

The Lord's Prayer

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[0:00] Man proposes, but God disposes. This talk was meant to be at the conclusion of our week of prayer, I'm not quite sure who that will be.

I wasn't expecting to be free at that time, but I'll have to text Daniel and Phil, and if they're not able to come, I expect I will be able to get here, or somebody else will.

But do have faith that it will happen, and come if you possibly can. More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.

That's actually a quotation from a poem, The Mort d'Arthur, The Death of Arthur, by Alfred Lord Tennyson. I think I'll probably refer to that later, well, at the end of the talk, actually.

But is prayer a good thing? Capital G, capital T. If you're a religious person, you probably do think that prayer is a good thing. Some people are against prayer, of course, though I must admit I never quite understood why atheists should be particularly against prayer.

[1:38] If there are no gods, prayer is pointless and a harmless conceit. Why get so upset when it happens? And yet they do. On the other hand, still, you're gathered here this morning, so I guess you probably think that prayer is a good thing.

A capital G, capital T. But why exactly? What is good about prayer? What is prayer anyway? How does it work? Those are certainly questions that are relevant to our week of prayer and indeed relevant to every day of our lives. And those are precisely the questions that Jesus is addressing in our packet passage here in the Lord's Prayer.

It's very easy, isn't it, to come to a passage like the Lord's Prayer and assume we know that all there is to know about it.

Some of us, the older ones at least, may have learned it at Sunday school or even at school. But if that's the case, I might ask you, are we still thinking about it as like children?

[2:58] To escape this trap of assuming that it's familiar stuff, it's worth putting the prayer in its context, and indeed in the context of the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' teaching generally.

Well, what is the Sermon on the Mount? We find this in chapters 5 to 7 of Matthew's Gospel. If you look at chapter 5, it's called that because it said he went up onto a mountain and began to teach them.

It's called the Sermon on the Mount. But what is the Sermon on the Mount? What isn't it? Well, let me point out the one thing it isn't is prophecy.

Prophecy. Prophecy addresses the question, what? What is the true situation now or in the future? And now that I know that, what should I do about it? But the Sermon on the Mount really doesn't fit in the genre of prophecy.

[4:08] In fact, it's much more what in the Old Testament is called, we think of as wisdom literature, wisdom teaching, like the books of Job and Ecclesiastes and even the Song of Solomon.

Wisdom teaching focuses on the why and the how. We could say that prophecy is a call to knowledge and then to obedience and action.

But wisdom in teaching is, first of all, a call to understand. And then when you have understood, to act according to that understanding. And if you just think about the scope of Jesus' teaching, if you're familiar with it, it certainly includes both prophecy and wisdom teaching.

But actually, it's probably fair to say there's more of the wisdom teaching than prophecy. There are chapters of prophecy, of course, like the end of Matthew's Gospel. But most of what we have recorded is Jesus' teaching.

And indeed, certainly the Sermon on the Mount really fits into that genre of wisdom teaching. Jesus wants us to understand, not just do it this way because I told you so, but rather to understand what you're doing.

[5:27] So Isaiah had a prophecy which said, this is Isaiah 52, 13, See, my servant will act wisely.

He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Well, that is a prophecy, certainly. But what does it prophesy? It's that the servant of the Lord will act wisely.

Of course, this refers primarily to Jesus himself. But if we are disciples of that servant, should we not also aim to act wisely? If we follow the Lord, shouldn't we be acting wisely?

And at this time, surely, above all, the Church of Christ needs wisdom. We're in a perilous situation, not so much perhaps like the early church in terms of physical violence, but in terms of losing the battle of what wisdom really is.

The culture wars, as the journalists talk about. The Church needs wisdom, to speak with wisdom into the current situation. And after all, it's the Spirit of God within us, not the Spirit of wisdom.

[6:40] So Paul writes, For if I pray in tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind.

I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. 1 Corinthians 14, 14 and 15. I don't know whether any of you have ever seen the film The Life of Brian.

I've never quite been able to bring myself to see it. But I'm told there is a scene in it in which Brian tells his disciples, You must think for yourselves.

And the disciples will dutifully recite, We must think for ourselves. Thus, completely missing the point of the injunction.

I used to be interested in teaching people to do research at university. There is a certain internal contradiction in trying to teach people to think for themselves.

