



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

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(Prayer, pp. 43-50)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Prayer in Eclipse
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📖 The Orant
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What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Praying for a Change

Do petitionary and intercessory prayers bring about real change? We may not openly doubt their efficacy, but the adage “prayer doesn’t change things, it changes us” has become an easy escape to explain away mind-bending puzzles about prayer and reconcile traditional Christian practice with contemporary rationality.

Prayer

Almighty and merciful God, we join our hearts and lift them to you now in prayer for one another.

Restore us, O God, and cause your face to shine upon us.

For those who have wandered away from you we pray...

Restore us, O God, and cause your face to shine upon us.

For those who are in need of healing we pray...

Restore us, O God, and cause your face to shine upon us.

For those who are confused and lonely we pray...

Restore us, O God, and cause your face to shine upon us.

We pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 18:1-14

Meditation†

Prayer is either a sheer illusion or a personal contact between embryonic, incomplete persons (ourselves) and the utterly concrete Person. Prayer in the sense of petition, asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine.

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)

Reflection

Asking God for things may seem crass (and in our practice it sometimes is) or unbelievably mysterious, but Scripture teaches us to petition for ourselves and intercede for others. When Luke says Jesus’ story of the unjust judge (or, the persistent widow) is “a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart” (Luke 18:1), it seems we are to be “continually coming” before God with requests. Paul’s exhortation to “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication” (Ephesians 6:18) is “designed not just to make [disciples] feel better about the struggle in which they are engaged, but to help them win that struggle,” Todd Edmondson notes. “So, when the author of James encourages his readers to be steadfast in prayer because ‘The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective’ (James 5:16), the effects he is talking about are not merely inward stirrings of the soul, but rather what we might call the ‘real-world’ effects of prayer.”

Since our culture is skeptical of practices it does not comprehend, Edmondson faithfully seeks to understand something of how intercessory and petitionary prayers work. He invites us “to reconsider how we customarily think about prayer and to recover perspectives that have been lost over the years.”

How can prayer affect God? Prayer is not just a human action, but “a relationship involving God, the world God has created, and the Church,” he writes. We do not change God, but “Why should we imagine that God would be unmoved, not only by the prayers of his



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people, but also by the constant intercession of the Son at his right hand and the Spirit moving within his Church?" A request to God in prayer is like an audience seeking an encore: when a band has worked hard to draw an appreciative response, the audience's request becomes a cause of the band performing its long-planned, well-loved piece. "After we have encountered in Scripture and in the life of the Christian community the awesome work of God, we are moved to ask for more. And God, like a performer who rightly takes great joy in his magnificent work, is more than happy to grant our request," Edmonson explains.

Not every prayer is answered quickly and to our expectation. Many "crushing disappointments" remind us prayer is a mysterious, awesome relationship. Yet they "do not tell us that prayer is ineffective in the 'real world' anymore than Jesus' pleading in Gethsemane or his cry from the cross proves his relationship to the heavenly Father was somehow lacking."

How does the habit of prayer change us? We become more Christ-like, "bolder petitioners, more compassionate intercessors, more active participants in this three-fold relationship among God, the world, and the Church," Edmondson concludes. As we mature as in discipleship, "God's presence in this world is revealed in us, and prayer is not incidental to this process."

Study Questions

1. How can we avoid two extremes—a rationalistic view that God is not moved in any way by our prayers and a naïve view that we can manipulate God with them?
2. In "Prayer in Eclipse," Ken Massey says profound family tragedy and unfulfilled prayers resulted in his spiritual dryness. What dimensions of prayer led him from this "eclipse"?
3. In James Montgomery's hymn "Lord, Teach Us How to Pray Aright," how does the practice of prayer, especially through dark times and unfulfilled requests, transform us?
4. According to Heidi Hornik in "The Orant," what is the significance of the gesture of the orant, especially for the disciple who petitions God for oneself or intercedes for others?

Departing Hymn: "Lord, Teach Us How to Pray Aright" (vv. 1, 5, and 6)

Lord, teach us how to pray aright
with reverence and with fear;
though dust and ashes in your sight,
we may, we must draw near.

Patience to watch, and wait, and weep,
though mercy long delay;
courage our fainting souls to keep,
and trust you though you slay.

Give these, and then your will be done,
thus, strengthened with all might,
we, through your Spirit and your Son,
shall pray, and pray aright.

James Montgomery (1824), altered
Tune: ST. AGNES

† C. S. Lewis, "The Efficacy of Prayer," in *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Inc., 2002, originally 1960), 8.

