

# Conspiring Prayer - 7th March 2021

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[ 0 : 0 0 ] hey everyone it's oh so splendid to be with you once again for this our latest youtube sunday session my name is matt the vigor of st john's community church and whether your connection with st john's is as a veteran of those distant days of in-person gatherings or whether you've plugged in more recently to what's on offer here virtually it's a special thing to be united together in this way each of us is welcome as the next and all of us sharing in something bigger than ourselves indeed that bigger picture is rooted in an awareness of god's presence with us or rather our presence with god since there's nowhere god isn't and that's a comfort in these times of transition as we cope with what's current while inching towards and opening up of our future common life together the schools are generally back tomorrow which certainly makes for a big week in our house although it is weird having those same first day nerves for our 10 and seven year old as we did on their first days at nursery and yet just as jesus said to let the children come to him so as a community we can entrust our children both into the hands of their caring teachers but also ultimately into the hands of our caring god you know jesus had a bunch of brothers and sisters so he no doubt had a whole host of nieces and nephews to whom he was an uncle i mean think about it how cool would it have been as a six seven eight year old to pop and see uncle jesus you know someone who would have made you feel just so special so loved well the good news is whether we tend to see jesus as an uncle a friend a brother a teacher a king a savior or indeed whether we see him in different ways on different days our connection with jesus our proximity to him through his spirit with us it's a gift which is ours to receive and so god thank you for being ace you know for being the one who whether we always realize it or not accompanies us on our journey these life journeys with all their twists and turns their chances and challenges open our minds please to the ways you would long for us to know you more to involve you more in our lives indeed help us to model our lives on jesus and to be the best versions of ourselves that we can be both individually and corporately and so speak to us today in this time now please that we might be encouraged and equipped for the road ahead thank you god amen all right well it'll be good today for us to think about the whole area of prayer it's a subject we may well spend the next week or two on as well because prayer is seen as an essential element to faith this idea that we can address god in word or in thought and hopefully receive some kind of response or answers back prayer is reckoned to underpin the whole spiritual life so much so that you've got that we can address the question of prayer that we can address the question of prayer and we can address the question of prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing it's quite the quote one which underlines the perceived importance of prayer but also a statement which implies

we should find prayer as natural for us as breathing in and breathing out i wonder to what extent would you say that's been your experience of prayer over the years prayer which comes as naturally and as effortlessly as breathing you see i think for me as much as i might aspire to finding prayer that easy not being honest with you for the vast majority of my life prayer has been the part of my faith which i've struggled with more than anything else is something which for years and years i've felt basically a complete fraud and failure at and i say that not so you get the string section of sympathy out for me no but simply because it's true i mean for example when i try to pray in any kind of formal way i just find my mind wandering to anything but the thing i should be focused on almost like dear god i pray for my next door neighbor who's going through a hard time and oh look a squirrel do you know i mean you you know my tension span in that kind of prayer is embarrassingly short so easily distracted so easily disengaged so easily bored that more often than not i genuinely feel like i suck at praying indeed i heard someone pretty central to the church here say once the trouble is matt's just not really into prayer is he and i remember not being offended so much as thinking well yeah they've probably got a point and yet the implications of that if it's true for me as a

vicar yeah but more importantly as someone of any kind of faith in god at all well it would appear to be pretty damning really i'm not going to be a part of prayer and yet what i've come to realize over recent years is that that's not true i am into prayer i do value prayer deeply in fact it's just that how i pray why i pray where i pray well it's an ongoing journey of discovery for me as i suspect it is for you and so to help us begin to think about our prayer lives today here's a parable jesus tells from luke's gospel chapter 18 then 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 who neither feared god nor cared what people thought 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 what people think yet because this widow keeps bothering me i will see that she gets justice so that she won't eventually come and attack me and the lord said listen to what the unjust judge says and 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 that they get justice and quickly however when the son of man comes will he find faith on the earth now it's a parable which luke tells us is jesus's way of highlighting how we should always pray and not

