

Chapter 17

Intercessory Prayer



Intercessory prayer is the purifying bath into which the individual and the fellowship must enter every day. —Dietrich Bonhoeffer

If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer. Intercession is a way of loving others.

When we move from petition to intercession we are shifting our center of gravity from our own needs to the needs and concerns of others. Intercessory Prayer is selfless prayer, even self-giving prayer.

In the ongoing work of the kingdom of God, nothing is more important than Intercessory Prayer. People today desperately need the help that we can give them. Marriages are being shattered. Children are being destroyed. Individuals are living lives of quiet desperation, without purpose or future. And we can make a difference...if we will learn to pray on their behalf.

Intercessory Prayer is priestly ministry, and one of the most challenging teachings in the New Testament is the universal priesthood of all Christians. As priests, appointed and anointed by God, we have the honor of going before the Most High on behalf of others. This is not optional; it is a sacred obligation—and a precious privilege—of all who take up the yoke of Christ.

A Magnificent Model

Moses was one of the world's great intercessors, and one particular incident in his life provides a magnificent model for us in our continuing work of intercession. On this occasion the Amalekites had

engaged the children of Israel in battle (Exod. 17:8–13). The military strategy of Moses was strange and powerful. He had Joshua lead the army into the valley to fight the battle. Moses himself went to the top of a hill overlooking the battleground with his two lieutenants, Aaron and Hur. While Joshua engaged in physical combat, Moses engaged in spiritual combat by raising hands of prayer over the conflict. Evidently Moses had the harder task, for he was the one who tired. Aaron and Hur had to step in and hold up Moses' arms until the sun set.

In the military annals Joshua was the commander who won the victory that day. He was the person up front and in the thick of the conflict. But you and I know the rest of the story. Back behind the scenes the battle of intercession was won by Moses and Aaron and Hur. Each role was essential for victory. Joshua was needed to lead the charge. Moses was needed to intercede on behalf of the children of Israel. Aaron and Hur were needed to assist Moses as he grew weary.

What Moses and Aaron and Hur did on that day is the work all of us are called upon to undertake. We are not all asked to be public leaders, but all of us are to engage in Intercessory Prayer. And as P. T. Forsyth reminds us, “The deeper we go down into the valley of decision the higher we must rise...into the mount of prayer, and we must hold up the hands of those whose chief concern is to prevail with God.”¹

The Interceding One

We are not left alone in this interceding work of ours. Our little prayers of intercession are backed up and reinforced by the eternal Intercessor. Paul assures us that it is “Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us” (Rom. 8:34). As if to intensify the truth of this, the writer to the Hebrews declares Jesus an eternal priest after the order of Melchizedek who “always lives to make intercession” (Heb. 7:25).

In the Upper Room discourse recorded in John's Gospel, Jesus made it unmistakably clear to his disciples that his going to the Father would catapult them into a new dimension of prayer. He explained to his mystified band: that he is in the Father and the Father is in him, that he is going to the Father in order to prepare a place for them, that they will be enabled to do greater works because he is going to the Father, that they will not be left orphaned but that the Spirit of Truth will come to guide them, that they are to abide in him as branches abide in the vine, that he will do anything they ask in his name, and so much more (John 13–17).

What is it about Jesus going to the Father that so radically changes the equation? Why would that make such a difference in their—and our—prayer experience? The new dimension is this: Jesus is entering his eternal work as Intercessor before the throne of God, and, as a result, we are enabled to pray for others with an entirely new authority.

What I am trying to say is that our ministry of intercession is made possible only because of

Christ's continuing ministry of intercession. It is a wonderful truth to know that we are saved by faith alone, that there is nothing we can do to make ourselves acceptable to God. Likewise, we pray by faith alone—Jesus Christ our eternal Intercessor is responsible for our prayer life. “Unless he intercedes,” writes Ambrose of Milan, “there is no intercourse with God either for us or for all saints.”²

By ourselves we have no entrée to the court of heaven. It would be like ants speaking to humans. We need an interpreter, an intermediary, a go-between. This is what Jesus Christ does for us in his role as eternal Intercessor—“There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5, RSV). He opens the door and grants us access into the heavenlies. Even more: he straightens out and cleanses our feeble, misguided intercessions and makes them acceptable before a holy God. Even more still: his prayers sustain our desires to pray, urging us on and giving us hope of being heard. The sight of Jesus in his heavenly intercession gives us strength to pray in his name.

