

# Sunday 27th July 2025 - Living Prayer: Connecting Through Prayer

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[ 0 : 00 ] We're concluding, as Laura just said, our Live in Prayer series. A series that we've been looking at the various ways in which prayer can be a living reality for us in our relationship with God.

And prayer is the way that we do relate to God. It's how we converse. It's how we communicate. It's how we connect with God.

And prayer simply means talking with God. You know, expressing ourselves to God and listening for God's voice in our lives, however that might come. And as Laura was helping us to think about last week and that listening to God talk she shared with us.

And yet what's interesting, I think, is that for so many folks, maybe even us, our primary understanding of prayer is often that it's about asking God for something.

We might say maybe prayers for healing or help or health or happiness, prayers for peace or protection or provision. You know, all prayers that are requesting or petitioning, even pleading with God to do something.

[ 1 : 17 ] Then after you've prayed that, oh God, just do something in this situation, please. Please, God, heal my husband. Please, God, protect my friend. Please, God, help me find a job.

Please, God, bring peace to the Middle East. You know, all perfectly understandable requests. But, and here's a question that I'd like us to think about today.

What difference do we think these prayers will actually make and why? What difference do we think these prayers will actually make and why?

You see, my hunch is that often when we make these prayer requests, you know, when we ask God to do something, it's almost as if our very request reveals that we think that God is not already doing enough.

And so we feel inclined to ask God to do more. And if that sounds a bit blunt, I want to play out a little example for us in this.

[ 2 : 28 ] So, for instance, we might pray and ask God for safe travel. Again, a perfectly natural prayer. You know, I've done it.

I'm sure you've done it. You know, especially if we're nervous about a journey, we might shoot up a quick prayer. Please, God, keep me safe on this journey. And yet, let's just think about that prayer for a moment.

Why do we feel the need to ask that of God? Why do we feel the need to ask God to keep us safe on a journey? You see, I think for me, it kind of implies that we think that without this prayer, God will somehow not be keeping us as safe as we might otherwise be.

Indeed, it kind of suggests that God isn't already doing all that he can within his power to keep us safe. I mean, if we were to go up to our bus driver or our airline pilot and say, excuse me, but can you keep me safe on this journey, please?

The driver or the pilot will be within their rights to sort of reply, what do you think I'm going to do? You know, I'm doing my best to keep you safe. What else am I going to try? Of course I will. Of course I'll do my best.

[ 3 : 48 ] And in a way, you can see perhaps then how weird that kind of request and maybe that kind of prayer might actually be.

You know, what difference do we imagine it would make to our safety if we didn't pray that prayer? That God would somehow choose not to keep us safe?

You know, what difference might it make if we prayed that prayer twice? Would we be twice as safe? Would we be twice as effective? Would God keep us really safe if we prayed that prayer for the whole of our journey?

You know, so what do we think is going on with that kind of prayer? And for me, well, this is all quite challenging for us, I think, to think about because it gets to the heart of the kind of God who we think we're in relationship with.

For example, do we think that our prayers somehow persuade God to do more than he would otherwise consider doing?

[ 4 : 59 ] You know, almost like we've got this picture of God sort of feet up in heaven almost, you know. Ah, but I wasn't going to keep you safe. But since you've prayed, you know, you've passed the test. You've twisted my arm.

Go on then. I'll pay attention and I'll look out for you. You know, is that how God, is that how prayer works? Well, try and answer this question.

We're going to look at a parable Jesus told in Luke's gospel from chapter 18, verses 1 to 8. And have a look at what Jesus says in this one.

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.

[ 5 : 59 ] 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. Now, it's a parable which Luke tells us.

It's Jesus' way of highlighting how we should always pray and not give up. So to do this, Jesus tells this story of this widow who persistently nags the local judge to grant her justice.

And although we're told this judge couldn't really care less, eventually he gets so annoyed and worn down with her relentless hounding that he gives in and he grants her wish.

