

Ephesians 6:10-20
Colossians 1:3-4; 1:9-14; 4:2-4

INTERCESSION

We will get to the Scripture readings in a minute. First I want to see if I can get us all on the same subject. If I can manage that ... remember from now on that you believe in miracles.

“Pray for me.” The phrase is not unfamiliar. Today, one often hears it said in jest. Even more often, it is thrown out with a slight hint of embarrassment or with the unmistakable flavor of one who does not really expect to be taken very seriously. Sometimes, indeed, the phrase comes with a profound and pleading earnestness. But however this phrase comes, it is seldom said and heard with mutual understanding.

If someone says to you sincerely, “Pray for me,” what is your personal reaction? If nobody ever says that to you, you might also wonder about why that is. Do none of your friends or relatives or workmates think of you as somebody who might pray for them? But assuming that people do ask you to pray for them, what is it precisely that you feel they are expecting of you? Is it some kind of superstitious rite with a fuzzy kind of comforting sound to it? Is the person saying, “Wish me luck,” only in religious language? Is the person saying, “I need extra power and guidance from God, and you can help me get it if you are willing”?

Have you ever said no to a person who asked you to pray for them? If a friend asked you for money and you didn't have any to give them, would you write them a bad check, just so you wouldn't have to disappoint them to their face? If a friend asked you to please come help them with some project or chore and your calendar was already committed for that time, would you tell them to count on you and then not show up? You would feel badly about treating a friend that way. But friends will tell each other almost anything about prayer, because ... well ... you know ... it isn't going to make any real difference anyway, right? Besides, the real benefit was in my telling them I would. Then they know I care about them. Whether I actually do it doesn't matter ... right?

Anybody who takes the Christian Life seriously knows that a bad prayer is a lot more serious than a bad check. I do not believe in the fires of Hell, but if I did, the people who would roast in them would be

the people who promise to pray and then never bother. To take the most important help of all and turn it into the cheapest and least significant help of all – does the most damage of all. Among the many idiocies of our world is the assumption that the most important help you can give to an eternal soul is money, clothes, food, medicine, and advice. So all across the world we have caring, compassionate people who will go to great lengths to give money, clothes, food, medicine, and advice to people in need. But only a very tiny handful care enough to give the greatest help of all.

Quite apart from the value and power of prayer itself, people can turn it into a thing of no significance by refusing to take it seriously. Inherently, prayer is the most important and the most difficult favor one friend can ask of or do for another. Only, the greater the value, the more a thing can be cheapened. And the more power a thing has to help, the more power it has to injure.

[Read today's Scripture Reading]

For the past several Sundays, I have been trying to hint at some of the principles and practices of the most basic, foundational level of prayer – the kind of prayer that undergirds the entire Christian pilgrimage. Such prayer is a confrontation between us and the Eternal Spirit of Jesus Christ which, in and by the grace of God, becomes a dialogue wherein we find our lives judged, sifted, lifted, and shaped toward God's design and plan for us.

There are many other dimensions to prayer. But all of them depend upon and grow out of this foundational kind of prayer. It is essential for us to keep aligning our own lives to the Holy Spirit each day – and to do that before we go fooling around with prayer's other dimensions. This is a warning. The higher we climb, the harder we fall if we are careless. I do not wish to be pushing us too far, too fast. I have pondered and prayed about whether this series on prayer is too soon. As always, we are caught between need and readiness. And all of us are not in the same place. So if you find yourself bored or sleepy during this sermon, please feel free to daydream or doze off. It may be the Spirit's protection.

This morning we are going to talk about Intercessory Prayer – praying for other people. Please remember the Golden Rule: *Do not do unto others what you have not bothered to do for yourself.* (Did I get that right? Righter than some of you do!) All over the landscape, there are

people who consider it noble to pray for others, and selfish to pray for themselves. In comparison to that, the Galatians were brilliant. [*“You stupid Galatians!”* (Galatians 3:1)] If you will not let God into your own life, how are you going to be God’s instrument in somebody else’s life?

It is imperative that we tune our own lives with the Holy Spirit before we claim the privilege of praying for others. Intercession presupposes that this work has already been done – not in perfection, but in the present moment and to the best of our humility. If somebody is praying for me but the content and context come from their own will, needs, and desires – how *they* see me and what *they* want my life to be like, instead of how God sees me and what God wants my life to be like – thanks a lot!!! I am already killing *myself* with that kind of garbage. I certainly don’t need another load of it from anybody else!

