying." Luther's words are shocking to us who are timid and faithless in our praying. When Luther's letter arrived, Myconius had already lost the ability to speak; but he revived, recovered completely from his illness and lived six more years to survive Luther himself by two months.

Prayer is a mighty force. Intercessory prayer changes things and people.