

PRAYER'S RELATIONSHIPS

by Ray C. Stedman

When D. L. Moody, the great American evangelist, was in Edinburgh in the 1880's, he was asked one morning to speak to a room filled with children. In order to get their attention, he began with a question. He asked them, "What is prayer?" Now he didn't really expect an answer -- he was going to answer this question himself -- but to his astonishment, hands shot up all over the room. He called on one young boy to give the answer, and the boy stood up and said in a strong voice: "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies." Moody's response was, "Thank God, my boy, that you were born in Scotland!" That was 100 years ago. I wonder how many adults could give a definition of prayer like that today?

We have been studying prayer from the Old Testament, from the worthies who learned how to pray through many trials, problems, pressures, and disappointments, and yet learned how to lay hold of God in wonderful ways. This morning I want to take a prayer from the experience of Job, found in the 42nd chapter of the book of Job.

Job was a man who was tormented by great physical affliction. He was tortured too by three tiresome old windbags who told him that the cause of his problems was his own personal sin. As a result, he was in deep distress. This book is filled with the prayers of Job, but the remarkable thing is that Job is the only one who prays. There is no prayer recorded from his friends, who seemed to feel no need for prayer in their own lives.

Now although Job is always praying, his prayers seem to be unanswered. One of his great problems was the silence of God. Though Job cried in great distress, God seemed to say nothing to him until at last, God did speak to him out of a whirlwind, and examined Job's fitness to deal with him. Then, as you know, Job repented in dust and ashes. At the end of that time, in Verse 7 of Chapter 42, we read this account:

After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has." So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the Lord had told them; and the Lord accepted Job's prayer.

And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. {Job 42:7-10 RSV}

One thing that emerges from that passage is the fact that here is a clear-cut example of a man interceding on behalf of his friends. This is an excellent example, therefore, of what we often call "intercessory prayer" -- praying for someone other than ourselves. There is much in this passage to teach us how to pray for others. As I have been meditating on this, it has ministered to my own heart. I see three things, at least, which strike me as very helpful in understanding the role of an intercessor.

First, this passage reveals to us that we have a relationship one with another; we belong to one another. This is certainly true in the body of Christ. We are instructed in the New Testament that we are members one of another. Our lives somehow have been blended together. Because we share the life of Christ, we are members of the same family; we interpenetrate one another.

Paul says a very remarkable thing in Chapter 12 of First Corinthians, where he points out that the body of Christ is made up in such a way that if one member suffers, all the members suffer. When you read verses like that you may say to yourself, as I have said to myself, "How can that be? I don't even know about the

suffering of millions of members of the body of Christ. How can one member's suffering affect me?" Even here in this congregation there are many of you who may go through trials, who may be honored or dishonored, and I do not know anything about it. How can that affect me, therefore? Yet when one member is honored all are honored, when one is disgraced all are disgraced.

If you think about it a moment you can see why. When a member of the Christian community is honored, what does everybody who hears about that think about Christians? Well, they think better of them, don't they? And they think that way because people tend to think of one member of a group as characteristic of all the members. The same thing is true when one of us dishonors the name of Christ. Everybody who hears about it says to himself, "Aha, that's what I thought about these Christians anyhow. They're all like that."

Now, because we belong to each other in this way and what we do touches and interpenetrates other people, we are expected to pray for one another. We have a relationship with one another we cannot deny. This is true even if we are not Christians. We have a relationship with everyone in the world. John Donne, the English philosopher, said, "No man is an island." That's true. One of the earliest challenges to that statement appears in the book of Genesis, when Cain said to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" {Gen 4:9}. All through the Bible that question has been answered in the affirmative. Yes, we are our brother's keeper. We are responsible for what happens to another. Because we are all members of one race we have no right to shut ourselves off in isolation and not concern ourselves about what others are going through. We are all tainted with the same fallen nature. We all react the same way. We all contribute to one another's difficulties in many ways. Therefore, we are responsible. This all serves as the basis and the background for intercessory prayer.

But this account also indicates that there is a difference among us. In one sense we are all the same, but in another sense we are all different. Notice that God particularly sent Job's friends to him so that he could pray for them, not the other way around. I'm sure this must have been something of a shock to these men, for all through the book it is evident that they consider themselves spiritually superior to Job. They have come to point out at great length and with tremendous verbosity all the evil things Job has done in his life. They thought of themselves as physicians to this spiritually and physically ailing man. But God does not think of them that way. In his eyes Job has reached a level of knowledge and understanding -- and therefore authority -- that they have not yet reached. When the time for correcting them comes, therefore, God sends the three men to Job for him to pray for them.