Intercession requires that we try to see another person – to understand another person – in God’s presence. The phrase is impossible, but you understand the intention and the humility that comes with it: to see another person “through God’s eyes” – from God’s perspective. It is never perfect or possible, but the willing intention is still incredible. To this day, I remember the staggering impact when it happened to me with Mariana. Probably when we were dating, it was clearer who she was ... or who would ever fall in love? But you get married and, without realizing it, start seeing a person in terms of what is happening: what you need, what you want, what’s going well, what seems scary, plans for the future, how about the children, and on and on. Pretty soon, the role and the function and the images we project onto the other person are all we can see. Then one day I was praying for Mariana (I cannot remember why), and the Spirit put a picture into my mind of her true identity. I was thunderstruck! I mean, I knew she was a lovely person, and I loved her, and all the rest – but I was thunderstruck! All this time, I was living with this incredible creature and did not even realize it – did not admire, appreciate, or comprehend it. I mean, I did – in lots of ways – as the world understands such things. But it was so far from the real truth, so far from appropriate to the reality.

I am trying to say that the first task of Intercession is to get beyond our own views and agendas. Remember Second Corinthians? *“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old*

has passed away – behold, the new has come.” (II Corinthians 5:16-17)
We must try, however imperfectly, to get on God’s wavelength in regarding this other person. Otherwise, how can we be helping with anything except our own will?

Of course, this is a lot of work. It is also highly presumptuous. By the way, the entire Christian Faith is highly presumptuous: Chosen People, loved of God, instruments of the Holy Spirit, destined for eternal life. There is no way to be *more* presumptuous. So get used to it. Being loved by the Omnipotent God is too high for us mortals. We can only try to remember whose idea it was, and stay as grateful and responsive as we are able.

Intercession is born of the desire to see people (or sometimes events) as they ought to be – that is, as we suppose and believe God intends them to be. Intercession believes that because it is the will of God, it can become reality. One step further: Intercession is to throw one’s own spiritual resources (puny as they often seem to us) into the fray – and, we hope, on God’s side.

Intercession is the astounding and gigantic claim that people can participate with God in bringing God’s will to reality in and for the life of another person. In the Scripture reading this morning, we come upon Paul speaking to his fellow Christians in the context of this amazing claim and without even batting an eye. Paul assumes that if the Ephesian Christians pray for him, he will be more effective. Paul tells his Colossian friends that he prays for them constantly, and he fully expects these prayers to have a strong effect on them.

It raises a lot of questions, doesn’t it? Here are a few: Doesn’t God care for all people even more than we do? And won’t God do everything possible for every person, whether or not we urge or plead for it in our little prayers? So what benefit or purpose could there be to our praying for another person?

Some people say that the real good that comes, when we pray for others, is the effect it has on us. Praying for others often changes our attitude toward them. We get off our knees and treat them differently, and do things for them we would not otherwise have done.

Certainly that does happen, from time to time, to everyone who prays sincerely. But that is a side benefit and not the purpose of

Intercession. It also evades our question, and implies or states that there is no real benefit to prayer itself – that is, we could achieve the same purpose by merely being thoughtful. And Paul was not expecting the Ephesians or the Colossians to pack their suitcases and come help him do his ministry. He expected their prayers to provide him with a special power inherent in the prayers themselves.

People believe in the power of Intercession because they have seen it work, not because they can explain it. On the other hand, we do have to have some concept of what we are trying to do or we cannot get far enough into it to even learn. So do not try to “accept” or “believe” the non-explanations I am about to give. Instead, try them out! See what happens. Five things:

- 1.) **FINISH YOUR OWN PERSONAL PRAYERS FIRST.** Turn to Intercession only after renewing your own allegiance and obedience. Some of you only half heard this, and will neglect it. But it is crucial.
- 2.) Bring to mind the person for whom you want to pray.

[Please allow me to interrupt myself a minute. My impression is that most people would be halfway through their prayers by the time they got to this second step. That is, they bring to mind the person for whom they wish to pray, and instantly jump to requests and petitions: “Dear God, do this and that for this person. Make them stop this; help them to do that. Make them well. Keep them safe ...” and so forth. Now, you can pray for a lot of people if this is the way you go at it – ordering God around on their behalf. I personally don’t think it does the other person any good – and I suspect it always does *us* some harm – to think we are in charge of bossing God around. But if you think it does some good, go right ahead.]

Back to step #2: Bring to mind the person for whom you want to pray. Bringing them to mind may take from five minutes to an hour, and sometimes more. You are bringing this person to mind in the presence of the Holy Spirit – allowing the Spirit to help you “see” this person, teach you about this person, instruct you about the situation or the condition of this person. And what you are really seeking is **PERMISSION TO PRAY** for this person. Maybe the timing is wrong. Maybe somebody else is already on this case and doing it better than you can. Maybe you have blind spots that will prevent you from being effective for this person. Most of the time, we do not know the details. What we *do* know is that

God is God, and we are only servants. We do not do things without permission. You cannot just pray for anybody you want, any time you want. Who do you think you are?!

