Community is not simply another ministry activity; it is the context for all ministry activities. It is the environment in which spiritual growth takes place. And since community is central to our model for spiritual growth, a few planned socials are not going to get the job done. We needed a resource to elevate community, encourage it, and teach it.

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Content of Book: Why We Pursue Independence; Why We Need Community; Repentance; Community and the Word-Communal Quiet Times, Community and Confession; Group Prayer; Godly Speech and Conversation, and A Commitment to Live Communally.

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From where I park, it’s a ten-minute walk down twenty-fourth Street to the UT campus. Sometimes I wish I had someone to talk to during those ten minutes. One morning I started to wonder why I couldn’t just talk to Jesus while I walked. He should be able to keep me company, right? So I tried it. It was an experiment in prayer.

It failed. I talked for a minute or so but mostly felt weird. Like a thirty-year-old man walking to a college campus with an imaginary friend. It was entertaining but not satisfying. Why didn’t this work? Why couldn’t I find in Jesus something as simple as ten minutes of companionship? This was a question that I felt like I needed to answer. Since nobody else was there, I asked Jesus. He answered my question—with a question. He’s always doing that to people. He asked, “Why do you want someone to walk to campus with you? Is it just companionship, or is there another motive?”

I started to realize that a major reason I like being around people is because I want them to think I am smart or funny or something. I do it in very subtle Christian ways, but many times that is what I am after. I’m pretty sure that explains the loneliness I felt that morning, the emptiness of not having anyone around to impress. If our aim in relationships is to appear as if we are important or have it all together—to keep people close enough to enjoy
but distant enough to impress—then we simply won’t be very interested in talking to Jesus. He knows us better than we know ourselves and is actually more impressed when we are not trying to be so impressive.

**MISTAKEN IDENTITY**

Tragically, we do not stop trying to be important even in the area of prayer. We want to sound good praying and be thought of as someone who has a good prayer life. This is why so many people are uncomfortable praying out loud, because it’s hard to pray and manage your image at the same time.

A problem I have in this area is treating Jesus like He is an imaginary friend. I talk to Him when I’m alone, but I would never talk to Him in public. If I did people would jab their friends with their elbows and point at me. I mean how would you feel if you told me about a problem in your life and I recommended that we talk to my imaginary friend to see what he thinks? That’s what praying with people feels like to me sometimes. It’s easier just to give you my advice. In addition to being easier, offering my solutions also makes me feel more important. I like it when people turn to me for help. Granted, I do have some good motives to being genuinely helpful, but I tend to “help” so much that we don’t even need to pray.

Our culture is bent in the direction of quick solutions and formulas. Answers make us feel secure, even if they’re not good answers. Having the answers to people’s problems is valuable, and I want to be valued. But that’s just the problem of supply. There is also demand. We have come to depend on people and resources to meet our needs and fix our problems. I almost always talk to other people about stuff before I think about praying or asking others to pray. We want to be Jesus to people, and we want them to be Jesus to us. Meanwhile the real Jesus gets lost in the mayhem of our know-how.
We desperately need to learn how to help each other talk to Jesus so that we can learn from Him directly. The good news is that Jesus is available to anyone who will simply come to Him by faith. That’s the gospel!

I got into a good discussion not too long ago with a girl who had a lot of questions about faith. Usually I would feel obligated to have answers in this kind of conversation. But I didn’t know what to say to some of her questions, and even though she was looking for answers as a prerequisite to faith, I didn’t fret about it. In the end I found myself telling her that it sounded like she wanted to be God (takes one to know one).

“Most people don’t get to hear the gospel as plainly as we do,” she said, “and that sucks.” I agreed and tried to clarify by saying, “It seems to me like you are saying: ‘God, this sucks, and because I don’t understand it, you suck.’” I told her that I didn’t understand it completely either, but that I didn’t think God was stupid about this just because I was. We decided that it was okay for her not to understand why everyone doesn’t get to hear the gospel as plainly as we do. Our focus became more about the importance of being honest with God about what we think and feel. It was so refreshing and right to admit that I am not the way and the truth and the life, and to proclaim that Jesus is. Understanding our limitations and acknowledging the wisdom and power of God is how prayer finds a home in our conversations.

PRETTY PLEASE

Forgetting that I am Will and not Jesus is one reason I fail to pray with people. A more obvious reason is that I often fail to pray in general. E.M. Bounds said that a lack of prayer reveals a lack of desire.¹ I think this is true, with one exception. A lack of prayer may also indicate a very strong desire for independence.

