

What should we pray?

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Preacher: Rev Dave Brown

[0:00] Let's pray, shall we? Heavenly Father, as the disciples came to the Lord Jesus and said, Jesus, teach us to pray. So we come before you this morning.

As we reflect again on the prayer of Jesus and across your word, Lord, teach us to pray. We might draw closer to you. In Jesus name. Amen.

Well, we began our series on prayer two weeks ago with the question, why should we pray? And there were three basic answers to that. Firstly, it's our duty, something we're commanded to do. Secondly, it's a delight and a joy because it brings us closer to our Father in heaven. And thirdly, because we depend on God for everything. And since we have a God who loves us, who hears our prayers, and who longs to answer them in ways that are good for us, we need to be people who ask duty, delight and dependence.

Last week, we thought about when should we pray? And the answer was unsurprisingly, every time, always. And in every circumstance, all times and places.

[1:14] On the glorious days, we should pray prayers of thankfulness to God. In the dark times, we're called to pray prayers of lament and sadness. We looked at Psalm 88 last week.

And in the ordinary days, well, we're told in the scriptures to pray without ceasing. To keep that line of communication with God open all the time. That's the kind of prayers that keep us grounded in God, steady in our faith, thankful, hopeful, trusting in God in every season that he brings us. Today, the theme is what should we pray? What should be the content of our prayers? What kind of conversations should we be having with our Father in heaven?

Well, think back to when you were young and the kind of conversations you had with your earthly father. I guess there were a number of times when you asked for things. Maybe it was for a new bike. Or a biscuit.

Or a lift to a party if you were a little bit older. Now, maybe as you were older still, you asked for some financial help for something. I'm sure at other times, if you're like me, you would have asked for advice and help.

[2:21] And at other times, you just wanted a hug and some comfort and encouragement. But your relationship with your earthly father would have been a very strange one if the only kind of conversations you had were ones where you asked for something.

Did you sleep well, son? Can I have my breakfast? How was school? Can you give me a lift to a party later? How's the job going? Dad, I need a deposit for a house. It would be a weird kind of relationship, wouldn't it?

To only speak in requests, whether they are practical and material ones. Or something else. But I wonder if that is largely a description of our prayer lives.

That if you think about the content of your prayer, that you spend most time asking. Well, maybe you're not quite so materialistic and selfish as those three examples.

I suspect all of us pray for other people, as well as for the world and for the church, or at least I hope we do. But if we're honest, are most of our prayers little more than requests for us and for others?

[3:27] If so, it's a pretty poor state of affairs, isn't it? Because in that view, all God is to us really is a divine vending machine. We put a request in. We hope to get something good out.

Now, if our prayers, our prayer lives are going to be healthily and biblical, they need to include much more than simply asking God for things, whether for us or others.

And once again, the pattern given to us in Scripture, the best pattern we have, is the one given by Jesus in the Lord's Prayer. So in your orders of service, would you turn on to page 23?

Keep these words. I know I'm sure you know them by heart anyway, but it might be good to have them in front of you. Let's look at the different kinds of prayers we see in the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Well, it starts wonderfully, doesn't it, with a reminder that God is our Father. That is a Christian privilege.

[4:28] If you're not a Christian, you don't get to call God your Father. But if you've been adopted through faith in Jesus into his family, God is your Father. That is an astonishing thing.

But that whole of those first two lines really are praise, doesn't it? It starts with worship and praise, recalling who God is and what he is like. He is holy, hallowed be your name. And since God reveals himself and his character through his saving works, so we might also want to bring to mind in that opening the God's saving work for us through Jesus and all other benefits of his passion, as the Book of Common Prayer puts it.

So I wonder if that's how you start your prayer times, with praise and worship. Do you spend any time acknowledging who God is, worshipping as who he deserves, praising him for his glory and his goodness, thanking him for Jesus and all he's done for you, marvelling at the access that we have to come to God in the first place and call him Father.

When God appears to people in Scripture and reveals his glory, people fall on their faces in humble worship before they do anything else.

We're drawing close to God in prayer. There should be some of that in us. Begin with worship and praise. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.

[5:56] Even this second section is very much Godward, isn't it? It's God-facing. It's not about us. It's about God, his kingdom, his will, his rule.

So I wonder what would it take for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven? Now what does his kingdom look like? What is his will that needs to be done?

And for us personally, what would it mean for us to not only seek to announce and build God's kingdom in our town, but to live each day knowing that we are a citizen of heaven?

