

## Endless shopping lists

Readings Matthew 6:5 – 13, 1 Tim 2: 1 – 6

Most of us think we don't pray enough; for others or for ourselves. And when we do pray we can feel guilty and inadequate. Some of us very tired of praying in the same old way and long for new life in prayer.

A theological student posted this: "I don't want to treat God like a waiter in a restaurant, ordering the things that I like and complaining about what I don't like, so I have stopped my shopping list prayers but I don't know what to replace it with."<sup>1</sup>

Does anyone else feel the same? When all we do is ask God for things, prayer feels very inadequate doesn't it?

Some of you will have used the ACTS method of prayer; Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. While it is theologically sound there are many more options available for prayer.

Today I am focused on Intercessory Prayer – though the term is a bit jargony. I'm trying to get away from Christianese so that we can have normal conversations with normal people and not have to think about the words we use. What words would you use to describe prayer for others?

How do you pray for others?

Before we get into practical suggestions, let's consider why we pray for others. It's not rocket science is it?

Almost everyone prays for others. They may not call it 'prayer' but when terrible news arrives, almost everyone's response is "OH God, that is terrible. Please sort something out for that person or circumstance."

Jesus tells us we are to love our neighbours as ourselves. Genuine love very rapidly drives us to prayer. We realise the limitations of our own ability to help in any way. Turning to the Lord brings hope for his healing companionship for those we love.

Our reading from Timothy today takes us from the general to the more specific. Paul's writes to his younger colleague: pray for everyone, especially those in authority. I'm not quite sure if he says we should pray and our prayer results in a lack of guilt so we can lead peaceable lives or whether the prayer results in change in political and military leaders who in turn enable peaceable lives. The words seem to indicate both.<sup>2</sup>

So we are enjoined to pray, keeping the cross of Christ central as we do so. As we pray we join in with what the Lord desires, that is everyone to be saved and to understand the truth. Jesus gave his life to bring freedom for everyone. V6 What

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.urbansanctuary.ca/us-blog/list-prayers>

<sup>2</sup> [http://biblehub.com/commentaries/1\\_timothy/2-2.htm](http://biblehub.com/commentaries/1_timothy/2-2.htm)

the Lord desires the Spirit is already working out and our prayers partner in this work.

But how do we pray? Endless shopping lists are demoralising and boring. They also seem disrespectful to God. It bothers me when I haven't connected with a church member for a while and then I need to ask them to help in some way. I always worry about overworking people and the potential to feel used.

And I feel the same concern for God. I wonder if God ever feels used?

But our prayer for others can be a way of enhancing our relationship with God too. Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus encourages us to pray; to ask for things and to keep on asking. He reminds us there that earthly parents know how to provide for their children; 'how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him'.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus is always more interested in character than rules or 'shoulds'. So in our excerpt of Jesus teaching, he begins by talking about authenticity, integrity and humility. And he reminds us what prayer is about – relationship. Prayer is a conversation between God and us; between the best Father who ever existed and his beloved children. In prayer our Dad will often speak to us too – giving us insights and ways to pray for others.

Even though the Lord knows what we need before we ask, he wants us to ask him. How cool is this! We don't have to find the right words. We don't have to use lots of words. And we are not to care what others think of our prayers.

So God doesn't feel used; the exact opposite.

I get bored with lists though. I have a short attention span and need variety if I am to be persistent in prayer. I love that some of you like writing prayers. This helps greatly in our corporate worship – in the prayers we use for others in our church services and through the week. Having different people write our prayers brings a variety of flavour.

I'd love to see some creative ways of using these prayers in our services. In our first service we always have responses that can be made during the prayers. That keeps us awake at least! We often don't do this in our second service. What creative ways could we pray for others together in church?

In our private prayer life, we all pray in different ways. I am a journaler and often use but drawings or collage materials or .... anything I can find really.

I love praying without words – sometimes I sit and call to mind various people and imagine God cradling them in his arms or lifting them up or holding arms out with the provision that is needed. I don't have to figure out what the person needs. I can

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 7:7 - 11

let go of my own preconceived ideas and just let God bless however he chooses.  
Words are not always necessary.

Jesus says that we should use less words and not babble on as the Gentiles do.

Three Russian monks lived on a faraway island. Nobody ever went there, but one day their bishop decided to make a pastoral visit. When he arrived, he discovered that the monks didn't even know the Lord's Prayer. So he spent all his time and energy teaching them the "Our Father" and then left, satisfied with his pastoral work. But when his ship had left the island and was back in the open sea, he suddenly noticed the three hermits walking on the water – in fact, they were running after the ship!

When they reached it, they cried, "Dear Father, we have forgotten the prayer you taught us." The bishop overwhelmed by what he was seeing and hearing, said, "But, dear brothers, how then do you pray?" They answered, "Well, we just say, 'Dear God, there are three of us and there are three of you, have mercy on us!'"

The bishop, awestruck by their sanctity and simplicity, said, "Go back to your land and be at peace."

On the face of it this story is more about personal relationship with God than prayer for others however their prayer is communal – have mercy on 'us'.

Have you noticed the Lord's prayer is in the plural?

Our Father

Give us the food we need.

Forgive our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.

Save us from the time of trial

Deliver us from evil

The mostly Jewish people, that Jesus taught this prayer to, knew little of individual spirituality or advancement. They lived in close community with one another.

Their household worship was conducted all together. So when Jesus talks of heading off into a prayer closet to pray individually, he isn't negating the importance of community.

A couple of years ago when I went on a 5 day retreat, one of those days was spent totally in prayer for others; for my family and my church family. Though physically separate from everyone, I felt closer than I sometimes do when physically present. In prayer, the human things, the annoying things all disappear and we see others through God's eyes rather than our own.

There's a phrase: 'pray as you can, not as you can't'. It is found in a book of Spiritual Letters written by John Chapman, an Anglican who converted to Catholicism and became a Spiritual Director, Abbot and scholar.

What does that phrase invoke for you?

The phrase is meant to give the freedom to explore various aspects of prayer; to allow the freedom not to be pushed into any kind of mould.

Most of us, except maybe those who have the spiritual gift of intercession, find praying for others difficult at times. That's one of the reasons we do it together in church. Extroverts find it much easier to pray with others. I know several of you belong to home groups or prayer groups. I'm very grateful to the folk who pray with me each week and to all those who have in the past. Introverts prefer praying alone but never-the-less prayer is a communal event, as well as an individual one.

All of us can carve out more space for praying for others. And it may not be as dramatic as you think.

Some of you will know Eric Gaffa, who volunteers with Lunch on the Hill. He told me the other day that, while he was sick, he got a number of cards from people, some from Lunch on the Hill people. Eric spoke of the handkerchiefs taken from St Paul to bring healing to those who would receive them in Acts 19:11 – 12. Those cards were for Eric agents of healing. They were prayers from the people who sent them. They built Eric's faith and encouraged him greatly.

There are many ways we can pray for others. Let's ask the Lord to show us how to pray creatively in ways that bring life to others and to us. Amen