[ 7 : 10 ] But Jesus uses this judge, this unjust judge, as he calls him, as a picture to illustrate that this is exactly what God is not like.

God is not someone who needs nagging to do the right thing. As Jesus 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? No, of course not. God will see that they get justice and quickly. See, just as with so many of Jesus' parables, I think this is Jesus' way of telling his followers about the true nature and the true character of God.

God is not someone who needs persuading or nagging to do the loving or the right thing, but is instead a God who will automatically be doing whatever is loving and right, because to do otherwise would be to go against his very nature.

God is love. And therefore, God is always and already doing all he can, wherever he can, whenever he can, to bless us with that love.

[ 8 : 33 ] But as I said before, I think God's ability to control events is limited by his love.

I'm not going to go into this in huge detail this morning, but if you want to revisit the whole talk I gave on this called Love Not Control last October, you'll find it on our YouTube channel.

But for now, and in a nutshell, just to repeat some of the key points of that talk, the Bible tells us, and this is central, that love does not force itself on others.

In other words, love is not controlling. And that means for me that God is not in control, since to override our free will and the free choices we make would not be loving, it would be controlling.

As much as we might sometimes hope he would, God cannot forcefully intervene in our lives in a way that overrides our free will. He can't physically, you know, jolt us back from walking out in front of a car any more than he can manipulate a shooter's finger on the trigger.

[ 9 : 46 ] If he did do that, we'd not be able to be in genuine relationship with God, but we'd simply be his puppets. And love cannot be controlling in that way.

And yet again, for me, God's inability to override our freedom doesn't mean that God is not doing all he can to interact with our lives.

Now, just the opposite. Because in his love, God is always doing everything possible to bless us, to provide for us, and to keep us safe from harm.

Now, I appreciate you may or may not agree with that view. And as always, you're free to disagree and work things out for yourself. But if that view of God's involvement in our lives is true, where does it leave prayer?

If it's true that God in his love is already doing everything possible to bring about love and justice and provision and so on, why bother praying for anything at all?

[ 11 : 03 ] If God is already doing all he can, why do we then still see so much suffering, so much pain, so much distress in the world? Well, we're going to think about the question about prayer first, because my hope is that that will inform our thinking in response to that second question about suffering too.

So firstly, where does all this leave us with prayer? Why would we ask God for anything if God is already doing everything possible?

And that's a good question, I think, but one which I think needs responding to by seeking to shift the focus of the way we pray. So if we return to that example of a pretty common prayer that we might all have prayed on our travels, you know, please God, keep me safe.

How might we reframe that prayer in light of the nature and the character of God and his uncontrolling love? Well, I'd suggest, as with everything to do with God, it's important to start with gratitude.

So we might start by saying, rather than please God, keep me safe, we might start instead with gratitude and say, thank you God for your love.

[ 12 : 29 ] And thank you that in that love, you are already doing everything you possibly can to protect me and others from harm.

You could add more grateful stuff to that. But having expressed gratitude, I would then move on to honesty, to being honest with our loving God about how we're feeling about traveling.

So we might continue our prayer with something like this. You might say, but you'll know God, I get so nervous about traveling. It's irrational, I know, but I get scared about what would happen if we had an accident.

I worry about putting my safety in other people's hands. So help me in my anxiety, God, to receive your peace so that I can play my part in being as calm and as sensible a passenger as possible.

And again, you could say more. But that gets to the heart, I think, of our concerns, you know, an openness before God about how we're feeling and why we're inclined to pray in the first place.

[ 13 : 41 ] But after gratitude and after honesty, third and final thing I'd pray to God about would be my response. In particular, my responsibility to pray for other people.

Most notably in this instance, those who have responsibility for my safety on that journey. You know, above all, I'm going to want them to be attentive to God's guiding voice and loving wisdom.

So say I was a passenger on a plane queuing up to fly. I might, therefore, pray something like this. So you start by saying, thank you, God, for the pilots and the engineers, the cabin crew.