We mull on those kind of questions, meditate on those topics. That will lead us to praise God all the more and to bring before him the needs of the world. So maybe in this section it calls for some lamenting.

When we see what God's perfect will is, when we see what God's kingdom is like, and we see what the world is, when we see what it should be for someone to live in perfect, perfectly in line with God's will, and we see what we're doing, surely that should lead us to lament, to pray for ourselves, to pray for the state of our nation, for God's world, for God's church.

[7:15] To pray that things might be changed according to his laws and purposes. And since God's kingdom comes now as individuals hear the gospel and believe in Jesus and start living in line with his commands, our own witness, our own sharing of our faith should sit under this heading as well, shouldn't it?

For God's kingdom to come, it means people need to come to know Jesus and know him as their Lord. Is that something we pray for? Give us today our daily bread.

It's only thirdly that we come to ourselves and our practical needs, isn't it? And even here, Jesus frames it in a way that puts the emphasis on daily reliance and the basics of life. For almost all of us, for most of our lives, I imagine, food and clothing and a place to sleep have never been in doubt. So maybe in these prayers for our daily bread, the things that we need just to live and to thrive in life, we might include health and strength, friendship, love, hope, the means to provide for our basic needs with a job.

I suspect we're pretty good at asking for those things for ourselves and for others. And that is wonderful. We should do, by the way. I don't think I'm trying to put you off coming to God with a list of requests.

[8:41] Jesus tells us to do that. He also tells us that we have a loving father who loves to give good gifts to his children. So don't ever be

afraid to ask God for things.

He is not stingy. He will not be offended. And his resources are unlimited. But we must be prepared for a no.

We'll think more on that next week. But just as our earthly parents often said no to some of our requests because they knew what we asked for wasn't good for us or wasn't good for us at that point, so our heavenly father will sometimes say no as well.

Because he knows everything perfectly. As I said, we'll think more on that next Sunday. But there's another kind of bread we need to be praying for, and that is our spiritual food. See, when the Apostle Paul writes to the churches he's planted or churches he's heard of, he begins most of his letters with a great prayer for them.

And it's noticeable that there are almost no prayers for the physical needs of the congregations. It's not that they didn't have any. It's not that none of them were sick or none of them had needs.

[9:49] But Paul's focus is on the spiritual needs of the congregation for stronger faith, greater joy, godly wisdom, more complete obedience, a deeper understanding and experience of God's love and mercy.

Paul's main concern for others and for himself, it has to be said, is his spiritual health. I wonder if that's an area where we need to pray more, for our spiritual needs, an area where we need to pray more for our children and our grandchildren, for our church family.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive them that sin against us. I guess this is the second section where we are most comfortable praying because we've done it already this morning, haven't we?

We've already had a time of confession. And if we have any sense of God's holiness and our own inability to live as we should, there will be many times, not just in our regular daily devotions, but maybe during the day, when we have to come to God and say, Heavenly Father, I've messed up again.

Forgive me. But what about the second half of that verse? How often in our prayers do we bring to God those who have offended and hurt us and against whom our hearts are still hard and bitter because of what they've done or said?

[11:18] See, when those hurts are deep, and sometimes they are, we can only truly forgive with God's help. We can't do that on our own. And since forgiving others is a clear sign that we ourselves have been forgiven, we can't willingly hold on to grudges and grievances and still expect that God is going to shower his love and mercy on us.

Jesus tells some wonderful parables about that. So are we good at praying for God's help? Not just that we might be forgiven, but that we might forgive others and learn to love and pray for our enemies.

What about that next stanza? And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. See, I think there's a clear link between this petition and the second one when we prayed for God's kingdom to come.

How are we led into temptation? How do we fall prey to evil? Well, most often, when we walk away from God and ignore his commands, when we follow instead the passions of the flesh rather than the call of the spirit.

That's why God's Old Testament people were told to put tassels on the edge of their garments with bits of scriptures in and bits of scripture on their heads as well. So all around their clothing, they were reminded of God's commands, reminded that God was with them.

[12:45] The psalmist encouraged us to write God's words on our hearts, to meditate on them so that his word becomes a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

See, the more we are, the more God's word is in us and nearer the front of our thinking, the more we are conscious that God is with us wherever we are, whatever we're doing, the less we are going to be prone to wander from that true and right path.

I don't know about you, but the most mischief I got up to as a boy and a teenager was when my parents weren't around. Is that true for you? I suspect so.

