

## Chapter 9

# Pray with Constancy and Company

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As we've seen, prayer is at the very heart of the Christian life. Not only is it obedience to God's command, but it is a vital means of our receiving his ongoing grace for our spiritual survival and thriving. And the joy of prayer—communing with God—is essential to what it means to be Christian. Without prayer, there is no true relationship with him, and no deep delight in who he is, but only glimpses from afar.

As Jesus teaches, private prayer (or “closet prayer”) has an important role to play in the life of the believer. We develop our various patterns and practices for secret prayer in the rhythms of our unique lives. We find our place and time to “go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Matt. 6:6). Amen to private prayer (chap. 8). It is crucial. But there is more.

### **Taking Prayer into the Day**

Prayer begins in secret, but God doesn't mean for it to stay in the closet. Prayer is for all of life, and especially for our life

together in community. When we follow the lead of the Scriptures, we not only practice prayer in private, but take its spirit of dependence and trust into the rest of the day, and into times of focused prayer together with fellow believers.

Likely you know the verses that lead us to whisper prayers long after we've left the closet. "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17); "be constant in prayer" (Rom. 12:12); "continue steadfastly in prayer" (Col. 4:2); "pray at all times" (Eph. 6:18). Jesus said that we "ought always to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1). These texts charge us not to stay all day in the closet, but to carry a posture of prayer in the soul as we give ourselves fully to our daily tasks and engagements—and that in a moment, we be ready to go consciously godward in the car, waiting in line, as we walk, before a meal, in the midst of a difficult conversation, and in anything else.

"Everywhere God is, prayer is," Tim Keller writes. "Since God is everywhere and infinitely great, prayer must be all-pervasive in our lives."<sup>1</sup>

### **The High Point: Praying Together**

The high point of all-pervasive prayer, outside the closet door, is praying together with other Christians. Arranging for accompaniment in prayer takes more energy than a whispered prayer while on the move. It takes planning and initiative and the syncing of schedules in a way that private prayer does not. But it is worth every ounce of effort.

And so we have at least two fronts to a healthy life of prayer. We pray personally, in secret and on the move, and we pray corporately, resisting the privatizing of our prayers, not just by asking others to pray for us but especially by having others pray *with* us.

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<sup>1</sup> *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 28.

## Christ and His Company

If any human life would have been fine without regular company in prayer, it would have been Jesus's. But again and again we catch glimpses of a life of prayer that was not only personal but corporate. "He took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray" (Luke 9:28), and he responded gladly to their inquiry, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1), with a communal prayer to "*our* Father," marked by the repeated use of "we," "us," and "our."

The classic text on Jesus's letting others invade his prayer space is Luke 9:18: "Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him." Rarely did he part company with his men (and only then to pray, see Matt. 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16), and doubtless one of their regular pursuits together was prayer. Keeping such company in prayer must have played a part in "the boldness of Peter and John [who were] uneducated, common men," when it was recognized "that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

Jesus's communal prayer with his men then led to communal prayer in the early church they led. It is explicit at nearly every turn in the book of Acts.

- "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer" (1:14; also 2:42).
- "They lifted their voices together to God" (4:24), and the filling of the Holy Spirit fell after they prayed together (v. 31).
- The church chose the seven, and "they prayed and laid their hands on them" (6:6).
- While Peter was in prison, "earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church" (12:5), and when he escaped miraculously, he found "many were gathered together and were praying" (v. 12).
- It was "after fasting and praying" that the church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas out on the first missionary

journey (13:3), and “when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord” (14:23).

- Even in jail, “Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God” (16:25).
- And in an emotional goodbye to the Ephesian elders, Paul “knelt down and prayed with them all” (20:36; also 21:5).

### **Five Counsels for Praying with Company**

Our need for God’s help today is no less than the early church’s, and prayer *together* remains a vital means of God’s ongoing grace in the Christian life and for our communities.

That the early church prayed together is plain; the details of how they went about it are not. This is significant. There is no one pattern for corporate prayer, whether it’s in twos or tens, hundreds or thousands. The practices of praying together vary from family to family, church to church, and community to community based on context, leadership, and shared history. Wise leaders are observant of what habits and practices are already at work in the group, which ones are helpful and could be encouraged, and which ones might prove unhelpful over the long haul and could be replaced.

Here are five lessons I’ve learned in leading small-group prayer in recent years. Maybe one or two would be good for a family, community group, or church you lead or are a part of.

