

When You Believe in God but Not in Prayer

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[0 : 00] I really hope you're enjoying this autumn series. I think it's inspiring, the Christian atheist. And this week, this teaching really cuts to the heart of where we are as Christians.

And when you believe in God, but you don't believe in prayer. There was a student who came out of a geography exam and realizing the mistakes he'd made, prayed, please God, let Paris be the capital of Turkey.

It's prayer, what is prayer actually like for you? Because I'm not going to mess around this morning. Let's challenge, where are we with prayer this morning? Hopefully, it's not as cringy as this lad who has to meet his in-laws for the first time.

I said grace in many a dinner table. It's...

Okay. Oh, dear God. Thank you.

[1 : 13] You are such a good God to us, a kind and gentle and accommodating God.

And we thank you, oh, sweet, sweet Lord of hosts, for the... ..smorgasbord you have so aptly lain at our table this day and each day...

...by day... ..day by day... ..by day... Amen. Amen. Amen.

Oh, dear Lord, three things we pray. To love thee more dearly. To see thee more clearly. To see thee more clearly.

To follow thee more nearly. Day by day. By day. Amen. Amen.

[2 : 15] Oh, Greg, that was lovely. Thank you. That was interesting. If you were cringing with that, that's okay.

That's fine. But it's a prayer. And this sense of Christians should believe in the power and relation of prayer. Because why? Because Jesus told us to do it.

And it's that simple. Jesus told us and showed us that we should pray as part of the communication. And we need to believe in that power of prayer.

In this book, *The Christian Atheist*, a pastor once asked his church to pray that God would shut down a neighborhood bar. It was notorious. Full of people that shouldn't be there.

It obviously upset the local church. And the whole church gathered for an evening prayer meeting, pleading with God to rid the neighborhood of the evils of this bar. A few weeks later, lightning struck the bar and it burned to the ground.

[3 : 18] Having heard about the church's prayer crusade, the bar owner promptly sued the church. It had to be in the States, didn't it? When the court date finally arrived, the bar owner passionately argued that God struck his bar with lightning because of the church members' prayers.

The pastor backtracked. Brushing off the accusations, he admitted that the church had prayed. But he also affirmed that no one in his congregation really expected anything to happen.

The judge leaned back in his chair, a mix of amusement and perplexity on his face. Finally, he spoke. I can't believe what I'm hearing.

Right in front of me is a bar owner who believes in the power of prayer and a pastor who doesn't. You see, we tackled this in men's group the other night.

So many Christians that I know, me included, have often treated God a bit like a cashpoint machine. We put in something, but we expect something out straight away.

[4 : 29] And often we expect more than we've put in because we have invested. My goodness, we have come to church here on Sunday morning, Lord. Therefore, you should answer our prayer immediately just in the way in which we have expected.

And that's often it, isn't it? It's relationship. And that's what we're talking about with prayer. How much have we invested in that relationship with God?

How much have we actually invested in that one-to-one talking and living and being? Martin Luther said, prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance.

It is laying hold of his willingness. In that sense that God actually wants to get involved in what we're doing, but our resistance to allow him to do that.

This is a God who longs for, longs to connect with him. And it says in our reading this morning, rejoice. Rejoice always. Pray continually.

[5 : 35] Is that our experience? 24-7? Give thanks in all circumstances. For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

A few years back, I laid in a hospital bed for about two weeks, just thanking God that I was there.

Prayer. Because for so many of us, other people in this world don't even have that option.

And just to lay there and actually say, thank you, I am in the right place, and I am surrounded by the right people, is a pretty good prayer at that time. The thing is, God's will for us is to pray continually.

We know that continually means what that means in our culture. Our electricity 24-7, our gas, our water. Everything else 24-7, our healthcare.

We know that it's there for us 24-7. And yet our experience of God, often our relationship, is we just need him when it's A&E.;

[6 : 40] That is it, isn't it? Suddenly, it's just that moment that we need, and we focus on God when it's our want. In our experience, you know, we are an instantaneous world, aren't we now?

