

Slow to answer: Memo to the congregation

by [Martin B. Copenhaver](#) in the [May 2, 2006](#) issue

Prayers offered by strangers had no effect on the recovery of people who were undergoing heart surgery, a large and long-awaited study has found. And patients who knew they were being prayed for had a higher rate of postoperative complications.

—Report in the *New York Times*, March 31

Dear Friends: You can stop praying now. In fact, as your pastor, I am asking you: please stop praying. An extensive clinical study has concluded that praying for those you don't know does them no earthly good.

In fact, the researchers have concluded that prayer may do patients some harm. So drop those prayer lists immediately! Just back away slowly from those liturgies of intercessory prayer! At our church, prayers for others will cease until further notice.

Some of you have told me in the past that you wished to thank all those who prayed for you during an illness, because you felt so upheld by prayer. Well, as it turns out, it's a good thing that you can't do that; it would only encourage them.

And those of you who gather to pray with others when someone is going into surgery—please stop. It turns out that the best thing we can do is give people some movie money.

Now that we know that prayers for strangers can be dangerous, perhaps we are better prepared to understand why nothing seems to be going right in Iraq these days. The Bush administration can finally escape blame for what happened after Hurricane Katrina. Clearly the problem was that so many people were praying for the victims. We should have known better.

Please don't pray for AIDS victims or people who have recently lost a loved one. They already have enough to worry about.

In light of this study, we will be making some changes at church. Instead of teaching people how to pray, we will be giving people the tools they need to resist the impulse to pray. When I leave your bedside after visiting you in the hospital, I will now say, "I just want you to know that I will not be praying for you."

If prayer is dangerous, it is probably best not to wish strangers well, either, just in case that has a similar effect. So I urge you to focus just on yourself and your own needs. I know that will be difficult, but it is important to try.

Yes, you can continue to pray for yourself. The study did not examine prayers for the self or prayers offered by close family members. So go ahead and continue to pray for your own well-being. Beginning this Sunday, we will make a few changes in the Lord's Prayer. It will now say, "Give *me* this day *my* daily bread and forgive *my* debts," just to make sure we don't implicate anyone else in our prayers. This new prayer has the added benefit of being the kind of prayer that all Americans can get behind.

You may be wondering why we should be paying attention to this study. Well, it used proven scientific techniques, the same techniques that settled the question of whether vitamin C helps prevent the common cold. OK, bad example. But even though the results were within the margin of statistical error, in times like these we simply cannot be too careful.

So I urge you to stop praying for others. For once, think only of yourself. That is a moral imperative—at least until the next study of prayer is reported on the front page of the *New York Times*.