

Prayer: Your Father already knows

Matthew 6.5-15

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For the past 2000 years, people have prayed the prayer that Jesus taught us - the Lord's Prayer. They prayed it in church and in their homes.

Worldwide, even today, hundreds of millions of people pray it in over 200 countries and in many more languages. 'Our Father who art in heaven...'

We pray it in church every week, and you probably know it by heart; but what did Jesus actually mean with that prayer?

Today and in the weeks ahead, I hope to speak about prayer, and especially about The Lord's Prayer.

1. The importance of prayer

Christians are people who pray. Sometimes more, sometimes less. But the normal Christian life includes prayer to God. Not only in church, but also when we are at home, or in our car, or shopping.

In the normal Christian life, prayer is like breathing. In and out. On and on. It is the natural thing to do.

It involves listening to God, for instance through listening to his word, for instance when you hear a sermon, or when you hear wisdom from other people. But it is also your talking back to God. Like breathing, in and out.

In the Psalms, David says that his soul is secure with God like a 'weaned child with his mother'. In that safety, prayer is as normal as the talk of a little child with his father or mother.

To pray is the most natural thing to do for a Christian.

Yes, you would think so. But why then do we so often read in the letters of Paul that we must pray. If it would happen so naturally, spontaneously, the Bible would not have to tell us, again and again, that we have to pray.



“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplications with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God”, Paul wrote to the church in Phillipi. Those words of Paul suggest that prayer does not always happen spontaneously.

Paul wrote to Christians, who knew times of prayerlessness. Who sometimes stopped praying. Who needed encouragement to pray. Who needed teaching about prayer.

When the disciples were with our Lord Jesus Christ, they one day asked him: “Lord, teach us to pray.” They had seen his own example, and they wanted to know how to pray in a similar way by themselves.

So even though in matters of religion it seems that we, nowadays, worship spontaneously, Jesus and the Apostles understood and made clear that prayer is not so easy, and that it needs teaching. We have to learn how to pray.

And this learning is not something you do once and for all. We all struggle, with ups and downs. Sometimes you go through times in which you pray much, and you sense that it is good. At other times, it feels your prayers to God are stale, you wonder, ‘does He even listen’, or you do not pray at all.

What is prayer anyway? The word ‘prayer’ is used, nowadays for a broad spectrum of communication with God. It includes worship and praise. We use it even for just being silent in the presence of God.

In the Bible, when the word ‘pray’ or ‘prayer’ is used, it always means, always, very simply, ‘to ask’. A few hundred years ago, this was still very clear to all English speakers.

Even today, if we like to be very formal, old fashioned maybe, you can say to someone, ‘I pray, pass me the sugar’.

But in modern speech, we do not use the word ‘pray’ anymore if we want to ask someone to pass the gravy. We only use it in religious speech - but the meaning is still the same. To pray means to ask.

The disciples asked Jesus for help. ‘Help us to pray. Teach us to pray’. If they needed it, we need this help as well. And I think you are also aware of your own need to learn better how to pray. Our prayer life can use a boost, and if that boost comes from Jesus himself, that is the best.

2. How not to pray

Before Jesus told his disciples how to pray, he first warned them against some bad habits in prayer. In his days, there were people who stood and prayed in synagogues and at street corners in order to be seen by others.

The Jewish system of prayer made ostentation, showing off, very easy. Jews prayed standing, with hands stretched out, palms upward, and with the head bowed. Prayer had to be said at 9am, 12 midday and 3pm. And it had to be said wherever a person happened to be.

So it was easy for a man to make sure that at these specific hours he was at a busy street corner, or in a crowded city square, so that the whole world might see with what devotion he prayed. What a good religious person he was.

The wisest of the Jewish rabbis in those days fully condemned this attitude: “A man in whom is hypocrisy brings wrath upon the world, and his prayer is not heard,” one of those rabbis said.



Prayer in public for the sake of being seen as a pious person is also fully rejected by Jesus. So, we must be careful that when we pray in church, or in any public place, we do not fall into this trap of worrying what other people think about us.