[7:48] That's what we're trying to do here. And that is what Jesus, in a sense, is trying to do in the Sermon on the Mount. He's trying to teach his disciples actually to think for themselves.

Do I understand? As Christians, we're not pawns in some cosmic chess game. We're not fodder in some interstellar battle like the Star Wars stormtroopers.

You know, those guys that are in white who seem to be terrible shots and are just there to get shot at. But we're not in that situation of those stormtroopers.

In fact, Jesus never says, You are not paid to think, just do as I say. Some bosses and some leaders say that, but Jesus doesn't do that. In fact, rather, he always calls us, doesn't he, to insight, to look beyond the obvious and the superficial to the core reality.

And this is particularly true, I think, in the Sermon on the Mount, even that bit we read. He said, Look beyond the hypocrites. Look to what's really going on here, not what appears on the surface.

[9:14] So, Christians have always recited the Lord's Prayer, haven't we? I mean, we've just done it ourselves. And this is a profitable thing, I'm sure. But there is a possible trap here.

And the trap is that just by reciting it, it becomes one of those vain repetitions, pagan babbling, that Jesus is actually warning against. The Lord's Prayer is not just a patterned prayer.

prayer. You have to remember in its context, it's a lesson to be understood. And as with any teaching about wisdom, a vital thing is not to read our own presuppositions into it.

It's so easy to do that. And here's just, I'll just give this as an example. What's the standard model that preachers use when they're talking about prayer? We all know, probably all heard the ACTS acronym.

Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication is what it stands for. You probably knew that already. Now, this is certainly a great way of introducing structure into our prayers.

[10:29] But the only thing I'd suggest, point out, is if you try and read that into the Lord's Prayer, it doesn't actually really fit. In fact, the Lord's Prayer doesn't quite fit into that model.

Why do I say that? Well, the start of the prayer in verse 9 certainly mentions the Father. But it's not actually adoration, is it? Or praise. In fact, all it tells us is where he lives.

And at that point, there is introduced to supplication and that's that he himself makes his name holy. And in fact, in the whole prayer, supplication, prayers of intercession as we say, of asking for things, actually precedes confession.

If you look at it, there's supplication in verses 9, 10 and 11. And the only confession is in verse 12. And there's not actually a lot of that. And actually, as far as I can see, there's no thanksgiving in this prayer at all.

Unless I'm missing something. So what Jesus is doing here is not so much giving us a patterned prayer, as though, obviously, it is a patterned prayer.

[11:54] But what he's really aiming to do, I think, is to clear up some common misconceptions about prayer. so that when we pray, we do pray with understanding. So what are these lessons, these lessons that he wants us to learn, these misconceptions that he wants us to get out of our minds?

I'm sure you can think of a whole lot of them. But this is a sermon, so I've just selected three. And I put them up on the screen there.

We'll look at these in turn. And the first one is that the purpose of prayer is not to change God's mind. It seems clear enough in verses 7 and 8. And the second one, you may notice there's a lot about location here in this prayer, one way or another.

Location certainly matters, but maybe not in the way you thought. And the third one is that the quantity of words doesn't matter, verse 5, but the focus and persistence does.

So let's think about those three lessons. So let's say first that the purpose of prayer is not to change God's mind.

[13:18] Jesus clearly says this in verse 7, doesn't he? He says that God knows what you need before you pray it. That's clear enough. But then you might think, well, okay, well, in that case, doesn't that make prayer rather pointless?

If God knows what we need, why am I bothering to say it? But the Bible never lets us think that way. In fact, the apostle, sorry, it's not the apostle James, the author of James' letter reassures us that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

That's James 5, 16b. It's not that prayer doesn't work or has no effect. It's just that if we think of it as the pagans are doing of trying to change God's mind, we're rather missing the point.

If we had got the sermon that was due for today, we would have learnt about Elijah. And Elijah prayed, and he prayed that it wouldn't rain and it didn't. And then he prayed that it would rain and it did.

But that was because he was already in tune with God's purposes. He already knew what God was going to do. I mean, just think about it. Otherwise, why would any sane person pray for a drought?

[14:39] The pagans that Jesus is talking about and so often ourselves think of God as a sort of spiritual vending machine. you just have to press the right buttons, put the right code in, and you'll get the product you want.

Prayer just doesn't work like that. James is clear on this point as well. You can always rely on James to put a down-to-earth comment. So James writes, you want something, but you don't get it. you kill and you covet, but you can't have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.

