



Intercessory Prayer

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What's Different About Intercessory Prayer?

Intercessory prayer is not the same as prayers for yourself, or for 'enlightenment', or for spiritual gifts, or for guidance, or any personal matter, or any glittering generality. Intercession is not just praying for someone else's needs. It is praying with the real hope and real intent that God would step in and act for the good of some specific other person(s) or other entity. It is trusting that God will act, even if it's not in the manner or timing we seek. God wants us to ask, even urgently. It is casting our weakness before God's strength, and (at its best) having a bit of God's passion burn in us.

"I commend intercessory prayer, because it opens man's soul, gives a healthy play to his sympathies, constrains him to feel that he is not everybody, and that this wide world and this great universe were not after all made that he might be its petty lord, that everything might bend to his will, and all

creatures crouch at his feet."

Charles Spurgeon (<http://www.spurgeon.org/>)

INTERCESSION IN THE BIBLE

The Bible has many cases of people standing up for others before God. The most striking example is that of Abraham. He took the initiative to step forward before God on behalf of his neighbors in Sodom and its area. He cared enough to do it, even though he knew how thoroughly wicked Sodom was, and knew how furious God was about it -- which explains why he was so careful in speaking to God about it (Genesis 18:16-33). Moses (Exodus 32:11-14) also stepped in when God was angry, standing in the gap in the fullest sense : offering his own life for that of his nation. (Thankfully, God didn't take him up on the offer.) It was part of the role of a prophet not just to speak what God speaks, but to speak with God for the people of Israel. A fine example is the exchange between the prophet Habakkuk and God (Habakkuk 1:1-2:20), where the prophet asks for God to act against injustice, but God replies about a coming doom. Isaiah prayed with King Hezekiah to save the nation from defeat and destruction at the hands of Assyria, and the armies were suddenly turned back (see Isaiah ch. 36-39). The master builder Nehemiah prayed to God to bring about the rebuilding of Jerusalem and of his people (Nehemiah 1:4-11). As they took their concerns to God, the key motivation behind these giants of faith was compassion. They loved the people, the culture, the faith with a love like God's love, and it burned in them so much that they dared to take on God on their behalf. Unlike the gods of the lore of most other lands, this God did not zap them with lightning or turn them into half-beasts. God listened to their cries -- not by ignoring the wrongdoings that got the divine wrath kindled in the first place, but by saving at least some of the people and bringing them back to where they belonged.

The New Testament has its cases of intercessory prayer. Jesus was the prime example of an intercessor. He interceded in prayer that God bless and protect His followers (John 17:6-26). At the cross, He prayed for those who had Him executed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Indeed, His whole life, His whole reason for being born, was to be a living intercession, a giving of His life to span the rift caused by our rebellion against God. Stephen's last words (Acts 7:60) were an intercession on behalf of those who were killing him. Paul prayed constantly for the struggling young church, for character, behavior, witness, and wisdom (for example, in Colossians 1:9-12). It is Paul's regular prayer for the church and its people that sets the usual pattern for our own intercessory prayers. And Epaphras was the 'prayer wrestler' for the church in Colossae (Colossians 4:12).

Even at its earliest, the young church was praying for people : for safe travel (Hebrews 13:18-19), praying that people might know Christ through other peoples' witness (Ephesians 6:18-20), praying for healing and health (James 5:14-15), for rescue (Acts 12:5-12), for wisdom, for childbirth, for spiritual growth (Ephesians 1:16-17), for marriages -- asking God to bring benefit or blessing to people other than themselves. The others were not always beloved; they prayed for their political leaders, some of whom were out to kill them. But they knew their God was merciful and was intimately involved with what was going on in the world. And they knew that they were called by God to share in that involvement.

DOING IT YOURSELF

The place where intercession must start is with you. It's great to know that others may be stepping up for someone before God, but God wants you to put something of yourself on the line. Otherwise, it's too cheap to be real. Your private devotions are not just for your own benefit. If God's love is at work in you, you will care about others, and your love for them will lead you to take it to the ultimate Source of

strength, healing, and love. Don't be fearful; be persistent and stubborn. God doesn't mind; God likes to see divine love at work in you. God honors your part in the relationship.