To stress that prayer is for God, not for the sake of being praised by people, Jesus says that it is better to pray in your room alone. Jesus actually uses the word that was used for the storage room, or the pantry, in the house. The place that is least likely to get public attention.

When you pray, do not focus on people. But on God alone. People cannot give you what you need. God alone can do that.

So pray to God alone. And if you enter into that storage room, the room with the lock, the most secluded place in the house, if you pray in that small room, as soon as you open your spiritual eyes - you find yourself in a palace.

When the apostle John was given a view of heaven, in the book of Revelation, he saw an angel in the heavenly palace, in the temple of God. And this angel was standing at the golden incense altar before the throne of God. And then John describes:

And that angel was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God. (Rev 8.3-4)

When you pray in your inner room, you actually enter into God's heavenly temple, you stand before the throne. Your prayers reach God as a fragrant incense. He hears you. He sees you pray. You join the wonderful chorus of the angels and all the company of heaven.

St John Chrysostom said in a sermon on this issue,

You are in communion with archangels and singing with the seraphim, who sing with great awe their spiritual hymns and sacred songs to God, the Lord of all. [...]

It is not to human beings that you are praying but to God, who is present everywhere, who hears even before you speak and who knows already the secrets of the heart. If you pray to this one, you shall receive a great reward. “For your Father who sees in secret shall reward you openly.”

St Chrysostom, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Homily 19.3

Your personal prayers, said in a secret place where no human can see or hear you, those prayers reach God.

Now, Jesus did not say that we have to pray in secret because he preached a private religion. Jesus himself also prayed in public. He taught us to pray: “Our father who art in heaven.” The Lord’s Prayer is not a private prayer - it is a prayer of the community, to be prayed in the community. Nothing is wrong with praying in public. It is good.

But Jesus speaks out against using prayer in public for the sake of showing off.

One way to show off, to create a spectacle, is by using many words, beautiful words, moving words. To impress people. If we have a problem with having a proper attitude, if we make prayer a show, well, stop doing that and then better pray privately.

3. Your Father knows what you need

In paganism, many in the days of Jesus believed that by using many words in prayer, you could wear out the gods so much that they would give in to your request. ‘Just show the gods how serious you are, how pious, how sincere, and then they might listen to you.’

In Judaism this attitude was also not uncommon. Rabbi Levi said: ‘Whoever is long in prayer is heard.’

Michael Green, an Anglican priest and writer of over 50 books, now living near Oxford, comments on this:



That attitude has not died in church circles. It is often tacitly assumed (though rarely stated) that the longer the prayer and the more ardently it batters on the door of heaven, the more likely it is to get the desired answer. But Jesus explodes this myth. ‘Do not be like them’. (6:8) Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew* (IVP, 1988) p. 99

When we pray, we must not think that we must convince God. He does not need convincing by our overload of words. And Jesus says something important here. “Do not be like them, because your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

That is, I think, the most important idea to help us in our prayers.

God already knows, and He is a Father.

But if God already knows, why pray? Well, think of this. If the Father did not know, he would not be God. And the fact that He already knows your situation should encourage you all the more freely to come and talk about it. You will not surprise him or upset him. And as a Father, what else does He want than to help you!

So prayer is not an intelligence briefing for God. He knows all things already. Prayer is, rather an intelligent conversation with the Father who wants the best for you.

We must always remember that the God to whom we pray is a God of love who is more ready to answer than we are to pray.

Israel had learned that God knows all things and how He is a caring Father, when God led them out of Egypt; when He cared for them in the desert; when He brought them into the promised land. And this loving Father Jesus now presents to us.

Conclusion

This God is our God; this God is our Father. Next week we will think more about what it means that God is ‘our Father, who is in heaven.’

But for now, let us be aware that in prayer, we must not try to impress each other. Prayers are addressed to God, and are not meant for showing off.

And your normal words are good enough for God. We don not pray to impress people, but we also do not need to impress God with our overdose of words.

He knows you, He knows your situation, He is your loving Father, He just wants to be asked and he is ready to help you, support you, give to you what you need.

+Amen