This is another instance in which I know something but do not really believe it. I know I need Jesus, but I practice self-sufficiency. I’m an adult after all. I should be able to take care of myself. Brett wrote a post on our blog that explains how growing up actually works against a life of prayer:

I sometimes wonder why Jesus likes kids. I’m hanging out at Borders trying to read and be contemplative, and there’s this girl hanging out at Borders trying to be loud and annoying. I’m not exactly sure how old this girl is, maybe six or ten. She’s doing a much better job of ignoring what I’m trying to do here than I am of ignoring whatever it is she’s doing.

First she was walking around drinking an empty glass of milk and ice. Empty. Not empty as in suck on the straw a little harder and maybe something will come out, but empty as in nothing left to drink. Next she went into question mode. Someone she knows named Vanessa just walked in. “Hey Vanessa…What are you doing?...Why?...What is that?...Why?...Where are you going Vanessa?”

Then she got a magazine and sat down at the table next to me. She somehow figured out how to make a really loud noise just by turning the pages. It kind of sounded like ripping off a band-aid, over and over and over. She didn’t seem to understand proper social protocol in this environment.

I’m pretty sure it’s not just this one. I know lots of other kids that do the same wrong-time, wrong-place things. They pick the most important part of the game to ask what a first down is. They spit up/throw-up during the three minutes you’re holding them. They don’t realize that when you laugh or cry you’re supposed to have some semblance of a reason.
I can see why Jesus likes kids, in a *Kids Say the Darndest Things* sort of way; I just don’t get why He would say something like, “Let the Children come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” And even, “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Before I got distracted I was thinking about how I’ve hit a wall with prayer. I get bored with the monotony of asking God to do the same things over and over again. I get disappointed when my earnest requests don’t get quickly resolved. I find myself trusting more and more in God’s sovereignty and “fate,” and see less of a point in actually asking Him to do things.

I know God’s not some big vending machine in the sky, giving me things if I have exact change—or if I shake Him a bit. But there are important things in my life that I need to talk about with God if I want to really have a relationship with Him. And these are things like having a friend who’s depressed or seeing how empty life can be for people at the University of Texas or my current dating status (single). These things I can’t honestly talk to God about without wanting them to change.

I often avoid praying about these things, because I’ve prayed about them fifteen times already, and I’m just not sure the sixteenth time will produce anything different. Other times I don’t ask God for things because I feel like that’s not the responsible adult thing to do; maybe I need to take more initiative, or maybe I just want the credit instead of the help.

This is where I think kids have it figured out. They

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2 Matthew 19:14, NIV; 3 Matthew 18:3, NIV
don’t know how to just be realistic. It takes them awhile to accept “no” as an answer. They are okay with needing help with things, or they at least recognize they have no choice. I think I’ve taken what it looks like to be socially acceptable and for some reason tried to be like that in my relationship with God. Prim and proper. Forgetting that before Him I really am just a kid in need of His loving help and grace, to the point that maybe I should be quicker and more persistent to ask for it. I’m not pretending to really understand prayer or what it does, but I think it probably involves being more kid-like, even if it annoys me.

Brett’s experience helps me understand why prayer is so important in the life of a community. It’s the surest way to strip us of our drive for independence. Honest prayer makes us more like kids, in the good way.

**SUBURBS AND SUBWAYS**

We need to experience situations in life that remind us of our need for God. And while I am wholeheartedly in favor of private prayer, I think praying with and for others helps us feel our need for God in ways that private prayer never could. I spent a week with twenty students in New York City during spring break last year. As a suburbanite I wasn’t prepared for how a city like that would make me feel. There is both prosperity and desperation around every corner. I felt my smallness there.

I spent an entire afternoon standing in a subway station holding a sign that said “Free Prayer.” I felt sad as person after person could not bear to make eye contact. But out of the flow of people a few made their way to me. Some even walked thirty feet past me and turned around as if they were being pulled. They would say things like, “What do I do?” I would say something like, “Um, I’m
just here to pray for you. What is going on in your life that I can pray for?” The requests were familiar—relationships, jobs, health, overcoming addiction.

I pray with people in the suburbs all the time. We even have meetings devoted to such things, meetings with a facilitator. Sometimes we have index cards and applicable verses. Suburban prayer is very constructed and predictable. We know what to say about certain things and certain kinds of people. Our experience in these things helps us keep the lawns of our spiritual life green and trimmed. When prayer is a checklist or a performance, it's hard to sense our need for God. It feels more like we are depending on our ability to pray right.

Prayer in a subway station is not about looking good. We looked like idiots from Texas who thought people would actually stop to talk to us. When people slowed down enough for me to look into their eyes, I saw and felt the pain of human struggle. The usual prayers did not seem to fit. My verses did not seem adequate for such reality. I had nothing to hide behind except a flimsy sign.

