

Praying with Others

I have a friend named John who's really outgoing. John is a faithful, outspoken believer in Jesus who at one time in his life smuggled Bibles behind the Iron Curtain at the height of the Cold War. To say that John is bold is to put it mildly.

One day after church, John and I were talking to a woman who was telling us about a loved one who was in need of prayer. "I will pray for you," I said, thinking, *I'll do that later, on my own*. But John jumped on the moment in a way I'll never forget. He said, "Yes! Let's pray right now! That way we won't forget to do it later!" The three of us had a brief prayer meeting right there on the sidewalk.

What I took away from that moment is that praying together is an opportunity that we don't want to miss. But we usually don't see it that way. Learning to pray with others has been a slow work of God's grace in my life. Today I love to do it and look forward to it, but there was a time when just the mention of a prayer meeting would have me glancing toward the door.

Maybe you've been there. Sometimes when we think about praying with others, we think about the worst ways to do it. Maybe we remember that well-meaning person who prayed on and on without consideration for others, or that time your group was supposed to pray but they spent their whole time talking about requests, and the requests were for things like a distant aunt's cat. I get it. I really do. But here's the thing: God never intended praying together to be so awkward. He wants it to be the very opposite of that, something we look forward to, where we actually meet with Him and spend time in His presence together and love Him all the more for it.

Today we're going to look at this thing called praying together from a few different angles. We'll consider some key places in the Word of God that show us how important it is. Then, we'll discover a fascinating promise Jesus made to believers who come together to pray. Last, we'll look at some practical suggestions for how to pray with others and a special way to pray with someone you love.

Let's jump in by looking at some verses from Scripture that shed special light on why praying together matters so much. Here's the

first, and it's so subtle it's easy to miss: "One of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray . . .' He said to them, 'When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name"' (Luke 11:1–2 NIV).

When Jesus says, "when *you* pray," the word that He uses is in the plural in the original language. Many other languages have a way of making clear if you're speaking to a group, and that's what is happening here. A close equivalent to it in English would be to say, "When you all pray." And if you keep looking at the wording of the Lord's Prayer, you see it again: "Give us this day our daily bread"—not "give me" my daily bread—"forgive *us* our debts, deliver *us* from evil." The assumption is that we are to pray this way together.

Here's another verse that shows us how important united prayer is. Right after Jesus ascended into heaven, what did the disciples do? Acts 1:14 tell us: "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers."

What were the first Christians doing when the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost and they were all gathered together in one place? Acts 1:14 makes clear that they were praying together, and you see this again and again throughout the earliest history of the church. In Acts 13 the church is praying together when the Holy Spirit leads them to send out Paul and Barnabas as missionaries. And when the disciples become so busy with the work of the church that they needed to appoint deacons as helpers, they state their priorities clearly: "[We] will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4).

Time and again you see how important praying together is for the early church; and I believe there's a special reason for that. It has to do with a promise Jesus made about what will happen when believers pray together with His interests at heart. Here it is in Matthew 18: "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. *For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them*" (Matthew 18:19–20 NIV, italics added).

I used to think that this was just a general promise that Jesus would be with believers whenever they met together. We know that is true because in Matthew 28:20 He tells us, "I am with you always." But take a closer look at this verse and you'll see that Jesus is saying something more here, something unique. That's

because of one little word, the first word in Matthew 18:20. That little word “for” is a coordinating conjunction, present in English and in its own form in the koine Greek; and it implies a connection between that verse and the verse immediately before it. And what’s happening in the verse right before it? Believers are asking God together. What Jesus is saying is that when we come together to pray, His presence will be manifest in a unique and powerful way.

I’ve experienced this so many times as a pastor that our prayer meetings have become a central focus of our church. There’s a sense that Jesus is there in a personal way, helping us and building His church, drawing us closer to Him and to each other. We’ve seen Him provide for needs and heal relationships and sicknesses. We’ve seen things happen that would not have happened if we had not prayed together. I can tell you honestly that there have been times where I didn’t want to go to the prayer meeting even though I’m the pastor; but without fail, about fifteen or twenty minutes in, I will sense the Lord’s presence and everything changes. Because there’s nothing like being with Jesus.

Keep in mind that when Jesus prayed for His followers in John 17, He prayed for our unity. Praying together is an expression of that unity that matters so much to Him, and He blesses it.