It is best to always be aware that you never really pray alone. For when the honest love in you for other people causes you to ask God to act to strengthen, heal, defend, change, or bless them, there is someone else praying with you : the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is leading you to pray. When your love is not whole or your mind is not clear, the Spirit steps in for you, to express the prayer and draw you into it. It's been the practice of Christian intercessors over the past two millenia that intercessory prayer is prayed in a 'Trinitarian' manner : to the Father, through the Son, and in and with the Holy Spirit. God isn't fussy about that pattern, but it helps us to see some part of how God works in prayer.

The intercessory prayer that first comes to you about someone may not be what God wants you to pray for. For instance, you might be praying to lift a burden, but the Lord might be using the burden to prepare them to do something for God. Then again, your prayer might be what God wants to happen. Thus, we are to pray listening for the Spirit, and pray that God's will be done. I find myself concentrating better when I mutter the words; it gives my mind more focus. The mind may go off to explore something during personal devotions, but not while you're interceding for others -- those others must be your first concern. So, it's sometimes best to do it before you seek stillness (though God will sometimes lead you out of stillness into intercession -- be open to it).

Don't be surprised if the Spirit starts tugging on your heart to take some sort of action about a matter you're praying about. You may be the answer God sends into their lives. That's not a license to be a buttinski, stepping into everyone's private lives like some sort of conquering hero. But the Spirit might be calling you to be more than a bystander. Be ready for it. When you intercede, bring your knowledge, gifts, abilities, attention and energies before God and say, 'use these, if that's what it takes to set this right'.

GIFTED INTERCESSORS

Anyone can pray for others and step in with God on their behalf. But some people are gifted at intercession. They have an ear for the needs of others, and take them before God even when those other people reject God. An intercessor's heart is touched for those in need, not so much *on* their side as **by** their side and **on** their behalf. They have a burden for that person. They persevere. They let the Spirit give them comfort about it, instead of worrying. And when word of results comes, they celebrate and are happy about it. If that sounds like you, then you may be a gifted intercessor.

Sometimes, someone is led to be an intercessor for a specific person or mission or task. Such people are valuable even beyond donors. Such intercessors sometimes get a strong sense of coming danger about whom they're praying for. They often report that they're driven to their knees to pray about something they can't otherwise have known was happening.

Intercessors also pray for world, national, and local political leaders. This follows in the tradition of the early church's prayers for the Roman authorities (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Some people actually think it's good to pray against evildoers and oppressive leaders, even to pray for their death. Not that God would pay any attention to you if you did. But such thinking poisons *your* attitude. Pray rather that the Spirit would lead them or change them (1 Timothy 2:3-4). When James and John asked for permission to do harm to their enemies by praying for divine acts of judgement, Jesus reminded them of why He was there (and they, too):

"For the Son of Man did not come to destroy peoples' lives, but to save them" (Luke 9:56).

Intercessory prayer aims to build people into what God wants of them, not to tear them down.

THY WILL BE DONE

"Therefore faith prays in such a manner that it commits everything to the gracious will of God; it lets [God] determine whether it is conducive to his honor and to our benefit."

(Martin Luther, in a sermon on Matthew 8:1-13.)

Some people make the claim that we can ask God to do things on behalf of people, and know that it will be done. It's understandable to think that, for Jesus promised that our prayers would cause things to happen, especially when we keep at it. But look at the Biblical intercessors again. Their 'success' was very real, but far from complete. Abraham stuck his neck out with a rightly-angry God, but could only save his relatives. Moses' people were spared immediate destruction, but his generation would not get the land God had promised -- the next generation did. All of David's deep and totally sincere weeping and begging could not save his baby son -- though it did set up for the birth of his successor. There is no evidence Paul ever lost the 'thorn in his side'; it may have helped his ministry in some ways, but at some point one runs out of lessons from such a thorn. The apostles prayed for the unity of the church, and gained much unity, but still had serious divisions. They prayed for their poor, but had more poor members by the day. They had hundreds of people constantly praying for their safety, but they died martyr's deaths. In such cases, God's mercy does not override God's purpose nor God's justice, not to mention our own wills. We cannot fathom God's purposes or know for certain what God knows about what is to be. God's love simply has a broader, deeper, longer work to do, and sometimes what we pray for simply cannot find a place within that work. The intercessor sometimes must accept even the most bitter of losses, with the awareness that their prayers did not -- and sometimes must not -- avail. This is the mystery of intercession.