Well, it says when you ask, but I suppose that what he means here is if you do ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives that you spend what you get on your pleasures.

I actually watched, it was broadcast again over Christmas for Terry Pratchett's Hogfather, and I actually watched it again and recorded it and watched it again.

[15:54] There's an interesting line, quite an insightful rhetorical question that one of the characters says in this film. He says, asks the question, what use is a God who gives you everything you want?

And the answer, of course, is not much. Of course, when we pray, we should expect an answer, but the answer may not be what we expect.

So we pray in expectation, but not expectation of changing God's mind, but rather acknowledging that he already knows what we need. In fact, we could say that the purpose of prayer is not so much to change God's mind as to change ours.

As we pray, we become aligned with and involved in God's program, don't we? And then that prayer actually becomes part of what God uses to bring his plans to fruition, as he did with Elijah.

And so it is indeed true that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. So the first thing, the purpose of prayer is not to change God's mind, but rather to change ours.

[17:21] Does it matter where we pray? Actually, this isn't quite as simple a question as you might think. Solomon realized when he prayed for the dedication of the temple.

he was praying towards the temple, but he had to acknowledge that God didn't really live in the temple. He had to acknowledge that God actually lived in heaven, not in his temple at all.

So we might say that location certainly matters, the location of where we pray, but perhaps not in the way you thought. God's mind is not so where should we pray?

On the street corner like the hypocrites, verse 5, perhaps in the temple at Jerusalem as most of the Jews would have thought was the optimal place. Well, we're not Jews, most of us, so should we be praying in church or some other religious building?

Or, that's kind of a suggestion in verse 7, these pagans probably were babbling in their own temples. Or should we be praying actually in secret?

[18:39] Verse 6, Where did Jesus himself pray, actually? And it's a remarkable thing that we have very, very little information as to what Jesus had actually prayed.

There's the odd hint when Jesus said, I prayed for you for Peter, but the only prayer we have of Jesus in any detail is the one in Gethsemane.

But we do find a few references in the Gospels to where Jesus prayed, and actually it seems to be mostly outdoors. So, for instance, in Luke 9, 28, we read that Jesus took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray.

Sorry, what's happening? Have we not turned on? Oh dear. Let's hope this works then. Is that helping or not?

I hope that's plugged again. Is this plugged in now? Is that turned that on? Well, we think we're seem to be all right, don't we? Well, let's carry on.

[20:02] Hopefully it's all right. I think that's the power lead, isn't it?

Yeah, it's not. No, it's not. All helps, yes. Plugging it all. Is it switched on now, or did I switch it off? It is on. Good. All right.

Sorry about that. As I say, these things go wrong. Sometimes it don't work out as we expect. So where should we pray? Well, as I say, Jesus prayed mostly outdoors and he went up on the mountain with Peter, James and John to pray when the transfiguration happened.

Now, I don't suppose we've been praying on the street corner in order to look good, but there is a thing you might think about here, actually. Several Christians are taken to praying outside an abortion clinic.

Now, is that a good thing or not? Well, I don't know. But at least be honest about it. If you're praying outside an abortion clinic and you're making it obvious that's what you're doing, I presume if you're not, there's not much point in it, then you're not actually just praying, are you?

[21:19] Be honest, you're protesting. Now, that may still be a good thing to do, but at least be honest with yourself and don't say you're just praying. You're not. You are protesting.

So what is the proper location for praying? The proper location for praying, as we've seen in verse 6, is where the action is. That may be different places, but we need to be a place where God is going to answer.

And of course, I'd suggest that actually there are three issues you need to think about when you think about where you need to pray.

The first is, firstly, who are you praying to? If you're not clear about this, you can't pray with understanding, can you? And, secondly, where is the recipient of the prayer actually to be found? It's no good petitioning the king at Buckingham Palace if he's actually in Balmoral. If you want to speak to the king, it's a good idea to find out where he is first and try and make an appointment.

[22:40] Now, of course, okay, we know that the father, in a sense, is everywhere. But, actually, that doesn't mean to say we may find it easy

to find him everywhere. So, Jesus does recommend a suitable environment for praying, doesn't he, in verse 6.

I don't think he's saying you can only pray at home. Of course, he didn't do that himself. But, he is saying you need to find a place where you can meet with the father.

And, the third thing when you're praying that you need to think about, what actually are you expecting? In essence, of course, what we're expecting is a reward from the father, verse 6.

