

Beyond Prayer Requests

Groups should consider whether their requests line up with what God is doing.

By Wayne Jacobsen

You'd have thought I'd just cussed by the way the mouths around the table soundlessly fell open. And all I'd said was, "I don't think I can pray that for you." The woman who had just asked us to pray was perhaps the most shocked of all.

My home group had just finished eating dinner, and we were sharing prayer requests. With obvious distress, Kris had told of her daughter's plan to move in with a boyfriend that weekend, and asked us to pray that God wouldn't allow it. I usually try not to take exception to people's prayer requests, but I have a low tolerance for requests I think God clearly will not answer. On this occasion, I didn't keep quiet.

Once they all caught their breath, I explained: "I think all of us here can understand why you want God to stop her from doing that. If anyone here feels that's what God wants, you're free to pray that way. I'm wondering, however, whether asking God to override someone's ability to make moral choices isn't akin to witchcraft." I could see Kris was near seething at my bluntness, so I hurried on. "What I suggest we pray for is that God would reveal himself to your daughter. That he would let her see clearly the choice she is making. And that God will show you how to trust him and love your daughter, even if she makes the stupidest mistake of her young life."

I had hardly finished before Kris blurted out through tears, "That's exactly what I need."

We gathered around her to pray. Instead of praying for the situation not to take a distressing turn, we prayed for Kris. What could have been a sympathetic but shallow exercise in prayer became a marvelous discovery of how God works in difficult situations.

Prayer Snares

At most prayer meetings a host of requests are made, then a handful of people offer quick prayers until the list is covered. Rarely do we stop to ask if a particular prayer request is in line with what God is doing. Rarely do we follow up to find out if God answered. We are often left praying a list of wishes—as though if we throw enough darts at the balloons on the wall, we're bound to hit one of them.

My young son awakened me to the folly of this. We were reading John 15 one morning for a family devotion when he suddenly blurted out, "That's not true!" I had just read the verse about God giving us whatever we ask of him. But my five-year-old was already aware that most of what we prayed for as a family didn't happen. I wondered if our prayer practices were teaching him, whether we liked it or not, that prayer is only wishful thinking.

While the exercise of prayer itself offers comfort for the moment, I'm afraid many prayer requests teach us to use God like a genie in a bottle. I don't want my son, or my brothers and sisters, to get that impression. I'm no longer comfortable praying for things that I'm not convinced are in sync with God's heart.

Here are certain types of prayer requests that reflect more our human desires than the desires of God. Do these sound familiar?

- *The trivial:* "Let's pray I can get over this cold" or "Give us a rain-free day for the church picnic." Our comfort and our plans seem important to us, but might God have something larger in mind? Might the farmers around us desperately need the rain? Our requests need to reflect things we truly expect God to do, not just our thoughtless hopes and whims. I don't want my requests to trivialize the awesome gift of prayer.
- *The self-motivated:* "My brother's unit just got called up to go to Iraq. Let's pray he won't have to go." While I can understand the emotion behind the request, it is still misplaced. If he's in the military, why shouldn't he go? God's purposes frequently include hardship and risk. Should we ask him to trump his purposes for our convenience?

- *The controlling:* As with Kris' request, I think we're spitting into the wind if we ask God to make other people act according to our will. He doesn't even force people to adhere to his will. Why should he make them act according to ours?
- *The manipulative:* Not all prayer requests are directed at God. We're usually more diplomatic about it than Charissa, who was only four years old, but knew what she wanted. "Jesus, would you help Bob and Laurie learn how to spank their children, so their kids won't hit me when I come over?" I'll admit it worked for Charissa, but I don't think prayer was intended to send subtle (or not so subtle) messages to the faithful.
- *The blaming:* A group in my former church was praying for an infertile woman. They thought she wasn't getting pregnant because her husband wasn't godly enough to be a good father. So they asked God to change him. She blamed him and tried to manipulate him to change, and by the time she came to see me, she was incredibly frustrated. I told her I thought they'd missed the point. None of us qualify for God's gifts. If God waited until everyone was ready to have a baby, no one would ever give birth.
- *The mass-produced:* I don't know why we think we have a better chance of getting prayers answered if more people are in on it. Like many of you, I receive prayer requests on the Internet begging me to pray for people I don't know, about needs I'm not involved in. God's answers to prayer are not based on a tally sheet. Prayer was designed for two or three faithful believers to focus on, agree, and fervently intercede, rather than enlisting large numbers of uninvolved people.

Prayer Pointers

Prayer enables us to discover what God is doing, to trace his hand in the circumstances of our lives. Through the vital communication of prayer, he transforms us in the process. Prayer, therefore, is not so much a means of manipulating the master plan, but of being shaped by the master's hand.

Not all prayer groups are conducive to that kind of prayer. Not all requests follow that understanding. Consider five guidelines to direct your prayer times to foster a transformational, ongoing walk with God.

