

Caring for People Through Prayer

We are here to love God and care for people. We love God through worship, observing His Ordinances, and obeying His word. We care for people by praying for them, practicing hospitality toward them, and proclaiming the Christ to them. I am going to talk this morning about caring for people through prayer, but before we go there I just want to take a moment to share with you the truth that caring for people is an outflow of our love for God. In fact, caring for people is a fourth way we demonstrate our love for God. We can also say that it is impossible to love God and not care for people; caring for people flows naturally, organically, from our love for God.

This is quite clear in Scripture. We began this series of messages with Jesus' statement in Matthew 22:37-39, where He says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" Jesus refuses to speak about loving God without mentioning love for people. What He is strongly implying here is that any love for God that does not include caring for people is bogus.

You may find this hard to believe but I've heard it with my own ears: One pastor asks another pastor, "How's your church?" The other pastor responds, "O my church would be wonderful were it not for the people!" The truth in such an answer is that sometimes people can be contrary, picky, and sometimes downright mean. The fallacy in such an answer is that without the people there would be no church, for the people onerary sheep as they may be, are the church.

In our Scripture from John 21, Jesus, after He was risen from the dead, drives this thought home to Peter on the lakeshore: John 21:15-17 say, "When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?' 'Yes, Lord,' he said, 'you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs.' Again Jesus said, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me?' He answered, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Take care of my sheep.' The third time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' He said, 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my sheep". Of course, the "sheep" and "lambs" Jesus is talking about here are the people, specifically the people who come to faith in Jesus. Peter is to prove his love for Jesus by caring for the host of new believers who are about to be brought into the fold on the day of Pentecost and following.

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We see the same theme in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. I Corinthians 13:1-3 say, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." And, it is clear from the context of these verses that Paul is talking about loving and caring for fellow believers. If you fail at loving one another, then all your mystical experiences and religious sacrifices, and all your talk about loving God, amounts to nothing.

James, the brother of our Lord, also connects love for God with caring for people. James 1:27 says, "What God the Father considers to be pure and genuine religion is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their suffering, and to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world."

I John 4:19-21 erases any remaining doubt: John says, "We love because God first loved us. If someone says, "I love God," but hates his brother, he is a liar. For he cannot love God, whom he has not seen, if he does not love his brother, whom he has seen. This, then, is the command that Christ gave us: he who loves God must love his brother also."

We are here to love and care for people, to love and care for one another and to love and care for all whom the Lord puts in our path. This is the supreme test of our love for Him, and the chief evidence that we belong to Him. I John 4:8 says, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." **A major way we love God is to care for people.**

With this foundation fully in place we can now begin to talk about caring for people through praying for them. Let me give you a definition: "**Praying for people is the process of remembering them in God's presence and asking God to bless them.**" With this being said, let me tell you some things that praying for people is not.

Praying for people is **not spiritual manipulation**. We can't turn people into the people we want them to be by praying for them. Transformation is God's job. Only God can turn a caterpillar into a butterfly. Don't waste your time praying for people to change. Focus on blessing, not change. Ask God to bless them and God will bring about any changes He deems necessary.

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Praying for people is **not a way to get even**. I know that the Scripture talks about "heaping burning coals" on someone's head, but the implication is not as negative as that may sound--not at all. In a day before the invention of matches, giving someone burning coals to light a fire to cook with or to heat or light one's home, was a good thing. And as a lot of people carried things on their heads in those days, this is not as painful as it sounds. Placed in a clay pot that was placed in a basket, one could carry coals on one's head with no discomfort whatsoever. Thought of in a spiritual sense, we remember how the Holy Spirit came as tongues of fire that sat above the heads of the disciples on the Day of Pentecost. The fire came to bless and to empower, not to harm. We never pray down harm on people only blessing.

Praying for people is **not a panacea or magic rabbit's foot**; that is, we will not see every prayer answered in the way we may desire. There are a lot of other factors that influence what happens in people's lives. The person's own will and choices, his or her genetic make up, level of faith, the influence of family and friends, God's unforeseen plan at work: lots of things have a say in the way any given prayer will be answered.

So, on the one hand, praying for people is **not spiritual manipulation, not a tool of revenge, and not a panacea**. The results in any given case are not guaranteed. But, on the other hand, praying for people with a heart full of God's love for them, and with faith in God's power to bless them, **is never futile. It is not a waste of time. It is not without effect**. James 5:16 says, ". . . confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

Jesus sent forth His first disciples with a command to heal the sick, cast out demons, cleanse lepers, and even to raise the dead. And, you may not know this, but they didn't have first aid kits, magic potions, or cardiac crash carts. I don't even think they knew any CPR. What they did have was prayer, the power of prayer.