We should follow the example of Jesus, who prayed on Thursday that He not have to go through what He was to go through that Friday. He prayed, "Not my will, but Thine". In praying that, He was not resigning Himself to death. He was praying with the confidence that whatever was needed to happen would and should and must happen, and though that apparently meant death, so be it. Jesus taught His disciples to pray that God's purposes be fulfilled everywhere, right here on earth, not just in the hereafter. Praying 'thy will be done' is not the same thing as praying with doubt. It is the act of putting your trust in Whom it belongs. God has something more in store for you -- that is why you get to breathe your next breath. When you step forward in faith, you can stand in that confidence, whatever happens with your specific prayer.

None of us are fully aligned with God's purposes. There will always be a difference between the two. It's okay to ask for what you want from the situation; that's a part of being honest with God. You can pray that your request somehow be found in the divine purposes, and pray for doorways to a better way if it can't be. (Maybe God will provide you a ram as with Abraham when sacrificing Isaac.) But God may have other plans, and your part is to trust that God's plans will be best.

Intercessory prayer does not work by our own power, as if we were the Almighty. When prayer is answered, it is answered in God's way, and it may not be at all like the 'victory' you are 'claiming'. Much of the time, the Spirit's main work is to change *you*, to make *you* care more, and to get *you* to focus on what others are going through instead of only seeing it from where you are.

Burden

burden : When God makes your soul 'heavy' for someone or something. It is when you share in the sorrow and concern that God has about what happens in human life. A 'burden' comes to people who are open to caring about others. The Spirit tells us, from inside of us, that a person, group, event or situation is facing an important spiritual moment and needs [prayer](#) or action **right now**. Don't mess

around with this; **stop whatever it is you are doing** as safely as you can, and **start praying**. When we respond to the Spirit's leadings in prayer or action, we are sharing someone else's load, and lifting a bit of our own, too. It may not feel like it at first, though. People with strong gifts of empathy or healing can find the 'burden' quite troubling and overpowering. Even without such gifts, people have been known to break down in tears from a burden laid on their heart.

THE GIFT OF GIVING BLESSINGS

"When a man falls in love, he almost instinctively seeks to present a gift. Even the gift of tenderness, kisses, and time which he spends without measure. Every beautiful thing he finds he feels the need of offering to her, and without hesitation : He knows that she, too, will find it beautiful, for every gift affords infinite pleasure when we are in love."

----- **Paul Tournier**, *The Meaning Of Gifts* (SCM, 1964) p.51.

There seem to be some people who are given a gift of imparting spiritual blessings. They are people of prayer who leave themselves open to God as listeners. As they are listening, God tells them of the blessings that are already being given to people who are present at the time (or will be present shortly) or are in the person's circle of acquaintance. When the gifted pray-er comes to that person, he/she will give a verbal prayer of blessing which mentions what the blessing or gift is for that person.

The related, traditional gift of 'helps' is about putting what we have into the task, the mission, or the spiritual life of another. It's about furthering other peoples' gifts.



Doing It Together -- Intercessory Prayer Groups

One of the most powerful ways to go about praying for others is to form a small group set aside for that purpose. The prayer time can be surrounded with other activities or be stripped of most else; each group develops its own tone. It's best not to make a big fuss about praying together for others or for the Church; it's something best just done. As with all small groups, a commitment and a comraderie is likely to develop over time, just from sharing these concerns together. It can get exciting when one of the prayers is answered.

Christians pray alone. They pray in large groups in worship, and sometimes even fill stadiums to pray together. But today's Christians often find their strongest moments of prayer in small groups with a few other believers. They do other things in a small group, too : Bible study, singing, and just being a small community together with each other. Prayer is a part of a larger **small-group** picture.