When they were there, sometimes you were on your very best behaviour. But the moment they weren't, but the hand was in the biscuit jar or worse, because there was no one there keeping you on the right track.

Bring God's word into the forefront of our minds. Let's remember that he is with us. So this is a prayer here for God to help us lead godly and holy lives. Do you pray that prayer for yourself? [13:52] Do you know where your weak points are? Is that something you should be praying for your family? It's certainly something you should be praying for me. Please.

It's those times when we are most confident in ourselves that we are actually at our weakest and most vulnerable. St. Paul puts it this way, 1 Corinthians 10.

So if you think you're standing firm, be careful you don't fall. May God lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

The last part. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen. That doxology, those words of praise, are not in the original prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, but they soon became part of Christian practice.

I think because it helps us end the prayer time as we began in worship. Praising the God to whom we have brought our prayers and requests.

[14:55] Being able to leave them with him, confident that he not only has the power to answer, but that he loves us deeply and will give us more than we can ask or imagine. This final bit of praise helps us to go, Lord, I brought you everything, now I'm leaving it with you and I'm carrying on with my day, confidence that I'm walking in your ways and I'm trusting in you.

There's such a lot of depth here, isn't there? Lord's Prayer isn't just, what is it, 12, 13 lines to say. As we think about them, it gives us a pattern for prayer.

Helps us to see that our conversations with God should be much wider than just, God, I'm in trouble, get me out of here. That's why we've been using this, the Lord's Prayer, as a basis for our Lent course, as we will do this week.

But what's interesting is that as we reflect on different parts of Scripture, we see these kind of requests coming up everywhere. Sometimes there is a waiting towards one or two of the sections, that sometimes the order is different, but they're all there.

So flip back in your Bibles to Psalm 86. Let's just reflect on this together just for a few moments. As I said earlier, one of the great privileges of being a Christian is that we can talk to God as our Heavenly Father.

[16:20] For the Jews, that they didn't have that understanding yet, but they did address God as Lord, as Yahweh. It was God's covenant name to his people who had been brought into relationship with him.

They knew that he was the covenant-keeping, people-saving, merciful, unchanging God. So that's how the Psalm starts. Hear me, Lord. Capital letters. Did you notice that? Yahweh.

The covenant name of God. Now the psalmist gets very quickly into requests here, doesn't he? But if you look down a little, there is praise in verse 5.

You, Lord, are forgiving and good. Down in verses 8 and 9, 9 and 10 as well. Verse 12 is even clearer. I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart.

I will glorify your name forever. There's more praise in verse 15. Words of thankfulness for God's saving work in verse 13. So although he's using different words, and he's putting them throughout the psalm rather than just at the beginning, he is praying, our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

[17:28] I'm praising you, God, for who you are and what you've done. What about praying for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done? Remember in the Old Testament, God's kingdom was embodied in the Old Testament people of Israel.

So the kings were God's kings. The prophets were God's prophets. So verses 14, 16, and 17 reflect these kind of prayers. The psalmist's enemies are those who have no regards for God.

So the prayer is for the psalmist to be saved, for the enemies to be humbled, so that God's kingdom is protected. Verse 9 also has the sentiment of glory coming to God's name and his rule being established.

Well, what are the needs the psalmist prays for? What daily bread does he ask for? Well, I'm not sure it's very clear here. He is poor and needy, verse 1.

He needs protection, verse 2. He needs God's mercy, verse 3. In verse 16, the prayer is for God to save him because he knows he can't do it himself. And I guess those requests will include both practical and spiritual elements.

[18:43] Psalmist doesn't make that clear here, but he's not ashamed to bring these big requests to God, is he? Nor is he ashamed to ask for a sign of God's love, something to encourage him, and also as a sign to his enemies that God is for him.

He certainly needs forgiveness, mercy, and grace come up in those same verses. What about praying for his enemies? Or for him to be able to forgive them?

Well, I'm not sure it's clear here. It's really only in the teachings of Jesus that we see that embodied for us really clearly. But in verse 17, he prays, may my enemies be put to shame.

And I do wonder whether there is an element of that, seeking their forgiveness and restoration there. Shame and guilt are needed, aren't they? We need to feel those kind of things before we will come to God and ask for our own forgiveness.

I wonder if that's a silent prayer in that direction. The psalmist's desire not to be led into temptation and kept safe from evil is clear clearly in verse 11.

