

Transforming Prayer - 21st March 2021

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Greetings everyone, terrific to be with you for this latest instalment of our Sunday stuff.

These sessions where the aim is to give us a spiritual sugar boost for the week ahead. If you don't know me, my name's Matt, the Vigorous St John's, based here in Chase Terrace in Burntwood in deepest, delightfulest Staffordshire, although I'm aware various other folks from well beyond our borders are tuning in as well. Indeed, that's a reminder that despite our obligations to stay local in these tricky times, we're all part of a much bigger body, a bigger community of people united in our desire to know hope and peace and joy in this God-given life. Indeed, our community includes younger ones as well, so if you've got those in your care, Lottie's over in our Sunday Stars playlist with another session for them.

This week looking at the parable of the Good Samaritan, so do swing over there if that sounds suitable. Back in this neck of these web-based woods though, well, let's pray as we begin, not for any superstitious reason, but simply because it's good to be intentional in acknowledging that God already is, always has been and always will be with us.

And so God, how you doing? And that's a genuine question because we'd love to know more of your thoughts, your feelings, your ways today. As you know, we've been looking at prayer recently this communication between you and us. So open our ears, our eyes, our minds, our hearts to you today. And in doing so, God, may we be increasingly open to those you've given us to live alongside, open to their needs, their dreams, their struggles, their joys.

Freshen us up today, we pray. Fresh enough to play our part in the common life, in community life, you know, looking out for ways we can serve, since it's in giving that we truly receive.

[2 : 26] Thank you, God. Amen. Amen. All right. Well, as I said, we've been looking at prayer in recent weeks, and it'd be good to continue in that groove today, in particular by exploring what we might call transforming prayer. And by this, I mean prayer that shapes us from within. Prayer that enables us to become more of the people God always intended for us to be. Now, to kick us off in our thinking on this, be good to go back to the beginning in some ways, and take a look at a particular aspect of the creation story in the book of Genesis in the Bible. It's the story of Adam and Eve, these prototype people whose stories give us real insight into the kind of people God first made us to be. Now, I don't want us to get bogged down in what kind of story this Genesis account is. You know, is it literal or more symbolic? Because, well, it's got a talking snake in it. So that's a pretty big clue that there are at least some elements which are intended to be read creatively, shall we say. But whatever style of story it is, it's set in the

Garden of Eden, an idyllic garden which we're told has been planted by God and in which Adam and Eve are placed. In this garden, the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground, trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were a tree of life and a tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So, a tremendous setting in which to live, an abundance of blossoming trees to enjoy and eat fruit from. The tree of life that's mentioned is just that, a tree which God gives as a gift to humans in order that they may have ongoing eternal life with God. The God who we see elsewhere in the story, who walks with them in the garden. Life designed to be lived with God. Now, Adam and Eve are told that they can eat from the tree of life. In fact, says God, you are free to eat from any tree in the garden. But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will surely die. Now, a bit harsh, we might think. You know, what's the problem with this particular tree? I mean, surely knowledge is a good thing for us to consume. So, on the surface, this sounds like a God who simply wants to keep hold of that knowledge and therefore the power that comes with it for themselves. Well, in order to help us understand this tree's significance, we need to dip into the Hebrew language in which this story was first told. You see, the words we translate as good and evil are the Hebrew words *tov* and *ra*.

Tov is good, ra is evil. Except that in translating ra as evil, we might be over-egging the pudding a bit because our English word evil tends to refer to moral evil. You know, seeing evil in a cosmic sense, you know, almost as some independent force. And yet, whilst the Hebrew word ra can mean evil in this moral sense, it tends also to mean something a bit less cosmic and a bit more every day. So, ra can be translated as unpleasant, harmful or not beneficial. In fact, our English word bad is probably a better translation. So, the tree in question becomes the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. Now, why does this matter? Well, this knowing good and bad, this knowing tov and ra phrase, crops up on other occasions in the Bible, such as here in the book of Deuteronomy, saying, your children, who do not yet know good from bad, they will enter the land. Or how about here in 1 Kings when Solomon says, now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, yet I am but a little child. So, give your servant a heart to discern between good and bad.

And so, whether talking about literal young children or feeling like a little child in the case of Solomon, knowledge of good and bad would seem to be regarded as a sign of maturity. It's the kind of idea that whilst teenagers and adults are old enough to know better, children, certainly at the very youngest age, haven't yet matured enough to have a knowledge of what makes something good or bad, or what the consequences of their actions might be.

