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## **Prayer Part 1: What is prayer? & Why pray?**

### **Matthew 6:5-15**

#### **Introduction**

If you were at the church meeting last Tuesday evening, or have been listening to what Ian and I have been saying on Sunday mornings over the last few weeks, then hopefully by now you'll know that we're specifically focusing as a church this year on prayer and evangelism. Two areas that we have recognised, as an Eldership, that we could be much better at. And a number of you have said things that confirm these are the areas where our focus should be.

Again at the church meeting on Tuesday we talked about how we could begin to re-invigorate the prayer life of the church. How could we be praying more together so that everything we do here is rooted in and undergirded with prayer?

So we're going to spend a couple of Sunday mornings looking at prayer. What it is, why we should do it, and ways of having a go. This morning 'what is prayer and why should we pray?' Next week, ways of praying.

All I can do in twenty minutes at a time is scratch at the surface of this topic. So, a couple of books to recommend that will help you go deeper— Richard Foster's 'Prayer – finding the heart's true home' and Philip Yancy's 'Prayer – does it make a difference', and a section of the library upstairs devoted to books on prayer that I would encourage you to borrow. And talk in your housegroups.

#### **Difficult.**

Martyn Lloyd Jones, the great evangelical preacher, said:

*Of all the activities in which the Christian engages, and which are part of the Christian life, there is surely none which causes so much perplexity, and raises so many problems, as the activity which we call prayer.'*

But why does prayer cause us, as Lloyd Jones says, so much perplexity and raise so many problems?

Well basically it's because we've got the wrong end of the stick when it comes to prayer. We behave as if the initiative lies with us, rather than God. We treat prayer as a shopping list of requests bounced off the ceiling. We talk, but don't listen. And we're ever so polite, but not very real.

Jonathan Aitken, the former MP who was jailed for perjury looks back on it like this:

*My relationship with God could be compared to that with a bank manager. I spoke to him politely, visited his premises intermittently, occasionally asked him for a small favour or overdraft to get myself out of difficulty, thanked him condescendingly for his assistance, kept up the appearance of being one of his reasonably reliable customers, and maintained superficial contact with him on the grounds that one of these days he might come in useful.*

### **What is prayer?**

So, if prayer *isn't* about making a big effort to offer up a polite request list to an unseen God, what is it?

*Prayer, says Richard Foster, is a love relationship: an enduring, continuing, growing love relationship with the great God of the universe.*

Someone else said simply 'Prayer is keeping company with God'.

**Firstly, prayer is a relationship, a communication between God and a human being, where the initiative lies with God.** We see that demonstrated in the Old Testament, right from early on, when in response to God, we read at the end of Genesis ch 4 that men began to 'call on the name of the Lord'. God was making himself known, and humans were responding.

It's always God who makes the first move. And then we respond to that. It's a hugely imbalanced relationship, but it's still a relationship. That of parent and child captures it well. A parent loves, provides for, constantly reaches out to the child. The child, for their part takes most of that for granted, occasionally remembers to say 'thank you' and actively turns to the parent in times of crisis.

Some of the first examples of prayer that we find in the Old Testament have a directness and a familiarity with God about them. Let me read to you the first six verses of Genesis chapter 15. *Genesis 15:1-6*

God speaks. Abram responds with a complaint. God speaks again. Abram responds again, this time by believing him. There's no pussyfooting around.

**Secondly, prayer is a declaration of our dependence on God.** (and there's no better example of that than the Lord's Prayer. ) Not only does Jesus teach the disciples to ask for things: for food each day, for forgiveness, for the ability to resist temptation, for safety from the devil. (v 11, 12 &13) But he also teaches them to recognise that it is God's kingdom they are seeking, and God's will they are waiting for. Everything is from God, and prayer reminds us of that.

**Thirdly, prayer is about realignment.** – the act of seeing reality from God's point of view.

Philip Yancy describes climbing a 14000 ft mountain in Colorado. As he looked down from the summit he saw tiny dots moving along the path far below. What were they? As he watched it becomes apparent that the dots were people. Fellow mountaineers. And then it hit him – that three hours ago *he* had looked like that. A tiny dot on a huge mountain. God's perspective means that in the grand scale of things we are tiny dots. As Yancy says: two – legged creatures clinging to the surface of a molten planet. Whilst God has the overall perspective on the universe.

### **Sudoku**

One of the ways that I've come to understand prayer is a bit like a Sudoku puzzle. You know, those annoying things where you have to fill in the numbers one to nine in a 9 by 9 grid. You can't repeat the numbers in each row, or column or 3 by 3 square.

This is by no means a perfect analogy but hopefully it helps a bit.

Without the starter numbers on a Sudoku puzzle, nothing is going to happen in the grid. It simply isn't possible to proceed. So God provides the first few numbers if you like. He initiates the relationship.

We just can't do the puzzle without them. We're reliant on the numbers and the framework.