[19:55] Teach me your ways, Lord. Give me an undivided heart that I might fear your name. That's a lovely prayer to pray for ourselves, isn't it?

Teach me your ways, Lord. Give me an undivided heart. We won't stray or be led into temptation if that prayer is answered. And although the psalm doesn't end with a moment of praise and doxology, the last words of verse 17 have that kind of impact.

In fact, it's the confidence in God that runs through this whole psalm. Every prayer of intercession is also a prayer of praise because the psalmist knows that God is a God who forgives, who is good, who abounds in love, who listens to the cries of his children, who is worthy, incomparably glorious, and utterly faithful.

It's as if there is an undercurrent or a beat that's going through this psalm. To him be the power and the glory forever and ever.

You see the variety of prayers the psalmist is using here? It's the same ingredients that we find in the Lord's Prayer. They're mixed up in a different way. It's a different kind of outcome, but all the ingredients are there.

[21:17] And I dare say, had the Old Testament writers known more of Jesus and his sacrifice, what he did for lost sinners on the cross, they too would have been more aware of their own sin and also been willing to pray for others.

Well, this is also a New Testament thing. So flick forward to that passage that we also had read earlier on today. Philippians chapter 4.

Almost at the end of the New Testament. Page 1180 something.

88? Gone too far. 1181. 1181. 1181. 1181. Now, this section isn't a prayer, okay?

It's not a prayer. It's not even a series of instructions about prayer. It's wider than that. It's about how we are to live life as Christians. But as we saw last week, one of the aim of a Christian life is to live in close fellowship with God with that open phone line, if you like, where we're talking to him regularly, in communication with God at all times.

[22:41] So again, there is no area of our life that is off limits from God and his Spirit's work. But notice the call to rejoice in the Lord always in verse 1.

Hallowed. Holy is your name, O Lords. There is praise here. How does God's kingdom come? Well, it comes as Christians or as people come to Jesus and are transformed as we live lives of humble, faithful, joyful obedience.

So verse 2. Let's live that out. Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Verse 9. Put what you have seen and heard into practice. That's how Jesus, how God's kingdom comes in our lives.

But the heart of the passage is the call to bring all our requests to God. So that by doing so, we are not anxious. The link between prayer and peace in our hearts is strong here, isn't it?

See, we will only know God's peace if God is our heavenly Father. And we will only know that closeness with him that allows us to leave those troubles behind if we have brought them to him

and said, I can't deal with this.

[23:56] You take it. But there is a need for thankfulness here too, isn't there? As part of our petitions. Let me read that to you.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God. I wonder, in the middle of our asking about what we do not have, do we sometimes lose sight of all the things that we have got?

And wouldn't it be better to have an attitude of gratitude, to live lives of thankfulness first, to appreciate everything that God has given? But notice there are no restrictions on what we might bring to God in terms of our requests.

We're not to be anxious about anything because we can pray and ask him for everything. In any situation, nothing is too small or too complex for God.

And as the Lord's Prayer shows us, those things will include our guilt and our sin, our failure to love others and love our enemies. And as for not being led into temptation, but delivered us, delivered from evil, well, Paul shows us how to do that.

[25:14] And that's to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. So that whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, pure, lovely, admirable, whatever is praiseworthy and excellent, according to God's standards, those are the things we're to spend our time thinking of.

It's a call to set our minds on things above, on the Lord. Things that build us up and make us more like Jesus. Because as we get our thinking right, as God's word and standards is engraved on our hearts, so our lives are reoriented, reoriented to pursue the things of God.

That's one of the ways God's kingdom comes in our own lives. Now this morning's been more of a teaching session than a kind of a heart-wrenching sermon, but I hope it's been practical and helpful.

As we gather in our prayer course this week, we're going to think about these things a bit more practically and what that might look like with some resources to help you. So even if you've not been along yet, can I invite you to come this week, either tomorrow lunchtime, half past 12 at Abbotsbury, or here tomorrow night.

Sorry, here on Tuesday night at seven o'clock. So even if that's the only session that you come to, do make the effort to come along so that I'm sure it'll be helpful.

[26:37] Because the more we learn to pray like Jesus and pray like the psalmists and the apostles, the deeper that communication with our Father gets, well, the closer to God we're able to draw.

And as we draw closer to him, the more our prayer lives will deepen and flourish. And the more we will know the joy and the peace that is ours through faith in Christ.

May God bless us and teach us how to pray.