Small-group prayer is very flexible. Most of what is done in private prayer or in public worship prayer or concerts of prayer can also be done in small groups. Plus there's the flexibility to go from one way of praying to another, which keeps giving different angles to our small-collective relationship with God. Each group develops its own rhythm, style, schedule, and history. If it is a group that meets on a regular basis, it needs a clear purpose that the members invest themselves in.

Most prayer group activities are done in a ring or circle. It's the most natural formation to take : each one faces most of the others, looking them in the face. It is a visible oneness (the ring) with visible parts

(each person). It becomes even more so when the hands are linked, since the people next to you in a ring, the two folks you're least likely to be looking at, are the ones drawn to you by touch. Some see something mystical about the ring/circle, but its 'magic' is really simple human togetherness -- unity. God takes that and blesses it, since it's what God hopes to create between us.

The procedure that most people find most natural is to stand together in a ring, and have each person share for however long is needed, then going to the next person in the ring, until done. If hands are linked, one person can pass their turn on to the next simply by squeezing the next person's hand or softly saying something. Another common way is for each to share freely, in no particular order, waiting until the person speaking is done. Those who have experience in leading groups say that these are fine ways to begin, but it tends to become a rut, or concentration spans lapse. It helps to move from one procedure of prayer to another. For example :

Sentence prayers : each person, one at a time, offers a brief specific concern, praise, or thanks to God, ending with "Amen" or some other refrain. No explaining it, just saying it and leaving it. (Allow those who don't want to share to say just "Amen" so it passes on to the next person.)

Silent intercessions : The leader reads a general concern, and is then silent. Time is then taken to silently pray for specific people, actions, and ministries involved with that general concern. Then, after a while, the leader speaks a word of the Bible relating to that concern, and a brief prayer on it.

Basket of prayer : each person writes just one concern that is most on their heart, onto a slip of paper. The papers are gathered in a basket, and the group prays over them. This can be done by reading each one or leaving them unread all together in the basket.

Prayer for witness : Each person in the group names *one* person that they most want to see turn to Christ. This would be someone from work, hobbies, family, or other non-religious activities, that they meet in the course of their daily lives. After each one is spoken, the group then prays for an opportunity for a Christian's witness to hit home.

Two-by-two : at the start, names are randomly drawn to be matched in pairs. The pairs then go to separate locations from the other pairs (like, say, one in the kitchen, another on the deck, another in the garden, etc.). The pair then takes time to minister, share, and pray with each other.

Echos : Someone speaks a phrase of Psalm or hymn or a very specific prayer. Then each person repeats the phrase, with short breaks in between each time it is spoken. This gives everyone time to think on the phrase, or to silently let it sink in, listening for some stirrings within.

Group confessions : one common approach is for a leader to talk briefly about a general kind or category of sin. All those present write onto slips of paper a few words of a specific instance where they committed that kind of sin. These are *not* to be read. The papers are then gathered into a cooking container. All those present gather around it, and speak together a prayer of confession of being sorry for it and expressing the determination to cease that sin. Then all take the container to a safe place indoors or outdoors, and then someone lights it, allowing it to burn completely to ash. (Have something to douse or smother it with in case of flare-up.) Once this is done, someone then says that these sins are forgiven due to Christ's work on the cross.

Strong personal needs : Sometimes, in a group setting, someone will be so hurt by life (or so moved by the group or its actions) that they will break down. Other times, composure will hold, but the need for prayer is acute and prayer is requested. Either way, see to it that the person is sitting down securely. (This sitting is known in some circles as the 'hot seat'.) Ask that person to start praying. Then bring the others present to gather around him/her, laying hands and praying until a sense of comfort about the matter comes over him/her, or that person brings it to an end.

Written responsory prayers : Those in liturgical churches know these from worship services. A petition is offered, then ended with a clear ending tag, like, "O Lord" or "in Jesus' name", followed by a standard response spoken by all, such as "hear our prayer" or "let it happen, Lord". Then the next written petition is spoken, and so on.

(The tags and response can be much less mundane than that. But simple often works best.)

Without a deliberate effort to keep prayer concerns as wide as God's world, groups (and people) tend to get ever narrower in what they pray about. This can be prevented by creating a structure in which a broad range of concerns are addressed each meeting. Most common is to start with praise, then introspective and contemplative prayer, then move to prayers for self and family, then intercessions for each other and the faith challenges/opportunities faced each day, then the congregation, then the community at large, the nation, and the world. Then, bring the focus back down to one : Jesus. Then, end with prayers of thanks and praise.

