



How to Pray for the Sick

Some ways of praying for the sick are more helpful than others. To give a brief nod to God with the words, “Now I pray for all who are ill” is obviously not as effective as intensive praying for a particular sick person. Let’s think about what kind of prayer works, and why.

What we are doing when we pray

When we pray for a person who is ill, we are not calling God’s attention to the individual. We are not informing God about the situation. We are not asking God to leave other duties to take care of this person’s need. We are in no way telling God what to do. We are using our spirits as channels for God’s Spirit in reaching and healing the sick one.

Often, when we are sick, we close off our usual openness to God. It is hard to think of anything but the pain or discomfort. A sick person may cry out to God occasionally, but will often not be able to maintain his/her usual spiritual relationship with God. The added spiritual power of others’ prayers is helpful.

Some of us have a close, warm, loving relationship with God. Others have a more tenuous or irregular relationship. But in praying for the sick, God can use whatever relationship we have.

God can use whatever spiritual resources we have available, whatever understandings, whatever power.

What good does it do?

If you cut your leg and the cut is full of dirt and grease, is God’s healing power operating? Yes—100%! Your body will try to rid itself of all that mess and get on with the healing.

Now, if someone cleans out that cut and stitches the skin together, will God’s healing power increase? No, it will still be working 100%. However, the conditions under which healing can take place have been vastly improved.

Likewise, prayer does not influence God to do what God otherwise might not do; but it does add the element of spiritual healing to the situation, vastly improving the conditions under which healing can take place.

Negative praying doesn’t help much: “Dear God, we pray for our sister here. We are aware of all her pain and discomfort. We know how lonely she feels and how unhappy she is. Please heal her. Amen.”

This sort of prayer doesn’t actually do harm—God surely has some way of dealing with negative prayers—but it doesn’t do much good. As you pray for the sick, remember that God is already focusing immense healing power. Thank and praise God!

The sources of sickness

A malady in one part of our being may produce symptoms in another. A headache, for example, may be the result of a brain tumor or allergy (physical causes), financial worries, or anger toward a parent (mental causes), or unresolved guilt or a sense of the absence of God (spiritual causes).

Each aspect of our being makes certain demands: Our bodies need proper nutrition, adequate rest, and exercise; our emotions need loving, accepting relationships; our spirits need a sense of God’s power, love, and presence, and the ability to act out of divine will. Anything we do that is contrary to the natural demands of our body, mind, or spirit causes imbalance and often a symptom or two.

Some illnesses come through chance contact with a disease. Some are caused by our own acts or attitudes or those of others. But illness is never caused by the perfect will of God. “Do you know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16, NRSV). We are whole beings—body, mind, and spirit—and must be treated wholly in order for healing to take place and health to return.

How to pray

The following suggestions will help you as you seek to pray more effectively for those who are sick:

1. Prepare yourself by setting aside some uninterrupted time—a minimum of half an hour—for the purpose of praying for the sick.
2. During this time, try to concentrate as much as possible on the task of prayer
3. Begin by setting yourself in a proper relationship to God. Think of God's greatness . . . love . . . presence . . . and especially God's caring concern for those for whom you pray. Set your mind on adoration!
4. Concentrating on one person at a time, reflect on God's healing power even now functioning in the patient's body, mind, and spirit. Thank and praise God for this gift, this natural movement toward health, and the divine love which prompts it.
5. Recognize the gap between God's expectations for you and your actual performance in life. Confess your individual share in the sin with which the world is afflicted. Admit that it is in spite of your own unworthiness that you dare offer prayer. Accept God's forgiveness.
6. Pray directly and individually for the sick persons. Visualize them receiving God's healing into their being with no barriers at all. Imagine them being carried lovingly and tenderly by Jesus himself. Envision them being filled with the Holy Spirit of God.

Try to empty out your own spirit to fill theirs. Work at this, knowing that God will continually refill yours. Try to communicate love, power, and healing to them.

Pray for the doctors, nurses, and technicians; the pastors, relatives, friends; and everyone else who is participating in any way in the healing process. Thank God for their care, knowledge, and skill, and pray that they too may be open to the Spirit's guidance.

Receive God's being into your own being, then channel this being to the patients. Conversely, pull out of them all that is negative, unspiritual, unhealthy, or that keeps them from absolute wholeness. Accept all this into your own being, then give it to God.

- Pray that they may be increasingly responsive to God's healing power, that they may increasingly be co-operative with that power. Visualize them receiving God's healing into their being with no barriers at all.
7. Feel free to pray for your own needs and wants. Ask God for a larger vision, a more profound experience, a more intimate spiritual relationship.
 8. Re-surrender, rededicate whatever portion of your being has already been consecrated to God, and try to offer even a bit more.
 9. Complete your prayer by agreeing to act upon whatever direction comes to you from God. Submit your will and conscience to the Holy Spirit's guidance.

Results of our prayer

Sometimes as you pray for the sick, you may have a profound sense of participation in the healing process. At other times you may wonder if you are "getting through" at all. Either way, give thanks for God's healing power for, and caring acceptance of, the patients and yourself.

Sometimes it is obvious that healing is taking place. If so, rejoice and praise God. Sometimes, in spite of your ardent prayer, the patient merely stays the same or even grows worse. Then you can redouble your own efforts, asking more people to pray with you or allowing more time for prayer.

You may wonder what's going wrong. It may be that the disease has not yet run its course, or that a change in medical regimen is in order, or that our society has not placed a high enough priority on medical research in this area, or that you are not praying as well as is possible for you. The Spirit may suggest to you new actions to take. If so, take them. But always remember that God's will for the patient is wholeness, adequacy, and health. That is the direction God wants to move, if only we will cooperate sufficiently.

God does not refuse to act because of some "mistake" in your prayer. God knows you totally and accepts and loves you and your prayers. There is no technically "correct" way to pray for the sick. God is already acting to provide healing. Nevertheless, whatever spiritual power you can add is a definite plus. The more you know how to channel God's power to the patient, the more effective you can be.

Death is a part of life

Sometimes the physical body is so diseased, injured, or old that it is unable to sustain life. Sometimes the only way God can provide wholeness is to bring us through the experience we call death.

Death may be seen as the tragic consequence of human disorder, or, under uncertain conditions, as a better alternative to life. It may be viewed as a happy end to a life well lived, or as a rite of passage to a different order of existence. If for many reasons death is the preferable alternative, praying for continued life is, of course, inappropriate. What is to be prayed for is health, wholeness, and adequacy—not merely the avoidance of death.

A partnership with God

It is never appropriate (though often attempted) to tell God what to do. God is not a cosmic bellboy, but the almighty and all-loving ruler of the universe. Our task is to discover ways of cooperating with the divine will, humbly doing and being whatever God wishes us to do and be. God loves us, cares for us, wants the best for us. Praise God!

THE SCRIPTURES SPEAK

Jesus

“Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (Matt. 4:23, NRSV).

The Twelve

“Then Jesus called the Twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. . . . They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere” (Luke 9:1-2, 6, NRSV).

“And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you” (Peter, in Acts 3:16, NRSV).

Paul

“(Paul) said in a loud voice, ‘Stand upright on your feet.’ And the man sprang up and began to walk” (Acts 14:10, NRSV).

The Church

“ ‘Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (James 5:14-16, NRSV).

Adapted from a leaflet written by Everett Taylor for Discipleship Resources.