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THE POWER OF GROUP PRAYER

**HOW INTERCESSION
TRANSFORMS US
AND THE WORLD**



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BEFORE WE PRAY . . .

WHAT BUILDS AND BLOCKS OUR ATTACHMENT TO GOD

PRAYER, FIRST AND FOREMOST, is about growing more intimate with God. The purpose of prayer is not about getting what we pray for. Shocking, yes? If prayer is just about getting answers, then we are more like consumers than children. Okay, we might be children—but spoiled children, the kind who only listen when they get what they want.

Prayer is about getting *who* we pray *to*. If we don't have intimacy with God when we pray, we may end up feeling the kind of frightening, desperate anxiety Dorothy and her whole crew felt as they approached the Wizard of Oz. When there is something we desire but don't have the power to apprehend, we come to a good Father who doesn't give us a stone when we ask for bread. So if we are going to be transformed in our prayer and be agents of transformation in the world, we need to consider how attached we are to God in the first place and what blocks that connection with God.

BUILDING ATTACHMENT TO GOD

The recent work in neuroscience by people like Jim Wilder, Curt Thompson, and Karl Lehman has connected our character identity and transformation to what happens along neural pathways in

the brain. Wilder and Michel Hendricks write in *The Other Half of Church* that the bulk of our discipleship in the church is derived from preaching and teaching, and maybe some spiritual disciplines thrown in. This will work for some, some of the time, but not for all. Hendricks shares that he was dumbfounded when he recognized character growth in himself during the first eight years of his life with God, but little thereafter. He *knew* a lot more things as he aged, but his character was not more like Jesus.

I was single until age fifty-one, but then God brought David into my life. In a matter of just a few months, here was someone who loved me not for what I could do for him, but just for who I am. Having served *lots* of people for nearly thirty years of ministry, it was rare to experience this kind of love. This was new for me. I grew attached to David in a way that I was not attached to others. Words were not necessary to understand this love, neither were thoughts; I didn't need to read a book to know this love; I felt attached through time spent together. It was the same when I'd walk into a crowded room and see him across the way. That deep, undeniable attachment helped me find him in a crowd.

This is the kind of attachment many of us feel in the first years after coming to Christ. We know deeply in our souls how much we are loved, forgiven, chosen, and cherished by God. It is like there is a constant glow on our faces. I remember Sharon, who had come to faith early in her freshman year, just could not help herself from telling others about Jesus and all that he had done for her. She undeniably experienced God's love for her and felt attached to God.

As in marriage, unless we actively nurture our attachment to God, we become stale and distant; we know the motions of being connected, but we lack desire. This can explain why we excitedly sign up for a new conference or buy the latest bestselling Christian book, thinking this will be our silver bullet to intimacy with God. And within weeks—or days, perhaps—if we haven't made significant inroads back to a meaningful attachment, we are right back

where we were. But regular efforts to connect with God, to recognize his presence in our lives, draw us close.

Jesus paid attention to his attachment to God. Many times in the Gospels we see Jesus pulling away to a solitary place to be alone with the Father. After his baptism and before he begins his public ministry, Jesus goes away into the wilderness for forty days to fast and pray (Luke 4:1-2). After an entire night of healing and casting out many demons in Capernaum, Jesus, in Mark 1:35, sets out early in the morning before light, to pray. Matthew 14:1-13 describes the beheading of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. When the message gets relayed to Jesus, he "withdraws to a deserted place by himself." Based on the references to Jesus withdrawing to solitary places and praying, we can assume that this withdrawal is a time of intimate connection with his Father also. And of course, we have the poignant description of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In John's Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17) we see the fruit of his prayer, of his attachment to God. Naturally, in the time of our testing, our true character is revealed. John 13:3, "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God," shows us that despite Jesus entering into what will be the most difficult point of his life on earth, he is solidly assured of who he is. He feels indelibly attached to his Father. And because he is sure of his identity, because he knows and has experienced the Father's loving touch, because he knows that he belongs to God, he can face the heartbreak of betrayal, the torment of torture and taunts, and ultimately, his last breath.

