

## How Praying for Enemies Changes Us

Praying for our enemies doesn't mean praying that they will slip on a banana peel, or finally get what's coming to them. It doesn't mean praying that our enemy will be transformed into someone different, someone we could get along with better. It doesn't mean praying that our enemies will come to see things our way.

It is not a threat, like the woman in the country song who said to the gossips, "You can talk about me just as much as you please, and I'll talk about you down on my knees." It isn't about praying for God's punishment or retribution for our enemies. It is about praying for their good.

Jesus said,

*But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (Matthew 5:44)*

*But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. (Luke 6:35)*

This way of thinking about enemies is about their good, not our own. We do not pray that they will go to Hell, but that we will see them in Heaven. We should want the best for them, not defeat and failure. We should be praying out of love, and this is very, very hard. How can we learn to do it? How can we become more loving to those who are truly our enemies?

### **We need empathy for our enemies**

Developing an appreciation for each other as human beings and feeling empathy for each other is not easy. When the other is an enemy, an opponent, or a potential victim, it is especially hard. In times of stress and conflict it's easy to see others as "all wrong," whether the actual issue is important or just seems to be important at the time.

Our opponent may be carrying a sign on the opposite side of a life-or-death issue like abortion or capital punishment, or simply wanting to paint the fellowship hall garish yellow when it would look so much better in blue.

When we're polarized against someone, we don't see the underlying common humanity we share. Their strengths, their values, and the struggles they've come through are invisible to us. We can't see these others as whole people, and as a result we don't sympathize with their feelings or have the ability to feel and share their pain.

True reconciliation means restoring a healthy and positive relationship, as well as letting go of whatever anger or grievance we hold. Leaving our anger behind only brings us part of the way. It only brings us back to neutral feelings about the person we have a problem with.

We may not be angry any more, but we're still not friends until we can replace our negative feelings with positive ones. This can only happen for real, deep in our heart. It isn't enough to pretend that we feel differently. We need to actually feel positively for the person who hurt us.

This can happen in lots of different ways, but the key is to be open to noticing the good things about the person we're mad at. It takes a change in attitude, because when we're angry we tend to notice the things we don't like about a person and to ignore the things we might like if we paid attention. It's necessary to change our selective noticing, to turn away from the things we don't like and turn toward the kind of things we do like.

## **Praying for our enemy's good**

One way to break this isolating distance is to invite God into the relationship with the other. If we can approach the other from God's perspective, we can see that person from God's point of view. God sees each of us as beloved but far from perfect people with unique preferences, abilities, faults, hopes, and blind spots. We can learn to see others this way by bringing them into God's presence in prayer.

We can engage our hearts in caring about another by accepting and praying for that person's needs and desires, by bringing that person before God. This must be prayer purely for the benefit of the other, looking at the other from God's own perspective and not from our own.

This prayer is not "God, please straighten them out and fix their attitude," but "bless them and help them achieve the good things they care about so deeply." When we bring a person before God to pray for the real concerns of his or her heart, it's very hard to withdraw to a distant view of that person afterwards.

When we pray for another freely out of God's love, a miraculous thing happens. The Holy Spirit joins in our prayer, strengthening us and transforming our hearts as we pray. We engage with God in our good wishes and best intentions for the other, and we are changed in the process.

## **Growing in prayer through practice**

There are many materials available to facilitate this kind of prayer experience. Most are labeled as Christian education resources on the topic of intercessory prayer. They usually combine teaching about prayer with specific exercises and practices.

One good example is a program called *Prayer Ministry Training*, which includes video presentations and has its own discussion guide. It was created by Rev. Sandy Millar of Holy Trinity Brompton Church in London, the church that originated the Alpha program. The program is available through the Alpha organization.

This particular material includes guidelines for prayer practice which turn out to be very helpful. In each exercise, a team of two people prays for one person, and the groups in prayer can contain either men or women but not both. The result of this dynamic is that over several meetings of the group, each person has the opportunity to pray for and be prayed for by folks who have been in opposition at one time or another.

Those offering prayer learn to ask the recipient about their needs and concerns. They learn to listen carefully and to check to make sure they understand what is wanted. The program lasts for six meetings or so, each with prayer opportunities, and it ends with a session of prayer for each other for filling with the Holy Spirit.

## **Consequences of praying for enemies**

When this program was used in one particular church setting, the group included leaders who were part of each of the factions in the church. Between twelve and fifteen people came to the sessions, including most of those who had the strongest feelings in the conflicts.

It's likely that leaders of opposing factions came out of mistrust—worry about what their opponents might be up to if left alone. Whatever their original reason for coming, all of the participants were willing to engage in the prayer exercises freely.

The program and practice of prayer was deeply moving and transformative for all the participants. There were times of hard work, as folks stretched to reach into God's perspective,

in spite of the long history of wrongs on both sides. There were tears as “tough guys” who had been in opposition for years heard the loving care in each other’s voices in prayer.

In the end participants were able to see and relate to each other as complex and more complete human beings, and not only through the lens of the divisions. Each had had a chance to experience the good will of each of the others, both allies and opponents. They could no longer fit each other into one-dimensional stereotypes.

One unexpected benefit of the program was that its alumni became participants in an active but very informal prayer ministry. Often during a fellowship event, or even while hanging out in the kitchen, one of the group would hear a need or concern and quickly gather two or three of the others for a short prayer.

Factional history was left behind since these impromptu teams included those who had once thought of each other as enemies. Their shared experience of prayer led opponents to become allies in ministry, even when their individual positions on other issues were still at odds.

### **Side effects of being prayed for by enemies**

Strangely, a transformation also happens in the recipient of a prayer from an enemy. Hearing a sincere expression of good will and appeal to God on our behalf, by someone we have thought of as an enemy, is intensely powerful. How can we not feel gratitude and even the possibility of affection for one who is been willing to step out and support us in our struggles?

For example, many years ago I was active in our church’s adult education program, and I volunteered to work on the committee. I heard that the elder in charge was looking for a volunteer for a particular job. I was pretty shy in those days, but I wanted to ask for the job.

One day, just as a meeting was breaking up, I went up to her and offered to do the work. She just stood there for a moment, not saying anything, and then walked away. Later I heard that she had given the job to someone else. I was hurt and embarrassed and very angry. That was no way to treat someone who was willing to volunteer. She could at least have said thanks but no thanks.

In my hard feelings about this church leader, one good thing about her caught me completely by surprise. In the evening service, joys and concerns were handled slightly differently from the morning services. As each person made a request for prayer, someone else in the congregation offered to pray for them.

One day I offered a concern in the service, and this leader was the one who offered to pray for me. To hear a prayer for my problem in the voice of one who I had thought of as against me, just blew me away. It melted the frozen part of me that had still kept me from being fully open and caring with her. I was suddenly able to see her great strength and her faithfulness, in spite of other qualities I didn’t like as much. I was once more free to react and interact with her as a sister in the church family.

### **Prayer transforms us**

Coming before God together in prayer is a transformative experience. We can no longer hold onto the emotional tension of the issues that divide us, because the love of God for our brothers and sisters is so great. Bringing our enemies before God, asking on their behalf for their own good, brings us closer to seeing them as God sees them, hoping for them as God hopes.

Afterwards we may still hold opposing opinions and be working for opposing causes, but we are held together in the family of God by God’s love. We can grow to love our enemies the

way we love family members who disagree with us or drive us crazy, but are still family. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, happening in and through our prayer.