



Bad, Redundant, and Needless People?



by Rajmund Dabrowski—

“Keep watch over me and keep me out of trouble” (Psalm 25:20, MSG).

Christians have their prayers. All of us do. Our prayers are not always original or even heartfelt. Most of us will have to admit to having prayed a prayer or two that we learned by heart and repeated more out of duty than need. I enjoy listening to how people pray. I love prayers that make me think. I crave prayers full of fresh expressions. Such



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prayers are not driven by a routine of formality.

If ever there was a time to pray, it is now. We all need a shake-up regarding our spiritual center. How clear is our morality? How pure is our speech? Is it perceived as divisive, hateful, and toxic—or does it bless even those we may regard as enemies? Each of us is vying for power—to move faster, be more important, be on top, be louder, be somebody. We need readjustment. If Jesus is the answer, as we profess, we need to reject that which is bad and redundant.

Henri J. M. Nouwen is instructive when he puts his finger on the issue:

“Against my own best intentions, I find myself continually striving to acquire power. When I give advice, I want to know whether it is being followed; when I offer help, I want to be thanked; when I give money, I want it to be used my way; when I do something good, I want to be remembered.”

He continues:

“Can I give without wanting anything in return, love without putting any conditions on my love? Considering my immense need for human recognition and affection, I realize that it will be a lifelong struggle. But I am also convinced that each time I step over this need and act free of my concern for return, I can trust that my life can truly bear the fruits of God’s Spirit.” (The Return of the Prodigal Son, pp. 127-128.)

So, have you rattled off a prayer lately? What was it about?

I will always remember the prayers of my parental home. Prayer was a time of family warmth. These were the moments upon which we hinged our own social and faith life in the present as well as the future. And there she was, my mother, praying for God’s guidance over our childhood days. “Dear God, protect us from all evil,” she prayed. “From people who are bad and needless.”

I wondered what she meant by these simple yet puzzling words. Did she mean *needless* as in *redundant*? Why was this important to her? I recall asking her to explain, and she said that she prayed for protection of our young lives from people who might introduce us to undesirable, wrong choices. Dozens of people marched through our home and our young feet often entered the trail of someone else’s life. Perhaps one of these individuals was “bad and needless.” She was praying that our future be built in a wholesome, values-driven way.



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How does one recognize a bad person, anyway? How do you reject someone and deem them as being redundant or needless? When does value turn into uselessness?

When no one is around, most of us are bothered by our loneliness. When we are surrounded by people, we seek to be alone. How human this is! Perhaps some of our fellow-sojourners are those in the category from my mother's prayer—bad and needless. Yet...

Look around. You will come into contact with someone who will take away your time, strength, goodness, or values. Yes, even your hope. Some may love you for profit. You may hang out with people whom you regard as members of your weekly feel-good club, where growth is optional, and the environment is rich with protective space.

Our naïveté may prevent us from noticing that we are at their disposal—until we realize that our soul has been stolen, along with our goodness, leaving only emptiness. Or could it be that some of us are making ourselves redundant in the world of others?

Life is rich with challenges and opportunities. There is a dire need for people whose values can embrace the needs of others. There are people to avoid because of the way they look, people who are different and whose love is hidden and needs to come out! But we have not placed ourselves in their circle of need.

My mother's other prayers called for God to help us be kind, compassionate, and loving. It is that angle that challenged me when I heard former Seventh-day Adventist World Church President Jan Paulsen, my former boss, say in one of his sermons:

"It is our anxieties which erect the barriers between people. In order to experience hope and an attractive future we must be secure and strong and open enough to step outside of our protected space and take part in the lives of people who are different from us—different nationally, racially, and religiously. How is your and my social circle composed? If I am incapable of showing warmth to a stranger, I will also be incapable of feeling pain and distress at his or her suffering. There is nothing noble in accepting people who are replicas of ourselves."

That little prayer of my mother's was her caring interest in my dignity, her plea that no one would rob me of it. The price was too big: to lose one's dignity. Could it be taken away by someone useless and bad?



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