

4 Suggestions to Deepen Your Small Group Prayer

Editors' note:

*Help your small group understand and apply biblical teaching on prayer by using the new TGC resource **Praying with Paul: A Study Guide for a Call to Spiritual Reformation** by D. A. Carson and Brian Tabb. The leader kit includes a small-group member study guide and two DVDs with a promotional video and eight 20-minute teaching sessions led by Carson.*

We've all been there. Sitting in a living room, having just finished a Bible study, your small group now turns to a time of prayer by soliciting requests. Sally shares about her cat Freckles. Freckles is old and has a bad hip—so she asks for healing for Freckles. You can't quite imagine the apostle Paul praying for his sick cat, but you don't want to be a jerk so you join the others by bowing your head and praying for Freckles.

Something doesn't seem quite right, but you're not sure why. This repeats itself throughout the meeting and from week to week. A single man shares about being really busy at work and requests prayer for energy. A couple shares about their upcoming trip to Colorado and asks for traveling mercies. Someone else shares about his second cousin just diagnosed with breast cancer. Your group dutifully bows their heads in earnest prayer. A newly married couple in the group shares a praise: marriage has been better than they could have ever imagined. Smiles and prayers of thanksgiving go up to God.

You wonder, Is this what small group prayer is all about? The prayer requests are near and dear to each person who shares, yet they seem to lack depth. They're not shallow, but they're also not substantive and seem to miss the bigness of God. They hover on the surface when your group is longing to go deeper with one another and with God. What should you do?

Navigating the Tension

There is a tension in prayer. We don't want to be cynical, hard-hearted, nit-picking prayer police who point out the shallowness of other peoples' requests. And we know that God desires for his people to pray with freedom to ask God for anything. Jesus doesn't just throw out things like "ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7) without really meaning it. If Jesus meant you can only pray for the really important or spiritual stuff he would have said so.

Yet Jesus makes answers to prayer conditioned on faith (Matt. 21:22), asking in Jesus's name (John 14:14; 16:24), abiding in Christ (John 15:7), persistence (Luke 18:1-8), having right motives (Jas. 4:3) and asking according to his will (1 John 5:14). And then we get verses that tell us just to ask (Matt. 7:7-11), to pray without ceasing (1 Th. 5:17) and to bring all of our anxieties and concerns to God in prayer (Phil. 4:6). So what should we do if our small group prayer times seem unusually skewed towards asking for stuff (petition), interspersed with some prayers of thanksgiving? What do we do if many of the things we pray for skim along the surface without ever getting deeper?

Praying is a learned skill that takes time, discipline, and work. Corporate prayer is shallow because private prayer is infrequent. Recognize that we all have room to grow in learning to pray to God together. Be gracious with one another. Yet learn to guide a small group's prayer time. Here are a few suggestions.

1. Remind the group what they're doing.

Asking, “We have about 15 minutes left, anybody have a prayer request?” will inevitably solicit shallow and circumstantial requests of the “daily bread” variety. The way you’ve framed the time has devalued its very significance. Take the opportunity to remind the group what prayer is. Instead of saying, “Any prayer requests?” ask, “Now as we move from studying God’s Word to praising him through prayer, what are some things God’s Word has revealed to us?” Remind the group that prayer is communicating with the God of the universe through the access purchased for us by the costly sacrifice of the Son and enabled by the indwelling Holy Spirit. We can reflect back to God praise, adoration, thanksgiving, confession, and petition in light of his revelation. We are approaching a holy God through the mediation of his beloved Son, in whom we have union and fellowship. Help the group be awed by what they will embark upon so that the oft-neglected aspects of small group prayer—praise, adoration, confession, and thanksgiving—will become natural responses to what God has revealed.

2. Let Scripture guide your prayers.

If your group has just concluded a spirited study of a passage of Philippians (or whatever book you’re studying), keep your Bibles open and let Scripture guide your time of prayer. God’s revealed Word provides the content and trajectory for our prayers. Pray the commands from the passage you just studied, asking God to help you obey. Praise God for truths revealed in the passage, thanking him for who he is and how his power, wisdom, and majesty are revealed. Let the Scriptures guide how you pray. If your group has discerned the “big idea” from the passage, pray for those revealed truths to transform you, your small group, church, community, and world. If you’ve glimpsed an aspect of God’s character, thank God for revealing it to you and praise him for his unchanging character. Ask for God’s name to be hallowed in your life, in your community, and among the foreign peoples where your church missionaries are ministering.

Tim Keller, in his book *Prayer: Experiencing Intimacy and Awe with God*, describes Martin Luther’s method of meditating upon a passage by discerning the instruction of the text (what does the text demand of me?) and then turning it into thanksgiving (how does this truth lead me to praise or thank God?), confession (how does this truth lead me to confess and repent?) and petition (how does this truth prompt me to appeal to God?). Providing your group a simple grid to move from the study of God’s Word to praying God’s Word will broaden the content of your prayers.

3. Get to the heart of the issue.

Many of us do not naturally discern what we really need. But Scripture opens our eyes to see our true needs in light of God’s holiness, power, grace, and love. Perhaps someone shares a prayer request about being busy at work. This requires more information to know how to pray. To pray for more hours in a day or for this person to magically become more efficient is not likely to happen. Ask a few questions to better discern how to pray for this person. Is he busy because of a demanding and overbearing boss? If so, how can he live out his role as a God-honoring employee and make wise decisions on talking with his boss or prioritizing his workload? Is his busyness merely a symptom of an unhealthy desire to succeed, please others, or make the most money possible? Does he idolize his own success and the admiration he receives from others? Does he need to grow in contentment, gratefulness, and joy?

God cares about our “daily bread” requests, but he’s also interested in exerting his kingdom and will in our hearts and minds. God is conforming us to his image from the inside out. So for Sally’s cat Freckles, you can pray

not merely for the health of the cat, but more importantly, for Sally’s fear, anxiety, and loneliness that are being revealed.

4. Let Scripture evaluate your prayers.

Scripture is the best judge of our prayers. Do we generally communicate with God in various types of prayer (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication) or do we typically just list off our requests? Do we begin by praising God for his character and asking for his name to be hallowed as the Lord’s Prayer instructs? Furthermore, Scripture helps us discern why some of our prayers are actually unbiblical. Praying for a new Lexus to show up on your doorstep probably doesn’t pass muster for being “daily bread.” Keller writes, “One way petitionary prayer can actually do us harm is if we see it as a means to say to God, ‘My will be done.’ We are prone to indulge our appetites, telling God in no uncertain terms how he should run the universe. Such prayer neither pleases God nor helps us grow in grace.” Does your small group just repeat and rephrase the request —“I pray for healing for Nancy’s cancer”—or do you apply the gospel of Christ to the situation? Pray for healing from cancer, but also pray for joy and trust in Christ, confidence in her eternal destiny, patience with nurses and doctors, opportunity to encourage and witness to others, and ultimately that God would be glorified through this trial.

More could certainly be said about cultivating a safe space for confession during a small group prayer time, following up prayer requests with questions of how things have gone, or praying for each other throughout the week. Yet the reality that we can approach a holy and awesome God together should awaken in us delight, joy, and praise that is reflected back to God in our prayers. Our ability to have access to God, corporately and individually, is blood-bought by the Savior. We pray to know and love God—not merely to list our requests. We pray to declare, again and again, that God is God and we are not, and to be amazed, humbled, and grateful for the blood of Jesus that makes it possible for us to approach the throne of grace.

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