

Corporate Prayer and Fear

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I have a confession to make. I used to feel fearful when I had to pray with other people. Part of my fear came from the fact that I'm an introvert, which means (among other things) that I like to process thoughts in my mind before I speak. I used to find myself thinking about what I was going to say while others were praying, which could compound my feelings of guilt and fear. Sometimes people who prayed before me would preempt what I was planning to say; so, I would feel like I had to think of something else to say so that my prayers weren't redundant. All of this could overload me; so, I felt fear.

If you feel fearful for any of these introverted reasons, you're not alone. I can very much identify with you, and you can be sure that others feel the same way. Here's some of what I've learned about praying with others. God made me the way I am. I needed to grow in godliness and change to become more like Christ, but I can't and shouldn't try to change my basic nature. I have to be Tom. I honor Christ the most when I trust Him, love Him, and obey Him as He made me. That means I have to take some time to think through what I'm going to say when I pray, and there is no law that says it's wrong to do so. I've stopped trying to plan almost every word, but I still usually think through the basic categories I'm going to cover before I pray. I've even come to believe that some planning for corporate prayer is a way of showing love for those with whom I'm praying, since I'm not just pouring out my heart to God as an individual, but I'm also leading others in prayer, which means that my prayer is a service to them. Planning also means that my prayers tend to be somewhat brief and get right to the the point. But why is that a bad thing? Others pray longer prayers because that's how God has made them. We're all different, and we're free to be different within the church of the Lord Jesus. We need one another.

Part of my fear came from being an introvert and all the feelings of awkwardness that go with that. I needed to learn to be comfortable with what God made me. I have no control over what I am, but neither is what I am an excuse to disobey God. I must use how God made me in obedience to Him. But being introverted is not where all fear came from. Some fear came from various kinds of pride.

1. Some fear comes from wanting others to think well of our prayers. We may hear others pray and feel like we need to pray just as well as they seem to be praying. Or we may want to set the bar high by praying well so that others will stay engaged and think we're really godly.
2. Some fear comes from trying to pray a good prayer. We may not be thinking of others at all. It may just be that we want to pray "right." We may not have much experience praying, or we may just not be sure that we ever learned how to pray correctly, and we want to do it the way the Bible says to do it. So, we're fearful that we might not do it "right."
3. Some fear comes from thinking that others may think our prayers are self-righteous. Pride comes in all kinds of twisted forms, including the pride of a desire to be thought humble. It's possible to be afraid that people will think you're a Pharisee for praying "too well."
4. Some fear comes from thinking God may not want to hear from us. If we've not been walking faithfully in Christ, not praying faithfully in private, then we know God knows all these things. We may feel fearful of praying with others because it feels hypocritical and we may not think God will accept our prayers.

So, what's the solution to pride, which is selfish and sinful self-love?

1. We have to understand what our prayers actually are. The truth is that every one of your prayers and every one of my prayers has enough sin to damn us to hell forever. They are all so full of doubts and sins of every kind that on their own, they would be worthy of condemnation. Therefore, we shouldn't seek to pray good prayers for our "rightness" in the eyes of God or in the eyes of others. Being "right" should never be our motive in prayer because our prayers can never be truly "right."

2. We need to remember that Jesus Christ bore our sinful prayers in His body on the tree. He died for all the faults in our prayers. He died for the deficiencies in our prayers, the pride in our prayers, the false humility in our prayers, the insincerity, the unbelief, the coldness, the empty formalism, and the pretended affections in all of our prayers. His blood freely washes and covers all of these sins. But there's more. Jesus prayed perfectly in our place. He prayed perfectly throughout His life and His prayers count for our righteousness in prayer. When you're praying, and you feel that your prayer is imperfect and sinful, you can know that in that very moment, by faith alone, God counts you as righteous. He regards you as though you are praying perfectly and He treats you as though you are praying perfectly. He accepts your prayer as though it's a perfect prayer, even though it's not. Martin Luther said that you're simultaneously just and sinful. But there's even more. Because of Christ's work, God the Father is actually pleased with your imperfect prayers. The Father loves to hear His children pray. He doesn't merely "accept" your sinful prayers, He celebrates them and is pleased with them because they are washed in Christ's blood and because they are the fruit of the Spirit's work within you.

3. Another thing we need to remember is that our prayers should be full of the fear of God. Charles Spurgeon, the great English Baptist preacher, said, "The fear of God is the death of every other fear; like a mighty lion, it chases all other fears away." Fear is not a bad thing at all in corporate prayer. In fact, it's required. Ecclesiastes says, "Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. . . . God is the one you must fear" (Eccl 5:2, 7). When we come together to pray corporately, we should come with a holy reverential and filial fear of God as our Father. We come before Him as the Sovereign of heaven and earth. He is the one we should fear.

4. Finally, remember that the Bible says love drives out ungodly fears. 1 John 4:18 says, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." Jonathan Edwards said that love and fear are like a pair of old fashioned scales. The more fear we have, the less love we have. The more love we have, the less fear we have. If we understand God's great love for us in Christ, we'll be able to love others as we have been loved: "We love because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). And the more we love God and love others because of His love for us, the less we'll fear what others may think of us or may take away from us. We'll simply love them, give ourselves up for them, and take up our crosses to show them Christ's love. One of the most important ways we can love others is by praying for them and praying with them.