As you get going on the Sudoku puzzle, it's very easy to get bogged down in the nitty gritty detail of what goes where in each little square. But regularly it's necessary to take a step back and look at the puzzle as a whole. To see the overall perspective, to look at the bigger picture. Prayer allows us, forces us, we might argue, to see things from God's perspective, the bigger picture. And then we can begin to fit in the numbers more effectively.

### **Fourthly, prayer requires honesty before God.**

As Samuel discovered when it came to anointing one of Jesse's sons as king 'The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart. (1 Samuel 16:7)

We might have prayer all sorted, all sewn up as far as others, those around us, are concerned. But there's no fooling God! He's not taken in by appearance. God sees our heart.

In the passage from Matthew's gospel that I read a few minutes ago, Jesus warned his disciples not to be like the hypocrites who made a show of their prayer. Nor were they to be like the pagans who thought the more words the better.

What we're thinking and how we're feeling as we pray (rather than the words themselves) may be the real prayer that we offer to God. He listens to our thoughts and attitudes as much as, if not more than, to our words.

And in the bible, prayer is so *honest*. We are too polite! If we look through the Bible for examples of prayer, it's full of rants and raves. Are we so polite because we're not confident of who God is? Children rant and rave, are honest with parents, because they're sure of love. God wants us to demonstrate a relationship built on love and to stop grovelling and start arguing!

*Everything* happening in life should be brought into the presence of God, said William Barclay. Not just the nice bits, not just the respectable bits. It shouldn't be sanitised, cleaned up, for God.

So prayer is relationship with God. It's an acknowledgement of our dependence on him. It's about glimpsing things from his perspective, and it's about honesty before him.

## **2. Why pray?**

So there's a brief look at what prayer is. But why pray?

### **Because Jesus did.**

The bottom line is: we should pray because Jesus prayed. As we look to his example we see that Jesus, who was God (God with skin on if you like), communicated with the father through prayer whilst he was on earth. That was how father & son maintained relationship. Jesus would go off to spend time alone with his father. He spent all night in prayer before big decisions such as selecting the twelve apostles (Luke 6). He thanked the father that he had heard his prayer before Lazarus was raised. He grappled with the father in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest. He cried out to the father from the agony of the cross.

### **Because we can't be in relationship with God otherwise.**

Prayer is relationship. To say that we're friends with someone is nonsense if we never make contact in any way. Friendship is built on communication. So it is with God.

### **Because it makes a difference.**

Jesus prayed as if prayer made a difference, and he taught his disciples to too. But it gets difficult here because we can't *prove* that our prayer makes any difference.

In CS Lewis's the Screwtape letters, a senior devil gives this advice on prayer to a young recruit: *worry him with the haunting suspicion that the practice is absurd and can have no objective result. Don't forget to use the 'heads i win, tails you lose' argument. If the thing he prays for doesn't happen then that is one more proof that petitionary prayer doesn't work; if it does happen, he will, of course, be able to see some of the physical causes which led up to it, and 'therefore it would have happened anyway' and thus granted prayer becomes just as good a proof as a denied one that prayers are ineffective.*

So what should we do now? What is our response to all this?

### **3. Learn by doing**

Don't wait to get things right to start. We learn to pray by praying. Like we learn to walk by staggering and falling over. No one ever learnt to walk by studying the theory of how bones develop, how muscles strengthen, how balance improves, how we place our feet, the role of toes....

Why not try to apply these principles this coming week. Enjoy time with God. Be honest before him. He knows anyway!! Ask for the privilege of his perspective.

We're going to be still for a few moments now and enjoy his presence.

**House Group Notes**  
**Prayer- Part 1 What is prayer and why pray?**  
**Matthew 6:5-15**

*'Of all the activities in which the Christian engages, and which are part of the Christian life, there is surely none which causes so much perplexity, and raises so many problems, as the activity which we call prayer.'* Martyn Lloyd Jones.

Why is prayer so difficult? Often because we have an incorrect understanding of what it is.

**What is prayer?**

*'Prayer is a love relationship: an enduring, continuing, growing love relationship with the great God of the universe.'* Richard Foster.

1. Prayer is a relationship, a communication between God and a human being, where the initiative lies with God.
2. Prayer is a declaration of our dependence on God.
3. Prayer is about realignment – the act of seeing reality from God's point of view.
4. Prayer requires honesty before God.

**Why pray?**

Because Jesus did.

1. Because we can't be in relationship with God otherwise.
2. Because it makes a difference.

**Learn by doing.**

We can know the theory, but the only way to really develop in prayer is to pray!

**For Discussion**

1. Think of an example of a pray-er in the Bible other than Jesus (eg Moses, Paul, etc.) What do you learn from him/her about prayer?
2. What things (if any) do you find difficult about prayer?
3. How can we maintain relationship with someone we can neither see nor hear?
4. What do you think makes us reluctant to be very honest before God? Why do we sanitise prayer?
5. How do you understand unanswered prayer? How do you explain it to non-Christians?
6. What needs to change in your prayer-life and how are you going to go about it?

7. Spend some time in God's company.