Before we engage in intense intercessory prayer, we must renew our attachment to God. When we access our attachment with God, we are filled with his unconditional love. We don't do this with words, or reading Scripture, or even listening to a worship song. None of those will hurt, but primarily we need an encounter. God is invisible, so this can be a little tricky. But just like David and I can sit on a couch together, look into each other's eyes and without

saying a word, know that we belong to each other and are deeply loved just for who we are, we can do the same in our sanctified imagination with God.

In my sanctified imagination I walk through an autumnal field with the warming sun on my back and a gentle breeze in the air. As I walk across the field, I see this lone oak tree, with its mature limbs spreading out like arms inviting me in. I walk toward the tree and the closer I get, I notice there a figure sitting underneath the tree. And as I approach, I have an inkling . . . yes! It's Jesus waiting for me. A broad smile lights his face as I come into view. The last few steps I break into a run, drop my shoulder, and playfully plow into his shoulder. I fall onto the ground beside him and we laugh and poke each other a bit, and then as I catch my breath, our eyes meet. He holds my gaze and looks at me like no one else has ever done. I am loved, known, held, and cherished. I breathe in these truths for a few seconds and my heart is full. I have undeniably, inextricably renewed my attachment to God. And from this place of deep attachment, I am ready to pray.

BLOCKING ATTACHMENT TO GOD

But what would happen if, when I see the figure under the tree, rather than picking up speed and hurrying over, I slow my steps and feel trepidation in the realization that I am approaching God in the flesh? How would I pray if my view of God is not one of unconditional love but of judgment or unpredictability or disinterest?

Our view of God shapes the way we pray. Does God indeed give us bread when we ask for it? Or does he, like Lucy in the proverbial scene with Charlie Brown and the football, hold bread out for us to see and snatch it away at the last second, leaving us looking foolish that we trusted him yet again? If I grow up with a view of God as far off and disinterested, or otherwise occupied with more important matters in the universe, that will not only affect my understanding of being attached to God but will also affect the way I pray.

Our view of God shapes the way we pray.

Joshua 7 tells the dramatic story of one man's greed becoming a stumbling block to victory and the fatal consequences that ensue. I hesitate to refer to warlike images as illustrations for intercession, as this can conjure up images of the Crusades and other negative things associated with missionary work blended with the proliferation of empire. But at the heart of intercession is reclaiming God's intentions for the world he has made. Clearly forces are at work—both visible and invisible—scheming against, blocking, and undermining God's kingdom from coming more fully. Let's look at a troubling story from Israel's past, just as they are beginning to taste God's good intentions for them.

God's chosen people—the Israelites—have just crossed over into the Promised Land. Slavery is over, wandering in the desert is over. God is doing a new thing and leading them to “the land flowing with milk and honey.” But along comes Achan and his coveting heart. When Jericho is taken, the Israelites are strictly instructed to plunder it completely, to destroy it, and not to take any of the spoils of victory. Many of the more precious items in this city would have been devoted to idols, and God did not want these to be tools to seduce his people away from his own love. Remember: “I am the Lord your God . . . ; you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2-3).

Before we move more into the story, it's important to pause here. We don't disobey God in a vacuum. Adam and Eve took the fruit because they questioned God's intentions. Their view of God became warped. *God was holding out on them*, they believed. The Scriptures are silent about what moved Achan to this greed. Perhaps Achan came from a family who, while wandering the desert with the other Israelites, took more manna than they needed because they weren't sure there would be enough the next day. His coveting was born out of some place of not believing that God was enough for him.

“But the Israelites broke faith in regard to the devoted things: Achan . . . of the tribe of Judah . . . took some of the devoted things” (Joshua 7:1). Notice that it was only one man—Achan—who sinned, but the whole of the nation is judged as having broken faith!

This one man’s sin affects the entire community. As they go forth to fight against a much smaller, inferior foe—Ai—they are thwarted.

Joshua—who earlier has had this rich encounter with God, who said to him, “for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9)—turns to prayer and intercedes for the nation, imploring the Lord for favor. Joshua intercedes for the nation he loves, pouring his heart out to the God who is with him. The Lord reveals to Joshua that devoted things of Jericho have been taken (Joshua 7:10-15). Achan is found out, and this is what Joshua, the leader of the people, says to him: “My son, give glory to the LORD God of Israel and make confession to him. Tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me” (Joshua 7:19).