In the Name of Jesus

Now that the topic of prayer in the name of Jesus has been raised, I would like to make a few comments about it. We are urged repeatedly in the Gospels and elsewhere to pray in this way. And wonderful results are promised as a result of doing so. “Until now you have not asked for anything in my name,” says Jesus. “Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete” (John 16:24).

I know that this notion seems rather provincial and intolerant to some. Perhaps you are wondering, “Isn’t it possible to be a bit more broad-minded and accept all sincere prayers in whosoever’s name and by whatever authority?” Well, first of all, it is not my business or yours to accept or reject anyone’s prayer. That is a matter that, thank God, belongs to him. My guess is that God is far more accepting of prayers than even the most broad-minded among us. (Often we are terribly narrow in our broad-mindedness.) We who are people of the Way, however, have been asked to pray by virtue of the authority given to us by Jesus Christ, who claimed

to be the unique revelation of God to us. And so we do.

But here we are faced with the practical question of how we pray in the name of Jesus. Any thoughtful person knows that this means far more than just tacking on a rote formula to the end of our prayers. But what exactly does it mean?

Two things, at least. The first we have already been discussing. To pray in the name of Jesus means to pray in full assurance of the great work Christ accomplished—in his life, by his death, through his resurrection, and by means of his continuing reign at the right hand of God the Father. Donald Bloesch writes:

To pray in the name of Christ means to pray in the awareness that our prayers have no worthiness or efficacy apart from his atoning sacrifice and redemptive mediation. It means to appeal to the blood of Christ as the source of power for the life of prayer. It means to acknowledge our complete helplessness apart from his mediation and intercession. To pray in

*his name means that we recognize that our prayers cannot penetrate the tribunal of God unless they are presented to the Father by the Son, our one Savior and Redeemer.*³

This is the objective, forensic side of prayer in Jesus' name. But there is also the subjective, experiential side. To pray in the name of Jesus means that we are praying in accord with the way and nature of Christ. It means that we are making the kinds of intercessions he would make if he were among us in the flesh. We are his ambassadors, commissioned by him. We have been given his name to use with his full authority. Therefore, the content and the character of our praying must be, of necessity, in unity with his nature.

When Simon Magnus asked to have the power to lay hands on people so they could receive the Spirit, he was wanting to use the power of God for his own ends (Acts 8:14–24). He was not praying in Jesus' name, and Peter, recognizing this, rebuked Simon for it. The seven sons of the Jewish high

priest, Sceva, had seen Paul cast out demons in the name of Jesus, and so they gave it a try, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." But the evil spirit replied to them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" Even though they used the proper formula, they were not praying out of the life and power of Jesus, and so they failed. In an almost comical aside Luke tells us that the evil spirit leaped on these seven pseudoexorcists and overpowered them, and they ran out of the house "naked and wounded" (Acts 19:11–16).

So how do we pray in Jesus' name, that is, in conformity to his nature? Jesus himself says, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7). This "abide in me" is the all-inclusive condition for effective intercession. It is the key for prayer in the name of Jesus. We learn to become like the branch, which receives its life from the vine: "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me"

(John 15:4). Nothing is more important to a life of prayer than learning how to become a branch.

As we live this way, we develop what Thomas à Kempis calls “a familiar friendship with Jesus.” We become accustomed to his face. We distinguish the voice of the true Shepherd from that of religious hucksters in the same way professional jewelers distinguish a diamond from glass imitations—by acquaintanceship. When we have been around the genuine article long enough, the cheap and the shoddy become obvious.

When we have immersed ourselves long enough in the way of Christ, we can smell Gospel. So we ask and do as we know he would ask and do. How do we *know* what Jesus would ask and do, you may ask? Well, how does a couple who has been married many loving years know what each other thinks and wants and feels? We know, even as we are known. This is how we pray in Jesus’ name.⁴

Persistence That Wins

When we begin praying for others, we soon discover that it is easy to become discouraged at the results, which seem frustratingly slow and uneven. This is because we are entering the strange mix of divine influence and human autonomy. God never compels, and so the divine influence always allows a way of escape. No one is ever forced into a robot style of obedience.

This aspect of God’s character—this respect, this courtesy, this patience—is hard for us to accept because we operate so differently. Some people frustrate us so much that sometimes we wish we could open up their heads and tinker around inside a bit. This is our way, but it is not God’s way. His way is higher than our way. His way is like the rain and the snow that gently fall to the earth, disappearing into the ground as they nourish it. When the time is right, up springs new life. No manipulation, no control; perfect freedom, perfect liberty. This is God’s way (Isa. 55:8–11).