A group can be focused as an intercessor group, but they usually have much more to them than their prayer task, such as friendship, accountability, Bible study, and faith education.

A prayer circle of 5 to 12 people is about the right size. If it's smaller, it will sputter when members are absent, and get more ingrown. If it's larger, the members lose touch with each other, or prayer time can get too complex and wearying. If it's too big, try splitting it into two separate groups, each led by someone who has had responsibilities in the original group. It's a good idea for the groups to keep in touch regularly after that, exchanging prayer concerns and perhaps taking on a service activity together.

There are rules of behavior - a kind of **prayer group etiquette** -- for intercessory prayer circle members to follow :

- **Be bold.** Don't ever think, "oh, this is too hard / big / small / rare a thing for us". Lay it before God, and if that is what God wants, God will make it come to be.
- Understand that **God's purposes go far beyond your group**, therefore concerns far beyond your group or your church must be a full part of the group's prayers.
- **Follow your leader during prayer, even if you don't like the way it is going.** Keep all arguments and fighting out of the actual intercessory prayer time.
- **Pray with the flow of the meeting.** There is a time for praying aloud, and a time for quiet and silence; a time to focus on interceding for a specific person or group or ministry, and time to take on all requests; a time to pray feverishly, and a time for relaxed trust; a time to speak up with a flow of words, and a time to just listen for the Spirit. The Spirit, like wind, can change direction quickly, and the meeting should learn to move with the Spirit.
- **Praise God for answers to prayer**, whether or not you think those answers are good. God is afoot in the world, and that is good news!
- **Stay focused.** Don't break from prayer unless you absolutely must. In prayer, you're collectively dealing with God, not each other. That means do the Scripture readings, announcements, healings, gifts of 'words', event scheduling, money collection, songs, counseling, correction or other duties *before* or *after* the prayers, not during them. (You can, for instance, go from one prayer practice to another, or suddenly steer into intercession for someone in need who is there with laying on of hands. But don't blurt out the time and place for the church picnic.)
- **Put others' needs before your own.**
- **Keep your own motives as clear as you can.**
- **Gossip and criticism are not prayer.** Pray, don't pry.
- It's okay when **someone chooses not to pray**. No one is ever to be pressured to pray.
- **Don't be afraid of gossip about yourself.** Someone else needs your prayers and you need theirs, and in intercession, that is what counts. (Do not pray aloud about *someone else* in a way that would breach another person's private confidences. Pray

- that specific prayer silently.)
- **Don't try to take over on someone else during prayer.** Pray instead that the pray-er gets fresh direction from the Spirit.
 - **Prayer time is not a time to pass messages or signals to someone else,** out loud or otherwise.
 - **A sermon is not a prayer.** If the purpose of your speaking during prayers is that others hear your point of view, then be silent and get into what they're praying. You're talking to **God**, not to those around you. Do you think God likes to be preached at?
 - **Please don't say 'Jesus' or 'hallelujah' every other word.** (This is *my* pet peeve, and most visitors and newcomers think it's bizarre.) Think of how it would sound to you if someone said your name every few words when speaking to you. Do you think God likes it any better? God knows His name! You can let out a good 'amen' or 'praise god', especially to voice support of another's prayer, but please don't let it swallow up the prayer itself.
 - **Don't reduce intercessory (or any other) prayer to the constant repeating of catch-phrases,** like, "more! more!" or "fire! fire! fire!". That's not really intercession, because it's detached from people.
 - **Make your prayers concise, specific, and to the point, yet with enough words to be a sharing of the heart.** There are those who ask for blessings, angel visitations and divine miracles on every little detail. That's for private time, not group time. No prayer hogs allowed. Everyone else must have the chance to pray aloud.

One of the great glories of the new web technologies is the possibilities of chat room prayer. One approach : people who bear a burden for, say, special needs children, or the victims of a disaster, can gather on the web in a specific room at a specific time from all over the world, all at once, sharing what they are each led to share, so that all can pray together on it. A record can be posted for the benefit of those who missed the scheduled time and still want to pray with them.

