

Why Pray for the Dead, and Why ask Them to Pray for Us?

By Jim Penrice

Why would anyone pray for the dead? And why would we try to ask people in Heaven to pray for us? Before we can address these questions we first need to understand the answers to two others: Why do we pray for anyone, especially a fellow believer, who is alive on earth with us? And why do we ask others on earth to pray for us?

A simple answer might be that the Bible tells us to in a number of places, perhaps most notably Ephesians 6:18-19, in which Paul tells the Ephesians they should be “praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints—and for me, that utterance may be given to me.”

But how does this make any sense in light of the clear Biblical teaching that Jesus Christ is our only Mediator?

I can pray to Jesus directly; I don't need anybody else to do that for me. If you agree with that, then why would I ask anyone else to pray for me? And why would I pray for anyone else when they can also pray directly without me? And why would Paul, of all people, ask for prayers—he had a direct supernatural encounter with Jesus, a clear, unobstructed path.

It would seem that anyone who puts forth this reasoning to argue that we have no business asking Mary or other saints in Heaven to pray for us had better stop asking anyone on earth to pray for them as well. You have only one Mediator between you and God, so you'd better stop asking your pastor or your neighbor or your brother to pray for you.

And you'd better stop praying for other people, stop trying to be another mediator, because by doing so you're trying to usurp the role of Christ.

Does that sound silly? Of course it does—especially to someone who understands the real reason we pray for others and ask their prayers for us.

We are not mediators for each other, that's Jesus' unique role. Jesus is the one Mediator between God and all of humanity. And we really don't need anybody else to intercede for us, because we can all pray directly ourselves. Jesus taught this clearly in Matthew 6:6 where he says:

“When you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”

But what we do need is an intimate connection to the other members of the Body of Christ to which we are all joined as one. We cannot live as individual members of the Body without a powerful connection to each other. (1 Corinthians 12)

Prayer is that connection, for when we pray for each other we enter intimately into each other's spiritual life—not just physical, emotional and mental life, but spiritual life, in which we are ultimately one Body. Prayer is the blood that circulates throughout the entire Body of Christ, much like the blood in my physical body establishes a bond between my right hand and my left ankle, for the same blood flows through both. Our prayer for each other draws us into a closer bond with each other and with Jesus the true Mediator.

So we pray for others, and we ask them to pray for us, not because we need their mediation or even intercession for God to hear us (as if God won't listen to me unless someone more influential speaks on my behalf), but so that we can be a stronger, complete Body.

And if it is true that the Body of Christ is one, not divided, then it is true that we are part of the same Body as all the other members, including those who have preceded us in death. So we continue to pray for them, and they pray for us, because we are still one Body in Christ and need to maintain that connection through prayer, the life blood of the Body.