This reflects the truth the New Testament teaches that, in the body of Christ, there are levels of knowledge and growth and experience and authority. First John says, "I write to you, little children, because you know the Father. I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning," {cf, 1 Jn 2:12-14}.

There are the levels of growth, of knowledge, and of true spirituality which are recognized in the Scriptures. Some are babes, just beginning their Christian life; others have grown to the status of young men who are able to do battle with the evil one and overcome in the assaults and battles of life; and then there are fathers who have been on the pathway a long time. Their age and experience has taught them many deep and penetrating lessons which the young men have not even learned yet. God recognizes these differences. We too are to recognize them and learn from one another, according to the status God has given us in this regard.

Now, I recognize that this has little to do with chronological age. An old man or woman can be a babe in Christ. On the other hand, one can be young in years and yet be a father, a spiritual giant.

I was in Fresno last week, at the seminary there, speaking to about 200 pastors from all over the Western States and Western Canada. I took with me a young man, Kenneth Lee, who is associated with the ministry going on at Vacaville prison. He was sent to prison some six years ago for murder, and he had become converted to Christianity while he had yet four years of his sentence to serve. In the prison ministry that goes on there, under the direction of some of the men we have been acquainted with, he began to grow in his knowledge of the Scriptures and his walk with the Lord. In four years of studying the Scriptures, sometimes four and five hours a day, he has grown to a level of spiritual maturity that is evident to everyone who meets him. I said to the young men who are in the seminary there in Fresno, "I would strongly recommend that all of you spend a year in prison!" Such an experience matures one to a level of spirituality that is not always

possible to those who are merely educated. So there are levels of knowledge; there are levels of authority. We all are equal as sons and daughters of God in relationship to one another, but all are not equal in knowledge or grace. God chooses Job, therefore, to pray for these men.

Then the ministry of intercession indicates the privilege we have of sharing our spiritual strength with those who are going through struggles. Sometimes you are the one who is strong and others are weak. You can pray for those who are struggling, who are under great pressure, confused, perhaps, deceived by sin so that they do not even see their own problems. "Those who are spiritual," Paul says in the book of Galatians, "are to restore such a one in the spirit of meekness, considering themselves lest they also be tempted," {cf, Gal 6:1}. At another time you may be the one who is weak, depressed, or discouraged, and yet someone who once was weak but who now is stronger than you can pray for you.

In my own life there have been times when I have been under tremendous pressure, perhaps under great depressions of spirit and on the point even of wanting to quit being a Christian, and some have prayed for me. This steadied me, strengthened me, upheld me and enabled me to meet demands I could not otherwise have met. (The Apostle Paul says he was aware that many were praying for him and obtaining his release from prison at times because of their prayers.) At other times I have been privileged to pray for some who were struggling, confronted with alluring temptations which beckoned them on into their own destruction, and God graciously delivered and helped them through those times.

Now sometimes you can not stop people from getting into trouble. Jesus prayed for Peter when he knew he was about to deny him. Peter, nevertheless, denied him. But Jesus said he had prayed that, when Peter denied him, his faith would not fail him, and Peter was upheld in that time. When it was all over, our Lord restored him in that beautiful scene by the Sea of Galilee, when he asked him three times, "Peter, do you love me?" {cf, John 21:15-19}. Intercession, therefore, has that wonderful quality of allowing us to share our times of strength with those who are in a time of weakness, that we might be upheld in our periods of weakness by those who have spiritual strength.

But there is more than simply intercession here. If you look at this account carefully, you see that, in Verse 10, something is recorded of what effect this had upon Job as well:

And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. {Job 42:10 RSV}

In the book of Job, we are given very clear evidence of when Job's physical problems began. They began, as the opening chapters tell us, when, after having destroyed Job's home and his wealth and killed all his children, Satan obtained permission from God to afflict him with a terrible siege of boils from head to foot. An awful series of painful, suppurating boils had turned him into a dreadful, revolting sight. This, of course, was shattering to Job's sense of self-esteem, and he groveled in the ash heap. The whole book is an account of how Job cries out in agony and despair week after week after week because of this. His friends come and torment him with accusations, blaming him for everything, so that he is mentally and physically tormented. But if you ask yourself, "When did Job's pain stop?" this verse is the only one which gives you the answer. God reversed the fortunes of Job when he prayed for his friends. Then the agony stopped. Even during Job's great encounter with God, recorded in Chapters 40 and on, there is no mention there that his agony had ceased. He is asked all these searching questions by God, but he is still feeling the awful pain in his body. When he prays for his friends, however, it all ends.

