***Getting Prayer Right***

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'

(Matthew 6:5-13)

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***Praying the Lord’s Prayer***

**Getting Prayer Right**

*‘Lord, teach us to pray.’* (Luke 11:1)

**Setting the Scene**

I like to imagine the excitement Jesus might have felt when his disciples came to him with their request. Luke tells us that Jesus had himself been praying ‘in a certain place’ and that when he had finished, one of his disciples approached him with their request.

**What made them ask?** Was it that they had taken on board what Jesus had said to Martha about choosing ‘what is better’? (Luke 10:42) Did they perhaps feel a bit puzzled by the fact that Jesus hadn’t done for them what John the Baptist had done for his disciples? Whatever it was that prompted their request, it was a good request and Jesus was glad to respond.

But here’s another question: **Why had they waited so long?** By this time in his ministry Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to suffer and die, rise and ascend (see Luke 9:51), thus placing their request towards the end of their third year with Jesus. ‘Better late than never’ is a saying that springs to mind!

**Excited and Frustrated?**

Along with feeling excited, I wonder if Jesus also felt a little bit frustrated? There have been times in my ministry when people have come to me and asked me about something that might be concerning or bothering them in their lives. And just occasionally I’ve felt a hint of rebuke that I’d not previously provided any teaching or guidance on the issue now troubling them. (I guess that’s why I find it easy to read the otherwise unnecessary addition of ‘just like John taught his disciples’ as a mild rebuke to Jesus.) My frustration will have come from the fact that I knew full well that I had indeed previously taught on the issue and that it had clearly gone in one ear and out the other!

Comparing the chronology of Matthew and Luke, it seems to me that Jesus must have previously taught his disciples to pray. The longer form of the Lord’s Prayer is found in the early chapters of Matthew’s gospel which is set in the first few months of Jesus’ ministry.

But this I have observed over the years: There are times in people’s lives when something becomes important to them. When that happens, then they’re hungry to know and eager to learn. As any teacher will tell you, there’s nothing quite like an eager, motivated student!

So I imagine Jesus in his heart giving a great big “Yes!! At last they’re ready to learn!” I suspect he had wanted to teach them many times but was just waiting for this moment to arrive. When it came, Jesus immediately set about teaching them.

**What about you?** Are you in that place where you are eager to learn? Is your heart hungry for prayer? If so, then what follows will excite and bless you. If not, I’m afraid it might just be a bit of a chore, at best giving you nothing more than something of a guilt trip. Can I be blunt? It’s your choice.

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**Getting Prayer Wrong**

No, I haven’t got the heading wrong, it’s right in that it says ‘wrong’ and not ‘right’. Let me explain myself.

Although I have introduced the subject of Jesus’ teaching on prayer from Luke’s gospel, it is to Matthew 6 that I now turn. Here Jesus begins his teaching on prayer by telling his disciples how *not* to go about it. There is a wrong way to approach prayer. There are pitfalls to avoid and Jesus didn’t want his disciples to fall into them.

**Both the Pharisees and the Pagans Got it Wrong** (Matthew 6:5-8)

*The Pitfall of Pharisaic Prayer* (vv. 5,6)

*“They love to pray ...”*

What better place to start? What a good example to us all! If only more and more Christians were to court a love-affair with prayer!

Unfortunately, however, it was not praying that the Pharisees loved, but themselves and the opportunity to impress people. They loved to pray - but only if surrounded by a crowd of impressionable admirers.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the parable of the *Pharisee and the Tax Collector* (see Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee wanted everyone to know just how good he was, and his prayer was loud enough for everyone within earshot to hear. And remember, he was praying in the open courtyard of the Temple where he was guaranteed a sizeable audience. His voice would have been hard to miss, but God wasn't listening.

The tax collector, however, was more concerned that God should hear his humble cry for mercy. God heard and answered his prayer.

Praying that is designed to impress others is something that Jesus wanted his followers to consider as out-of-bounds. The key thing, even when praying out loud with others present, is to be ‘in the secret place’, just you and God. As someone who was (and is) expected to lead others in public prayer, this was a lesson I needed to learn!

But even if you never breathe a word in a prayer meeting (some of you are going to hate me for this), you might still be falling into the same trap. You might be sat there thinking that your prayers “are not good enough”. You’re worried what others might be thinking about your prayer, so you say nothing. In other words, the human audience is more important to you than it should be. Don’t worry what others might or might not be thinking about your prayer. It’s what God thinks that matters, and he loves to hear you pray!