But I would begin praying, asking God in my mind what to pray, and then letting the words become audible to the other person. I didn’t sound spiritual or important, but people cried and hugged me and dragged their friends over to me so I could pray for them. I couldn't explain why they kept coming or why this affected them so deeply. I only knew that this was not the way I was accustomed to doing prayer.

One of the people who asked us to pray was a woman whose sister was “having a hard time.” That’s all she said. While I was praying I sensed God telling me to pray for restored communication, and that He would remove those barriers. I hesitated. At the very least, I thought, that sounded random, and at the worst presumptuous. The words forced their way out of my mouth, though, and when they did the woman began to cry.

This is why praying together is so powerful. We could have set up prayer booths where people could get a moment of solitude to
pray about things. But when the bulk of our prayer life is private, it is easy to feel isolated, even from God. Is He there? Does He hear me? When we pray together we allow God to speak into our lives through other people’s prayers.

That’s what happened in the subway station. God wanted to speak to the woman we were praying for, to let her know that He hears her desperation, that He is not far but right there in the Union Square subway station. I could have asked her for more details and uncovered this issue. I could have even given her advice or biblical insight—four keys to open the doors of communication in her life. I could have told her that God is sovereign, but I’m not sure she would have believed me. She needed more than my “wisdom;” she needed to hear from God.

Truth, in the informational sense, will help you think correctly, and maybe even behave correctly. But when you feel truth, when it comes at you unexpectedly, like a light that has pierced the part of you that you have been keeping a secret, it feels like God has stepped into your life. Praying with people is your chance to step back and ask God to step in.

There are no magic formulas, of course, concerning how prayer works. Scripture and church history provide us helpful models and patterns, but no formulas. Relationships don’t have formulas. The difference between my experiences of Suburban vs. Subway prayer is a matter of desperation. How dejected would you have to be before you would walk up to a stranger in a subway station and ask them to pray for you? You’d have to be a prostitute or a blind man or a religious person who wants to be born-again. That kind of person—the person who thinks they are really sick—does not pray just to pray. They pray for healing. They feel as if they will not be able to go on without a touch from God.

That kind of desperate need drives those who pray to dependence. Can you imagine the pressure of praying for someone with those expectations? You start pleading in your mind: Oh God, I don’t know what to pray. You know this person and what they need. Please
Lord. I have no words. Lord, give me words to pray. And then you speak, not as one trying to sound spiritual or eloquent, but as one calling on God to free the captives and bind up the brokenhearted.4

In our communities prayer will always mirror the level of honesty. Shallow conversation begets shallow prayer. But when we talk about the Bible, engage in meaningful conversation, and confess our sins, we will become painfully aware of our desperate need for God’s help. Helplessness is the beginning of prayer. There is no place for independence or self-importance.

PRAY WITH PEOPLE

Prayer is very much an issue of the heart. It would seem shallow to offer action-oriented solutions to a heart problem. But the actions that I am going to suggest are not solutions. They are activities that will surface the struggles we face in prayer and allow us to address the heart issues in the context of community. It’s like counseling. Debbie has battled an anxiety disorder for years. The first time she went to a psychologist for help, he made her do this activity where you basically write out your train of thought to see how one thought leads to another. It seemed to neglect the heart issues involved. But the assignment wasn’t a solution. It was an activity to help Debbie discover the heart issues in a more tangible way. In that way engaging in activities of communal prayer is both a means and an end. The only way to get to a place where praying together is normative is to start doing it even when it’s awkward.

Spiritual activities are easy. Wanting to do them when you don’t necessarily feel like it is not easy. That is why people call them spiritual disciplines. And in the case of what I am proposing—practicing together—you run into the problem of needing multiple people to feel like it simultaneously.

Prayer is even more difficult in that regard because it’s just

4 See Isaiah 61:1
not something we are used to doing. We are more comfortable with small talk or pretending to be Jesus. Imagine for a moment, though, what it would be like to pray regularly and casually with our friends in a way that nobody feels awkward. Would our lives be different if we naturally stepped back and asked God to step in? If we imagine that our lives would be different, and for the better, then our desire is in place and all we lack is the means to bring it about. That’s pretty much where I am. All I can do is offer some activities that we have found helpful in our community.

There are two arenas of communal prayer for us to think about. The first is a planned time of prayer, either a prayer meeting or prayer as part of some other kind of meeting. I used to think that scheduled prayer was contrived and that spontaneity was the mark of true authenticity. But we do not think that way in relationships. It is actually very loving to think about a conversation ahead of time, to consider how we want to express ourselves and how we will best be able to listen. And in either case—whether we are on a date or at a prayer meeting—thoughtful preparation allows the conversation to take a natural course. For some reason it is very relational and thoughtful to invite a bunch of people over for a movie, but somehow contrived to invite a bunch of people over to pray.