give up to do this jesus tells a story of this widow who persistently nags the local judge to grant her justice and although we're told this judge really couldn't care less eventually he gets so annoyed with her relentless hounding that he gives in and grants her wish and so jesus uses this judge as a picture to illustrate that this is exactly what god is not like god is not someone who needs nagging who couldn't care less who isn't bothered about administering justice and so on no rather in contrast jesus describes god this way saying will not god bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night will he keep putting them off no of course not god will see that they get justice justice and quickly in other words god's not at all like an uncaring judge we need to convince or nag no we can trust god to hear our cry and respond in as full and timely a way as possible and yet what i find interesting about this parable is that so much of how i've tended to pray over the years would suggest that actually i do think god is somewhat like this uncaring judge for example one common way we tend to pray for folks might sound something like this dear god please keep fred safe today would you pour out your love on him amen now in some ways it's a perfectly fine prayer you know a simple one maybe asking for god to keep fred safe and love him and yet i'm curious why do we feel the need to ask god to do that yes it may well come for us and maybe even fred to know that we've prayed it but asking god to keep fred safe implies that we somehow think god won't already be doing everything in his power to do just that that somehow we need to request or convince or remind god to do what he would already be doing to the best of his ability anyway or by asking for god to pour out his love on fred what does that request actually suggest that god is not already loving fred in as full and complete way as possible that somehow god could be withholding his love from fred but that our prayers might somehow prompt an increase of god's loving activity in fred's life you see i don't think god needs asking to be loving to someone or to care for their welfare or to grant them traveling mercies as though without such a prayer god would withhold such action i mean imagine asking jesus to his face you know jesus you know could you could you show fred some love please i suspect jesus may well look right back at us with a kind of wry smile and say something like why are you asking me to do that do you not think i'm already loving him in as full a way as possible equally as jesus parable explains i don't think god needs to be nagged to do something good either in somehow our persistency in prayer will eventually twist god's arm to act in a way that he wouldn't have done before we'd proved how much we cared now god already cares for us and our loved ones in

unfathomably deeper ways than we can ever imagine goes back to this idea of the uncontrolling love of god that we looked at back in october last year and now it's in god's nature to already be doing everything in his power to love people and the only limit on that love is that it can't be imposed on us since as we saw the other week love does not force itself on others so no the limit of the impact of god's love in our lives is not due to god's unwillingness or inability to love rather it's that it can't be imposed on us that's the spiritual battle if you like that love won't always be welcomed or lived out in people's lives for all sorts of reasons and god can't force anyone to be loving or indeed to be open to his love and so rather than praying dear god please keep fred safe today would you pour out your love on him i think for me a better place to start would be from a place of gratitude for who god is and what god's already doing in fred's life so for example it might instead sound like this dear god thank you that you are already doing everything you can to keep fred safe today thank you that you are already pouring your love into his life at every opportunity

you see it might seem a subtle difference but it actually totally shifts the tone of our prayer because it opens up and gives space for us to share what's really on our hearts so our prayers might continue from gratitude into greater honesty we might continue yeah and yet god if i'm honest i am really worried about fred i'm worried for his health the pain he's in but i feel so helpless and i so want him to know how much you love him you see when we start with an initial attitude of gratitude it reminds us that we're dealing with a god who is love who couldn't possibly be more loving and the confidence that gives us then enables us to be honest with god about why we might be praying for fred in the first place in this instance it's because we love fred and we're worried for him and i would say it's through this honesty that the whole point of this kind of prayer begins to come into focus you see in saying at the end there and i so want fred to know how much you love him it then prompts the question okay well how will fred know how much god loves him what's the answer well i'd say we are usually that answer fred will experience and crucially become more open to receiving god's love through the way we love and care for him how can we show fred love and bingo within a few short words our prayer has shifted from simply handing everything over to god in a passive kind of please do your thing god amen kind of way to becoming a far more involved relational active prayer as we begin to ask not for god to love fred more because god's love for fred is already infinite but how we can love fred more what can we do to show god's love to fred

and this for me is central because in praying in this way we're now opening ourselves up to be able to hear from god for god to give us ideas empathy inspiration imagination for ways to care for fred whether that's giving him a phone call a card a cake a takeaway a crate of beer a day out a lift to the hospital while someone else mows his lawn you know there are all manner of ways in which god might inspire us to be the answer if you like to our own prayers but the beauty of this is that prayer becomes a much more two-way process it becomes a partnership with god not a one-way petitionary prayer you know please god do this kind of thing but rather a conspiring prayer literally breathing together with god conspiring to find ways together to bring love into people's lives and in my experience as we've been saying for a while now when people encounter and are the recipients of love in action well it invariably makes them more open to relating to and receiving god's love directly for themselves that's what i think persistent prayer is all about not being persistent in nagging god nah i suspect that does god's heading you know persistent prayer has got nothing to do with repeating our requests like some stuck record we wouldn't speak to jesus like that in person so why do it in our prayers now instead i'd suggest being persistent in prayer means not giving up on working with god to be the answers to those prayers and this kind of prayer of starting with gratitude moving on to honesty before working out with god what an active loving response might be well for me it can totally transform how we feel about and engage with prayer and so leaving fred aside let's take another example but a very different kind of situation that of the country of yemen whose people are facing the biggest humanitarian crisis of our time indeed to highlight what's happening here's a recent report from bbc news yemen is at risk of the worst famine the world has seen in decades according to the united nations the un warns that 16 million people will go hungry this year including some 400 000 children who will suffer from what it calls severe acute malnutrition and could die without urgent treatment yemen was already the arab world's poorest country before its civil war escalated in 2015 houthi rebels backed by iran control most of the population there the yemeni government which is helped by a saudi-led coalition which is backed by the uk has been carrying out a bombing campaign in support of the internationally recognized government our international correspondent all agarines report from southern yemen does contain some distressing scenes from the start every breath is a struggle and he is dangerously thin mohammed ammar is 12 months old but too weak to hold his head up he's in the grip of severe acute malnutrition mohammed needs to go to hospital urgently his mother huria knows but