Thanks for all the security staff and airport staff, for the air traffic controllers and the engineers. Thank you for their skill and their care. And I realize, God, my safety is in their hands.

So I pray, God, for them that they would be open to your prompting and attentive to your voice, guiding their actions. May they receive with open hearts the fruit of your spirit in their lives, especially today, patience and self-control.

[ 15 : 02 ] Would you help all those concerned with this flight to resist feelings of pride or arrogance that could hinder their judgment and instead prompt them to be extra careful and mindful today.

above all, may they appreciate the pleasure you take in them and the care with which they do their job. Amen.

Now, it's probably quite a long-winded prayer. I appreciate you're not necessarily going to say all that as you queue it up to get on a plane or a bus or whatever. I'm sure we could pray in a much more shorthand kind of way.

But do you see the difference? You see the difference. You know, it's not asking God to be or do anything he's not already doing.

Rather, it's being grateful for his goodness, honest with God about our needs, and responding by longing for God's loving spirit to be received by those in whose hands our safety rests.

[ 16 : 10 ] And yet, in all of those prayers, I think the most mysterious aspect, perhaps, is how. How would our prayers work in inspiring other people to be open to God's guiding voice of love?

How does that work? How might my prayers for the pilot be received, for example? Well, this is a bit more speculative on my part, but my experience and my faith tells me that we as humans are far more connected than we sometimes realize.

As people made in God's image, we really are the body of Christ here on earth, intrinsically connected to one another and to God. So just as I can feel that you're here today, if I close my eyes, I know I'm in a room full of people still.

You get a sense of the energy that comes, if you like, from being together. I think that's probably how God works through our prayers for each other by connecting that same energy.

We might say connecting our spirits together by connecting my spirit with yours. Indeed, just as we're told that Jesus felt power go out of him when the woman touched even just the hem of his cloak, so too I'd say that our spirit, certainly God's spirit residing in our bodies, is bigger and broader than our physical bodies, ourselves.

[ 17 : 51 ] Through prayer, through the connecting work of God's Holy Spirit, I believe that's how my spirit and my prayers for other people can connect with them and with their spirit.

And so when I pray for someone to be open to the prompting of God's loving voice in their lives, I believe that that prayer can make them more receptive because God is able to connect my good desire for them with what God is already doing in their lives.

And I say this because of verses like this where Jesus says, here I am, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.

See, God is already knocking on everyone's door. God is already doing all God can, speaking to them, knocking on the door of their lives. But in some profoundly mysterious and yet potentially hugely effective way, when I pray for that person to respond to God's voice, God is able to connect my spirit to their spirit and their willingness to respond to God has the potential because of the prayers to become just a bit clearer and just a bit more tuned in.

That's ultimately how I think prayer works. Our prayers, our spirits partner with, they breathe with, they conspire with God's spirit in opening up and shaping the way in which each of us are willing to receive the goodness of God's love in our lives.

[ 19 : 46 ] So, when I pray, as I do any week that I'm up here, for God's blessing on us, I'm not asking for God to do anything that he's not already doing.

God is already blessing us. We don't need to pray in God's blessing. Rather, I'm praying that we might fully receive the blessing, the love, the guidance, the smile, which God is already sending our way, both for ourselves, but also so that we might pass that same blessing on to all those we're given to share this life with.

That kind of makes sense. In a very real way, prayer changes us. It changes the way we see God. It changes the way we relate to God.

and it changes the way we see one another. You can't pray for someone to be open to receiving God's love and not feel a deeper affinity, even love towards them.

I suspect it's that love, that solidarity, I might call it that spiritual unity that makes it easier for all of us to hear God's voice, receive God's love, and be transformed by his spirit.

[ 21 : 07 ] And so in light of all that, that's how I think we can begin to respond to that second question, in that if God is already doing all he can, why do we see pictures like this this week?