Christian author, speaker, and seminary professor, Reggie McNeal tells the story of a man who heard Reggie's exhortation to ask God to show him people to bless. The week after he heard Reggie's message, this man was shopping in a sporting goods store that he often frequented, and the Holy Spirit impressed upon him that the owner of the store was having a bad day. The Christian, boldly seeking to obey God, said to the man behind the counter, "Are you having a bad day?" The man said, "I certainly am, and I wish I was anywhere else but

here." The believer said, "I will pray for you." The man asked, "Are you serious?" "Yes," the believer said, "I will pray for you." At that point the man behind the counter went on to say how miserable he was in the sporting goods store and how business was bad, and also shared the fact that he and his wife were arguing all the time and she refused to go with him to counseling. The believer said, "I will ask God to bless you." And that's all that was said.

But the believer remembered the man in his prayers daily and returned to the store several weeks later. As soon as the store owner saw him he got all excited. "Come here, come here, come here," he said. When the man went to the counter, the shopkeeper said, "You've been praying for me?" "Yes," the believer replied, "I've been praying for God to bless you." "Well, it's working," the man said. "There was a man in here a few days ago wandering all over the store. I tried to sell him something, but he didn't buy anything. But, he came back later and said, 'I want buy your store,' and I'm going to sell it and I'm going to make a lot of money. Besides that, my wife has agreed to go with me to counseling."

Now there are a several things in this story that make the prayers of this Christian particularly effective. Number one, he knew from the beginning of his day that he was called to be on mission for God and that that mission involved caring for people. His heart was right; his attitude was one of expectation for God to lead, and a willingness to follow that lead. And I have to ask at this point for an attitude check from you and me. Do we understand that our ongoing everyday mission is to love God and care for people? Are we primed, as we leave this service this morning, are we primed to sense and follow God's lead in blessing the people around us? **Attitude is at least half the battle.**

The believer in Reggie's story had the **right attitude**. A second thing we can say about this believer is that his prayers on behalf of the other man were **God inspired**. Some Christians may feel that they need to offer prayers on behalf of everybody and respond in prayer to every sad story they hear, and if God has called you to that kind of praying, I don't want to discourage you. If you are sure that that is what God has called you to do, keep on doing it. But, I think God can and will place on our hearts very specific people and needs to pray for, and when we pray specifically for those God has directed us to pray, those prayers will be most effective and will bring the most blessing. In other words, we can pray with a shot gun approach not seeing what we are praying for, and still get a hit once in a while. Or, we can pray with a rifle approach that aims at a specific target appointed by God,

knowing that God will answer every prayer that He has directed us to pray. **Prayers targeted by God will be most effective.**

The third thing we need to note about the believer in Reggie's story, is that he **stepped out in faith to obey God**. Reggie McNeal points out that a sporting goods store is probably not the easiest place to talk about prayer or do Christian evangelism. You know, it's a very "macho" kind of place. As Reggie says, "they sell stuff there that kills things." But the Christian stepped out in faith. He fought off any feeling of embarrassment or fear and followed God's lead. Based on what he sensed from God, he asked the question, "Are you having a bad day?" And, if the believer had misread what God was saying to him, the man behind the counter could have said, "No, I'm having a great day!" and the believer could have said "that's great," and the conversation would have been over. But, the point is, we will never know we are hearing God right, if we don't talk to people to check it out. **Effective prayer follows through on God's leads.**

I challenge us to take this message to heart and to intentionally seek God's direction to care for people by praying for them this coming week. Ask God for eyes to see at least one specific person for whom He wants you to pray. Ask God to show you the need and check it out with the person God puts on your heart. Start a conversation as the Holy Spirit leads. Listen carefully to the response. If you get a strange response, you can always blame it on me, and tell them you are conducting an experiment in blessing people through prayer. Your crazy preacher put you up to it. It might open a door to invite them to come and see what's going on here.

But, I think you may be surprised how some people will be touched by your offer of prayer, and if they are open to it, then make sure you follow through. Don't promise to pray and then fail to pray. Pray until you hear an answer or until God releases you from the burden. Ask God to bless and to provide for the person He identifies. If our hearts are right, and if we are open to obey God, He will do great and awesome things through our prayers. One important way we can care for people is by praying for them.

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John 21:15-17, James 5:13-20

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