This process is a hard one for us to accept, and we can easily become disheartened by it. I think

Jesus understood this, and, as a result, he gave more than one teaching on our need for persistence—what we today call the parables of importunity. He even specifies his reason for telling these stories, namely, that we would “pray always and not... lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

These parables have been a special grace to me, for how quickly I lose heart. Perhaps you know what I mean. We pray once or twice, and, when nothing seems to move, we go on to other matters, or sulk in self-pity, or even give up on prayer altogether. Our quick-fix approach is a little like turning on a light switch, and, if the lights do not come on immediately, declaring, “Well, I didn’t believe in electricity anyway!”

But Jesus gives us an altogether different vantage point from which to view our prayer work. Prayer, he says, is a little like a helpless widow who refuses to accept her helplessness and instead stands up to injustice, and her persistence wins the day (Luke 18:1–8). It is sort of like compelling a neighbor to help provide food for a stranger—even though to do

so is terribly inconvenient—because otherwise the whole village will be disgraced for not caring for the stranger in their midst (Luke 11:5–13). In each case the point of the teaching is persistence. We keep asking, we keep seeking, we keep knocking.

There is a religious word for what I have been describing: *supplication*. Supplication means to ask with earnestness, with intensity, with perseverance. It is a declaration that we are deadly serious about this prayer business. We are going to keep at it and not give up. John Calvin writes, “We must repeat the same supplications not twice or three times only, but as often as we have need, a hundred and a thousand times.... We must never be weary in waiting for God’s help.”⁵

This is an important teaching to hear, for we live in a generation that eschews commitment. One of the old cardinal virtues was fortitude, but where today do we find such courageous staying power? We must admit that it is in short supply everywhere we look. Jesus, however, makes it foundational to real effectiveness in Intercessory Prayer.

Do you, do I exhibit this patient determination in our prayers for others? How easily we fall short! In the levitical legal code the fire on the altar was to be kept burning perpetually; it was never to go out (Lev. 6:13). As God builds stamina and grit into our spirituality, we today must learn to burn the eternal flame of prayer on the altar of devotion.

Organized, Corporate, Intercessory Prayer

Intercession is done individually; it is also done corporately. Jesus promises to be present in great power whenever the community of faith is truly gathered in his name (Matt. 18:20). When enough faith, hope, and love are found in any given community, the blessings are multiplied, for then organized, corporate, intercessory prayer is possible.

Drawing upon the prophet Isaiah, Jesus declares, “My house shall be a house of prayer” (Isa. 56:7; Luke 19:46). I would love to see our churches become houses of prayer. I know you would, too. All too often, however, they are places for everything and anything except prayer. I say this with

sorrow, for I believe it saddens the heart of God. True, we need to have our business meetings and our committee meetings and our Bible studies and our self-help groups and our worship services, but if the fire is not hot at the center, these things are only ashes in our hands.

In the seventeenth century Jonathan Edwards wrote a slender book with a bulky title: *A Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of All God’s People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ’s Kingdom on Earth, Pursuant to Scripture Promises and Prophecies Concerning the Last Time*. Edwards understood it so well. We must have both “explicit agreement” and “visible union” for this kind of prayer to go forward. It is not an easy combination to come by, but when it occurs, “extraordinary prayer” is not too strong a description.

Recently a student of mine, Jung-Oh Suh—a Korean pastor on a study sabbatical—learned of my research on prayer and brought me a newspaper article (complete with his excellent translation, for

it was written in Korean) that describes the story of the Myong-Song Presbyterian Church, located in the southeastern part of Seoul. The Korean churches are well known for their early morning prayer meetings, but even so this story is unusual. This is a group that began about ten years ago with forty people, and today twelve thousand gather each morning for three prayer meetings—at 4:00 A.M., 5:00 A.M., and 6:00 A.M. Jung-Oh explained to me that they must shut the doors at 4:00 A.M. to begin the first service, and so if people arrive a little late, they must wait until the 5:00 A.M. meeting. Then he added, “This is a problem in my country because it gets cold in the winter! So everyone brings a little pot of tea or coffee to keep warm while they wait for next service.”⁶ This is organized, corporate, intercessory prayer.

There are indications that, as we approach the twenty-first century, the greatest prayer movement in living memory is already under way. In much smaller but still significant ways the story of Myong-Song Presbyterian Church can be repeated

many times over. One congregation I know has forty prayer meetings per week involving a total of a thousand people. I am acquainted with churches in which anywhere from 15 to 24 percent of the congregation are engaged in organized, corporate, intercessory prayer weekly. I have met with national prayer leaders, and none of them has seen anything like what is now beginning to occur. It is too early to tell how significant this new awakening toward prayer will be, but the signs are encouraging.