*The Pitfall of Pagan Prayer* (Matthew 6:7,8)

Jesus himself encouraged his disciples to be persistent in prayer, but he wanted them to avoid mindless repetition. This kind of praying is well illustrated in the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal (see 1 Kings 18:25-29.) The prophets of Baal put their trust in the *quantity* of their praying. Elijah's one *quality* prayer stood in stark contrast.

It is perhaps ironic that the superstitious repetition of The Lord’s Prayer illustrates what Jesus was warning against!

How are we to avoid the pitfall of pagan prayer? What does Jesus recommend as the cure? It’s all to do with knowing God as our heavenly Father, a thought which brings us nicely to ‘*Our Father* …’

**The Right Approach**

*‘Our Father …’*

Christian prayer is rooted and nourished in a loving relationship with God, a relationship which Jesus himself knew. He invites his disciples to share with him his experience of knowing God as his heavenly Father. Such a relationship is one of great love (both given and received), care and trust. It is a close relationship of deepest respect.

In order to share in that relationship, in order to know God as our Father, our faith and trust must be in Jesus (the Son of God) as our Saviour and Lord. We then receive the gift of the Spirit of sonship enabling us to relate to God as ‘Abba’ Father (see Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 4:4-7;1 John 3:1)

This, then, is when prayer begins – in a loving relationship with God where we exercise childlike faith and trust. (It’s interesting to note that most examples of prayers in the New Testament address God as Father, in the name of Jesus and powered by the Spirit.)

**God as Father?**

Talk of knowing God as our loving Father is problematic for some people. Because of their poor experience of human fathering, the very thought of God being fatherlike sends a shiver down their spine. This is a pastoral issue that needs wise and sensitive handling. The bottom line, however, is to understand that the God Jesus had in mind was not drawn from his experience of the fatherhood of Joseph. It was drawn from his experience of God. Whether our experience of human fathering is good or bad, we need to understand God as our Father in the light of Jesus’ experience and not our own.

*‘… in heaven’*

It has been well said that this is not God’s postal address! Jesus is not telling us *where* God is, but *who* God is. *‘Our Father’* tells us that God is good and loving. *‘In heaven’* tells us that he is great and awesome. There is no-one like him. None of this world's gods are a match for our God. No circumstance of life is beyond his redemptive power. Our God can do things! Great and mighty things! When we come to God in prayer, remember that he is able to do more than all we can ask, think or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). Our Father in heaven is worthy of our adoring worship! That’s a great place to start in prayer.

**The Right Motivation**

*May your name be hallowed*

What gets you going in prayer? In my own experience a serious illness is a great motivator and it is, of course, right that we pray for ourselves and others when things are desperate.

The apostle James encouraged his people to pray and told them that they ‘do not have because they do not ask’ (James 4:2). I then imagine one of James’ flock saying “But Pastor James, I am asking, but I’m not having!” It may well be a question of a dubious motive, so James replies “When you ask you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.” (James 4:3) When all our praying revolves around us and what we want then God may well hit the pause button while he deals with our motives.

*The* motivation for our praying must be the glory of God and the honour of his name. I well remember being challenged about my motives in praying that Pinhoe Road Baptist Church (Exeter) would grow. Nothing wrong with that, of course, after all, our Lord is in the business of building his church. But a growing church would reflect well on me and help establish my name and reputation. I could have a piece of the glory? And so my prayer is now ‘Lord, help! Purge my motives so that it is truly the honour and glory of your name that I seek.’

This matter of motivation may be one of the keys that God wants us to use to unlock the treasure chest of the riches of answered prayer. And to be honest I find it daunting. Can my motives ever be that pure? God’s grace comes to the rescue: Look up and read Psalm 139:1-4; 23,24.
I have found that acknowledging and confessing mixed motives is the way to go, along with claiming the promise of help found in the words of Paul recorded in Romans 8:26: *“The Spirit helps us in our weakness.”*

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name

(Psalm 29:2)

*Help us, O God our Saviour, for the glory of your name; deliver us & forgive our sins for your name’s sake.* (Psalm 79:9)

*Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love & faithfulness.* (Psalm 115:1)

**The Right Priorities**

The *right approach* in prayer is rooted in our **relationship with God**.

The *right motivation* in prayer is rooted in the **glory of God**.

The *right priorities* in prayer are rooted in the **work of God**.