What makes for an intercessory group leader?

It is important that there be someone who takes the main responsibility for leading the group. Often a main leader emerges from the first few meetings, just naturally, but if things start to drift or fizzle after a while, a more deliberate choice needs to be made. A group without some sort of leadership usually drifts off into the mists. The leader sets the basic course for the prayers of the meeting, maintains the contacts, makes suggestions for further devotions, and provides a way for the group to effectively pray on private matters without breaching privacy. The leader is the main contact, the one to go to on specific prayer matters outside of group time, or with questions on prayer practice. Most groups find that it's best to take one subject at a time; if so, there needs to be someone who is responsible for keeping the group on course, and to stop members from hijacking the prayers, while still allowing the Spirit to have the freedom to switch the tracks. The leader also debriefs - he/she goes over what happened with those who couldn't be there. It can be a shared or alternating role, but responsibilities need to be made very clear. A leader should have traits like these :

- **a servant's heart.** (Intercessory prayer is not a stepping-stone to church office or power-broker roles.)
- **a belief that God listens when we pray for others, God wants us to pray for others, and God acts because of it.** (This trust is based on God's promises in Scripture.)
- **has some ability or gift to spiritually discern.** (This is how they know where to lead, when the group is going off-task, and when someone is trying to manipulate what's going on.)
- **is reliable.** (Someone can't lead if they suddenly don't show up.)
- **is steeped in Scripture.** (Through it, they develop a 'scripture instinct' that helps discern the Spirit's direction for the group.)

- **is discreet.** (Prayer-ers get very personal and confessional sometimes. That can be fodder for the rumor mill in just about every church.)
- **is open-minded and teachable, taking the time to really listen.** (As time goes on, a good leader learns some lessons about leading and about following Christ.)
- **is emotionally and spiritually mature.** (If not, their place in the group is to follow.)
- **prays and does personal devotions.** (How can someone lead a prayer group when they don't have a devotional life of their own?)
- **is loving, not harsh.** (The leader should be someone who draws people in, not scare them off.)
- **is not central in a congregation's internal politics.** (If the leader's a player in the parish's power struggles, the group will eventually be drawn into it.)
- **has enough time.** (Leading takes preparation. It's hard to lead when a thousand other things demand your attention. The leader needs to be reasonably available to the others in the group, because some things will be left undone during meetings.)

What Comes First

One last note : notice that I said nothing about Satan, nor about tearing down strongholds, or claiming victories over cities. This is not because there is no Satan; the Devil really exists (in his own surreal way). I don't even object to a 'spiritual warfare' view of intercessory prayer, taken in the right way. But spiritual warfare is not the heart of intercessory prayer, nor are strategies for victory against the Devil. Intercession, like true spiritual warfare, is a matter of *love* first, before and beyond anything else (1 John 4:8). It is a matter of perspective, looking outward from ourselves to see the torture that life can become for other people, and being moved by it. It's always specific, about specific people (or specific groups) and specific happenings or needs. The Devil loses when the Spirit builds people up through praying and being prayed for. The place for all other matters (and there are many) is within the context of love.

QUOTES

"He prayed for His enemies, and you do not even pray for your friends."
----- **Johann Arndt**, *True Christianity*

"All vital praying makes a drain on a man's vitality. True intercession is a sacrifice, a bleeding sacrifice."
----- **J.H. Jowett**

"When you pray for your friends, be ready to lend a hand. Lip service does nothing for God."
----- **Dennis Kean**

Study Questions

1. When you were ill or in serious trouble, did you ever *feel* the prayers of others? What was that like? What were you getting from those prayers?
2. Have you ever been so concerned about someone that you felt **driven** to pray for them?

3. If you take part in a liturgical service : take note of the Prayers Of the Church, which usually happen somewhere between the Sermon and Holy Communion. Is it an *intercessory* prayer? What is it that you are praying for in it? What can a prayer like that do for those praying it?
4. Can you think of any gifted intercessors in your worship community? What is special about their intercessions? Do you ever pray *for* them? Do you ever pray *with* them?
5. Is there someone who comes to mind right now? Take time right now and pray for that person.

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