1. **Focus prayer on the people involved.** The temptation at "prayer-request time" is to narrow the request to action points we want God to undertake or gifts we want him to give. That misses what God considers most important. When the news arises of a brother sent to war, the opportunity for prayer is not to ask God to keep him home. That limits the scope of prayer to events, when it should be focused on people. It also limits the other pray-ers to a specific request, without offering an opportunity to discern God's heart in the matter. Instead, address the fears of his sister, the worry of his mother, and the faith of the soldier himself. We can pray that God will mold our courage and our ability to trust, that he will help us overcome fears, and that the brother will recognize God's presence. These are the evidences of God's work and the kinds of prayers he answers.

I've discovered that smaller groups give us time to process someone's struggle and help identify God's work. Even home-sized groups can be too big for this kind of prayer. I have always found it more effective to break down in groups of two or three where people really know each other and give them the time to explore the situation together.

2. **Seek God's perspective.** Most prayer requests fit what we think is best, but often run counter to what God is actually doing. I love how Peter and John responded to the Pharisee's threats that they stop proclaiming Jesus or face punishment. When they gathered later with other believers to pray, they didn't pray for what would be easiest. They could have prayed God would convert the Pharisees or wipe them from the face of the earth. But they didn't see either of those options as fitting God's design. Instead, they prayed for boldness to continue to do what God asked, even when they knew they might be beaten, imprisoned, or executed for it.

A primary step in prayer should include asking God to reveal what he is doing in the situation and pausing long enough to let him answer. Prayer should be directed by talking together to see if anyone has a specific insight about how to pray for the people involved.

3. **Let trust, not fear, fuel your prayers.** Fear is the death of prayer because it is the opposite of trust. Most of my prayers, even well into midlife, were driven by my anxieties and fears. I remember praying through our finances, and though we had enough to supply our needs for the present, I was concerned about the long term. I trusted him enough for today, but kept praying that he would do something to take my anxiety away for tomorrow. But God didn't want me to trust in my IRA or the state lottery for security, he wanted me to trust in him.

What most enhances my relationship with Jesus is my ability to trust him, no matter what circumstance I'm in. He rarely answers prayers that ask him to fix my circumstances so that I can trust him less. His desire has always been that I would trust him more. Prayers permeated with a faith-filled security in God's love and confidence in his character will be more effective than petitions for him to appease me. When I'm fearful, I've learned to pray first for my fear and for a fuller revelation of God's love before I pray for the specific outcome I might want. When I'm praying for others, I do the same.

4. **Pray in agreement.** I learned this fascinating aspect of prayer from a group of Christians in the Australian Bush. The man leading the prayer meeting offered some unusual instructions: "Tonight as we pray, we're only going to pray for what we agree upon. If one of you feels led to pray over something, ask the group if that's something we all sense. If it is, we can pray in agreement. If not, we'll pass over it for now and move on to other requests."

I asked him later why he gave the unusual instructions. He said they had learned that praying for someone can become a subtle form of manipulation. "If a man is depressed, then others pray for him to be happy. He's pressured then to smile at the end of the prayer and say, 'Thanks. I feel better,' whether he does or not. Maybe he doesn't need to 'feel better' right now. Maybe he needs to learn to cling to God in the midst of suffering. You don't know unless you ask."

By asking permission of one another to pray in certain ways, these Australians were able to maintain a more authentic and honest form of prayer. They also had a chance to share insights and see what God might be saying. It gave them the freedom to pray with boldness when they knew that all were seeking the same thing.

5. **Follow up.** Nothing expresses our concern to someone in need more than following up with a phone call a few days later to see how they are doing and what might have happened after our prayer. I'm convinced we do too little of this because we have so little hope that our prayers will affect much. But if the goal is to zero in on what God is doing and see him accomplish his will in our circumstances, then our initial prayer only begins the process. If nothing has happened since, we can ask God for wisdom. Is he doing something else in this situation than we thought? Is he teaching us to persevere in what we started?

Staying in the process until something is resolved will not only be a blessing in that instance, but will train us for future opportunities in prayer. This invites us to make any request of God, but it does not tell us to expect him to answer them the way we want. God is not our fairy godmother who waves a magic wand to conform every circumstance to our whim. Real prayer is the process of getting involved with someone's need, praying as best we understand God's work, and then staying in the situation until we see God act.

It is a risk to pray in that expectant way, but it can lead to some incredible prayers. One of Henri Nouwen's spiritual directors once prayed over him: "May all your expectations be frustrated. May all your plans be thwarted. May all of your desires be withered into nothingness that you may experience the powerlessness and poverty of a child and sing and dance in the love of God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit." While I don't recommend praying that for someone you don't know well, here is someone who understood God's heart in prayer.

Teaching people to move beyond their own agenda to touch the heart and passion of God will be a challenge, but it will deepen and enliven your prayer life.

—WAYNE JACOBSEN; excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP JOURNAL, copyright 2001 by the author and Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit www.leadershipjournal.net.

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