From a heart passionate about the glory of God will flow prayers dedicated to the Kingdom of God. ‘Your kingdom come’ – just three words that can be said in less than a second and yet they encompass the eternal purposes of God.

The ministry of Jesus opened with the declaration that the kingdom of God was near (Mark 1:15). The Kingdom mattered to Jesus because it was all about re-establishing the reign of God in every place and for all time (and eternity).

We pray ‘kingdom prayers’ when we pray:

* for others to come to faith (with Jesus enthroned as king within their heart)
* for justice for the poor
* for BMS World Mission (and other mission/relief agencies)
* that God would bless churches other than our own
* for kings and all those in authority (1 Timothy 2:1-3)
* ?? (the list could go on!)

The bottom line is that Jesus is teaching us that the highest priority in our prayers must be God’s work, the extension of his kingdom. These priorities need to be central in our praying. And so we must be on our guard against Kingdom priorities becoming swamped by all sorts of other things that may well be important, but that may leave little or no time for the things that matter most to God.

The Kingdom of God is also future - When Jesus returns, God’s rule will then be unchallenged. All God’s enemies will then bow the knee, and his name will be glorified in all the earth. “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20)

The Kingdom of God starts with you - It is also a matter of praying that God’s rule be extended in our own lives; opening up our hearts to allow God to uproot the sin that lurks so deeply within.

*“Reign in me, sovereign Lord, reign in me”*

**The Right Understanding**

*‘Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’*

If you’re excited about making a difference, then get excited about prayer!

Jesus had high expectations of prayer, expectations reflected in this sentence in his pattern prayer for his disciples. At one level it may be seen as simply an underlining and emphasising of 'Your kingdom come'. But it goes further for it also highlights something of the *power*, the *purpose* and the *privilege* of prayer.

**The Power of Prayer** - What does prayer achieve? There can be no doubting what was in the mind of Jesus: God’s will gets done on earth. The powers of heaven are let loose around us and the kingdom of darkness has to step back.

**The Purpose of Prayer** - Prayer has to do with wanting what God blesses, rather than with our asking God to bless what we want.

**The Privilege of Prayer** – In days gone by, when I have been working in the garden, or doing some painting and decorating in the house, an eager little helper would often draw alongside with the words "Daddy, can I do that?" Very often I found something that would keep little hands occupied while I got on with the real task in hand!

But our heavenly Father is not like that. Through prayer, he invites us to get stuck in where it really counts, and where it really does make a difference! He does not give us something to do to keep us out of his way while he gets on with the really important things. He wants us to be right there, right at the heart of his Kingdom purposes! What a privilege!

**The Right Ask** *‘Give us today our daily bread’*

The focus shifts, but the scene has been set. With the right relationship, motivation, priorities, and understanding in place, our Lord invites us now (and only now) to look to ourselves and our needs.

Bread is a basic and staple food, so we can extend this prayer to include everything we need for life:

* physical needs (shelter, clothing, food, water, heating, medicine, work, money, health)
* psychological needs (peace of mind, hope, encouragement)
* social needs (companionship, friendship)
* ‘Daily’ – If we are blessed with well-stocked larders, fridges and freezers the emphasis upon ‘daily’ may be lost on us.
If we rely on the Food Bank, it will take on a whole new meaning, a meaning which is perhaps closer to what Jesus had in mind.
* Jesus wanted to encourage humble and continuing trust.
It can be too easy for us to take things for granted or to become complacent or even ungrateful.
* I wonder, did Jesus have Proverbs 30:7-9 in mind when he included this phrase in his pattern prayer?

Two things I ask of you, O LORD; do not refuse me before I die:
Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise I may have too much and disown you and say 'Who is the LORD?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonour the name of my God.

***What about non-essentials?***The advertising power of the world around us emphasises that there is so much we ought to want. It’s then a short step to thinking that we *really need* things that in reality we could survive perfectly well without. All day, every day, we are bombarded with the message to ‘desire more, get more and get it *now*’.

Our Western lifestyle is challenged by the Lord’s Prayer! While we do have a mandate to ask for necessities, this prayer does not sanction luxuries. Furthermore, it should make us think of those on ‘the bread line’. Buying Fair Trade goods is one way through which this prayer is answered for others.

**The Right to Forgiveness**

In our praying, Jesus teaches us always to include the need to confess our sins and ask his forgiveness. It is actually implicit right at the begining because we can only know God as our Father if we have come to him in confession and repentance. But here it is explicit.

