

## Sermon 1 July 2018 Prayer

### Matthew 6:5-8

It is impossible to do justice to the subject of prayer in one sermon. There are so many issues, so many aspects, so many different forms, so many ways of approaching prayer. Prayer is an exercise which is undertaken by the devout, by the not so devout, and in fact at times, by those who would in the normal course of events would not profess to have any faith. This would usually be the case in times of stress or extreme need.

Prayer is vital to our relationship with God; in fact, without prayer it would be impossible to have a relationship with God, because essentially prayer is communication with God, and without communication you just cannot have a relationship.

Prayer is such a vast topic and encompasses so many strands that it is really quite hard to know where to begin. I will focus on just two questions this morning – what is prayer and how do we pray?

So what is prayer? Let me begin with some background by referring to our gospel reading. Prayer was a huge part of Jesus's life. He grew up with a culture of prayer. Probably no religion ever ranked prayer higher in the scale of priorities than the Jews did, and remember Jesus worshipped as a Jew. As far as the Rabbis were concerned, if they could pray all day, every day they would. There was a prayer for absolutely everything in Jewish life, from using new furniture, to receiving good news, for fire, lightning, rain, the sea, rivers, lakes and so on.

The devout Jew had set times for prayer. The hours were 9.00am, 12 midday and 3.00pm. Wherever he was, a Jew was bound to pray. However, there was a danger that prayer was such a ritual that it became all too easy to rattle off without really thinking about what you were saying. Now I don't think the Jews have that on their own for one moment. Hands up those who have said the Lord's Prayer while their mind is elsewhere!

It is through prayer that we communicate with God. A good way of thinking about prayer is to think of it as a conversation with God, and to approach it in a similar way you would a conversation with anyone else. The elements are in many ways the same. So this leads on to the question of how we pray.

Firstly, I would make the point that you can pray anywhere, anytime. You can pray sitting in a bus, walking along, working at your desk. However, I would also suggest that it is also a very good idea to have a set time and a quiet place where you can have what I would call quality time with God. This is what Jesus is recommending in our gospel reading. (*Matthew 6:6*). By having a set time/place it becomes a habit, and that's a good thing because then we are not praying when we need something from God.

I go back to what I said about approaching prayer in a similar way to a conversation with anyone. If the only time I spoke to you was when I wanted something from you, would that be the basis of a good relationship? Hardly. Well, it is exactly the same with God. I read the true story of a boy who was going off to bed. He announced to his family, 'I am going to bed. I'm going to be praying. Anybody want anything?' By all means, personal requests to God are fine, but also on the agenda should be thanking God for our blessings, chatting to God about our day, and especially requests to God on behalf of others. In fact, this should be the most important aspect of our prayer. I don't believe God is going to take any notice of prayers for ourselves if our first priority is not the welfare of others.

Another danger of prayer is that we get into a position of bargaining. 'If you do this for me, God, I promise I will do something good for you.' Again there is the story of a boy who, while saying his prayers, begged God for a new BMX bicycle. His mother corrected him and explained that prayer should not be an attempt to get our selfish desires met.

It was Christmas, and when the boy's mother came into the living room in the morning, she noticed that something was missing from the manger scene under the Christmas tree. She was surprised to see the little figurine of Mary was gone. In its place was a note that read, 'Dear Jesus, if you ever want to

see your mother again, you had better get me that BMX bike.’

A very important part of any conversation with anyone is listening. Communication is a two way thing. You simply cannot have a relationship in which communication is just one way. It is just the same with God. A lovely way of praying is to just be still in the presence of God. One of my favourite verses in the Bible is Psalm 46:10, ‘Be still and know that I am God.’ Just enjoy the presence of God, listen to the presence of God, soak up the presence of God.

Another very important element of prayer is faith. Believe that God is listening. If we throw out a few requests of God in the hope that he might be listening, a kind of ‘nothing ventured, nothing gained’ attitude, I don’t believe for a minute that our prayers will be answered. As with any conversation, we must mean what we say and what we are doing, we must be genuine. There is the story of a prayer meeting that was called by the people in a certain country in Africa which was in the throes of a terrible drought. The meeting was held in the afternoon, the sun blazing, not a cloud in the sky. A twelve year old girl walked in the meeting and she was carrying an umbrella! That is faith.

I want to finish by making two points. First, prayer should be an integral and regular part of our lives, and here we can take a lead from Jesus. Time and time again we read how Jesus withdrew to a quiet place in order to pray. (*Mark 1:35, Mark 6:46, Matthew 26:36*). Jesus spent a huge amount of time in prayer, and if it is good enough for Jesus, then surely it is good enough for us.

Secondly, prayer does work. Interestingly, God invariably answers our prayers in a way we least expect. How often have we thought that God hasn’t responded to our prayers and then all of a sudden it dawns on us that he has indeed responded but in a way we never contemplated. And remember, God has a very different understanding of time to what we do. There is a lot of truth in the expression, ‘All in God’s time.’

Putting all that aside, there are countless stories of amazing examples of the power of prayer. I want to conclude by sharing with you the experience of Dr Tony Campolo, who I referred to three weeks ago. Tony was about to speak at a Pentecostal college chapel service. Eight men took him to a side room to pray for him. That was fine, but then as the praying got under way, one of the men began to pray for somebody named Charlie Stoltzfus. This went on for some time and went something like this, ‘Dear Lord, you know Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives in that silver trailer down the road a mile. You know the trailer, Lord, just down the road on the right-hand side.’ (At that point, Tony said he wanted to tell the man praying that he probably didn’t need to furnish God with detailed instructions). Anyway, he continues, ‘Lord, Charlie told me this morning he is going to leave his wife and three kids. Please step in and do something about this.’

After the service Tony gets in his car and drives away. He hadn’t gone very far when he noticed a hitchhiker whom he picked up. ‘Hi’ he said, ‘My name is Tony. What’s yours?’ The hitchhiker replied, ‘Charlie Stoltzfus’. Tony took a double take, turned the car around and drove back the way he had come.

‘Hey, mister. Where are you taking me?’ ‘I’m taking you home.’ ‘But why?’ asked the hitchhiker. Tony replied, ‘Because you have just left your wife and three kids. Right?’ That blew him away. ‘Yeah! Yeah, that’s right.’ He then plastered himself against the passenger door, his eyes riveted on Tony.

Tony then really did him in when he drove right up to his silver trailer. His eyes bulging, he said, ‘How did you know that I lived here?’ ‘God told me’, Tony said. He bounded out the door of the car, his wife appeared with absolute amazement written all over her face. Tony said, ‘The two of you sit down. I’m going to talk to you and you’re going to listen.’ And did they listen! And the following Sunday they turned up at church, and continued to do so.

Prayer is not always answered in such a dramatic fashion, but prayer does work. There is so much more I could say about prayer, but for now, let’s remember to make a practice of prayer, to pray with faith, to pray for others and not just our own needs, and let’s not forget to be still in the presence of God, to listen to his voice.