Achan has a choice now. He can come clean or protect himself by lying. He says, “It is true; I am the one who sinned against the LORD God of Israel. [Then he explains what he did]. . . . I coveted them and took them. They now lie hidden in the ground inside my tent” (Joshua 7:20-21).

What follows is a grim picture of the judgment meted out on Achan, including his family members. Judgment was swift and included Achan and his family being stoned and burned. Stones were brought and piled on what was left, as a remembrance. And the place became known as the Valley of Achor (meaning “trouble”). Ai was then conquered in their second attempt.

Our Western individualistic mindsets have a hard time seeing that an individual’s “private” sin could affect others, much less that the sin of one family member affects an entire family. But we see this all the time, don’t we? The alcoholic who loses his job and puts his family in grave financial straits, the student who steals an exam and passes it to others in the class, the building contractor

who cuts corners and costs by using inferior materials and later lives are lost when part of the building collapses. We will never understand God's ways this side of heaven, but we do know that Israel was meant to be set apart (i.e., to act differently than the other nations around them), to have no other gods before them save the one True God. God wanted to establish his people, and that meant they needed to be vastly different from what surrounded them.

In other words, they were meant to attach to God, and God only.

Two barriers hinder a rich, life-giving attachment to God: our rejection of God's offer of intimacy, and our dutiful service to God, who we think is only concerned with rule-following.

Achan may have hidden the stolen devoted articles because he didn't want others to take them. Hoarding, perhaps. But more likely he hid them because he knew he was wrong. He was ashamed of his disobedience and didn't want anyone to know about it. There are things that we do or have done in secret, and we would rather others not know about it. Pornography. Bingeing on unhealthy food. Sexual relations outside of marriage. Binge drinking. Countless hours playing computer games. We may feel guilty about engaging in the activity, but that doesn't feel as bad as the shame of having others know. Like all of us when we turn from God and do what seems right in our own eyes, Achan loses connection with God by choosing to fill his emptiness with created things. When I question or lose sight of God's deep love for me, I am prone to fill my life with secondary things—with substitute replacements—which never fully satisfy and leave me detached from God still.

The good news is that another person from the tribe of Judah—Jesus, the Lion of Judah—courageously took on the public shame and punishment for our sin by being crucified. On the third day he rose again, that we might also be raised from the

consequences of our own dark secrets—and live. In one sense, we deserve the stoning and burning done to Achan, but Jesus took it for us instead.

Jesus also gives us the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit both convicts us of sin and empowers us to live a life that glorifies and honors God. Jesus came to give us abundant life. And that abundant life is not just about an eternity in heaven. Abundant life is now! He came to set captives free. *What is holding us back from the fullness of joy? What is holding your church or your fellowship captive?*

When it comes down to it, I believe there are really only two barriers that keep us from intimacy with God, from that rich, life-giving attachment to God: our rejection of God's offer of intimacy and our dutiful service to God, who we think is only concerned with rule following. How we view God makes all the difference.

AN INVITATION TO INTIMACY

The brothers in the Prodigal Son parable in Luke 15 are good examples of this truth. The younger son rejects a relationship with the father, while his older brother seems to only take a servile view. Neither one of them truly knows their father.

Let's take a deeper look at the younger son (Luke 15:12-19). His sin is deep even before he leaves the house. What is his sin and how does it become a barrier to intimacy with his father? Asking for his inheritance is not just an advance on his allowance or a loan. In essence he is saying, "I wish you were dead. You are not enough for me, your love and what you have provided are not good enough for me—I want to find life elsewhere!"

The son rejects the relationship, the offer of love and intimacy; his father is nothing more than an ATM, a means to get what he really wants in life. He is only interested in the resources that his father has, and believing that the blood relationship gives him access, he audaciously demands what he wants. He doesn't want relationship; he wants money.

