

JESUS PATTERNS THE GIFTS FROM PRAYER

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We recently had to replace the tires on our car, due not to excessive mileage but to neglect. The front tires had been out of alignment for some time. Too much driving and too little attention to where the rubber meets the road led to unnecessary friction, stress, and potential personal danger. Other things took priority and we neglected one of the fundamentals of good stewardship, not to mention safety!

That may describe your prayer life. Too much activity; too little attention to where “the rubber meets the road”. Result: unnecessary friction, stress, and potential personal danger.

One doesn't have to be a licensed mechanic to ensure a car is in good repair. Nor does one have to be an expert in prayer to ensure that our lives stay aligned with God. Yet how often do we hear, if not out of our own mouth then the mouths of others, “Pray for me. God listens to you!” As if God has given some the gift of prayer but withheld it from others. If God doesn't seem to be listening to our prayers we need to examine other aspects of our lives, not whether He is withholding the gift of talking with Him. If we have difficulty conversing with another human being – our spouse, member of our family, friend or co-worker, it isn't because we lack the ability to talk. It's because something else gets in the way. So it is in talking with God through prayer.

The Bible has many examples of people talking with God under various circumstances for many different reasons. The book of Psalms is filled with prayers (Psalm 4, 6, 17, 65, 86, 102, to cite a few). While many of the people whose prayers are recorded were great leaders (albeit many of them with feet of clay), and some of them may even have been prayer warriors, none of them as far as we can tell, had "the gift of prayer." They simply talked with God.

Perhaps as Christians we need to focus more on the gifts from prayer rather than the gift of prayer.

Jesus did precisely that the night He was facing arrest, trial, and death. In the fourth Gospel, John has recorded Jesus' prayer for Himself, for His disciples, and for those who would believe as a result of the message proclaimed by His disciples in every future generation (see John 17). It is instructive to see how many times the word "gift" and words implying gifts are used.

"..... you [God] *granted* him [God's Son, Jesus] authority ... that he might *give* eternal life to all those you *have given* him. Jesus Christ, whom you *have sent*. I *have brought* you glory on earth by completing the work you *gave* me to do...

"I *have revealed* you to those whom you *gave* me out of the world. They were yours; you *gave* them to me and they have obeyed your word. ... I pray for ... those you *have given* me..." (John 17:2 – 9)

John continues this great prayer for another 17 verses, but the theme remains the same.

"Now they know that everything you *have given* me *comes* from you." (John 17:7)

To see others as a gift to us from God the Father revolutionizes our view of them as well as ourselves. It can revolutionize our view of work, of leisure, of our possessions. Jesus understood and teaches us that others are not gifts simply to be enjoyed, owned, possessed; they are people to whom we are obligated. And paradoxically, that obligation forms part of the gift. Jesus was obligated to pray for His disciples and for those believers who would come later (including any of us who are believers), precisely *because* they are gifts. He was obligated to thank God for the work God had given Him to do, precisely because that work was a gift.

We are obligated to do the same for those whom God places in our path – not just our family members, our staff or co-workers, our neighbours, but anyone. They are gifts - to be enjoyed, of course. But they are gifts to whom we are obligated, in the same way that Jesus was, and as the living Lord still is, obligated to those whom God gives Him as gifts.

These are the gifts *from* prayer. It is not necessarily that our spouse or family or job or friends or possessions come to us as a direct result of our request to God. They are not necessarily the gifts that result from prayer; rather, they are the means for transforming our relationship with God, and our understanding of our place in His creation. And as such, they lead us to the gifts from prayer.

As we pray for others, we understand our obligation to them, and therefore just how precious a gift they really are. As we pray for them, we deepen our knowledge of God and how He works in our own and others' lives. We begin to comprehend His will for us through our prayers for others.

Our workplace can be transformed by the simple act of seeing, and treating, our co-workers, our employees, our manager, the CEO, our customers and suppliers as gifts from prayer, a present from God to us. It starts by seeing them as individuals, rather than categories (e.g. "staff," "manager," "boss") or as functionaries (e.g. "customers," "suppliers"), and getting to know them one-on-one, and one by one. And the transformation continues as we pray for them.

In the act of praying for others, we find our strength is renewed and we increase our commitment to continue being faithful witnesses. We desire to stand at the throne of God beside them rather than alone. We want them to experience God's blessing and to know firsthand the depth of God's love, just as we know it and experience it. And so we pray fervently for them, and we continue to pray for them. They become even more important to us than we are. And as we pray for others, we take hold of the gifts from prayer and make them our own.

As we do this, our prayers begin to fit more closely into the pattern of Jesus' great prayer. There are twenty-six verses in the seventeenth chapter of John. Only five of them refer to

Jesus' prayer for Himself. He prays for others more than four times as much as for Himself, at a time when He was preparing to face the greatest trial any human being can face: arrest, brutal torture, degradation, public ridicule, and a slow, indescribably painful death. He knew first-hand the gifts from prayer, and it was those gifts that sustained Him.

If it was enough to sustain Jesus, it's enough to sustain you.

You may think you do not have the gift of prayer. Like Moses, you may not be eloquent of speech, and you may become tongue-tied and stammer in the presence of the Lord (Exodus 4:10). None of that need keep you from receiving the gifts from prayer. As God said to Moses, He says to you, "I will help you speak and will teach you what to say." (Exodus 4:12)

You don't have to be a licensed mechanic to ensure a car is in good repair. And you don't have to be an expert in prayer to receive the gifts from prayer.