It is God’s desire to bring individuals and families into saving faith. It is God’s desire to bring people off of addictions to drugs, sex, money, status. It is God’s desire to deliver people from racism, sexism, nationalism, consumerism. It is God’s desire to harvest cities, bringing whole communities into Gospel fidelity. Organized, corporate, intercessory prayer is a crucial means for the fulfillment of these yearnings in the heart of God.

For the Well-Being of Others

If you are part of a community where corporate prayer is the serious business of the church, I hope you are rejoicing in this gracious gift of God. Many are not as fortunate. A very large number of us find ourselves in situations where the Christian leaders simply do not lead in this realm, but that must not stop our work of intercession. We are responsible before God to pray for those God brings into our circle of nearness. With Samuel of old we say, “God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you” (1 Sam. 12:23, KJV). We do this individually and in little bands of two and three. Some small instruction may be helpful for these situations.

There are as many ways to go about the work of intercession as there are people. Some like to keep lists of people they are concerned to pray for with regularity. I once visited a very holy lady who was confined to a bed. She showed me her “family album” of some two hundred photographs of missionaries and others she was concerned to hold before the throne of heaven. She explained how she

worked her way through this entire album each week, flipping the pages and praying over the pictures. I was a teenager at the time, but even at that young age I knew that the place where I stood beside that bed was holy ground. Another approach comes from the great preacher and pray-er George Buttrick. He recommends that we begin with prayer for our enemies: “The first intercession is, ‘Bless So-and-so whom I foolishly regard as an enemy. Bless So-and-so whom I have wronged. Keep them in Thy favor. Banish my bitterness.’” He next encourages us to go on to leaders in “statecraft, medicine, learning, art, and religion; the needy of the world, our friends at work or play, and our loved ones.”⁷ The great value of Buttrick’s counsel is that it keeps us moving beyond our provincial little concerns and into a broken and needy world.

Here is my own approach. After prayer for my immediate family, I wait quietly until individuals or situations spontaneously rise to my awareness. I then offer these to God, listening to see if any special discernment comes to guide the content of the

prayer. Next I speak forth what seems most appropriate in full confidence that God hears and answers. After spoken intercession I may remain for a while, inviting the Spirit to pray through me “with sighs too deep for words.” I will stay with any given individual or situation until I feel released from the prayer concern. Throughout the time I may jot down brief notes in a small prayer journal as I sense the Spirit giving instruction. These notes are often extremely helpful, for over time a pattern sometimes emerges that holds the key to the person’s need. This then informs the direction of future intercessions.

When it is possible and appropriate, it helps to go directly to the person for whom we are drawn to pray. This was Jesus’ normal, though not exclusive, pattern. A simple question such as “What would you like prayer for?” can at times be tremendously revealing. Remember, prayer is a way of loving others, and so courtesy, grace, and respect are always in order.

One caution: none of us is to shoulder the burden of prayer for everyone and everything. We are finite human beings, and it is an act of humility to recognize our limitations. Often people will come to us with a glib “pray for me,” and they have no idea what they are asking of us. In such cases we are to take the matter under advisement and wait until there are promptings from a higher source. God will make it clear who and what are to be our prayer concerns, and the other situations we are to leave with him.

Your situation, however, may be just the opposite. Far from getting overcommitted, perhaps you find it hard to get up much enthusiasm to pray for others. The desire simply is not there. What can you do?

There can be many causes for such a lack, but I suggest that you begin by praying for an increase in your love for others. As God grows your capacity to care, you will very naturally begin working for the good of your neighbors, your friends, even your enemies. Doing this, you will quickly reach the end

of your tether. You will want them to enter into things and receive things that you cannot give them. This will cause you to pray. “Prayer,” writes Augustine, “is to intercede for the well-being of others before God.”⁸ By means of Intercessory Prayer God extends to each of us a personalized, hand-engraved invitation to become intimately involved in laboring for the well-being of others. In the following chapters we will turn our attention to several specific forms of intercession. It is my hope that each one will play a part in helping us accept this divine invitation to freely give even as we have freely received.



Gracious Holy Spirit, so much of my life seems to revolve around my interests and my welfare. I would like to live just one day in which everything I did benefited someone besides myself. Perhaps prayer for others is a starting point. Help me to do so without any need for praise or reward.

In Jesus' name. —Amen.