And, as we've already considered, we want to receive what he has to give. But, actually, if you look at, think of this as the context of the Lord's prayer, you realise there's actually quite a lot about location here.

Our father is in heaven, verse 9. In our prayer meeting this morning, Jerome mentioned Psalm 115, wasn't it?

[23:58] It says, the heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to men. we're not in the same place in that sense, as the father is.

Our father is in heaven, but we're not. And so, our prayer is mostly about what happens on earth, isn't it? Verse 10. Your will be done on earth.

It already is in heaven. It's what happens on earth that the prayer has in mind. And, of course, like any kingdom, the kingdom of heaven needs good communication.

Just ask anybody planning a battle and see what goes wrong if the communication lines break down. Any kingdom needs good communication between its headquarters and those soldiers at the front line.

And that's, in a sense, what we are. Soldiers at the front line talking to the headquarters in heaven.

And we need good lines of communication in both directions.

[25:06] And, actually, once you're looking out for it, you realise that that dynamic actually runs through the whole of the prayer. Of course, we're concerned about having enough to eat. Verse 11.

We have to eat. We need a roof over our heads and something to keep us warm as well. God's love. But that shouldn't be a distraction from what we're actually doing.

That's not the end in itself. So, a bit later on in the sermon, Jesus gives a bit more teaching on this. This is actually just chapter 6 verses 31 to 34. Do not worry, saying, what shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or what shall we wear.

For the pagans run after all these things. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has trouble enough of its own. So, what we're praying about, in a sense, is not what happens in heaven.

[26:18] We're praying about what happens here, in our private room, or in our house, or in our church, or in our community, or in our nation, or in our world. Because that's where we are.

We're here. That's where we live and operate. but always with a kingdom perspective, not to be distracted by forgetting the job we're about.

First priority is always the kingdom, the promotion of the kingdom. And that's a kingdom which exists both on earth and in heaven, as verse 10 tells us.

Everything else follows from that. And if you think about it, you even get this interaction, this dynamic, in the last part of the prayer.

Verse 12, forgive us our debts. Well, where's that happening? That's happening at the throne of grace in heaven, isn't it? But there's a contingent clause, because it's contingent on the way we forgive our debtors down here on earth, as it makes quite clear in 14 and 15.

[27:31] And indeed, in verse 13, the evil one himself operates in the spiritual realm, doesn't he? But the temptation that he gives exists right down here on earth.

In fact, the whole dynamic of that tension runs all the way through the prayer. What happens in heaven? God's willing to what happens in heaven and what happens on earth and how the two can be matched.

And thirdly, what about this question of pagan babbling, as it talks about in verse 7?

Well, clearly, what we need is quantity, but not quantity. The quantity of words doesn't matter, but the focus and the persistence does.

And as Jesus told another parable to emphasize this, this one strangely isn't in Matthew, I thought it ought to be part of the Sermon on the Mount, this parable, but it's actually recorded by Luke, and it's Luke 18, 1 to 8.

[28:40] Let me just read it. Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

He said, in a certain town there was a judge, in a certain town there was a judge who neither feared, God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, grant me justice against my adversary.

For some time he refused, but finally he said to himself, even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming.

the Lord said, listen to what the unjust judge says. Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night?

Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see they get justice and quickly. Then there's a snapper in the end here, a question.

[29:45] However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? Again, there is that dynamic of what happens in heaven and what happens on earth.

So, the story of this widow who refused to give up. She was obsessed, wasn't she? You get people like that, you see people on the television sometimes, perhaps their daughter has been killed or something, and they become completely obsessed with making sure that it won't happen to somebody else, and that's not a bad thing in itself.

This wisdom, this widow was certainly obsessed with getting justice became the whole focus of her life, until she got what she wanted. But still, this is just a story, after all.

The reality is verse seven. Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? As I've said, the real question is verse eight.

When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? If the Son of Man were to come through that door just now, would he find faith among his people here?

[30:59] A question we have to ask ourselves every morning, as it were. Will Jesus find faith? Are our heads in the right place?

Well, evaluation. actually, as I said, this sermon was meant to go at the end of the week of prayer and to sum it up. Of course, you have to have an evaluation nowadays, don't you?

It's absolutely essential. You have to fill in this evaluation form and put your review on Trustpilot. You get bombarded with the things.