#### **1. MAKE IT REGULAR**

Make regular prayer with company a part of your weekly or biweekly routine. Instead of just hit-or-miss, have a planned time and place to gather with fellow believers to pray. As for how many weeks or months you commit, make a finite pledge together, rather than a world-without-end-amen kind of plan. When the specified time is up, renew or reconsider. Regular

prayer commitments without an end date tend to fizzle over time, and then prove discouraging for future engagements.

## 2. START WITH SCRIPTURE

Christian prayer at its truest comes in response to God's self-revelation to us. It is, as George Herbert wrote, "God's breath in man returning to his birth."<sup>2</sup> And so it is fitting to begin sessions of corporate prayer with some anchor in God's own speaking to us by reading a passage or referencing some place in Scripture as a kind of "call to prayer." We inhale the Scriptures and exhale in prayer.

## 3. LIMIT SHARE TIME

It can be easy to let the sharing of requests cannibalize the actual praying together. Keep your introductions short, read a passage, and go right into prayer. Encourage people to share their requests by praying them with the information needed to let others in on what they're praying.

## 4. ENCOURAGE BREVITY AND FOCUS

The corporate setting is not well served by rambling. It tries the attention and focus of even the most devout prayer warriors, and contributes to setting a length standard inaccessible to many and a poor model to everyone. At suitable times, urge short, focused prayers, and perhaps even include an explicit season of one-sentence praises or thanks which can encourage more people to participate.

## 5. PRAY WITHOUT SHOW, BUT WITH OTHERS IN MIND

Remind yourself that corporate prayer is not for impressing others—some personalities especially need the regular prompt—

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<sup>2</sup>"Prayer (I)," available online at Poetry Foundation, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/1173636>.

but for gathering others up with us in our praises, confessions, thanksgivings, and requests. However, minding our own penchant for praying for show doesn't mean we forget or neglect the others gathered.

Good corporate praying is not directed just to God, but has our fellow pray-ers in view. This means that, like Jesus, we pray most often with “we,” “us,” and “our,” and with both authenticity and candor that is appropriate for those assembled.



## **Nine Profits of Praying with Company**

It is almost too good to be true—almost—that in Jesus we have the very ear of God. What an indescribable gift that the God whose greatness is beyond comprehension actually stoops to listen to us.

But the joys and benefits of prayer aren't limited to our personal prayer lives. A shared joy is a doubled joy, and as we've seen, God means for us not only to pray in our closets, and “without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17) as we move through life in a spirit of dependence, but to pray with company.

Inestimable good happens, no doubt, when the regenerate rally with their fellows; it is past finding out all that God is doing when we pray together. Yet it helps to trace out some of the good, and whet our appetites for some of the graces for which our prayer together is a means. So in helping us celebrate the place and power of corporate prayer, here are nine profits of praying with company.

### **1. FOR ADDED POWER**

Matthew 18:15–20 may be one of the more misunderstood texts in the New Testament. That often quoted promise “where

two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (v. 20) comes at the end of a section on church discipline and when a “brother sins against you” (v. 15). However, Jesus does appeal to a deeper principle here, which is a benefit of corporate prayer. He says, “If two of you agree on earth about *anything* they ask . . .” (v. 19). There is an added power to our prayers when we unite with fellows in the faith and make our requests to the Father with our hearts joined together.

## 2. FOR MULTIPLIED JOY

Let’s make explicit what we said above: When we share the joy of prayer, we double our joy. When we make the regular practice of praying together with fellow believers, we avail ourselves of a channel of joy we otherwise would be neglecting. And by praying with others, we not only add to our joy, but also to theirs. And when we work with others for their joy in God (2 Cor. 1:24), we again increase our own.

## 3. FOR GREATER GLORY TO GOD

Our multiplied joy in God then makes for multiplied glory to God—because *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.*<sup>3</sup> If we hear gratitude to him in terms of God’s glory—which we should in light of Romans 1:21, where giving thanks to him is connected to honoring him as God—then 2 Corinthians 1:11 makes this truth explicit as it relates to prayer: “You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.” Praying together not only adds power to the request, but also means more glory for the Giver when he answers.

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<sup>3</sup>This is the refrain of John Piper throughout his corpus, and the mission of desiringGod.org, which I serve as executive editor, is to help people everywhere understand and embrace this truth.

