

Praying for Others

from *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* by D. A. Carson

If we follow Paul's example, then, we will never overlook the monumental importance of praying *for others*. Prayer will never descend to the level where it is nothing more than a retreat house in which we find strength for ourselves, whether through the celebration of praise or through a mystic communion with God or through the relief of casting our cares upon the Almighty. Prayer may embrace all of these elements, and more; but if we learn to pray with Paul, we will learn to pray for others. We will see it is part of our job to approach God with thanksgiving for some and with intercessions for others. In short, our praying will be shaped by our profound desire to seek what is best for the people of God.

There are two corollaries. First, we must always submit to God's definition of what is best. That means it is vitally important for us to listen to the prayers of Scripture, for how else shall we know what God judges to be best for us? Just as Scripture must reform our beliefs about God, our dealings with others, our fundamental values, so too must it shape our praying. Here is one of the places where it may do so in dramatic fashion. In particular, after we have worked through Paul's prayers and observed how often he prays for others, we need to work through them again to find out exactly what it is he asks God for on their behalf and compare the results with what we normally ask for.

Second, praying for others demands that we examine our own hearts. How can we effectively pray for others if we nurse resentments against them? The hindrance is more than psychological, as if the principal problem were the sheer difficulty of bringing ourselves to intercede for those toward whom we feel bitter. That is a real barrier, of course: how often have you prayed for anyone whom you resent? But there is a deeper barrier. God himself declares that unconfessed sin will cut us off from communication with him, from his powerful answers. "Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isa. 59:1-2).

The sins that cut us off from effective praying may be the displays of evil condemned by Malachi—such things as half-hearted religion that offers God second best (Mal. 1:6-14), meaningless tears of repentance while adultery and divorce abound (Mal. 2:13-16), and abysmal absence of the fear of God, a lack that issues in the corruption and the oppression of the poor and unfortunate (Mal. 3:5), a wretched hankering after the ways of the arrogant and the evildoers of society, nurtured by a whispered suspicion that it is futile to serve God (Mal. 3:13-15). Small wonder that God is not moved by the prayers of people who behave in such ways.

But notoriously, what so often cuts us off from effective intercession is sheer bitterness, nurtured resentment, nicely preserved grudges, a desperate want of forgiveness. This is pitifully common among us, despite the fact that it is the Lord Jesus himself who teaches, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matt. 6:14-15). More pointedly still (for the purpose of this study), he says, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins" (Mark 11:25). Indeed, if we have experienced anything of the Father's bountiful forgiveness his mercy must become the standard of our own: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Eph. 4:32; cf. Col. 3:13).

If you are serious about reforming your prayer life, you must begin with your heart. Unconfessed sin, nurtured sin, will always be a barrier between God and those he has made in his image.

True, sometimes when we try to clean up relationships that have soured in the past, the other party remains intransigent. But that is between that party and God; you and I must watch *our* hearts.

This is true even when the offense has been entirely on the other side. Not long ago a pastor counseled a woman who, twenty years before, had been the victim of four years of incest, her own father the brutal culprit. Eventually her father went to jail. The scars on this woman's personality and faith were gathering to a head twenty years later. Her own husband did not know any of this history and therefore offered little support or understanding. They lived increasingly isolated lives, and the woman's faith shriveled until prayer became impossible, worship mere fakery.

As she and the pastor worked through this background, one of the critical steps she had to take was to forgive her own father. That did not mean she was assuming his guilt; it meant she had to deal with her own bitterness and rage. For this she needed the Lord's forgiveness; and in this context she needed to forgive the man who had abused her. This forgiveness had to be total and unqualified—and expressed to him, *regardless of whether he responded in repentance or in wretched self-justification and anger*. In fact, he chose the latter course, which did not make the woman's part any easier. But the Lord gave her strength to forgive, and that forgiveness was a decisive turning point that led to a restored relationship with her husband, to renewed joy in her Lord, and to revived praying.

Of course, the principle extends to every area of life, not just to the bitterness aroused by memories of incest. How can we intercede for our church, if we secretly hold some of its members in contempt? How can we meaningfully pray for revival, if what we want is some abstract blessing called revival and do not particularly care to see *people* revived? If we harbor bitterness and resentment, praying is little more than wasted time and effort.

Before we go any further, this is the time to examine your own heart, honestly and humbly. It is always the time to do so but especially when you seek to approach the God whose peerless holiness and forgiveness are the immutable standards for his people.