Now let’s take a moment to consider four practical suggestions for praying with others. You’ll find that most of the mistakes we make when we pray with others can be corrected very simply, and once they are, praying together becomes what God has always intended it to be—something to look forward to. When we were kids, it was always good if your report card said, “Plays well with others.” So as children of God, now we’re going after “Prays well with others.” Here are four quick points:

First, don’t worry about how you sound when you pray. Just talk to God. As we’ve already seen, it’s not the words we use that matter, it’s our hearts. So we don’t have to sound like King James or anyone other than ourselves when we pray.

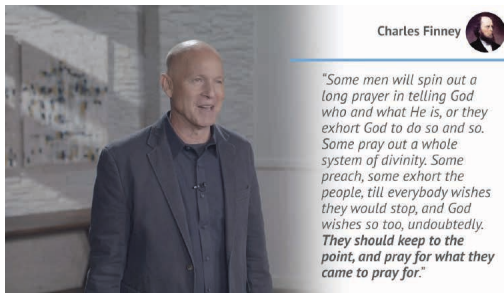
Second, when you’re praying, do your best to keep your words brief. This is one of the greatest challenges we face when we pray together—nothing hurts united prayer more than long-winded praying. When I did my doctoral studies on united prayer, I discovered that people have faced this in every century. Charles Finney, an evangelist from the early nineteenth century, observed:

4 Practical Suggestions for Praying with Others

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"Some men will spin out a long prayer in telling God who and what He is, or they exhort God to do so and so. Some pray out a whole system of divinity. Some preach, some exhort the people, till everybody wishes they would stop, and God wishes so too, undoubtedly." Finney concludes, "They should keep to the point, and pray for what they came to pray for." I've heard it said that a prayer in order to be immortal need not be eternal.

And that brings us to the third suggestion. When our church was in her early days, we had a practice of saying, "Does anyone have any requests?" when we started our prayer meetings. But we found when we did time would often get away from us. But one of our members, who was a professor emeritus in psychiatry at Duke University and a bit of a curmudgeon, called us on that one night. After we were sharing requests for about twenty minutes, he said, "Are we going to talk, or are we going to pray?" He was right. So, instead of saying, "Does anyone have any requests?" and talking beforehand about what you want to pray about as a group, just go directly to prayer; and if you have a request, simply pray it. Talk to God about it. This maximizes the time spent about every need before the throne of grace. And remember, just as we mentioned in the previous talk, it's always good to begin praying by simply praising God, because that builds faith in and helps us remember who God is and what He can do.

Here's a fourth practical encouragement for praying with others. When someone asks you to pray for them, go ahead and do it right then and there, just like my friend John did. That way you won't forget later, and you'll find that the person you pray for is helped and encouraged. Praying spontaneously is also so helpful for families with children, because it demonstrates living with God in the moment. Besides praying at mealtimes or bedtime, if someone is sick, pray. If there's a need, pray. If you hear a siren, pray for the first responder and the person in need. This way children can learn to pray together naturally with others.

As a bonus suggestion as we wrap this lesson up, I'd like to suggest a way for couples to pray together. The difference prayer can make for a relationship is so significant, but finding the time and the way to do it is often a challenge for many. So how can you make it easier? Try this simple, three-step approach:

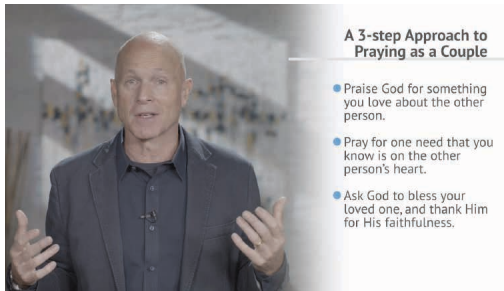
1. First, begin by praising God for something you love about the other person.

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- Go directly to prayer.
- Pray in the moment.



2. Then, pray for one need that you know is on the other person's heart. Be sure to make it something that is important to them, not something that you wish was. And whatever you do, don't preach to them when you pray. Just love them by praying for their personal concern.
3. Finally, ask God to bless your loved one, and thank Him for His faithfulness to love us and answer prayer.

Pray that way one step at a time, each of you praying for the other, and you'll find that God blesses your time together.

Remember that learning to pray with others takes time. It's a work in progress with trial and error, but we can grow in it, and God will help us. And if we seek Him together, we will see Him move in wonderful ways. Let's ask God for that right now, shall we?

God help us to learn how to pray with others. Help us to learn to love it. Help us to learn to remove the obstacles from it and simply praise You and be in Your presence as Your praying people. Lord, thank You for this amazing gift and thank You for Your amazing promise, that You will be with us as we seek Your face together. In Jesus' name, amen