Why do we still see so much suffering, so much pain, so much distress in the world? Well, part of the truth is that sadly, tragically, we're living in a world in which since so many people have deliberately kept the door of their lives shut to God's voice of love, suffering is an inevitable consequence of that lack of openness, that lack of love.

love. But alongside that reality, I do wonder if part of the reason why suffering takes such a hold is that we're not always praying in the most effective way in order that it might be overcome.

What do I mean by this? Well, if we follow that gratitude, honesty, response approach that we took with that imaginary plane journey, how might we pray in reality for Gaza this week?

Well, I'd humbly suggest that it might be something like this. I'm going to use this as a sort of template by its genuine prayers as well. so you might want to feel free to close your eyes if you wish.

[ 22 : 48 ] But using that gratitude, honesty, response pattern, let's start with gratitude. So we might say, thank you, God, that you are already doing everything you possibly can to love those in distress and provide for their needs, for the way in which you're working, in community and through the courage and the care of aid agencies on the ground.

Thank you that you are doing all you can to turn the hearts of those who are committing such atrocities in that land. Thank you that in the midst of this genocide, your heart breaks for those who are suffering.

thank you that in Jesus we see you suffering alongside those in pain, but that in your resurrection love, you long to bring healing, justice, freedom, and peace.

and then I'd move on to honesty. I then would say well speaking honestly though God, we feel so overwhelmed by the scale and the barbarity of what's going on.

We're ashamed that our fellow humans can treat people in this way and especially that some people of faith think that this is a justified way of living simply because of some thoroughly mistaken and warped ideas about your plans for the land and people of Israel and Palestine.

[ 24 : 31 ] Lord, we are so sorry. We're so sorry for our lack of courage in holding our own government to account for the weapons that they're still selling to Israel, for the ineffective nature of our protests, for our complicity in creating a media and political landscape in which this type of behavior is not sanctioned or condemned more effectively.

Lord, we long for those who are hungry to be fed, for those who are penned up, Lord, to be freed. We long for different people groups to live side by side in harmony, and we long for the horrors of land grabs, greed, and religious fundamentalism to be overcome by justice, peace, and love.

Help us to know what we can do to enable your ways to come. And in having been honest, we thirdly respond by praying for others.

We might say, and so in all this dreadful situation in Gaza, we ask that the cries of our hearts, the cries of our spirits, might be connected by your spirit to those who have the power to change the course of history in those lands.

We know you are knocking, we know you are banging on the door of the lives of Netanyahu, of the Israeli government, of the Hamas leadership, of Trump, of Starmer, of all those in power in our world who are either complicit in perpetuating this violence or responsible for seeking a lasting resolution of peace.

[ 26 : 30 ] And so we fervently pray that the doors of their hearts would be open to your voice, bringing people back from the brink of further catastrophe and prompting them as leaders to seek a different way, your way of justice, compassion, hope, peace, and love.

Amen. Now, a fair few words in that prayer I grant you in this gratitude, honesty, response thing. And I'm not for a moment suggesting that that kind of prayer is anything like a comprehensive answer to all that's going on in Gaza.

And we're all just feeling our way with how to live in this world as people whose faith is in God, but who also believe in the power of prayer.

And I think for us, even though this series is coming to an end, I think it needs to be an ongoing conversation and an ongoing action as we help each other grapple with the whole area of prayer and exactly how it works.

But to go back to Jesus and that parable he told of the judge and the persistent widow. It's interesting that Luke tells us that Jesus told that parable as a way of showing us why they, why we should always pray and not give up.

[ 28 : 01 ] You know, I, we may be. We may not always understand prayer, but we persevere with it and we embrace its possibilities because Jesus tells us to.

And Jesus knows best. That in itself is a good enough reason. But if, as I believe it is, prayer is a key way by which more and more people, including us, might become more open to God's life-shaping voice of love, then it's through prayer that this world might be renewed by God's love.

The good news is that God is already doing everything possible to bring his good news of love and joy and peace into reality.

And so as we partner with God and with each other in building his kingdom here on earth, may our lives truly be a living prayer.

Amen.