

A Lesson Learned from the Heart of God

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To say that I don't multitask

well would be an understatement. In fact my wife would have a pretty good laugh just seeing my name and multitasking in the same sentence together. So you can imagine the frantic state I was in the Friday morning of Family Camp Weekend. Not only was I "Camp Director", in charge of shepherding 30+ volunteers to help manage the 200+ campers, but my wife was away. This meant that I was also busy trying to pack up our family gear while my two small children stayed underfoot, barraging me with camp-related questions. "Will the Burkmans be there?" (Yes) "Can I bring Kitty?" (No!) Meanwhile, I am fielding non-stop phone calls with various camp related issues. And for some unknown (but perhaps soon to be known) reason, I had volunteered to give somebody else's kids a ride to camp as well. To put it mildly, I wasn't handling all this with much élan.



So when one of my very best friends called in great distress, my response wasn't exactly well thought out, and was seriously lacking in empathy. He called to tell me that the son of one of his co-workers had been killed in a late-night car accident near my house the night before. My friend was very upset and said "Listen, I know you're busy with Family Camp stuff, but all I'm asking is that if you have a spare minute, lift up this family in prayer." My reply was something as brisk as "Gee-that-is-terrible-Ok-for-sure-I-will-pray-but-I-gotta-go-now." Immediately after I hung up I felt convicted. As I replayed our phone conversation in my head I could only hope that I sounded even half as empathetic as I felt. Because while I felt a little empathetic towards my friend I clearly had none for the family of the accident victim. Quickly the rationalizations began: I was super busy, the guy who lost his life was out late and therefore probably under the influence of something, which in some sick, twisted way made me less sympathetic. And finally, I didn't know this family. They were just a faceless group of people to me.

However, as the morning progressed an unexpected thing happened. Everything was packed up and ready to go, all the phone calls that needed to be made had been made, and I somehow had about thirty minutes before I was scheduled to leave. After the shock of this realization wore off I quickly made an executive decision "Kids! Put on Spongebob!

Dad is going to lay down for twenty minutes and then we're going to leave." Retreating to my room I started to reach for the remote control and Sportcenter when I remembered my promise to pray for the "unknown" family.

I lay down and closed my eyes and began with a confession. "Lord, forgive me for my callous heart towards my friend, and especially toward the family of the victim." Then came the rationalization, followed by a request. "But," I continued, "I don't even know these people, and it's hard to feel for people I have never met. Maybe you could teach me to be more empathetic in situations like these." And then I finished with the standard "Comfort them and heal them and reveal yourself in this situation." And like that, my twenty minutes were up and I quickly marshaled my kids into the car and headed up the hill to pick up the other two kids.

I don't think words could ever adequately describe what happened next, but I will try. Driving up the hill from our house we were stopped by a policeman standing in the roadway. Behind him I could see a police car and some people standing around. Before I could make sense of the situation I was waved ahead with an indication to drive slow. As I proceeded slowly, I began to realize that this must be the place where the accident was, and therefore these people standing around were likely the family of the victim, perhaps having just come from the hospital to survey the accident site. Just as this thought crossed my mind we slowly were passing two men. One was consoling the other saying, "I know how you feel brah."

And that's when it happened.

The other man, who was obviously the father of the deceased son, let out a sound. To attempt to describe that sound would be impossible. To call it a moan, or a sob, or a groan just would just cheapen it, and it wouldn't even begin to tell you what passed into me in that moment. But the cry of that father touched my very soul. All the hairs on my body stood straight up, a shiver ran right up my spine. I had no more than a moment to consider what I had just felt, when my son, my only son, piped up. "Why was that man crying, dad?" I began to explain "Well, son. Last night there was an accident here, and that man's son was killed. And you see son, if you ever..." And that's when it hit me. Like a ton of bricks falling on my head, like scales falling from my eyes, like a million lamps illuminating my mind, I got it. For just the briefest of seconds, maybe even just a minuscule fraction of a second, I had felt a tiny particle of that man's pain. Trying even for a millisecond to imagine what I would feel if my son were ever taken from me like that was simply...unbearable. And then I began to really pray for that family.

Incredibly, and quickly, God had answered my prayer "teach me to be more empathetic when I pray for people I don't know." It was so clear, and so striking that God had just revealed this to me, that I was dumbfounded. Speechless. Thankfully, after picking up the

two other excitable children, they were having so much fun laughing and yelling that I was left alone to drive the hour and a half to Family Camp in silence. And here is what I considered:

Prayer is a mystery. Don't believe anybody who thinks to have figured it all out. I once spent a whole summer studying prayer, read lots of books about it. There are lots of theories out there to explain how an all sovereign, all knowing, perfectly Holy and never changing God reacts to the specific requests of sinful people who close their eyes and think about stuff. You could fill a church with all the books about strategies for effective prayer. But after a summer's worth of research on the subject I was forced to conclude that if there is anything we can confidently say about prayer in the Bible is that *how* we pray is not nearly as important as the simple fact that we are compelled to do it. As if God was saying, "I don't care how you pray, just pray!" Which is fine, but it doesn't answer the question of why we pray. If God is all powerful and will always do the right thing, why then does it matter if we pray? Considering this on the drive to Family Camp, I recalled something I had read about prayer that now seemed incredibly true: Praying is God's way of making us part of the situation we are praying about. It is how we get involved in the lives of people, become part of what God is doing in their lives, whether we know them or not. It is how we learn to love them as we cry out for mercy for them.

Have you ever prayed for someone for a long period of time, someone you didn't know and then met them in person? You feel like you know them! Have you ever cried at the death of somebody you prayed for, having never met them in person? If so, you'll know what I mean. One time I saw a prayer request come across my email for a critically injured accident victim. In the busyness of my life, I never got around to praying for that person. A few days later another email update came through trumpeting God's victory through a "miracle healing." I was so bummed! I felt like I had missed a chance to be part of what God was doing! Prayer puts us in the situation, and we get to share in both the triumphs and defeats of the people we pray for.

No wonder we are constantly reminded in scripture to pray for our enemies. What better way to begin to understand them and have mercy and love for them. I have a friend who has a policy to pray for people who irritate him. He says after a while it becomes easy to love them. How true is that!

Finally, God showed me that day that He truly hears and responds to our prayers. How uncanny that after asking Him to teach me empathy, He did so in a matter of minutes. But most importantly, knowing that He hears our prayers for the people around us, how much more motivated should we be to stop for a few minutes and lift people up to Him? Like Paul says, we should truly be a people who "...pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying..."

Ephesians 6:18