#### 4. FOR FRUITFUL MINISTRY AND MISSION

God means for us to pray for each other in our various ministries and manifestations of mission, in light of our great shared Commission. Paul modeled this in asking the churches to pray for his gospel work (Rom. 15:30–32; 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 6:18–20; Col. 4:3–4; 2 Thess. 3:1). He was more than able to pray these things himself, and doubtless he did. But he anticipated there would be greater fruitfulness in the work when others joined him in prayer for it.

#### 5. FOR UNITY AMONG BELIEVERS

Praying together is one of the single most significant things we can do together to cultivate unity in the church. There is a unity that is a given to those who are fellows in Christ and share spiritual life in him. Acts 1:14 says it was “with one accord” that the first Christians “were devoting themselves to prayer.” Already we have “the unity of the Spirit,” and yet we are to be “eager to maintain” it (Eph. 4:3). So praying together is both an effect of the unity we already share in Christ and a cause for deeper and richer unity. It’s not only a sign that unity exists among the brothers but also a catalyst for more.

#### 6. FOR ANSWERS WE OTHERWISE WOULDN’T GET

James 5:14–16 implies that there are some answers to prayer we simply would not get without involving others in our praying.

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.<sup>4</sup> And the prayer of faith will save

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<sup>4</sup>Much could be said about the act of anointing with oil. While this is not the place for a full treatment, it is worth briefly summarizing, in a book on the means of grace, the essence of this act and how it can accompany prayer as a means of grace for the Christian.

the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

God means for some answers to prayer to await the joining of others with us. Often we pray alone for our personal needs, and God is pleased to answer. But at times, his means include the leaders of the church, or just the simple prayer of a fellow sinner made righteous in Christ.

## 7. TO LEARN AND GROW IN OUR PRAYERS

Plain and simple, the best way to learn to pray is pray with others who have had their prayers shaped by the Scriptures. Listen for those around you who are acquainted enough with God in prayer as to regularly draw others into communion with him through their praises and petitions. Give careful attention to their approach to God, the kinds of things they thank him for and ask for, and how they keep others in mind in the corporate setting. And beyond what we're conscious of, we're being shaped deep down as we join our hearts with others in prayer.

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Some have speculated that the anointing in James 5 is medicinal, and that the instructions are simply to apply the medicine of the day along with prayer. This view seems to overlook the wealth of theology across the Scriptures about the symbolism and significance of anointing—a theology that culminates in Christ himself as the Anointed One (*Christ* means “anointed”).

Throughout the Bible, anointing with oil symbolizes consecration to God (Ex. 28:41; Luke 4:18; Acts 4:27; 10:38; 2 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 1:9), with Christ being the greatest manifestation of consecration to God in his perfect human life, sacrificial human death, and victorious human resurrection from the grave. Anointing with oil is an external act of the body that accompanies, and gives expression to, the internal desire and disposition of faith to dedicate someone or something to God in some special way.

Here in James 5, as Douglas Moo writes, “As the elders pray, they are to anoint the sick person in order to symbolize that that person is being set apart for God’s special attention and care.” Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James, Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 242. Similar to James 5:14, Mark 6:13 mentions anointing with oil as a means of grace accompanying the apostles’ prayer for the sick. The disciples “anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.” It is not automatic in producing healing, but a prayerful expression, and intensifier of prayer to God, asking and waiting for him to heal.

#### 8. TO KNOW EACH OTHER

One of the best ways to get to know fellow believers is by praying together. It is in prayer, in the conscious presence of God, that we're most likely to let the veneer fall. You hear their hearts in prayer like nowhere else. When we pray together, not only do we reveal what most captures our hearts and truly is our treasure, but as we pray together, says Jack Miller, "You can tell if a man or woman is really on speaking terms with God."<sup>5</sup>

#### 9. TO KNOW JESUS MORE

Saving the best for last, the greatest benefit in praying together is that we know Jesus better when we pray together, in his name, with fellow lovers of him. With our limited vision and perspective, there are parts of Christ we're prone to see with more clarity than others. Our own experiences and personalities emphasize some aspects of his glory and make us blind to others. And so Tim Keller observes, "By praying with friends, you will be able to hear and see facets of Jesus that you have not yet perceived."<sup>6</sup>

And since the great purpose of prayer is not getting things from God but getting God, perhaps this benefit alone will be enough to inspire you to initiate or accept that next opportunity to pray with company.

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<sup>5</sup>Keller, *Prayer*, 23.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 119.