That indicates that, in order for this to happen, Job has to deal with his natural resentment against these men. If we put ourselves in Job's place, we can understand how he must have felt. At best, he would see these men as a trio of self-righteous windbags who were just blowing hot air. At worst, Job would see them as a group of malicious slanderers who were out to destroy his reputation, because they accused him of things he never did, of attitudes he did not possess, of actions he never dreamed of doing. Those were the reasons for all his trouble, they said. They assaulted him, they insulted him, they outraged him. He had every right by natural standards to be angry, and upset, and bitter against these three so-called friends. But you cannot pray for somebody when you think of him in that way. In order to obey God, Job had to forgive these men. He had to set aside all the bitterness, the resentment and the anger he might have felt and deal with them as sinners, just

like himself. That is the beauty of this passage, because the moment Job did that his own healing began.

Anger and bitterness always affect us. Holding a grudge against somebody destroys us. Jesus said this in several parables and stories in the New Testament. He clearly implied that, if we do not forgive others, we subject ourselves to a terrible inner torment that will not stop until we are willing to forgive. Paul says to the Ephesians that we are to be "tender-hearted, forgiving one another even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven us," {Eph 4:32 KJV}. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us that we were to forgive: "Forgive us our trespasses even as we forgive those who trespass against us," {cf, Matt 6:12, 6:14}. Everywhere in the Scriptures there is this recognition that no healing can occur in our life until we forgive those who have offended us, hurt us and damaged us.

All this was made easier for Job by a second factor here, and that is that these men were told by God to take with them seven bulls and seven rams and offer an offering for themselves. That is the symbolic language of the Old Testament which tells us what is going on in their own thinking and hearts when they do this. In the book of Leviticus, in the descriptions of the offerings of Israel, we find that each of these animals has a peculiar significance.

First, these were male animals -- bulls and rams. Now male animals are treated differently than female animals in the offerings of the Old Testament. Males always stand for leadership, so here is a recognition that these men were acknowledged spiritual leaders in the land. But, as leaders, they had done something wrong, therefore, they had to offer an offering. A death had to come about; they had to die to that which they had been doing, whatever it was. Furthermore, bulls are always a picture of strength in the Old Testament; while rams are a picture of passion. Even in the ancient world of Greece, these animals had this significance. What these men were saying by this offering which God commanded them to bring, therefore, was that, as acknowledged leaders, they had misused their strength in an ungracious attack upon Job. With excessive passion, with unjustified anger they had attacked him and insulted him. They had to confess that by the death of these animals as their substitutes, speaking of their own self-judgment of these ugly things. Now I am sure that helped Job to pray for them because it meant these men had repented.

But there is another factor too that helped Job, and that was the fact that he himself had just repented before God. In this great encounter with God he had learned something about himself that he had never seen before. Though, at the beginning of the book, he is acknowledged by God to be a righteous man, yet there was a spirit of self-righteousness in Job's heart that he was unaware of. It took all the pain, all the distress, and all the weeks of torment to bring him to the place where he finally saw what he was really like before God. He did not see that at first, however. All through the book he argues with God, almost to the point of charging God with blame for the whole thing. He does not quite say that, but at last, when God appears to him and begins to question him about his capacity to handle the deep, complicated problems of life -- the most amazing series of questions in all the Bible -- Job at last faces himself with these words in Chapter 42, Verse 5:

**"I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees thee;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes." {Job 42:5-6 RSV}**

It is easy to pray for somebody who has hurt us when we begin to understand how many times we have hurt others, when we, like Job, see that we have been insulting to God. We have accused God of wrong things; we have blamed him for things he sent our way as a gift of love. We have complained and murmured and criticized and accused God falsely, but he forgave us; he did not hold it against us. He helped us to see it and then he wiped it away. Job was able to do that with these men because he himself had been forgiven. The result was an immediate healing in his life. All the poison of bitterness drained out; all his anger subsided. Job began to be cleansed, his boils healed, and God began to pour blessing back into his life -- "twice as much as he had before." That may not mean much to us because it refers to material things, but in an age when prosperity and having children were signs of God's blessing, this was God's testimony to the whole watching world that Job had cleansed a deep-seated error in his life. God had washed him and cleansed him and forgiven him; and Job simply extended forgiveness to these men who had so severely injured him.

A few years ago a friend of mine told me a most remarkable story about an experience he had at a Christian conference ground in the Sierras. He had met a man and his wife at dinner there, and he noticed that this man treated his wife in a very cavalier manner, speaking harshly whenever he spoke to her, but ignoring her most of the time. My friend said that as he was leaving to drive down to the valley, this man said to him, "Do you mind if I ride along with you? My wife can ride with another couple. I want to talk to you."

