

PRAYER AS RELATIONSHIP

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Following a successful career as an elite athlete, and ordination to Christian ministry, former NFL-er Joe Ehrmann and his wife Paula have made it their business to develop leaders to be their best - personally, professionally, and relationally – in business, on the field and in life. His approach to coaching and life-lessons is chronicled in the Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Season of Life*, by Jeffrey Marx.

In a memorable quote, Ehrmann says, “Masculinity, first and foremost, ought to be defined in terms of *relationships*. It ought to be taught in terms of *the capacity to love and be loved*.” (emphasis added). The same could be said for femininity.

In fact, the sentence could well be reframed as, “*Humanity*, first and foremost, ought to be defined in terms of relationships. It ought to be taught in terms of the capacity to love and be loved.”

This applies as much to prayer as it does to any of our other interactions.

Prayer, after all, is neither more nor less than our unspoken thoughts and spoken words directed to (or at) God. When directed *to* Him, they are part and parcel of a relationship *with* Him. When directed *at* Him they are an attempt to de-personalize Him, to remove Him from active engagement with us.

Engagement with another is what relationship is all about. We cannot be in relationship with another unless we are prepared to actively engage with that other – to learn from as well as to impart information or knowledge to that other; to share spontaneously in ever-changing circumstances and situations, as well as to seek to influence those circumstances and situations.

It is at the point of relationship that love comes in – both the capacity to receive it, as well as the capacity to give it. Note that love is not passive, nor is it inert – it involves receiving as well as giving. It is an active dimension in a relationship. More than an emotion, love is as much an act of will as it is a feeling. If we engage in relationship with another only when we *feel* like it, the relationship will be short-changed, and so will we. Indeed, if we engage in relationship only when we feel like it, the relationship itself is likely to be short-lived! Emotions are much too subject to outside influences to be reliable indicators of when we should engage with another. They are as likely to *flow from* an engagement with another as they are to *lead to* an engagement with another.

The disciple John gives full expression to this: “God is love,” he writes. Moreover, “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” So, “we love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:8, 9, 19)

We need not wonder whether God is there, or whether He desires to hear from us, or whether He answers prayer. He is a God of relationship who seeks actively to engage in relationship with us.

The relationship on which prayer is based, then, has been initiated by God, not by us. We *respond* to Him through our words, thoughts and actions, in love. Thus, in many ways “God-seeker” is an oxymoron, unless we understand that term to mean that God is the One doing the seeking and human beings are the ones being sought. The seeking has already been done, by God. Love is flowing toward us.

Our response to God’s initiative hinges on our capacity, first, to be loved (that is, to receive, to accept, love) and secondly, to love - both God and others. It is not a matter of *initiating* a relationship with God through prayer; it is a matter of *engaging in* a relationship that is already offered to us by God. Thus, prayer becomes the means, the vehicle, by which our God-initiated relationship is strengthened, developed, and realized.

To know God as Father, which is the way Jesus defined our relationship with Him, is to experience the love that flows from the Father to us. To understand ourselves as His children is to place ourselves in a position to return love to our Father, in a dynamic, inter-active, fluid relationship that grows as our understanding of the Father grows.

Within this context, then, our prayer life becomes vital, exciting, comforting, challenging, humbling – and essential to our well-being! There is nothing that cannot be brought to our Father in prayer – nothing that needs to be hidden from him, even if hiding was a real possibility, which of course it is not. Given that God is all-seeing and all-knowing, hiding anything from Him is impossible.

In this most intimate of all relationships, we pray without censoring – no thought is too insignificant to share; no shame so great as to sever the relationship.

In this most intimate of all relationships, no part of the relationship is omitted. Using a purely human analogy, participants in the most intimate relationships often seem to have the capacity to read each others’ minds, or at least to anticipate each others’ thoughts and actions. Before a response is given to a request for a favour or service or other transaction, the individual examines

it in terms of the best interests of the other. In that framework, the answer sometimes is “Yes,” sometimes “No,” and sometimes “Wait.” Never is it indifference.

So it is with God. Even the most mundane or inappropriate request is responded to in due course, though not always in the way we might desire. Whatever the response, we can be assured that “If you, then ... know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:11)

In this most intimate of all relationships, we learn the things that are on the Father’s heart. The apostle Paul explains it this way: “The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.” In short, says Paul, “we have the mind of Christ,” who is the earthly expression of the heavenly God. (1 Corinthians 2:10 – 12, 16)

Thus, in this most intimate of all relationships, we begin to see the world, and ourselves, from something more closely approximating God’s perspective. With that knowledge, we refine our prayers to more accurately reflect the way our Father would prefer their content, as a child learns how to enrich the relationship with parents.

In this most intimate of all relationships, the words “ask” and “answer” take on new meaning. No longer do we expect a one-to-one correlation between request and answer; that is, the answer looking exactly like the thing requested. Instead, the answer may be very different from the request, yet represent a much better response, because our Father has heard and understood what lies behind the ‘ask’. The answer He provides is so much better, so much more fitting, than what we had envisaged, because He knows us even better than we know ourselves. And, He knows the future in all circumstances.

As we move ever deeper into our relationship with God, we come to trust His answers more and more. Looking back on the lessons learned from a long life of faith, the beloved disciple John reflected: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.” (1 John 5:14, 15)

As Joe Ehrmann has said, it all comes down to relationship, and to our capacity to love and to be loved. Nowhere is that capacity developed and nurtured more fully than in our intimate relationship with God through prayer. It is a gift, given in response to our prayers, by our Father. Therefore, let us pray...