Our culture expects immediate results. In fact, if we complain, if we don't get the service we want that we expect, we're upset.

And sometimes we need to understand that we are in a relationship with God, and it's not a demand and receive culture. When I choose a book to read, it's often a biography.

I love hearing about people's lives, what they do, where they lived, how they were schooled, how they got to where they were, maybe their life story, their divorces. Do I know them?

No, I don't know them. If you walked up to somebody in the street and said, Hi, Alfred, they're stalking. It would be, I don't know them, but they don't know me either.

[7 : 48] And essentially, our relationship with God needs to be about an everyday, in and out, fun, relationship, talking, chatting, just being with the Lord, not making it just one big event, now and again.

Many people sadly know that the breakdown of a relationship comes when we stop talking about the everyday things.

When we stop talking, when we stop conversing, when we just stop chatting and being together.

You know, when encouragement, and gratitude and thank yous in the everyday go out of the window and we just exist.

You see, prayer is a relationship and not a formula, but God knows our thoughts. So, if God knows our thoughts, why do we need to tell him?

I don't know about you, my kids are grown up now, but there was teenage years, if you're going through teenage years, additional prayers for you.

[9 : 06] But you would find out that in teenage years, your children would want to come and talk to you at the most inappropriate times. It was always 10 o'clock, 11 o'clock or 12 o'clock, when they'd come in, that they would want to sit at the bottom of your bed and talk to you.

Would you turn them away? No! I've been craving for this conversation for ages, but it happens to be on their terms and we welcome it.

The thing is, I know, I know deeply, deeply, deeply that my children love me. How upset I would be if they didn't tell me. And to get that on the end of a text, on the end of a message, to get that from somebody at the end of a phone call from your kids and say, oh dad, love you, is so important.

If we're not in that relationship with God, of talking to him, of telling him that we love him, of telling him that we're there for him, of telling him that we want to be part and deeply in this relationship, then I would suggest to you, it's not a relationship.

And I think that was my issue for many years growing up in the church, as though I told God what I thought he needed to do, what I thought he needed to do now, and when he needed to do it, rather than of actually just hanging out with God in his wisdom.

[10 : 29] Many of us live with that image of prayer in our lives, of eyes together, hands closed, and that's great, but that it just has to be on a Sunday.

I met with a lovely lady in my curacy once, and it was a great conversation, I think we sort of met at the door, and we were just chatting, and I said, do you enjoy sort of evening prayer, compliment, it's one of my favorite things, at the end of the day, just to just come together with God, and just chat about the day, and it's brilliant.

And she threw me this look, and she said, young man, I come to church one hour a week, on a Sunday to say my prayers, and that is enough for me, and for God as well.

Oh. Phew. You see, Jesus died, rose again, and ascended.

The Holy Spirit came for all people to empower, and enable us, equip us, and enthuse us, and excite us to have this relationship. And woe to us, if we don't take up that relationship, of having that 24-7 conversation, that comes, and that he loves us for, and we love him for.

[11:48] And, that's the other thing. Lord, I want this, I want that. You know, it's not a Father Christmas moment.

God hears us, he knows us, we can talk to him, but it's so important to listen. I wouldn't be here, stood here in front of a church today, if I hadn't listened, and been made to listen, for six weeks. We need to listen. Pete Gregg was caught up, Pete Gregg, our 24-7 prayer, that's going on in Clevedon, at the moment, came out of very much, this movement of 24-7 prayer, of Pete Gregg. And Pete Gregg tells this great story, of when he had to stop, and listen. And what God can do, when we actually do that. Thanks. So, I don't know if you remember, when that Icelandic volcano, erupted, and it grounded, all the aeroplanes.

I got trapped in Chicago, and I was sitting there, getting really bored, really frustrated, just wanting to get home, to my kids. And then I suddenly thought, isn't everything, meant to work together for good, for those who love God?

[12:57] And so maybe, God's got some purpose, in me being stranded here. So I actually prayed, and said, God, what do you want to do, with my time, while I'm here? And different friends, around America, very kindly, invited me, to go and do all sorts of things, see all sorts of people.

