



Intercessory Prayer: How to Pray for Others

by Mike Bennett

God appreciates people who pray fervently for others facing trials. Why does God command intercessory prayer, and how does He want us to pray for others?

What is intercessory prayer?

Intercessory prayer is prayer for the needs of others. Praying for others is an unselfish expression of love.

Why does God want us to pray for others? Because intercessory prayer reflects God's own character of outgoing love and mercy. God wants us to think like He does, and praying for others helps us to think beyond ourselves and to grow in compassion for others.

God compares prayer with sweet-smelling incense that pleases Him (Revelation 5:8).

Who should we pray for?

God gives us instructions to pray for others in several places in the Bible. The apostle James tells us to "pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

The apostle Paul encourages us to intercede (pray) for Church members and ministers, "praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints—and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains" (Ephesians 6:18-20).

Paul urges us "that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made *for all men*, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence" (1 Timothy 2:1-2, emphasis added throughout).

So we are even to pray for government leaders and others who may not know we exist and who haven't asked us to pray for them.

Jesus Christ even commanded, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and *pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you*" (Matthew 5:44, emphasis added).

Jesus' example of intercessory prayer

In the midst of His greatest trial, Jesus prayed fervently. What would you have prayed about when facing torture and death? It's fascinating to see what was on Jesus' mind as He prayed, not only for Himself (Luke 22:41-42), but for His disciples and for us:

"As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth.

"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:18-21).

Jesus did not just focus inward, but by His words and His prayers (John 13-17) showed that He wanted love and joy and peace and patience and all the fruit of God's Spirit for His followers.

He knew that His trial would be their trial. He knew that when He, the good Shepherd, was struck, “the sheep will be scattered” (Mark 14:27). He prayed for them—and us—out of love and deep concern.

Jesus Christ is our Intercessor (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25). He lived a human life of trials and challenges, so He understands what we are going through. He is at our side and can sympathize with our weaknesses, and He makes it possible for us to receive the mercy and help we need when we approach the “throne of grace” (Hebrews 4:15-16). And He wants us to learn to be intercessors too.

Misconceptions about intercessory prayer

Intercessory prayer is not a numbers game. God does not have to wait until 10 or 20 or 100 people pray about a situation in order to intervene. Prayer is not a vote or petition that God has to act on if enough people “sign” it. Our prayers can’t force God to do anything.

God can and does act when the time is best, whether one person or a million people pray about it. Study more about God’s timing in our article “God’s Timing Is Perfect.”

Also, intercessory prayer is not something we should do to try to earn points with God so we can collect when something bad happens to us. Our motivation must be love—outgoing, unselfish concern.

What about the person seeking prayers? Can a person ask other believers to pray for him or her and then find it unnecessary to pray himself or herself?

No, we can’t delegate prayer. Prayer is part of our personal relationship with God, and so we must go to Him fervently ourselves, whether or not others are praying for us.

How to pray for others

Prayer is a vital part of our communication with our loving Father in heaven. In the Bible He tells us how we can pray most effectively—in a way that pleases Him.

Here are a few biblical principles for effective intercessory prayer. We should:

- **Pray for others from the heart, with deep feeling and sincerity.** (See our article “Prayer From the Heart” for more about this.)
- **Pray for others regularly.** In what is often called the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus told us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11; see “The Lord’s Prayer”). We should pray for our needs and the needs of others every day.
- **Pray for others in detail.** God knows everything; but He wants us to come to Him with all our specific requests because He likes to hear from us and to know what is important to us. The Bible compares our prayers to incense, and God loves prayers that are like “sweet incense beaten fine” (Leviticus 16:12). Detailed, thoughtful prayers are more pleasing than rushed, summary prayers to “bless everybody.” Making a prayer list or prayer journal can help you remember the details.
- **Pray for others with faith,** knowing that God has all power and loves the people we are praying for. Faith reminds us that God knows what is eternally best for each person, and that even if God does not answer in the way we want at the time we want, we can trust He has all of our best interests in mind. (For more about faith, study the scriptures in our article “What Is Faith?” and the other articles in that section.)
- **Pray for others with love.** Remember that names on a prayer list represent real people with deep needs, struggles and feelings. Consider that God loves each of them and wants us to have the same outgoing concern. Godly love is totally unselfish and is the essence of God’s character (see “God Is Love”).
- **Pray for others fervently—with intensity, zeal and passion.** James 5:16 tells us “the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”

Why does God want us to pray for others? Because intercessory prayer reflects God’s own character of outgoing love and mercy. God wants us to think like He does, and praying for others helps us to think beyond ourselves and to grow in compassion for others.

- **Pray for others with a desire to help where we can.** This might include physical help and encouragement. Cards, calls and visits might be helpful. It is not wrong to tell a person you are praying for him or her if it will help encourage the person.
- **Pray for others occasionally with fasting.** When a situation is very serious or hits close to home for you, you may decide to fast and pray to draw close to God to present your supplication to Him. (Read more about the spiritual tool of fasting in our article “What Is Fasting?”)

Prayer list ideas

Many find it helpful to make a list of the people and situations they plan to pray for. What should you include on your prayer list?

- **Prayer requests.** Many people in need submit formal prayer requests to their pastor to be announced at church, or through email or social media.
- **Personal requests and things you become aware of through fellowship.** Some people don’t feel comfortable submitting formal prayer requests, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t facing trials and needing encouragement.

God designed His Church so brethren can grow as a Christian family that supports each other. In addition to prayer requests that may be given formally, we can also get to know our brethren by fellowship. This will naturally provide many things our brethren are facing that we can pray about.

Hebrews 10:24-25 shows some of the responsibilities and benefits of Christian fellowship:

“And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Study more about fellowship in our article “Christian Fellowship.”

- **Personal needs of other friends and family members.** Some may not request prayers, but our care for them can lead us to pray for them as well.
- **News stories about disasters and other trials facing people.** There is no end of people to pray about in this troubled world. These situations also lead us to “sigh and cry” and pray fervently for God’s Kingdom to come (Ezekiel 9:4; Matthew 6:10).

Bible verses about praying for others

The Bible gives many examples of people praying for others, and we can learn a lot by studying and meditating on these examples. Here are just a few examples of intercessors in the Bible:

- Abraham interceded for the people of Sodom for the sake of his nephew Lot (Genesis 18:23-33). He memorably started by asking if God would spare Sodom if 50 righteous people were there. From there he boldly but humbly asked about 45, 40, 30, 20 and finally 10, and God answered, “I will not destroy it for the sake of ten.” Though God did not find 10, He fulfilled Abraham’s intent by sparing Lot and his family.
- Moses pleaded for God’s mercy for the sinning people of Israel (Exodus 32:9-14; Numbers 14:11-20). Moses turned down God’s offer to make a nation out of Moses’ descendants, and persuasively begged for God’s mercy for God’s name’s sake.
- Daniel begged God for his people (Daniel 9:3-19). Daniel’s passionate and meaningful prayer ends with his plea, “O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for Your city and Your people are called by Your name” (verse 19).
- The apostle Peter prayed for the beloved Dorcas, and God even raised her from the dead (Acts 9:36-41).

- The apostle Paul prayed regularly for the people he served (Romans 1:9-10; 10:1; Ephesians 1:15-19; Philippians 1:3-11; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13).

For more about prayer, see the articles in the section “How to Pray.”

About the Author



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