

Praying for People within our God-Given Spheres

by
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I have the privilege of serving the congregation of Grace Covenant Church of Bremerton—for over 25 years now. After several years of pastoring the congregation, I commiserated with colleagues that I did not know very many people in our community outside the church. Serving a small church can be all-consuming, yet I have enjoyed my work very much! In 2011, I began a sermon series on Communion Sundays entitled “Prayer and Evangelism,” focusing on the vital role of prayer in reaching lost people. While conversing about the series with a friend and colleague, Rev. Doug Olson, who is pastor of Hope Covenant Church in Tacoma, he mentioned, “You need to look at the verses in 2 Corinthians 10 about spheres.” So, after finishing our call, I looked up the passage:

For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding. {13} But we will not boast beyond our measure, but within the measure of the sphere which God apportioned to us as a measure, to reach even as far as you. {14} For we are not overextending ourselves, as if we did not reach to you, for we were the first to come even as far as you in the gospel of Christ; {15} not boasting beyond our measure, that is, in other men’s labors, but with the hope that as your faith grows, we will be, within our sphere, enlarged even more by you, {16} so as to preach the gospel even to the regions beyond you, and not to boast in what has been accomplished in the sphere of another. {17} But HE WHO BOASTS IS TO BOAST IN THE LORD.¹

(2 Corinthians 10:12-17)

Considering the context, Paul was writing to the Corinthian church against the so-called super-apostles who had brought in a false gospel. Paul recognized that to every person sent out to proclaim the gospel of Christ God had apportioned a measure of influence. But, unfortunately, the super-apostles had been invading Paul’s ministry with the Corinthians. He had planted the church, but now the Corinthians were being wooed away by a false message.

¹ The *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

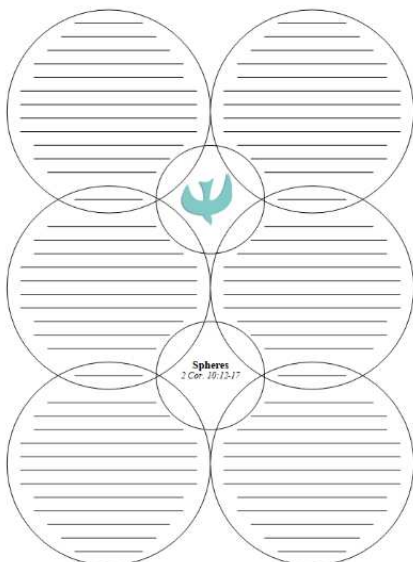
Paul’s argument spans several chapters—from ten through thirteen—in which he defends his authority as an apostle and the integrity of the gospel he preached and taught.

These verses, and Rev. Doug Olson’s recommendation of them, invited me to begin thinking about the sphere of my influence here within the city and county in which I live. Then one day, while standing in a line at my bank, the Holy Spirit opened my eyes to see that I do know many people outside the church. My wife and I had been banking at the same two branches for fifteen years. As I stood waiting, I realized I had never taken the time to learn the tellers’ and bankers’ names—much to my shame. Before, I would grumble to myself at having to wait in such a long line. Now, the Holy Spirit opened my eyes to see that the time spent waiting was an opportunity to pray for those who would soon be serving me. When I finally approached the counter, I quipped to the teller, “I am embarrassed to admit that I have been banking here for many years, but I have never learned your name. Will you forgive me?” The teller told me her name—which was conspicuously printed on her name tag! Thankfully, she laughed good-heartedly!

Later, I contemplated what this realization meant for all the other spheres I have in the community. For example, while knowing a few of my neighbors’ names, I had not learned all of my neighbors’ names—excusing myself because of the highly transient nature of living in a Navy town. So I made a list of the various spheres in which I live. Instead of generally listing them as “grocers,” I listed them specifically, such as Fred Meyer, Safeway, Costco, and Walmart. Along with grocers, I added the accounting office where

I get my taxes done, the barbershop where I get my hair cut, the various doctors’ offices where I have my appointments. To these, I added neighbors, restaurants, hardware stores, department stores, and the nursing homes I visited. I have concluded that I do indeed know a great many unchurched people!

I made up a document to keep all these places and names straight (see at the end of the document). First, I printed the paper double-sided, which gave me a total of twelve spheres. Then, on the top line in each sphere, I wrote the establishment’s name and added the names of



people as I introduced myself to them. Finally, I kept the list folded in my wallet for ready access. For example, before entering my bank, I would pull out the list and review the names for whom to pray while standing in line. Afterward, I would add any new names I had learned while in the bank. Also, I began greeting the tellers and bankers by name.

Over several months, I ran out of room on the sheet I had made, so I purchased a small, pocket-sized notebook, devoting each page to a different sphere. Since then, I have moved to using the Microsoft OneNote app on my smartphone to keep track of names.

For my health, I have begun walking several times a week: either in the neighborhood, at a local park, or the Kitsap Mall when it is raining. I call it “Walking Evangelism.” My goal is to get to know more people in my neighborhood and the community of walkers at the park. When walking at the mall, the Holy Spirit has led me to pray for the various people I have met and pray for the businesses’ prosperity.

There is no “right way” to do this! For instance, I pray for all the people in the bank branch I am visiting. Or, if I am standing in line at Walmart, I pray for the teller. However, my friend and colleague, Rev. Doug Olson, does this differently. First, he waits for the Lord to place one person from that sphere on his heart, and then he focuses his prayers on that person. What is essential is to continue to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit’s leading.

What would happen if all of us began praying for the people we encounter in our day? One teller at a bank branch might have four or five people praying for him! Praying for people in this way is not reaping the harvest; it is preparing the soil of their lives to receive the word sown. Rather than making this a burdensome program, weave this prayer strategy into your daily life. The lists I keep are only to help me remember people’s names. When I frequent one of the spheres in my life, I pray.

Within a few years of beginning ministry here at Grace, five or six families began attending our church from a mobile home park in Silverdale. Sometime later, I discovered that a group of older women at a church near that mobile home park had dedicated themselves to praying for the people in this park. They had been praying for many years. As a result, our church reaped the blessing of their prayers in welcoming to our congregation several

new families, most of whom had been unchurched. We were deeply grateful for those women's perseverance in prayer—even though they would not see the fruit of their prayers.

Similarly, we may never see the fruit of our prayers for the individuals in our spheres. Some prepare the soil through their prayers, while others then plant the seed of God's word, while others reap the harvest in the proper season. Preparing the ground of a person's life is a vital effort! Without this essential preparation, the seed of God's word falls on untilled soil, hard and rocky, shallow, or full of thistles.

Many people with whom I have talked expressed reservations about sharing the gospel with other people. But all of us can pray! As we get to know the people in our many spheres, including their names, and then pray for them, God will open opportunities for conversation!

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