[ 20 : 20 ] can do nothing can do nothing can do nothing can do nothing can do nothing this rural clinic couldn't provide transport for mohammed can do nothing we were able to give mother and baby a lift to the hospital an hour away this was a chance encounter in taiz province an area ravaged by hunger in one of the world's poorest countries malnutrition was entrenched in yemen before the war but has increased every year since the hospital at halifa hospital doctors do what they can they say mohammed's weight is about half what it should be and he has a chest infection he's put on oxygen a lifeline for now we can help the the case which reached to our hospital but there is a lot of baby cannot reach to our hospital so this is the problem are you afraid that there are children dying at home yes there is a lot of cases dying home due to a lot of factors or a lot of causes those causes are complex but don't include lack of food in the markets there's plenty to buy

but many can't afford it six years of conflict have taken their toll food prices have risen about a hundred and forty percent the emmini currency has collapsed along with the economy and the youngest here are heartbreakingly vulnerable her name is gada waleed she came because of acute gastroenteritis she's four months old tiny gada is deteriorating rapidly in the southern city of aiden for her mother iptida displaced by the war seeing her like this rigid with pain is another trauma gada has severe acute malnutrition and is running a high fever dr maha suleiman tries to cool down her tiny body with a cold cloth some of gada's test results come back it's not good news when i found the really sick children and they give on coming deteriorated or not responding to treatment it's very hard even we have some of the sleep disturbance really for me i have a sleep disturbance some nights and it's very hard and painful and we have even no time to change the the sheet of the bed just to change the sheet and another patient is just coming well doctors are now extremely concerned about gada they say her case is critical she needs an x-ray but it's too far away across the hospital they can't take the chance of moving her now she's on oxygen at the moment and they're just trying to stabilize her as the spectre of famine hangs over yemen those in need are getting less food aid because of cuts in international donations the un says yemenis are not starving they are being starved since we filmed these pictures gada has died or lagiran bbc news southern yemen the terrible plight of so many young children there in yemen that was all lagiran reporting now it's the kind of news story that can't fail to move us and yet in light of what we've been

talking about today how might we pray into it well as with that earlier example we could pray something like please god protect those who are suffering meet their needs and bring peace to that land and in many ways that's a well-intentioned compassionate prayer to pray and yet as before by asking god to protect people meet their needs bring peace and so on well i think it risks implying that god is not already doing everything within his ability to do just that which surely cannot be the case since the god who jesus reveals to us is one who does everything possible to feed the hungry and care for the sick now i don't think we need to ask god to do more as within the confines of what human free will allows god's love will already be working to the maximum effect possible rather if we take the gratitude honesty response pattern of prayer from earlier let's just imagine what might be a better way to pray for yemen now this may sound a perverse way to begin but what is there to be grateful to god for in this dreadful situation well we might pray something like this dear god we thank you for the love you have for our brothers and sisters in yemen thank you for the compassion and expertise you've given to medics on the ground to aid agencies working there to journalists reporting what's happening thank you that you are already doing everything currently possible to bring hope to those who are suffering and maybe we pause there because it's important we then move on to honesty and so we might pray something like this and yet god what we see on our screens is utterly heartbreaking where the consequences of war and greed by the few are devastating the lives of millions yes the politics of it all is hugely complicated but it can't be right that our government continue to sell weapons to saudi arabia which are then used to bomb areas where so many civilians live can't be right that there's enough food to go around but that people are dying because they can't afford it it can't be right that just this week our government announced a 60 percent cut to its aid budget to yemen because we need to protect our own finances at home you know looking at these pictures that's appalling and if all of this makes us angry and upset and grieves our our hearts how much more heartache anger and grief must this be stirring up in you oh god of love and justice and maybe again we pause because silence can often be crucial at this point in order to allow for both the gravity of the needs before us to become clear but also to give god time to begin to stir up our imagination for what response might be required of us in partnership with him to the needs we've seen

and so the outworking of our prayers the response that this situation calls for could involve something like this would you show us god how we can partner with you by standing in solidarity with and offering practical support to those suffering in yemen just as that news team gave a lift to muhammad and his mother so they could get to hospital what can we do god well thank you that we can donate money to help combat this humanitarian crisis indeed god give us generous hearts in donating to the unicef oxfam or save the children appeals online thank you that we can put pressure on our own government to stop selling arms to saudi arabia and to help us to write to our mp today thank you that we can campaign against the government's drastic cuts coming at the worst possible time to their humanitarian aid for yemen again give us the commitment to write to our mp on this matter to sign the online petitions god the word yemen originally means blessed help us please to