As they drove away, this man said to him, "Did you notice when we were together this evening that I had a hard time talking to my wife?" My friend told him, "Yes." "Well, let me tell you why," this man said. "We were married about ten years ago. I loved my wife very much and we had a couple of wonderful years together. Then I got busy around the ranch. I had so much to do that we did not spend a lot of time together. As the ranch prospered, I had to hire a man to come and work for me, and it wasn't long before I discovered that he was spending time in my house with my wife while I was out in the fields. When I learned about this I warned him that he must not go into the house anymore, and I warned my wife that I wouldn't tolerate this kind of thing."

"Shortly after that my wife became ill and had to have minor surgery. I went to the hospital to see her during a time which was not the usual visiting hour. To my absolute astonishment, I walked into the hospital room and found her in bed with the hired man. I was so outraged I left and went back to my ranch. I didn't even go back to get her for a couple of days because I couldn't stand the sight of her. Finally the hospital called and said I had to come and take her home, and I did so. I asked her why she had done this. She cried and said she knew it was wrong and asked me to forgive her. But I can't. Since that time we have hardly spoken to one another. I can't stand the sight of her. She makes me angry every time I look at her. I'm sure you could see that when we were together today. What will I do? How can I work this out?" he asked.

My friend, who is a Christian, said to him, "Can't you see what you are doing to yourself? You are in constant torment and agony, and it is going to keep getting worse, not better. And look what you are doing to your wife. You have her on a dead-end street. She can't go anywhere. She has done everything she can do about this situation. She has admitted it was wrong. She has asked you to forgive her. She can't change it; she can't eliminate it. So what are you going to do in the future, just hold it over her forever?" They talked further and prayed together. Then my friend left.

Two weeks later he happened to be up in the mountains and he ran into this couple again. It was obvious at first glance that everything was different. This man ran up to my friend and said, "Oh, I want to thank you for what you said to me. Afterwards I went to my wife and told her that I was wrong for not forgiving her. Then I did forgive her, and I asked her to forgive me for all the ugly, mean, cruel things I said to her since that time. Then we knelt together and asked the Lord to forgive us both. Now it's like a second honeymoon. Things are so different."

Many people hold grudges against others for years. Their own spiritual life is poisoned as a result, and they are poisoning other relationships in their homes too. But God's grace teaches us that intercessory prayer helps us to forgive each other.

Forgiveness always means three things:

- It means, first, I will not say anything about this ever again to that person; he is forgiven. This is how God forgives us: "He casts our sins into the depths of the sea and remembers them against us no more," {cf, Micah 7:19}.
- Second, it means I will not talk to anybody else about it. I will not complain to anybody; I will not bring it up again and rehash it with anybody.
- Third, it means I will not talk to myself about it anymore. I will not play it over in secret all the time. I will not set up the motion picture projector in my mind and run it all over again until it arouses me and angers me and gets me all upset again. Now I will not be able to stop it coming back at times, but I will not entertain it; I will not listen to it; I will not play it again.

That is what forgiveness means. That is what God tells us to do: "Be kind, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you," {cf, Eph 4:32}. Jesus warned us, "If you do not

forgive one another, neither will my Father in heaven forgive you your offenses," {cf, Matt 6:15}. We cannot live in a forgiven spirit if we are not willing to extend forgiveness to others.

This has been a good preparation for us this morning as we prepare to celebrate together the table of the Lord. On the night Jesus was betrayed, he gathered with his disciples and took a towel and a basin and went around and washed their feet, cleansing them of all the filth and dirt they had accumulated in their walk around the city that day. This was symbolic of the act of forgiveness. Many of us need cleansing before we come to the table of the Lord; we need to forgive each other. Jesus said. "If you come to offer your gift on the altar and there remember that your brother has ought against you or you against him, leave your gift and go to him [mentally, at least, if not physically] and tell him. Be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift," {cf, Matt 5:23}. Some of us need to do that. We need to be reconciled, at least in heart, and then in person, perhaps, afterward.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you that you are the God of truth and reality. You know our inner, as well as our outward life. There is nothing hidden from you; all things are naked and open before him with whom we have to do. So because we cannot hide from you, Lord, help us not to even try. Help us to get out all the hurt and the agony, and remember that we are just as guilty as the ones we are feeling angry about; that we have offended others and offended you in many ways and you have forgiven us. Because we are forgiven, grant to us the ability to extend a free and full forgiveness to others; to our mates, our children, our parents, our teachers, our bosses, whoever it may be. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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