[8 : 10] And so, because of their immaturity, we know not to put too much responsibility on their young shoulders. Rather, as adults, we do know better than children do, and so our role is to guide, advise, protect, model, encourage, provide boundaries, and so on, in order to help them, in time, to mature.

Now, what's interesting is that this principle of not putting too much responsibility onto immature shoulders, well, it continues way past those earliest years of childhood.

I mean, I know in my life, there have been times when I've been given responsibility without really having the necessary maturity to handle it.

So, if you recall last week, I said that in my early 20s, I was a furniture restorer in London, and that's true. But alongside that practical role, I was also responsible for the day-to-day running of the furniture shop we did that restoration from.

So, at the age of 23, I was employed by the owner to manage his shop, which, at the time, had a half a million pound annual turnover.

[9 : 32] Now, some 23-year-olds would excel in that environment. But was I really ready for that managerial responsibility when I was 23?

No, not really. I mean, I'd be going out drinking till four in the morning on a work night, and during the day, I was far more interested in flirting with customers than selling to them.

I remember once, you know, no word of a lie, I even gave an antique table away to a woman who came into the shop, simply because I fancied her. I know, I know, it's terrible, really.

There's certainly no way to run a business. Now, you'll be pleased to know I've grown up a little since then, but it's an illustration of how necessary maturity is to handling responsibility.

And that, I think, is the context in which Adam and Eve are told not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad, because God knew that if they did, it would put too much responsibility on their shoulders.

[10 : 44] Responsibility which they didn't have enough maturity to handle. You see, God effectively says to Adam and Eve, look, I'll give you life and everything you need to enjoy it.

I'll walk with you every day, but let me be the one who guides you with how to live, who helps you understand what will be good or bad for you.

Don't take that fruit into your own hands. Don't take that responsibility onto yourselves. It's too much and it'll break you. Rather, let me give you the wisdom you need as my gift to you when you need it. Adam and Eve were told that God, not them, would be the best judge of what's good and bad. And so all they had to do was trust in God's knowledge, in God's wisdom.

Trust which would be demonstrated by agreeing not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. And yet, these two rejected God's direction, decided they knew better, and did indeed eat from the tree.

[11 : 57] And sadly, it all went downhill from there. And so how does this story relate to us? Well, it seems to me that in many ways, we're still tempted to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad today.

We're still tempted to define for ourselves what's good and bad for us, without instead trusting that it's God who knows what's best for us.

I mean, if we take a moment, I wonder what you'd say are the things you struggle to follow God's guidance, God's wisdom on.

Those things you know that God would encourage you to do or not to do, but you decide to compromise on or even do the opposite of anyway. I wonder what you'd say your weak spots are. I think for me, and you may find this for you too, the longer I follow a path of faith, it's not so much the big or scandalous things I struggle with.

[13:13] Rather, it's the small, daily choices, because these are a lot easier to succumb to, a lot easier to overlook. So, for example, I understand that God knows that we as humans need to take at least one day of rest a week.

Exodus 20, verse 10. It's good for our bodies, our minds, our spirits, our relationships. But do I always follow that wisdom to take a day of rest once a week?

Nah, do I heck. Why don't I? Well, to put it bluntly, it's because I think I know better. Or when God says don't keep a record of wrongs, 1 Corinthians 13, verse 5, do I follow that advice?

Nah. In fact, I can be pretty bad at letting things go, especially in arguments with my wife, Gemma, when I can usually be relied upon to drag up some distant behaviour of hers in order to avoid facing my own failures in the present.

Why do I keep a record of wrongs? Well, because I think I know better than God. Well, when God says do not gloat when your enemy stumbles, Proverbs 24, verse 17, do I follow that rule?

[14:40] Nah. If I'm honest, I tend to love it when people I don't like are knocked off their perch. Why? Well, because I think I know better that that rule somehow doesn't apply to me.

You know, these are all things I'm not proud of. They're all things that creep up on me so I don't always realise I'm doing them or that I feel that way. But they're all ways in which I'm choosing to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad convincing myself that I'm in a better position than God to define the best way to live my life.

I mean, I'm sure I must sometimes come across to God like a toddler who's having a tantrum, screaming that I'm not tired and I don't want to go to bed, all the while yawning and itching my eyes.

And yet, like a toddler in that situation, I don't know what's best for me. I don't know what's good and bad for me better than God does. And yet, I still tend to behave as if I do.

I still choose to eat fruit from that tree. Ask me, what about you? In what ways might you make choices where it appears you know better than God?

