

praying



2.2 the art of praying: how can prayer move people?

the big idea

In humble dependence, we can ask God to move in the lives of our spiritually lost friends, and he will answer those prayers.

ice breaker

Who is a famous person you would like to see become a Christian? To what extent do you believe praying for that person would make a difference? Explain your answer.

related Scripture

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Matthew 9:36-38 (NIV)

challenging wisdom

God will make us pray before He blesses our labors in order that we may constantly learn afresh that we depend on God for everything. And then, when God permits us to see conversions, we shall not be tempted to ascribe them to our own gifts, or skill, or wisdom, or persuasiveness, but to His work alone, and so we shall know whom we ought to thank for them.

– J. I. Packer

Moved to pray

Even though we may try desperately, our own efforts can do very little to shift the hearts of unbelievers toward God. There is at least one thing, however, that does make a difference: God's activity prompted by our prayers. We may not be able to explain the mechanics of how it works, but we know from Jesus' words that our prayers are honored by God, and used by God.

Our motivation—*why* we pray—may very well be as important as *what* we pray. How effective will our requests be if they come from a place of pride, obligation, or contempt? When praying for spiritual movement in people's lives, we must remember that the object of our prayers is a real person—not a project. As our heart lines up with God's heart, and we start praying in accordance with what matters most to him, our God-honoring prayer moves both the people we pray for, and us—the people around them who can help.

French theologian John Calvin explained:

Our prayer must not be self-centered. It must arise not only because we feel our own need as a burden we must lay upon God, but also because we are so bound up in love for our fellow men that we feel their need as acutely as our own. To make intercession for men is the most powerful and practical way in which we can express our love for them.¹

1

discuss

Do you tend to pray for people who are far from God because you want to or because you think you should? Explain your response.

¹As quoted by Dick Eastman in *The Hour that Changes the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1986), 80.

Perhaps we do not pray for non-believers with greater focus or frequency because it seems too simple. Or, maybe we are convinced that other outreach tools and techniques are more persuasive. We may even be “practical prayer atheists”—professing believers in the value of praying but unbelievers in practice. However, when it comes to loving people toward Jesus, prayer is not optional. It is the primary way we will shift from relying on our strength to God’s power in our spiritual engagements, and the means by which our efforts actually become spiritually effective.

Richard Foster, in *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, speaks about the practice of “Intercessory Prayer” and how it flows first from a spirit of genuine humility and compassion. He says, “If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer.”² When we realize that we cannot provide non-Christians with what they really need on our own, prayer will surface as our only viable alternative.

2	discuss
<p>When you pray, what interferes with actually believing that God can answer your prayer to change the minds and hearts of those you are praying for?</p>	

Just before Jesus sent his disciples out on their first ministry adventure, he modeled for them the significant (and seemingly endless) work of proclaiming God’s good news from town to town. And when he came face to face with the masses of people who were experiencing life without hope, his heart broke for them.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Matthew 9:36 (NIV)

Jesus’ concern for the people was not simply a quick glance at a pitiful situation. Love compelled Jesus in everything he did. In this instance, he was affected in an even more profound way. He knew the crowd’s plight and their fate, and it moved him to the core of his being. Jesus knew these spiritually wayward people needed someone who would love them with both grace and truth, someone who would lead them well and protect them from spiritual harm, someone who would bring them eternal hope and healing—the very thing he left heaven and came to

earth to do. Christ’s compassion got the attention of his followers who were preparing to head into Kingdom ministry.

3	discuss
<p>Describe a time when you were moved to pray for an unbelieving family member, friend, or stranger. What caused you to start praying?</p> <p>If you have stopped or gotten discouraged in your prayers, what is getting in the way?</p> <p>What can revitalize your prayer for them?</p>	

Moved to get God’s good news out

With a heart that was deeply moved, Jesus looked at all the people who were still separated from the Father, and he commanded his followers to invest their hearts—not just their time and talents—to pray for more Kingdom workers: *“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field”* (Matthew 9:37, NIV).

This was probably not the first thing on the minds of the disciples, but praying for workers was important to Jesus; they—and we today—need to do as he asked, and pray.

4	discuss
<p>What would it look like for you to pray for workers for the harvest? Think about how this focus could apply personally, professionally, nationally, and globally.</p>	

We must not forget that prayer moves believers and non-believers alike. According to Jesus, when we pray, people are stirred to get God’s good news out—not just receive it. Granted, our simple thoughts about it don’t magically move people into ministry. Rather it is God at work in whatever manner he deems appropriate, and by his sovereign decree, we

²Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 191.

participate with him in that work as we talk to him in prayer. Given that we are commanded to pray, a correlation surely exists between our prayers and God’s increased movement in and around us. We don’t have to know how it works—we just need to step into the assurance that it does.

R. A. Torrey, an American pastor, evangelist, and educator in the late 19th/early 20th century, held revival services in nearly every part of the English-speaking world. He wrote:

The most important human factor in effective evangelism is prayer. Every great awakening in the history of the Church from the time of the Apostles until today has been the result of prayer. There have been great awakenings without much preaching, and there have been great awakenings with absolutely no organization, but there has never been a true awakening without much prayer.³

God moves in response to our words; something shifts in the hearts of people and changes occur in this world when we go to the Lord of the harvest in prayer. We know that God uses his message-bearers to bring the good news of Christ to the spiritually lost (Rom. 10:13-15). And, just as Paul requested prayer so he could clearly communicate the gospel (Eph. 6:19), we know that partnering with God and others is critical for effectiveness in our circles of influence. As a priority in our prayer for unbelievers, we would be wise to place the request that the Lord send others to assist. We are all invited into the adventure of praying for his message and messengers to get out into the world.