Now when I say ‘The Right to Forgiveness’, let’s be clear: Forgiveness can ony be thought of as our ‘right’ by the grace of God. On the cross Jesus secured the right to forgive us and it is therefore only ours ‘by right’ in and through him.

Even if it’s not raining, a wet motorway and the dirty spray it throws up will soon cover your windscreen. Every so often, if you are to continue to drive safely, you will need to use your wash/wipers.

Think of regular confession as the spiritual equivalent of the wash/wipe. The dirt that accrues as we go through life builds up and up until we lose sight of where we’re heading. Unconfessed sin obscures our view of God. We lose track of the sense of his love and the assurance of his grace. We can end up losing our way with God.
We need to keep the windscreen clear and clean!
Here’s the go-to verse from the apostle John:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

But Jesus here lays down the rule that **being forgiven means being forgiving**. So important is this that of all the clauses of this pattern prayer, the one that is repeated and underlined is this one (Matthew 6:14,15).

Corrie Ten Boom saw her sister tortured and killed in a Nazi PoW Camp. Years later she met the SS officer responsible, who had since become a Christian. She asked her to forgive her. Corrie Ten Boom tells how she just looked at the outstretched arm of friendship and peace and stood frozen to the spot. She was unable to forgive, until she remembered that God had forgiven her and so asked God to help her to forgive this ex-SS officer.

"Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you" (Colossians 3:13).

**The Right Protection**

*"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."*

At the time of writing there has been much controversy surrounding the lack of Personal Protection Equipment for all those on the front line in the fight against Covid-19. Prayer is PPE’s spiritual equivalent for the disciple of Jesus.

This line in the Lord’s Prayeralerts us to the fact that we live our Christian lives in a hostile environment. It encourages us to cry out to God for deliverance from the seduction of temptation and the power of the tempter.

The ‘evil one’ is opposed to us knowing God as our Father, is committed to vilifying the name of God, contests every advance of the kingdom, is determined to overturn and thwart the will of God on earth. He opposes God’s blessing on everyday life, opposes justice and is committed to stoking the flames of hatred and bitterness. If we, as disciples of Jesus, take to heart all that our Lord teaches us about prayer, and put it into practice, then we will represent a considerable threat to the kingdom of darkness. We will be targeted. Little wonder that Paul in Ephesians speaks of the need to put on the full armour of God (Ephesians 6:10-20).

But remember: In Christ ‘we are more than conquerors’ and prayer is powerful in both defence and attack.

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Summary

Church life and ministry as we have known it for generations has come grinding to a halt. But Jesus is still in the business of ‘building his church’. Nothing can stop him doing that! And now, more than ever, is a time to renew our commitment to prayer. You can *say* the Lord’s Prayer in a matter of seconds. It can take a little longer to *pray* the Lord’s Prayer as we allow our minds and hearts to be captured by its majestic vision and life-changing power.

*Lord, teach us to pray!*

*For thine is the kingdom, the power* *and the glory
for ever and ever. Amen.*

*P.S.* Jesus Shows Us How

Writing to the church in Thessalonica, the apostle Paul urged them to “pray continually” (1 Thess 5:14)

The prayer life of Jesus shows us what this looks like in practice.

SET PRAYER Jesus would have been brought up to have had his SET times for prayer, probably at least three times per day (morning, noon and evening). The synagogues and the Temple in Jerusalem would have played a key role in this. Even in exile, Daniel had his set times (Daniel 6:10) and Peter and John were heading to the Temple for prayer when they encountered the crippled beggar (Acts 3:1).

Praying continually means being self-disciplined with SET regular times for prayer. What are your set times?

SPECIAL PRAYER The gospels provide snap shots of Jesus setting aside time for prayer on top of the SET times. This was …

* when life and ministry was busy (see Mark 1:35; Luke 5:15,16; Matthew 14:23)
* before important decisions (Luke 6:12,13)
* before important stages & times of impending crisis (Luke 9:18; 9:28; Matthew 26:36-46; John 17)

As we journey through the covid-19 crisis, **special** times of prayer seem particularly appropriate.

SPONTANEOUS PRAYER Luke records Jesus bursting out into praise and thanksgiving (Luke 10:21). Nehemiah provides example of what are often called ‘arrow prayers’ (see Nehemiah 2:4). You can’t really plan to be spontaneous, but you can cultivate the habit of praying anywhere at any time as the opportunities present themselves.

Putting these three S’s together and you have a working model of what *praying continually* looks like in practice. Over to you!

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