

Prayer: A Key Discipleship Strategy

Move your prayers to focus on growth and fruitfulness.

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When we think of discipleship, we tend to think of spiritual disciplines—practices that help us grow in our walk with God and become more like Christ. Disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, and community are important because they place us in a position where we can grow. But discipleship is more about what *God* does in us than what *we* do.

John 15:1–8 is all about fruitfulness for the kingdom, but Jesus never commands us in this passage to bear fruit. Rather, fruit-bearing is a natural result of remaining in the Vine. The branch does no work to bear fruit; all it needs to do is to remain connected.

How do we remain connected to the Vine in order to bear the fruit of discipleship in our lives? Besides the general command to remain in him, Jesus gives only one other command in these first eight verses of John 15: Ask. He says, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7).

It's as if our discipleship is predicated on our asking—asking God to examine our hearts, to cleanse us from sin, to make us holy, to help us love and forgive people, and more. Everything that we need to become as we follow Christ is done as we allow God to work in us. And he does these things in response to prayer.

Praying "So That"

As small-group leaders, we tend to be very intentional about our Bible studies, choosing studies that will help our groups grow in an area of discipleship. We need to be equally intentional about how we pray for each other—both together and on our own.

Our small-group prayer times often center on sharing personal requests. These tend to be somewhat surface level requests, even among mature believers—sick relatives, unemployed friends, difficult relationships, and other personal needs top the request lists. We bear each other's burdens by praying over these requests, but we don't necessarily invite God's work in our lives in areas of discipleship. How can we move our small groups in the direction of discipleship prayer?

God longs for us to bring our needs to him, trusting him as our provider. But he has more in mind as he answers our prayers than our comfort or wellbeing. Going all the way back to Abraham, God's promise to bless the patriarch came in the context of a larger plan to bless all the nations through him (Genesis 12:2–3). Similarly, God longs to bless us today in the context of a larger plan to bring glory to him.

Jesus says, "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, *so that* the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13). He reveals the ultimate purpose of asking in this promise to his disciples—that God be glorified. He comes back to this twice more in this discourse: "If you remain in me and my

words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:7–8) and "I chose you and appointed you *so that* you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and *so that* whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you" (John 15:16).

Discipleship. Fruit-bearing. Bringing glory to God. These are God's larger purposes as he answers our prayers. Praying according to these purposes puts us in line with God's heart for our prayers.

How might this look? Instead of "Father, please heal Mary from her sickness," perhaps we pray "Father, may your presence with Mary encourage her and draw others toward you. In her time of weakness, fill her with your compassion for others, and heal her in such a way as to make your work in her life obvious to those around her."

Or maybe instead of "Lord, please open the door for John to have the job he's interviewing for tomorrow," we pray "Father, we honor you as John's Provider. Lead him to a job that will enable him to honor you in his work. May your provision for him become a testimony to others around him of your grace and power."

We ask God to meet each other's needs so that he may be glorified by his work in our lives, so that we as believers may continue to grow in discipleship, and so that God may use us to bear fruit for the kingdom.

Beyond Personal Comfort

When Paul was in prison, the focus of his requests for prayer wasn't getting out of prison; it was bringing glory to God in his imprisonment: "Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should" (Ephesians 6:19–20). Similarly, when he writes to the Colossians, he says, "And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should" (Colossians 4:3–4).

The early church in Jerusalem also prayed this way. Acts 4 tells of Peter's and John's imprisonment for their proclamation of the Gospel. When they returned to the gathered believers after their release, the believers glorified God and presented this request: "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (Acts 4:29–30). Nothing would have been wrong with praying for protection from the Sanhedrin, but they focused on God's glory and on the spread of the kingdom rather than on their own comfort or safety.

Praying this way requires us to look beyond our circumstances to the ways in which God is working through those circumstances. Perhaps a difficult relationship at work becomes an avenue for humility and reconciliation. Maybe a time of enforced rest due to illness, injury, or

unemployment becomes an opportunity to connect with God in ways not possible in the midst of our normal busyness.

Paul reached the point of desiring only that Christ be exalted in his body, whether by life or by death (Philippians 1:20). As we learn to focus on God's work in our lives, our prayers begin to emphasize God using circumstances to his glory, rather than getting us out of those situations. We change our mindset from "fix it" to "use it."

Inspired Words

Praying Scripture is another way that small-group members can focus on God's work. One idea for praying Scripture is to use Paul's prayers for the churches as a guide. Consider these examples:

- *Colossians 1:9–14*. Paul prayed for the Colossians to have knowledge of God's will and spiritual wisdom; live lives that pleased the Lord and bore spiritual fruit; grow in the knowledge of God and be strengthened by his power; and have endurance, patience, and joyful gratitude.
- *Ephesians 1:17–19*. Paul prayed for spiritual wisdom and revelation for the Ephesians, increased knowledge of God, and ever increasing hope.
- *Ephesians 3:14–21*. Paul prayed for the Ephesians would have spiritual power and faith, be rooted in love, grasp the magnitude of Christ's love, and be filled with all the fullness of God.

A second way to pray Scripture for group members is to tie your prayer time into the Bible study. For example, if you are studying the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23), you could ask each group member to identify one of the character trait they would like to see more in their lives. Then have other group members pray for that particular fruit in their lives. Or, if you're studying a passage like Colossians 3:5–11 that identifies behaviors that believers should avoid, you could have group members identify any areas of struggle from the list of behaviors and have the group pray for victory over those particular issues.

Pray Consistently

We don't know what times of testing might be ahead for our group members, nor how Satan may be trying to tempt them. Perhaps the prayers of our small-group members for each other will be the very means by which God chooses to protect them from the evil one. As we learn to pray for our walks with God, for our growth in Christ, and for our spiritual fruitfulness, we invite God's protection from the attacks of Satan and participate with God in the work he is doing in our lives.

—Andrew Wheeler is the author of [Together in Prayer](#); copyright 2015 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What kinds of prayers do you normally pray in your group?
2. Which of these types of prayers especially interest you?
3. How can you incorporate prayer like this into your next meeting?