But I prayed, and I really felt like, I needed to go and see my friend, Joe Stanky, who was living in Madison, Wisconsin at the time. And so I emailed him, I said, Joe, can I come and sleep, on your couch, tomorrow?

I guess it's like, five, six hour bus ride away. And Joe replied, going, that's incredible Pete, I've just hit, a really major crisis, and my wife just said to me, who do you wish, was sitting on your couch, right now, that you could talk to?

Those were her exact words. And I just said to her, I wish Pete was here, but that's crazy. He's never been to my house, and he's in England. And within a few hours, I've emailed, out of the blue, saying, Joe, I feel like I need to come and sleep, on your couch.

And so I turned up there, in Joe's living room, like a man on a mission from God, aware that God does make, all things work together for good, and that when we take time in prayer, to listen, God directs our parts.

[14:12] He is faithful, and he will do it. And I think my immaturity in prayer, and whether you resonate with me in this, was that actually, sometimes I used to get upset, that God hadn't answered my prayer.

I think in my maturity, I find out now, that God hasn't answered my prayer, in the way in which, I expected him to do it. And Bill Hybels was very helpful, when he talked about prayer, in his book, Too Busy Not to Pray.

And it talks about slowing down, sometimes to hear God. And he uses this, if the request is wrong, God says no. And some of us don't like to hear that no sometimes.

We're used to getting it our own way. And yet sometimes God definitely says no, and I am so pleased now, that when I hear God's no, because I think it was, I think it was somebody's wife, Billy Graham's wife, she said, if I hadn't heard God's no, I'd have married the wrong man, several times over.

And I thought that was so honest of her. And it's good to hear God's no sometimes, and just suck it up and say, okay, that's not for me. Well, what is it then?

[15:35] What is it? Sometimes when the timing is wrong, God says slow. Slow up. Take some time. Take some wisdom. Pray with other people. There's nothing more powerful, than praying with other people, and hearing what God has to say through someone that he's brought alongside you.

And that is so helpful, to slow up. And when you're wrong, God says grow up in it. Grow through it. That is such a place of maturity and prayer in Christian life and discipleship, to just grow through it. As tough as it is, but to get to that point. And then if the request is in line with his purposes, it's right. And God says go. But then when God says go, so many of us step back and say, whoa, no thank you.

Yet the one who is faithful, he will do it. And he will equip you and empower you to do that. Experience in our relationships.

So how is your relationship with God this morning? How is your communication? How is your prayer life? What does that look like?

[16:47] What do you chat to God when you're out for a walk, when you're doing the washing up, when you're doing your housework, when you're at work, when you're traveling, wherever you are?

What does that look like? What does your hands-free communication look like together? What did you chat and communicate with God about this morning when you were on your way to church, when you got up, when you took the dog out, whatever you were doing?

What did that look like? You know how, what do you say? What did he say to you? What do you sense that he was saying? What did you sense that he was saying in your waking moment?

When he asks you to do something and prompts you to do it, do we not believe that he will empower you? Because he will.

The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. When I hear someone say, I'm going to do this because, or whatever, I can't do that.

[17:54] Imagine you're saying that to him face to face. And I often get this wonderful picture of God just smiling back at me and looking at me and saying, do you know what, Clive?

You know we can, don't you? You know we can. Kate this morning said that we had a challenge to our church. It was 10 years ago. And would we make a difference to young people in our community?

You know, if ever there has been an answer of prayer for this church, that is it and a continuing answer to prayer. So as I come into land, I sense more and more to encourage each other and build each other up in prayer.

Don't wait. Just pray. If it's now, you know we have, people say, oh prayer ministry and we think, oh it's got to be something good. It's got to be something large. It's got to be something crisis.

No it hasn't. Just go and pray with people. Go and be with them. Soak in prayer. Listen, be there. Just maybe, just offer now.

[19:06] Maybe just chat. I mean you don't have to use, if you're new to church, if you are new to the Christian faith, please don't think that by using holy words, it's some kind of opinion longer into prayer.

Just talk as you talk and relate as we relate because that's the way that he'll speak to us. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.