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## *The responsibility of love*

—*The third and fourth steps—*

At the close of a lecture on prayer, a modestly attired little woman approached me, and asked if I would pray with her. Moving to a quiet, vacant corner, we sat down and together prayed. Afterward her gratitude was so apparent, I asked, "Don't you have anyone with whom to pray? There's a woman's prayer group in this church, isn't there?"

She assured me there was, but added it was not possible for her to take her request to them. The request concerned her sick mother living in Germany. This woman, an only child, was faced with making a decision concerning her mother—a decision too great for her to make without help. Again I asked why she couldn't share her problem with the group and request their prayers.

"You don't understand," she tried to explain, "they do not pray for themselves at their meetings. They do not pray for personal needs but rather for

missionaries and world needs. I can't ask them to pray for me, as mine is a personal request."

How many times have we been in a meeting with other believers, feeling our very life being pressed out of us by burdens too heavy to bear? Did anyone know this? Did anyone sense it? What provision, among all the various kinds of meetings for Christians, is made to assure love, concern and the sharing that helps lift burdens? Most of our "meetings" are too large, or too general, too social, or too public to encompass personal needs.

I've discovered it isn't necessary to make elaborate plans, nor schedule rooms in order to pray together. God's love, operating in our hearts, requires no re-planning. Nor do we need advanced programming before stretching forth a helping hand to another.

At the close of another lecture, a lady said, "I'm one who has never been able to pray aloud. Can you help me, please?" I slipped my arm through hers. We turned from the gathering crowd, and suddenly ahead of us I saw a long hall. It seemed to be waiting for us to walk down it. As we walked, I prayed aloud,

"Thank You, Lord Jesus, because You love Betty. Thank You for bringing her here, today."

Continuing our walk, we prayed in short sentences. Because there was no strain nor artificiality between us, her "Thank You, Lord," prayers came as easily and naturally as my own. She was praying. She was thankful for what she'd learned and not afraid to say so. The joy was twofold because it was shared.

These two women illustrate the third step in our prayer outline—*Lord, help me—Lord, forgive me*, which is confession. Confession of need is often accompanied by tenseness and distress of some kind.

For this reason, a fellow Christian can assume the responsibility of love by being there and sharing the need. When one prays for another, this is intercession. This is the fourth step: Dear Lord, please *help my brother*.

These two vital parts of prayer are very personal and very necessary, whether performed alone or shared with another (or other) Christians. Here's how it was done with three working girls.

### Three working girls

Two girls with whom I worked in China joined me in a decision to try conversational prayer—praying for one another. It was a first attempt and it wasn't easy, as our former prayers had been impersonal and general. However, we were determined to give this a day by day trial until we found out how it worked.

One morning before we met to pray, I knew I ought to begin to pray for myself, openly and honestly. I wanted my friends to pray with me and for me, using my name in their prayers. The previous day I'd felt a new depth of rapport between us when one of the other girls had prayed in this way. I decided my prayer would be one of admission concerning my strong tendency to be "bossy"—to always imagine my ideas are superior to those of others and far more workable.

"Lord," I began, "if I have been . . ." I stopped, sensing I was giving myself a "leg to stand on," which I really didn't mean to do. I started over. "Dear Lord, I sometimes have a tendency to . . ." I stopped again. I knew in that moment I was still not taking any personal responsibility for my actions and attitude. I started a third time! With determination. "Dear Lord Jesus, *forgive me* for always thinking my way is better, and for always wanting to 'boss' every-

thing . . ." I stopped knowing I'd finally revealed the truth without rationalizing.

The girls were wonderful! They picked up this fragment of conversational prayer, with something like:

"Thank You, Lord, for Ros's honesty."

"Yes, thank You. We have always known she was like this, but it sure helps us to hear her admit it."

This brought a little subdued laughter, and ended our prayer. We looked at each other, and one of them remarked, "You know, it's funny, but this sort of honesty makes us love one another more. Why is it you love a person more when they admit a failure than when they just keep quiet about it?"

#### Praying with your family

This approach to prayer works very well in a family situation. It gives each member an opportunity to be themselves in the presence of God, without trying to cover up, which only compounds errors and further separates them from the very ones to whom they belong.

Here is a mother teaching her child to pray. Unknown to her, an experience that morning in a forbidden part of the neighborhood had been exerting pressure and guilt upon the child.

"Thank You, dear Jesus," prayed five-year-old Tommy, "that my Mommy didn't spank me this morning when I went into the cemetery, and help me not to crawl under the fence anymore."

Tommy succeeded in lifting several loads of guilt all at once. The mother thought twice, and prayed as honestly as he had. "Dear Jesus, help me . . . not to always be a 'spanking' mommy."