[16:04] Where you live in ways which go against the guidance we've got from God on how to live? We all do it, either through negligence or weakness or our own deliberate fault.

And yet, the good news is that as a loving parent, God doesn't reject us or disown us. Nah, God gets that we've been daft in taking that responsibility onto ourselves even when we don't have the emotional or spiritual maturity to handle it.

I mean, what does Jesus say on the cross even with those who are literally killing him in mind? Father, forgive them for they do not know what they're doing.

It's the same for us. We don't know what we're doing. I certainly don't. And yet, I get things wrong all the time because I think I do. I eat from the tree because I think I know best.

But I don't. God does. And when we realise that, well, that's the prompt for us to confess that fact and ask for God's forgiveness.

[17:19] Forgiveness which will always come because God will always forgive us as the immature but wholly loved children we are. And it's at this point of reaching a place of confession, of acknowledging that we're not mature enough to always decide what's right and wrong for ourselves, well, I'd say that's the crucial first half to what transforming prayer is all about.

It's about being able to say a simple but profound sorry to God that we've taken the responsibility for deciding what's good and bad in our lives onto our own shoulders when really that wisdom that judgment that discernment belongs to God and God alone.

Now, if confession is the first half what's the second half to transforming prayer? Well, once we've acknowledged that God knows best we're then in the right place to ask for God's knowledge God's wisdom God's discernment to shape our lives.

We don't take that knowledge like we might pluck a piece of fruit from a tree now rather God gives us that knowledge as a gift God gives us wisdom and discernment as a gift as and when we need it

most.

And so I guess this begs the question how might our prayer life help us to know the gift of God's knowledge God's wisdom in our lives?

[19 : 01] And it's a big question so I'd just like to share a few practical ways in which God might help us work this out in our lives. Now, for a start as we've been saying over the last couple of weeks prayer is primarily an ongoing conversation with God a way of relating that ideally becomes an increasingly natural integral part of our lives.

And so if we want God to teach us wisdom to teach us to live in good ways then I'd suggest we do well to surround ourselves with reminders of that fact.

So for example one of the simplest best but for my money best things I've seen and these pop up in schools workplaces staff rooms and so on all the time is this little acronym THINK T-H-I-N-K you've probably seen it it's basically a reminder for us to say to ourselves before we speak think is what we're about to say true helpful inspiring necessary kind because if it's not then probably don't say it so next time you're at work in a shopping queue on the phone especially maybe when you're posting on social media THINK is what I'm about to say true or helpful or inspiring or necessary or kind and whilst that momentary pause to think before we speak might at first feel a bit clunky the more this acronym comes to mind the more of a habit it will be to follow its wisdom and as the apostle Paul writes in

Philippians says this whatever is true whatever is noble whatever is right whatever is pure whatever is lovely whatever is admirable if anything is excellent or praiseworthy think about such things thinking on these things before we speak well that to me is a prayer for wisdom a prayer which can slowly but surely transform us now the beauty of this think thing is that you can write it up or print it out and stick it up at work stick it up in your home have it is your screensaver and so on all without a worry that you're going to be seen as some god bothering bible basher because it's not like it's some cheesy kitten poster with a bible verse on it nah and yet it is godly wisdom wisdom which can shape our prayers wisdom which we can meditate on wisdom which forms our actions and that can only be a good thing equally equally though in the privacy of our own home our own car our own workspace maybe perhaps it is an idea to put in other prompts to be open to god's guiding knowledge of what's good and bad so for example in my office at home in amongst pictures of jimmy hendrix and west ham and back to the future and other things i love i've got this picture on my wall words based on a parable jesus told in matthew 25 says feed the hungry give drink to the thirsty clothe the naked shelter the homeless visit the sick the imprisoned bury the dead now i've got this on my office wall mainly as a reminder to me to not let the busyness or the admin of my job take priority over the people who really matter and so this picture for me is in effect a prayer of aspiration i want to be someone who helps to feed the hungry and so on even if sometimes my own preference would be to hide away or let someone else do it i wonder for you maybe there's something in your home that conveys an aspiration you might make part of your prayer life could be a picture a fridge magnet a postcard even having a welcome mat outside your door might raise an awareness of the need to welcome the stranger in our midst there are all sorts of everyday icons if you like that can help us to pray for god's ways to become our ways or perhaps consider this what's your password on your computer or your email account i mean don't tell me and by all means have your second cousin's best friend's neighbor's maiden name as your password or whatever but it may be more helpful to change it to an encouragement or a bible verse or something which acts as a reminder for you that when you type it you're quietly asking to seek god's will to put god's ways first that day or maybe put photos on your fridge of places where you've particularly felt close to god in the past again as a way to keep that awareness at the forefront of your mind or what's your profile background on facebook by all means have something daft or cute even kittens if you must but maybe vary it sometimes with something which reminds you to be kind with what you post and share or when you're making a playlist for the car are there songs in there whose lyrics remind you to ask