An activity in the realm of formal prayer that I have enjoyed is sort of a combination between a communal quiet time and a communal prayer time. When I do it I establish the following guidelines for the group: you can read any passage that comes to mind; you can pray about anything that comes to mind; if you want you can stop and just tell us something that you are thinking about, but as much as possible, let’s listen to each other with the aim of correlating what we read and pray. For example, someone may ask God for wisdom regarding a decision they are facing, which would prompt me to read James, where it says that God gives generously to those who ask for wisdom and do not doubt. Someone else may think of the man who

5 See James 1:5
said to Jesus, “Lord I believe, help me overcome my unbelief.” Thus we may pray for faith to believe God’s Word. It’s not a Bible drill or a way to justify our requests. We look to Scripture to find words that express what we are thinking and feeling. We look to Scripture because we identify with the struggle of humanity found there.

In this way prayer starts to gain momentum, as it’s rooted in the truth of God’s Word. People start believing that God really will grant wisdom, and that His hand is among us. We begin to experience the desperation of subway prayer even in the comfort of a suburban living room. Prayer like this is quite powerful and very simple. Once you get started passages and sentiments naturally come to mind. That is how this kind of prayer can go on for a while before people get restless.

I decided to try this with some fraternity guys. We hardly ever pray at the SAE Bible study. When we do it’s only because Hawkins has some kind of conviction about beginning or ending with two minutes of prayer. When I told them what we were going to do, everyone was pretty hesitant since I was proposing that we pray thirty times longer than usual. It’s easy to sit around at Bible study and talk for an hour, because you don’t have to think much about what you say. But prayer is different. I mean nobody wants to say stupid stuff to God.

I gave them the guidelines, and I added that they could read excerpts from the book we had been reading all semester. For the first five or six minutes it was all me, scrambling to read whatever I could find that might prompt some thoughts. It’s not easy to get in the mood to pray. It took awhile for the guys to focus, but it wasn’t long until everyone was reading and praying. We prayed about things that we had never talked about. It was a very meaningful time for me. I felt connected to the guys in ways that years of discussions had never afforded. When we finished I asked them what it would be like to do that with each other whenever

6 Mark 9:24, NIV
they were just hanging out together. I went on and on about how revolutionary it would be to make a habit of doing these communal prayer/quiet times, how it would transform the quality of their conversations and deepen their relationships. They had that look in their eyes, the one that says, “Will, we love you, but you are way too excited about this.”

Brett came up with an exercise that is more contemplative. He wrote out various words on note cards and put them in three locations throughout the house where about ten of us were meeting. We split up into three smaller groups and each group went to one of the prayer stations. We would do whatever the cards said to do and then rotate. Each station lasted about ten minutes. Some of the cards had topics of prayer like “the lost” or “decisions;” others had words like “grace” or “hope;” and other cards instructed something like “singing,” in which case we sang hymns together, or “quiet,” in which case we simply sat there silently. I took a nap. This exercise was great because it got us talking to each other, not only about the stuff going on in our lives, but also about what hope means and how we would go about praying for one another regarding hope.

These two exercises can be adapted to a number of groups or environments. You can focus the first one on praying through specific books, like Philippians, or specific topics, like pride. In Brett’s exercise you can obviously change what is on the cards, or you can change the number and/or duration of the stations. The main idea is simply to stretch the mind and engage the heart.

The second arena of communal prayer is informal—in conversations and normal interactions with people. This is the area where I am most likely to forget who I am (Will and not Jesus). I am not quick to pray. I am quick to give advice, quick to talk about how my problems are worse, quick to get out of uncomfortable situations, but not quick to pray. What if I made it a point to pray with everyone I spent time with throughout the course of my day, as a way of disciplining myself to pray with people? I only know a few
people who do this, and I think they are weird. But thinking about how careless we are in our conversations, and how important they are in missional community, maybe our conversations could use some prayer. I had a friend in college who did this. Every time we sat down to talk, even if it was pretty casual, he would say, “Can I pray for us?” I would say, “Sure,” because what else are you going to say, “Um, I don’t think so…we don’t need to pray just to talk to each other.” Then he would invite God into our conversation and ask Him to use us to encourage each other. I always found it much easier not to say stupid stuff around that guy.

So what if we started there, just by inviting God into our conversations? That way the awkwardness of praying together is already on the table. Then when things come up in the conversation that we should and want to pray about, it will be easier to do. This is a simple thing to do so, but it will be incredibly difficult to try because of our desire for independence, which will surface in the process. But that is exactly why we should try it. This is how disciplines lead us to heart issues. I will think you are weird if you try it with me, but prayer is just weird in general if you think about it.