

Sermon 1 February 2026 Prayer

1 Thessalonians 5:12-22 Matthew 6:5-8

Prayer is such an integral part of our relationship with God. It really does lie at the heart of that relationship. Martin Luther said, *'To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.'* I guess that kind of sums up just what a crucial role prayer should play in our spiritual lives.

In this short discourse on prayer, Jesus is making the point that we need to be sincere in our prayer: *'When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them.'* Matthew 6:5. In other words, it is what is inside that matters, not the outside. I am sure you all have at some time bitten into a nice, juicy apple only to find that inside it has begun to turn a little brown. So the apple immediately goes into the bin; it is worthless. In the same way, for prayer to be effective, to be good prayer, it must come from the heart, and that heart must be sincere and righteous. As long as our prayer is genuine and we mean what we are saying and what we are doing, then God will take notice and will do what is best for us.

There is the story of a little shepherd boy who was watching his sheep one Sunday morning and he heard the bells of the church ringing. As he watched the people walking to church, he thought to himself, 'I would like to pray to God but what can I say to him?' He had never learned a prayer.

So, on bended knee, he began to recite the alphabet. Repeating this prayer several times, a man passing heard the boy's voice and peaked through the hedge. He interrupted the boy. 'What are you doing, my little friend?' The boy replied, 'I was praying, sir.' The man seemed a little surprised and said, 'But why are you reciting the alphabet?' The boys explained, 'I don't know any prayer, sir, but I want God to take care of me, and to help me take care of my sheep. And so I thought, if I said all I knew, he could put the letters together into words, as he would know all that I want and should say.'

The man smiled and said, 'Bless your heart. God will.' And he went on to church knowing that he had heard the finest sermon he could possibly hear that day.'

Just tell God what is on your heart. Keep it simple. God is not impressed by highfalutin, theologically-pretentious words. He knows what's in our hearts and that's all that matters. As Jesus says, *'When you pray, don't babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!'* Matthew 6:7-8.

Whatever we do, we must persevere! The fact that we persevere shows God that we are genuine, that we are sincere in what we are saying and what we are doing. You might be familiar with the story Jesus told of the persistent widow, who pestered a judge for justice. In the end, because of her persistence, the judge granted her what she was seeking. Jesus finished the story by saying, *'Learn a lesson from this judge. Even he rendered a just decision in the end, so don't you think God will surely give justice to his chosen people who plead with him day and night?'* Luke 18:6-7.

And think about this, Jesus often spent most of the night praying: *'One day Jesus went to a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night.'* Luke 6:12. If Jesus felt the need to pray all night, what does that say about what we should be doing? I don't need to tell you that his relationship with God was considerably closer than any of ours, so perhaps we need to be spending even longer in prayer! That is considerably challenging, to say the least.

Someone said, *'Persevering in prayer is like rowing a boat upstream; if you do not persevere, you will be carried downstream by the current.'* I like the image.

Another thought on prayer. An effective way of praying is to reflect or meditate on a Bible verse. Pick a verse that is relevant and applicable to you according to your circumstance or needs at a particular time and repeat it to yourself over and over. Let it percolate through your mind and into your being.

Just to give you an example. Perhaps you are feeling under some pressure, feeling a little weighed down with problems. So take the verse, *'Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about what happens to you.'* 1 Peter 5:7. Repeat that to yourself as you go about your daily routine. I'll be surprised if it doesn't bring you comfort.

I want to finish by emphasising the point Jesus makes in our gospel passage. Keep it simple and most importantly, be sincere and genuine.

There is the story of a bishop and several pilgrims who were travelling on a fishing boat. During the voyage, the bishop overhears a discussion about a remote island nearby where three elderly hermits live a spartan existence focussed on seeking salvation for their souls. The bishop decides he would like to visit this island. The captain of the boat tries to dissuade the bishop, saying that they are foolish old fellows, who understand little and never speak a word.

However, the bishop insists and the captain steers the boat to the island. The bishop is met on shore by the three hermits. The bishop informs them that he has heard of their search for salvation and enquires as to how they are getting on with their relationship with God.

The hermits say they are not too sure but they pray, very simply, 'Three are ye (referring to the Holy Trinity), three are we, have mercy on us.' The bishop acknowledges that they have a little knowledge but are ignorant of the true meaning of the doctrines of the incarnation and the Holy Trinity. He tells them he will teach them and also how to pray the Lord's prayer.

The hermits struggle with the words of the Lord's prayer. They keep forgetting the words but the bishop persists until the evening. Finally, he takes his leave, satisfied they have memorised the words of the Lord's prayer. He climbs back on the boat and they sail away. They hadn't gone very far when the bishop sees what looks like another boat following them. However, it is soon apparent that it is not another boat but the three hermits running across the surface of the water.

The hermits catch up with the boat and they say to the bishop, 'We have forgotten your teaching, servant of God. When we stopped saying the Lord's prayer for a time, the words wouldn't come back to us. Please could you teach us again.' The bishop was humbled and replied, 'Your own simple prayer will reach the Lord. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinners.' And with that, the hermits turned around and walked back to the island.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, *'It matters little what form of prayer we adopt or how many words we use, what matters is the faith which lays hold on God and touches the heart of the Father who knew us long before we came to him.'* Mahatma Ghandi said, *'It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without heart.'*

A final observation on prayer. For our prayer, and therefore our relationship with God, to be genuine, it must be something which takes place on a very regular basis, and to take the form of sharing, praise, confession and thanks, not just when we want something. Or as American baseball player, Satchel Paige said, *'Don't pray when it rains if you don't pray when the sun shines.'*