god for wisdom on how to live it doesn't have to be overt worship songs could be but it could be anything that speaks to you i mean my go-to for that kind of stuff is bruce springsteen or are there instrumental tracks which enable you to focus on god then again maybe when you eat every meal can become a form of communion not just by saying grace and giving thanks to god but as you eat maybe just quietly asking god to fill you with what you need to live in ways which reflect the ways of jesus when you're down the pub soon i hope soon maybe make every first sip of a new pint a time

to ask god to guide your conversation with those you're sitting with when you're putting the bins out at home ask god to recycle and redeem the mistakes you've made that week when you're gardening or cooking talk with god about how your time and talents could be used to nurture or sustain others when you plug your phone in to recharge it ask god to recharge your capacity to love when you're on your way to pick up the kids or walk in the dog or get in the shopping ask god to give you the right words to be able to encourage those people you might bump into or when you're logging in to your bank account online ask for god's help to become more generous with your money and where you might give it to and so on and so on and so on see what works for you in the everyday

[26 : 39] I mean I guess if you find prayer comes best to you when you're sitting quietly with your eyes closed and you block out all distractions then that's great go for it go for it in that way of praying and yet as I said the other week with that squirrel comment you know for me I'm so easily distracted that I find it nearly impossible to pray like that and so what I realise I'm doing more and more of these days is allowing and asking god to speak to me through those distractions through the tasks I do through my surroundings asking god to use all that I experience to transform me more and more into the person I was intended to be and maybe that's an approach you may find is fruitful for you too and I'll finish with this

I said earlier that in that Garden of Eden story we're told god was in the habit of walking in the garden in the cool of the early evening a daily walk which it seems would normally be taken with Adam and Eve strikes me that's what prayer is walking and talking with god and that's why it's transformational because as we keep company with god so god's ways god's wisdom will increasingly shape and guide our thoughts our words our deeds as we follow and walk with jesus by his spirit may we be ever more transformed into his likeness through his love all right well as i said one of the ways we can keep conversing with god is through music and the saint john's band have recorded a smasher of a song for us this week whose words are rich in meaning and significance is the song called this i believe it's been added to our playlist of worship songs here on youtube playlist of well over 50 songs from the band now so as with them so with this one in that our prayer is that god would speak to us through it now as we respond to his love our father everlasting the all created one god almighty through your holy spirit conceiving christ the son jesus our savior i believe in god our father i believe in christ the son i believe in the holy spirit our god is three in one i believe in the resurrection that we will rise again for i believe in the name of jesus our loving the god just our our judge and our defender suffered and crucified forgiveness

Forgiveness is in you. Descended into darkness, your rising glorious light, forever seated high. I believe in God our Father. I believe in Christ the Son. I believe in the Holy Spirit, our God is three in one.

I believe in the resurrection, that we will rise again. For I believe in the name of Jesus.

[31 : 40] I believe in you. I believe you rose again.

I believe that Jesus Christ is Lord.

I believe in you. I believe You rose again. I believe that Jesus Christ is yours.

I believe in life eternal. I believe in the virgin birth. I believe in the saints communion and in Your holy church.

I believe in the resurrection when Jesus comes again. For I believe in the name of Jesus.

[33 : 02] I believe in God our Father. I believe in Christ the Son. I believe in the Holy Spirit. Our God is three in one.

I believe in the resurrection that we will rise again. For I believe in the name of Jesus.

For I believe in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Splendid stuff. And my thanks to the band for all their continuing to give us each week. It's time to wind things up here though for today. But if you fancy a few more minutes of thoughts and questions on today's session.

Do make use of the extra time video as and when you'd like to. And as always if you found this helpful. Do share it around on social media with your friends and so on.

[34 : 16] Until next time though. A word of blessing to send us on our way with God. Indeed may the blessing of God.

The one who knows the way to live. And walks with us day by day. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit. May that blessing increasingly transform your life and mine.

So that we are becoming more and more like Jesus. Both now and always. Amen.