Did we create this person? Do we hold their life in our hands? Do we have the blueprint to their eternal destiny? Do we love them with a perfect love? Have we power or wisdom enough to go messing around in their psyche, sure we can fix them to be better? Whatever happened to reverence, humility, obedience, discipleship? Even moderately intelligent humans know that messing around with the environment can lead to disastrous consequences. But we can rush into other people's lives and fix them all up in a jiffy, and even tell God all about what he ought to be doing for them?

Again, Step #2: Bring to mind the person for whom you want to pray, and meditate about them until you **GET PERMISSION TO PROCEED**. Often, you will not get permission to proceed. Then thank God for his care for them, and ask if there is someone else or something else you should be paying attention to. If nothing comes to mind, move on.

3.) Let us assume the person is in focus, and you have permission to proceed. The checkpoint, by the way, is that you are in a "place" where there is no judgment, only empathy – and you are aware of this person's worth and identity far beyond what you have ever known before. Now you try to focus – in the Spirit's presence, and with the Spirit's help – on what it is that you are going to try to send to this person.

I can only be general in this sermon because we have no particular person in mind. But **THE MORE GENERAL YOU ARE, THE LESS EFFECTIVE THE PRAYER**. Stay with step #3 until you have distilled the essence of one thing you will try to send to this person. Some form of courage ... some form of strength ... an idea they have forgotten ... a confidence they have lost ... a specific action they need to take. Usually you will need to put this into some crisp image or phrase that will not go vague or "wobble" when you send it.

4.) Now you are ready to **SEND**. Meaning, the real Intercession is about to begin. Now: You ask for the Lord's help, you get as comfortable as you can, then you beam whatever signal you have distilled straight toward the person you are praying for. Repeat: With all the focus you can manage, with all the confidence and energy of your whole being, you send the message to the person you are praying for. You keep sending for

as long as you can maintain concentration. When you feel the concentration starting to weaken – when the focus starts to break up – move to step #5.

Before *we* move on to step #5 this morning – just to be sure we are being clear: In all other forms of prayer, God is the focus. In Intercession, the person you are praying for is the focus. The “prayer,” so to speak, is directed not at God but toward the person for whom you are praying. You and God have already talked it over and coordinated to the best of your ability. You are sending your own power and energy to the person you are praying for, and TRUSTING GOD to boost that many times beyond your own power.

Why is God boosting your channel to this person? Why does Jesus come in human flesh? Why can children sometimes get through to other children when adults cannot? God is always trying to make the God-to-human connection, but sometimes it is hard, as you all know – especially when we are hurt, confused, afraid ... when we need it most. And sometimes human-to-human connections are more basic, and if God has faithful human servants, he can use us as channels to get his love and power through – often with remarkable results. Humans sometimes call it miracle.

5.) When you are finished, **CLOSE THE GATE**. Do not try to keep the focus when it starts to weaken; you only start sending less valuable energy. Never just walk away from Intercession without closing the channel. If you leave the gates open, junk can start floating back and forth either way with no monitor. Close the channel. Thank God for the privilege of caring about this person with him. And turn the person over to God’s care. That means you are forbidden to worry or fret or muse or be anxious for or about them. Having established the link, and even though you formally closed it, if you go on thinking about this person, there is the danger that you will inadvertently open the channel back up, at least partially – only now you are sending worry, anxiety, negative stuff ... undoing part of the good you did. Let go. Turn it over to God. Go do something a lot less important, like make money, or reform the government, or feed the hungry.

The word “intercede” is not really accurate, if that word bothers you. Intercessory Prayer is the common phrase used when we refer to praying for other people. Many words, as you know, change meaning over time. “Intercede” means to plead on behalf of another – to step

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between – like Moses stepped between the wrath of God and the people. I have great regard for Moses, but my theology comes from Jesus Christ. I do not think we need to protect people from God. If we can help God get through to them, or us, everything will be unspeakably improved.

I want to mention that God does grant us free will. If you are praying for a person and they begin to sense the influence and do not like it, they can shield from it. Looking back, I realize that for years I was shielding from prayers trying to get me to stop smoking and drinking. I mention it because sometimes you will be aware that a person is shielding and that your prayers are not doing any good. If this becomes clear, you might consider directing your energy where it will be appreciated and used.

I know that we have only scratched the surface on the subject of Intercession this morning, and that for some of you, many questions have been raised. An old saint (Winn Hall) took six months to teach me a little piece of what I have tried to tell you this morning about step #2 alone. I am sorry if I have confused you. But we need to get into this area of the Christian Life. I have already waited for over three years before mentioning it to most of you. God knows when the purpose of this church will depend upon it.