But, as I say, it was originally planned as an evaluation at the end of the week of prayer, but I thought it was worth keeping in any way to ask these questions at the start.

Perhaps at the end, you can ask yourselves the same questions again and see if you've changed your mind. The first thing you need to know is, can you just tick one or can you tick all of them?

[32:07] Well, these questions are tick all that apply. So, the first question is, what is my involvement with the week of prayer going to be? It could be I'm not going to get involved at all, because I think it's a waste of time.

That's only going to be the case if you think that prayer is useless. That would be what you're saying. But some people do think that. So, in that case, you won't bother, will you?

That's your answer. But it might be a bit more complicated than that. It might be that I'm trying to get involved, but I am very busy. And then you have this tricky question of priority, don't you?

Yeah, of course you've got to turn up for work tomorrow, if you're still working. Those of us who are retired, a different situation. Of course you've got to turn up for work.

But is the kingdom your priority? And if it is, perhaps you can find some way to work around that problem. I hope your answer is going to be, I want to participate as much as I can.

[33:24] God knows that we can't, you know, that there are problems, things get in the way. But if we want to participate as much as we can, then I'm sure he will take that as faithful.

people. And of course the real question is why? What is your motivation? Why am I going to get involved?

And I think actually to some extent all these are valid answers. Phil and Daniel encourage us to pray, that's their job, isn't it?

That's what they're there for, prepare God's people for works of service. But in God's providence they're not actually here this morning, but nonetheless that was their job to encourage us to pray. And we will look bad if we don't, won't we, if we're church members? I mean, that's probably the least valid reason, but it is a reason, and it's not entirely useless.

[34:42] But a better way perhaps of thinking about that is that the church needs my support. It does for each of us here. And I say I'm asking myself these questions as much as everybody else.

The church does need my support. But a better reason perhaps is that I want to be about the business of the kingdom. because that is the business that Jesus tells us to be about.

And finally, we could simply answer, I'm a disciple, I must follow Jesus. Jesus tells us to pray. And so let's take the opportunity to do that.

And the third questions we might ask is, what do we expect to get out of it? If I'd done this at the end of the week, it would be, what have we got out of it?

But now it's going to be, what do we expect to get out of it? And it may be you're not expecting anything at all. I don't think it's actually going to make any difference whatsoever.

[35:50] Well, you may think that, but I would challenge you with what we've heard from Jesus and what James says about the prayer of a righteous person having much power in its effect.

what do we expect to get out of it? A better perspective on where we are. I think that's a valid reason because, as I said, part of prayer is actually aligning our purposes with those that God has. So that's one thing we might expect to get out of it. And moving on from that, perhaps a new vision for the future. A renewal of our spiritual focus.

we all sort of get, you know, stale, don't we? And of course we're expecting answers from the Father.

Not because, as I say, he's a spiritual vending machine and if we turn up religiously and push all the right buttons he will give us what we want. But because we believe that he does want to give gifts to us.

[36:54] But the gifts that were for our own benefit as a church and as a people. So we should expect answers from the Father. As I say, you can ask yourself those questions at the end of the week.

I'm not going to collect the answers, don't worry. But you can perhaps think of those questions now and at the end of the week. So as we draw to a close, this is a time of change for us, as was pointed out in some of the emails about the week of prayer.

I almost have a feeling that this is for me a kind of a swan song. I don't think that's quite true. I don't think this is going to be the last sermon I'll ever preach unless the Lord returns.

But I do have a bit of a feeling of it's been around a long time and it's time to pass the torch on to somebody else. Whoever will pick it up.

Whoever will take it up. So I thought I would actually finish with these words of Tennyson. Of course it's just a story. There probably never was a King Arthur. You certainly don't know if there was how he died.

[38:03] But actually there's quite insightful words that Tennyson puts onto the mouth of King Arthur when he describes his death.

The old order changeth, yielding place to new. And God fulfills himself in many ways lest one good custom should corrupt the world.

What is good in itself can sometimes be an opposition to change. We can get dug in, stuck in a hole as it were and not ready to move on.

So one good custom should corrupt the world. Comfort thyself. What comfort is in me? I have lived my life and that which I have done.

May he within himself make pure. But thou, he's speaking to Sir Bedivere, his knight, but thou, if thou shouldst never see my face again, pray for my soul.

[39:10] More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.
Amen.

Amen. I'm going to come and close matters down.