How often have I asked God for things rather than asking God for *God himself*? When have I asked God to do the impossible, while vigorously shaking my head at his request to give him more of myself? In my twenties I got into a relationship that dangerously crossed some lines. I sensed strongly that God wanted me to end that relationship. I knew it was unhealthy for me, but I wanted that relationship more than I wanted the intimacy of God. Eventually, God's grace won me over and I broke off the relationship. How do we relate to God when we don't get what we really want? *What happens to our level of intimacy with God then?*

The younger son gets what he asks for—the money—and winds up miserable. He winds up bereft of his inheritance and his relationships. He is utterly empty. Ironically, when he does come to his senses and thinks about his father, he only thinks about what his father can give him materially—food. He likens himself to a servant and cannot even imagine he could still have standing as a son. He hasn't really learned the lesson. His dream of returning is fueled by his stomach, not by intimacy.

What is your alternative to intimacy with God?

Now, let's have a look at the older son (Luke 15:25-30). He is a dutiful, loyal son. He honors his father, is faithful to his father. But his heart is far away. He believes his service should reap him benefits. What has he allowed to get in the way? What is blocking him from seeing the loving, generous nature of his father? Resentment blocks his heart. He resents that his younger brother got to have a "good time."

He seems a bit like Javert in *Les Misérables*, who at all costs must play by the rules: if there's sin, it must be punished; no one gets a free ride. He is so concerned that his rebellious younger brother should be punished that he cannot enter into the joy of his return. A party was clearly not what he had in mind!

He views his father as "the boss" who wants to get the most out of him for the least cost. He's bitter, he's resentful, and he's jealous. He fails to see his father as all-giving and forgiving, who does not measure

out his love based on good behavior. He is so busy comparing, he fails to see all the good that has been given to him by the father—“You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” (Luke 15:31).

Gordon T. Smith in *The Voice of Jesus* writes, “Gratitude is fundamental for the Christian believer because through thanksgiving we open up our hearts to the Spirit of God. . . . Quite simply, when we give thanks, we open our heart and let down our guard.” The barriers we have constructed and hide behind begin to come down.

There have been days in my life—not ones that I am proud about—where I have gone through the entire day without any thought about God. I’ve just moved through my day, taking care of the things—good things, *God* things, ministry things!—I’ve needed to get done without any inkling that God might have been interested in being invited along with me. If I had engaged in just the slightest bit of thanksgiving during that day, I could have been brought to my senses.

Now, in contrast, imagine how the father—meant to be a metaphor for Jesus himself—might have looked in this parable as he expresses intimacy with his children. He yearns for the return of both of his children. He waits expectantly, but patiently. He hopes and seeks. Kenneth Bailey says this alone would put off the scribes and Pharisees for whom Jesus is telling this parable. Any Jewish father who would run after a wayward son would be a laughing-stock. His arms are extended in invitation, not crossed in anger. Not scowling, but looking with expectant eyes. Ultimately, relief and joy mark his face at the younger son’s return—and yearning marks his voice as he interacts with the elder son.

You are my beloved. I have always loved you. I’ve never stopped loving you. Never. I delight in you. I rejoiced the day you came into the world and have not stopped. You have made me so happy. All that I have is yours.

These are also God’s thoughts toward you. Let these words speak to you personally.

So, before we pray, before we jump into the deep end of the pool of intercession, we need to nurture our attachment to God and search our heart with the Holy Spirit's help to see if there are any barriers in our lives.

FROM INFORMATION TO TRANSFORMATION

1. Building attachment exercise. Set aside fifteen minutes for this. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths; settle into your chair. Come into an awareness of God's presence with you. Smile. The One who loves you like no other is in the room with you, near you.
 - a. Call to mind something you are grateful to God for. It could be a nice meal that you had when you were hungry, the healing of a friend, or a deep encounter you have had with him.
 - b. Engage in thanks to God. Say, "Thank you, God, for _____." Tell God all that it meant to you, what it provided for you, what you appreciate about it. Don't just think this, but interact with Jesus. Use your senses. Are there smells associated with this gratitude, sounds, tastes, or textures? What is in your visual awareness?
 - c. After some few minutes of thanking God, listen for God's response to you. It may start off like, "My dear child . . ."
2. Find a trusted friend, and using resource A, "Healing Distorted Views of God," talk about which view of God most contributes to your lack of intimacy with him. (If you are in a group split up into pairs.) Be specific, be honest, be transparent. Bring it before the good Father and ask for a more accurate view to be restored to you.
3. Consider an "Emptying Secret Closets" prayer time (resource B).

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