

A Form of Prayer That is Proven to Help Marriages

Excerpt from an article by Thomas Burnett, published in the Washington Post



Does prayer affect our intimate relationships? Frank Fincham at Florida State University’s Family Institute, along with several collaborators, has conducted a series of empirical studies of how prayer can impact romantic couples. Fincham wanted to learn whether petitionary prayer—a prayer where you request something—for someone’s partner has any objectively measurable effects on couples. After numerous studies that spanned two decades and published in top journals like “Psychological Science,” the answer appears to be yes.

Praying daily for one’s partner has been linked to numerous positive outcomes: increased relationship satisfaction, greater trust, cooperation, forgiveness and marital commitment. Many of these benefits apply both to the prayer as well as the one being prayed for.

But to experience these benefits, not just any kind of prayer will do—it has to be praying specifically for one’s partner. Of course, prayer can take many forms: ritual, petitionary, colloquial and meditative, among others. The form studied by the researchers was petitionary, making specific requests during prayer. The focus of these prayers was for one’s partner, specifically for divine love, well-being and blessings. (Disclosure: The John Templeton Foundation, where I work, has funded some of Fincham’s studies.)

Praying for one’s partner is linked to numerous positive qualities. For example, for couples to thrive, both partners must be willing to make occasional sacrifices. If these sacrifices lead to resentment, the relationship erodes. However, partner-focused prayer caused participants to be more satisfied with the sacrifices they made.

Another set of five studies indicates that partner-focused prayer shifts people toward greater cooperation and forgiveness amid conflict. Forgiveness is not only essential for one’s relationships, but it is associated with better physical health, too, so the benefit is amplified. Fincham’s other studies found that partner-focused prayer was associated with greater overall commitment to one’s marriage. This trait was observed both in the person who was regularly praying and the partner who was being prayed for.

Yet how exactly does prayer improve relationships in so many ways? None of these studies presumed that the prayers were being answered by a divine being. Setting aside the possibility of supernatural intervention, research suggests that partner-focused prayer increases selfless love towards one’s partner. It could also help reorient a couple toward long-term shared goals, and away from short-term, adversarial behavior focused on “winning” conflicts. †