5	discuss
<p>Name two or three people God sent into your life who helped you come to faith. How would your spiritual story be different had they not responded to God’s call to be a message-bearer?</p>	

Moved to being sent

In Matthew, have you ever noticed that Jesus is standing with harvest workers when he challenges them to pray to the Lord to send out those folks? His disciples were just about ready to go out on an important mission, and here Christ is telling them to pray for even more workers to be sent out. They are both evangelistic pray-ers and workers.

Your spiritual journey would be quite different if God had not allowed you to cross paths with certain individuals; the same is true of the impact you may have on someone else’s journey. God’s desire is that you will be open to being used by him in the lives of those who still don’t know him. You might be the answer to someone else’s request for a worker to be available! When we pray that the Lord will send people out on his behalf, it should not be all that surprising that this includes us too!

6	discuss
<p>When you consider that you might be the answer to someone else’s prayer for a Kingdom worker, how do you feel? What activity in your life may indicate that God is at work through you in this way?</p>	

Without question, God-honoring prayer moves people. The Lord desires to release evangelistic resources into the world, and prayer stirs believers to respond to the call of God’s Spirit leading them out. It leads unbelievers to hear God’s Word clearly and receive the gospel openly. And, it challenges us to humbly and compassionately bring people who are far away from God right into his throne room.

7	practice
<p>A great starting point for prayer is to find an area of spiritual harvest that moves you to Christ-like compassion. Spend a few moments reflecting on groups of people to whom you want God to send workers. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • your unbelieving family members, friends, and neighbors • people you work with, go to school with, do business with, or play sports with • people-groups identified by ethnicity, socio-economic status, disabilities, or life-stage... <p>List several specific “harvest fields.”</p>	
<p>Share at least one area that stirs you to pray. Take turns praying that God will send workers to reach the spiritual harvest in the areas you each identified.</p>	

³R. A. Torrey, *The Fundamentals*, “The Place of Prayer in Evangelism” (Commentary Essay) (Ada, MI: Baker, 2008), 185.

Practice on Your Own

Take the list of “harvest fields” that you generated in the practice within this module and continue to pray every day for those people and for a spiritual harvest in the area that you identified. Journal your prayer experience.

At the next meeting, be prepared to share with each other anything that you have noticed happening inside of you as you have been praying. Make sure to encourage each other and celebrate every attempt!

Getting the Big Idea

When we pray out of trust in God and hearts filled with compassion for people who are far away from him, God moves people and opens the way for the harvest to be reached.

Resources to Check Out

- *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* by J. I. Packer (InterVarsity Press, 1991)
- *The Hour that Changes the World* by Dick Eastman (Baker, 1978)
- “The Place of Prayer in Evangelism” commentary essay in *The Fundamentals* by R. A. Torrey (Baker, 2008)
- “Prayer” (Chapter 3) in *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster (HarperCollins, 1998)

Q Place Story

In third grade, James decided to follow Christ. Though the relational gap between him and his father widened, James was committed to sharing the reality of God’s grace with him. He invited his dad to church, shared Bible stories and songs he was learning, and asked him to come to his baptism. Many times as he grew up James openly talked with his father about his relationship with God. After moving out of state he wrote his thoughts down in a letter, hoping that the ability to re-read the words might make a difference. He had learned a few time-tested apologetic arguments, and when his father did not respond by trusting Christ, he presumed his ability to communicate them effectively was lacking.

As a growing believer, James knew the importance of prayer, so he prayed for his dad to become open to faith in God. Yet even then there hadn’t been much apparent spiritual movement in his dad. Then James

began to pray for the “spiritual harvest” area surrounding his father. He thought, *What if I pray for my step-mom, brother, and sister?—they all interact with Dad. What if I include my dad’s co-workers, neighbors, friends, and extended family?*

To James’ surprise, within six months his father’s closest co-worker became a follower of Christ. Within a year, two neighbor families identified themselves as believers and another Christian family moved in next door. Within two more years, James’ sister and several of his father’s friends decided to trust in Jesus.

Though James’ dad hasn’t yet come to Christ, they have grown closer through James’ consistent walk with God, his genuine love and compassion, and an ever-widening circle of Christ-followers surrounding his dad. James believes it will only be a matter of time before his father makes the decision to follow Jesus for himself. He’s still praying because of what he has experienced first-hand: prayer moves people!

the **arts** of spiritual conversations™

Getting Ready: Noticing, Praying, Listening

Getting Started: Asking Questions, Loving, Welcoming

Keeping It Going: Facilitating, Serving Together, Sharing

These nine surprisingly simple practices build a foundation of relational trust and open the gateway for conversations about God to unfold naturally. The goal of the Arts curriculum is to help Christians cultivate ongoing spiritual conversations.

Each module in the Arts series could be used:

1. By individuals who desire vibrant spiritual conversations with those around them
2. In a triad of facilitators getting ready to launch a Q Place
3. In a small group of Christians wanting to grow in these practices
4. In Sunday school classes and a variety of church-based discipleship groups



www.QPlace.com

800.369.0307

P.O. Box 1581

Wheaton, IL 60187

Q Place empowers Christians to engage in meaningful conversations about God with people who believe differently.