Here is a father and his 12-year-old son. "I don't seem to be able to get anything out of Carl," said the father. "He used to tell me everything. Now I don't know what he's thinking at all." The family began using the first two steps on prayer instead of the usual grace at breakfast time: *Jesus is here*, then each one saying some meaningful *Thank You, Lord* prayer of gratitude.

I suggested that following their evening meal they try the last two steps: Lord, please help me, and please help my brother (father, mother, etc.). I also suggested that one of the parents start it by admitting some fault of their own. For as faults are admitted, in this mutual approach to each other's needs, and those present cover them with a loving prayer, there is forgiveness and hard feelings melt away.



A clergyman told me about teaching his family to pray using these four steps. One Sunday evening he spanked his youngest son, despite the child's insistence he was being wrongly accused. Monday morning at the table, while the family prayed conversationally, the truth came out, for it is practically impossible to lie when one prays.

"Dear Jesus," prayed the little fellow, "thank You for helping me to forgive my Daddy for spanking me when I didn't do it." The father's honest prayer for forgiveness which followed healed a breach which could have become permanent, and has separated many parents and children.



#### How it works in a group

Doris H. had come more than 100 miles to learn

to pray because she heard there was to be a prayer workshop. After brief silent worship, *Jesus is here*, we gave thanks. Then as their leader, I moved to the 3rd step: "Is there someone here who would like to pray aloud for their need, so we may pray for you?"

Doris was the first. "Lord, forgive me," she prayed, "for this resentment in my heart against a certain person in our church. I can't carry it any longer . . ." Quick tears cut off any further words. I wish you could have heard the women of that group "pick up her prayer" and in loving, brief prayer responses let her know they cared. So quietly and easily and with a bit of overlapping did these prayers come that it was like a breath of fresh air touching us all.

"Thank You, Lord Jesus, for Your love for Doris."

"And Your love for the other person, too," added another.

"Thank You, Lord, for healing her now, from this inner resentment."

"Yes, thank You," came quietly from us all.

Doris prayed again, "I do thank You, Father, for Your forgiveness. I thank You . . . but . . . oh . . ." Here she paused before resuming her prayer; "Oh, I still don't love her, but I want to love her."

Again the group of women joined in "agreeing" prayer, expressed briefly and to the point as God's love flowed through them to Doris and even further—on to the other person concerned although she was not present. Space or miles are no barrier to the love of God.

Suddenly there was joy! All felt it at once. Doris, however, was the first to put it into words.

"Oh, thank You, Father," she prayed. "And thank you all for praying for me, and with me." Then

I'll never forget her next words. "Now I can help pray for you, for my own burden is gone."

This is the meaning of bearing one another's burdens. To span the separation between us we can build bridges of faith and love, of caring and forgiveness for one another. We can give one another the comfort which comes through praying for one another by name. Another's courage to honestly admit a fault or express a need helps us discover we all fail and we all have needs. This human aspect draws us closer and tightens the circle of our love for one another.

#### About confession

1. You might like to refresh your memory on the first steps of confession found in Chapter 5.

2. If you are in a group, it is always safe to start on a surface level, with obvious things. By the response of your own heart and of those present, you will know whether it is the right time to move to deeper levels of need.

3. Honesty is an attitude which requires cultivation, so start now, and work at it. Let go of the image of yourself, and admit you often fail. The more specific you can be, the deeper will be the cleansing within you.

4. When you have learned to be honest, you will be ready to accept the honesty of another. Our acceptance of each other calls for trust and commitment to each other.

5. When any person admits sin, he is asking for and needs forgiveness. Don't withhold it from him, nor evade your responsibility of love by silence. Put yourself in his place. You will find that the healing of the heart comes from each of us to the other, as well as from God.

6. The problem of prayer-communication is not what the speaker says, but what the heart hears. You will never "hear" all that is contained in another's prayer until you have been honest to the point of pain. Having felt this, you will also feel the joy of the healing fellowship as others pray for you. Then your ears will indeed be opened to "hear" with a new sensitivity, a new ability to withhold even your own request until another's has been met.

7. There is an immediacy about receiving, once we have asked, especially if our asking is done with the "agreeing" of those present and with thankfulness. Try giving thanks as you ask.

8. Are you able to face and name the areas of your differences? Are you ready to love and accept all people in your life?

9. Be on guard about exposing in prayer the sins of others. This is not an act of love nor of humility. Pray for yourself, confess your own sins. You do not need to criticize God's other children to Him when you pray—He knows all about them, and loves them as He does you.



If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

I John 1:9

Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.

James 5:16

