

HOW TO PRAY WITH YOUR SPOUSE

by Geneva Cobb Iijima
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Couple prayer can add intimacy, both to your marriage and to your relationship with God. Here's how to get started.

"If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask," Christ promised in Matthew 18:19, "it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven."

This promise, of course, is not limited to married couples, but who else has the capacity to agree so deeply? And who else needs such prayer so badly?

Couple prayer, as I call it, can be a powerful tool in deepening communication and commitment to each other. Here are some ideas to help you and your mate along the road to openness in prayer.

Begin Gently

Ann and David hadn't always prayed together. They knew they should. They both wanted to, but Ann suffered from low self-esteem.

"I always felt David was more spiritual than I," she explains. "I thought he wouldn't think the things I prayed about were important. He'd criticize my prayer, maybe even diagram it in his head." The time came, however, when David persuaded her to try. "This is something we must do. Our kids need it," he insisted.

"We began with just a few sentences each," Ann remembers. "David was very gentle with me, and gradually I began to feel more comfortable about praying with him. If we couldn't have prayed through these last crises, I don't know how we'd have made it."

If your spouse is like Ann, here are some ways you can help:

1. Don't push. If you're eager to pray together, but your spouse is not, go easy. This sounds simple, but it's very difficult, when you know how necessary and how powerful couple prayer is.
2. Be sensitive. Your spouse may want to pray with you but find it hard. It is harder for some people than it is for others. Often, as you become more open in other areas, however, you will become more open in prayer as well.
3. Let your spouse know you value his or her prayers. "I'd really appreciate it if you'd pray for me as you go through the day. I'm scared about..."
4. Mealtime prayers are an easy way to start. Hold hands around the table. You may be able to introduce a little more depth by suggesting, "Honey, when you pray at dinner, would you thank the Lord for helping Angie with her test." Or, "Would you mind praying for the medical tests I'm having tomorrow." Go easy, though. Remember, don't push!
5. Pray with the children. Some spouses feel more free in praying aloud with the children than alone together. If your spouse does, be grateful for that, at least.

6. Share prayer requests and pray together silently before going to sleep. If the reluctant spouse doesn't feel his prayer is being judged, he or she may be more willing. This was our first step back into praying together.
7. Pray together in times of crisis. "When there is a specific need," one woman told me, "we pray better." When you have children, that can be most of the time.

Make Time

In these days of two-career families and busy schedules, making time for couple prayer can be a formidable hurdle, but others have succeeded, and you can too. It's really a matter of priorities. If prayer is important to both of you, you'll make the time.

Pray about finding a suitable time. If possible, pray together about it. Then start experimenting. One of these options may work for you.

1. Set the alarm a few minutes earlier in the morning. Catherine Marshall and her husband, Len Seurd, would set their coffeepot timer each night. In the morning they woke to the aroma of fresh coffee perking. They'd pour a cup of coffee and sit propped up in bed as they prayed and studied the Scriptures together.
2. If you breakfast together, pray then. We do this, though it's not our main prayer time. I feel good about the day when I've heard Pete pray for me and the children. He appreciates my prayers then too.
3. Pray before going to bed. It can be very comforting to share with God about both the day's blessings and problems before going to sleep.
4. Pray on the telephone together at lunch or another convenient time during the day. You can also do this when one spouse is out of town—it's a lovely way to keep in touch. Many businesses pay for calls home.
5. Take time for spontaneous prayers whenever a need arises. This may even be several times a day.
6. If you absolutely do not have a time when you can pray together on a daily basis, agree to set aside a time once a week when you can pray. Make it special. Share a scripture or two to set the tone.
7. List prayer requests and praises for each other, then pray separately, but at the same time if possible. You can be close in spirit, even when you are not together in body. If you are accustomed to praying together at 10:00 p.m., and one spouse is out of town, try to continue the practice. Just meet in spirit at God's throne.

Experiment

Once you've incorporated couple prayer into your schedule, experiment with different prayer styles to find the one that fits your needs. When you find it, you may want to occasionally use a different method to add variety.

1. *Conversational prayer.* Begin with praise and thanksgiving. Continue to confession of specific sin, and end with requests. Let the conversation flow back and forth, with each partner praying spontaneously. Recognize God as a participant; accept short silences as times when He may be speaking.
2. *Structured conversational prayer.* As with conversational prayer, begin with praise, thanksgiving, and confession of sin. When you are ready to make requests, one spouse leads out with a concern. The other then continues that prayer from his or her own perspective. Suppose Johnnie is having trouble with mathematics at school, for example. The husband may pray for him to be able to concentrate and understand the concepts better. The wife continues by praying for patience on the part of the teacher or herself in working with him.

The wife then prays about a subject of concern to her. When she finishes, her husband continues that prayer, adding his own thoughts about it. He then introduces another prayer request. This method of prayer helps each partner concentrate on the prayer of the other, since he will continue the same subject.

3. *Traditional prayer.* In this style of prayer, one person prays about all of his/her concerns. Then, the other prays about all his concerns. If you have been brought up on this kind of prayer or like things very structured, you may feel more comfortable with this style. This type of prayer requires more concentration on the part of the agreeing (listening) spouse, however. So, avoid lengthy prayers, unless they are meaningful to both of you.

Ideally, prayer times should include praise, confession, requests, and listening to God's voice. Practically, it's more important that you pray than that you get all the parts incorporated properly. If there's only time for a short sentence or two, God understands.

Pray With-Not at-Your Spouse

My husband Pete and I faced our own crisis over prayer in the first month of our marriage. Each evening we'd kneel by the sofa for our prayer time. I treasured those minutes as we poured out our hearts to God, telling Him our needs and desires.

Then one night before we prayed, Pete looked at me and said, "Sometimes I feel like you pray at me." "What?" I asked. "I just tell the Lord the needs as I see them."

"But, when you pray, 'Lord, help us do this or that,' I feel like you are really pointing out what you think I should be doing," he insisted.

Deep inside, I knew he was right, but how could he criticize my prayers to God: How could I ever again be spontaneous in our prayers together?

Devastated, my emotions erupted in uncontrollable sobbing. Pete looked on helplessly. When there were no more tears, we discovered that our ability to be vulnerable in prayer together had disappeared. Many years passed before it was restored.

Here are some suggestions on how to keep your prayer time a positive experience:

1. *Don't scold or nag.* Unless your spouse asks for prayer in an area where you think he or she needs improvement or help, it's wise to keep quiet. Reserve those prayers for private time with the Lord. No one likes to be preached at—especially in prayer.

2. *Find common ground.* You don't have to agree with your mate on everything about a situation in order to pray together over it. You may need to sort through the pieces, discuss, perhaps even vent your anger or get counseling in a crisis. But at prayer time, decide what the bottom line is.
3. *Accept yourself and your mate.* Some people, for instance, are naturally more reticent to pray with their spouse than are others. Perhaps they consider prayer a private thing, or maybe they are more regimented. These people are often matched with more open, spontaneous mates. Learn to appreciate these differences.
4. *Focus on Jesus.* One wife told me, "Sometimes I feel like we're praying to each other, rather than to God." To avoid that danger, take a little time to center your thoughts on Jesus. Sing a worship song, read a Psalm, have a short praise time together.
5. *Persevere.* Anything new feels difficult and awkward. Then too, I'm convinced that Satan will prevent any kind of prayer if he can—but how much more so couple prayer! Whatever you do, don't get discouraged if you miss a day or two.

Again, don't give up! Things that are worthwhile usually do take time. I pray that the day will come when you will say to your spouse, "I don't know how I'd have gotten through this day (or week) without your prayers."

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