Praying for a Change

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Luke 18:1-14	Luke 22:31-24
Meditation	Meditation	Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss how prayer can affect God	Discuss the problem of 'unanswered' prayer
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 4	Questions 2 and 3
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To reflect on how petitionary and intercessory prayer can affect God.
2. To consider how the practice of petitionary and intercessory prayer can change us.
3. To explore the problem of 'unanswered' prayer within a Trinitarian understanding of God.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prayer (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Lord, Teach Us How to Pray Aright" locate the familiar tune ST. AGNES in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

When A. J. Jacobs experimented with living by biblical principles, he prayed three times a day and recorded the changes he noticed in *The Year of Living Biblically* (Simon & Schuster, 2007). Reflecting on Abraham's prayer on behalf of Sodom, he writes on Day 103 about intercession:

I'm not finished with my year, so I'm withholding judgment, but my rational side says that intercessory prayer today is no more effective than Abraham's effort. I still can't wrap my brain around the notion that God would change His mind because we ask Him to.

And yet, I still love these prayers. To me they're moral weight training. Every night I pray for others for ten minutes – a friend about to undergo a cornea surgery, my great-aunt whose sweet husband died in their swimming pool, the guy I met in a Bible study class whose head was dented in a subway accident. It's ten minutes where it's impossible to be self-centered.

"A pragmatic, psychological, even therapeutic approach to the practice of intercession is what readers might expect of a writer approaching the Judeo-Christian tradition from within the mainstream of Western culture," Todd Edmonson notes. "What may be more alarming is the inescapable reality that in just three months, a self-professed, lifelong agnostic like Jacobs has arrived at a perspective on prayer that is not markedly different from that held by many longtime Christians. We have an enormous amount of trouble coming to terms with how petitionary and intercessory prayers might bring about real change."

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 18:1-14 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Asking God for things, whether petitioning for oneself or interceding for others, raises two puzzles. First, how can such prayers possibly ‘work,’ for given God’s complete knowledge and goodness, our requests should not affect God or make any difference in God’s actions. Second, why do they sometimes not ‘work,’ even when our requests are proper? The disappointments of unanswered prayer haunt us. Todd Edmondson refocuses these problems in two ways. He says prayer is not merely a human action, but is a relationship among God, the world, and the Church. He commends an analogy with an appreciative audience requesting an encore at the end of a concert. Further, he emphasizes that the Triune God prays through us and for us.

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one session reflect on Edmondson’s account of how petitionary and intercessory prayer is effective. In the other, use Ken Massey’s “Prayer in Eclipse” to explore the problem of unanswered prayer.

Study Questions

1. These two extremes—a rationalistic view that God is not moved in any way by our prayers and a naïve view that we can manipulate God with them—are always in the background of Todd Edmondson’s discussion. The first view reinforces the widespread cynicism in our culture about petitionary and intercessory prayer; the second is prominent among those who teach a “health and wealth” gospel. These two views seem to feed off one another—in reaction to one extreme, some people retreat to the opposite view. Edmondson seeks a different way to understand what it means to ask God for things.

From a Christian perspective, these extreme views of prayer are based on misconceptions about the nature of God and God’s relation to the world. God is not the distant, unmoved creator assumed by the rationalistic view, but the Triune mystery to whom we pray, even as God prays through us and for us. And God is not the changeable creature assumed by the naïve view, but the creator who is active in redeeming the creation. The analogy with the musical artists (who work to draw their audience into asking for an encore, so that they might do what they have planned and the fans now want) illuminates, though it cannot entirely explain, the more complex relations among God, the world, and the Church.

2. In Ken Massey’s reflection, we can see the major elements of Edmondson’s rich theological discussion. Massey understands prayer not as merely something humans do, but as a mysterious relationship among God, the world, and the Adversary. (Edmondson mentions the Church, the body of Christ, as essential to true prayer. Ask members how they might extend Massey’s story to bring out this dimension.) Furthermore, Massey emphasizes that God in Christ prays *for us*, even when we cannot participate in the prayer due to emotional pain.
3. James Montgomery (1771-1854), the noted Moravian Church poet, was a newspaper editor and abolitionist. He was prominent in nineteenth century missionary movements. In verses one and five of “Lord, Teach Us How to Pray Aright,” he mentions that through the practice of prayer we develop virtues of proper “reverence and fear” for God, “patience to watch, and wait, and weep,” and “courage” to “trust” God. In verse six, he says God’s gifts strengthen us not to pray alone, but “through your Spirit and your Son.”
4. In a famous mosaic in San Apollinare in Classe, Italy, the congregation’s protecting saint, Apollinaris, is depicted as an orant (from Latin for “person who prays”) with his arms uplifted in the traditional cruciform gesture, and as a shepherd caring for twelve sheep. This iconography suggests that as an intercessor for the congregation, Apollinaris is like Christ, the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. An orant in the early Church might petition God for her own needs as well, in which case the cruciform stance would reflect Christ’s submission to the Father’s will as he petitions for “this cup” of death to be removed.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.