

Prayer 2015

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[0 : 00] The recent events of the siege in Martin Place gripped our city. The outpouring of shock and grief was incredible. One thing that I noticed on the TV, the newspapers, Facebook, other media, was the amount of times I heard people say, or the amount of times I saw written, things like, our thoughts and our prayers are with you.

I noticed it again on Facebook in response to the South Australian bushfires just last night. My thoughts and my prayers are with you all.

This was posted from someone who I know personally, who's got no trust in a God or whatever, no connection with God, actually openly declares themselves to be an atheist, and yet writes, my thoughts and my prayers are with you all.

And I noticed it again today, this afternoon, reading the paper about the event of that guy who punched his brother and he's in hospital, the area police commander said that there's a whole lot of fingers crossed out there and there's a whole lot of prayers floating out there.

When difficulty or danger threatens, the immediate response of many people is to pray. Most humans on this planet pray at least some time in their lives, but usually without giving much thought to what they're doing.

[1 : 22] I wondered whether the TV presenters and even the area police commander, a bunch of other people I've seen on Facebook, actually were giving any thought to what they were saying when they said, my prayers are with you.

Most who pray occasionally probably don't even consider it a difficult thing to do. My children pray often with a real simplicity and an ease that I can't even muster.

Sometimes their prayers put chills down my spine as they use the prayer times to bicker with one another. But on one level, prayer seems a natural thing to do and a spontaneous thing to do, and yet for Christians, prayer is anything but the easiest thing to do.

We know we ought to pray. We feel that prayer should be right at the heart of our relationship with God. And yet few things are so agonizingly difficult as a consistent prayer life.

Few things make us feel less Christian as when we have gone long periods without praying. And so we're kicking off 2015 by spending the first five weeks on the topic of prayer.

[2 : 29] And I'll be frank with you. I need this reminder as I begin a new year. Sam said to me just then, so any New Year's resolutions, Steve, that you've broken yet?

And I said, yeah. My New Year's resolution was I want to be more prayerful. And I haven't been prayerful in the first four days of this New Year's because I've been writing a sermon on prayer. The irony of that. And so I need this as much as I'm assuming you need this. My hope is that I will grow in prayerfulness throughout this year.

I know I need to be more deliberate in my planning to pray and have more humility for spontaneity in my prayer. And of course, I want us to grow as a church in our core value of devotion to prayer. And so what I'm going to do is I'm kicking off today and I'm going to assume nothing. That's probably the safest thing. I'm going to assume nothing today. I'm going to start at the very beginning. So here it is.

[3 : 26] Prayer is an interaction between us and God. Now, I'm pretty sure that's not Twitter worthy. Prayer is an interaction between us and God. It takes place between two parties who have a relationship.

And to understand anything about prayer, we must first discover what this relationship is like or, more importantly, what God is like. You see, when the Buddhist spins his prayer wheel and the Hindu sits in mystic silence, both are reflecting the nature of the God or the gods to whom they're praying to.

That is, prayer is shaped and defined by the being to whom we pray. And so, if I decided tonight to make Sam, Saint Sam, the object of my prayers, then who I think Sam is and what he's capable of will govern the sort of prayers that I pray to him.

I'm not going to pray for Sam to control the weather because I figured that that's kind of beyond him to be able to do that. Prayer is shaped and defined by the being to whom we pray. It is only possible, prayer is only possible if the God is willing to accept my prayers, first of all.

So, if Sam says, no, stuff you, I'm not going to, don't pray to me. Then prayer breaks down at that point. Or the God is willing to answer my prayers.

[4 : 56] So, if Sam hasn't got the capability to answer my prayers, prayer breaks down at that point. And without those two things, prayer is ineffective. So, throughout the Bible, there is a real insistence that the God of the Bible is significantly different from all the idols and pagan gods of the worlds around and the nations around them.

Jeremiah 32, 17 says, Psalm 145, verses 10 to 21, says that God's rule over all that he's made lasts forever.

That he's faithful to every single promise that he's made. And he is loving to all that he's made. It says that he upholds those who fall. He sustains everything that he's made.

And that he is near to everyone who calls on him. And so, the Bible consistently asserts that God is sovereign over all of his creation.

Nothing is too hard for him. He's also a God who cares for the intimate details of everything that he's made. He knows every number, every hair that I've got on my head. He knows when one falls out, which a few have been doing in recent times.

[6 : 13] He knows everything about his creation. He's a God of mercy and love. He is both powerful and he is merciful. And he is loving.

And yet, the other side of the coin is that the Bible speaks of a God who is so holy, so pure, so perfect, so powerful, that he is unapproachable. That he is so perfect that he will not allow the imperfect to commune with him.

So, 1 Timothy says, God, the blessed and only ruler, the king of kings, the lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.

And so, the biblical picture is that prayer, a communion with God, is an exciting possibility and an enormous privilege, and yet, a practical impossibility at the same time.

God is the all-powerful creator and ruler of the world who delights to show kindness to those who call on him, and yet he is blindingly holy, righteous.

[7 : 23] His eyes are too pure to look upon evil. And Psalm 145 says, The God who delights to hear those who call on him will also hold all who are guilty accountable.

See, the Bible tells us right at the beginning that when people rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden, God punished them by throwing them out of his presence. He actually threw them out and he cut them off from access back to him.

Sinful, rebellious people cannot have access to God. People no longer had access to God, and how then can we approach the unapproachable? How can mortal sinners pray to a holy God and even work on the assumption that he is listening?

Well, the answer to that dilemma is what we celebrated last week or so at Christmas. God takes the initiative to re-establish relationship with his revelable creation by coming to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

For thousands of years, God held back his anger against his rebel creation, and eventually his patience ran out and he unleashed his anger, but not upon his guilty rebels, but upon his son, who was born so that he might die.

[8 : 50] You see, Jesus died to rescue us from the position of being cut off from access to God. God resolved our problem so that we can have full and complete access to him again.

And anyone who trusts in Jesus has a relationship with God and therefore has been granted free access to the almighty and true and living God. Jesus is the one who tore down the barrier.

He's the one who moved the roadblocks away. And so what's that got to do with prayer? I want to say it's the very foundation of prayer. This is the beginning of prayer. It's got everything to do with prayer.

Prayer only takes place because of this new relationship through Jesus Christ. This new relationship that Christians have with the Father through the saving work of the Son in the Spirit is

the beginning and end of all prayer.

You see, prayer is not some sort of an addition, a duty that we have in the Christian life. It's not an appendix to the Christian life. It is the heart of who we are as Christians and how we relate to a heavenly Father.

[9 : 56] Prayer is simply our relationship with God in action. It is why we can pray our Father who is in heaven. And it's this issue of relationship with God that's at the heart of the context of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6.

So if you grab your Bibles, open it up. Matthew 6. I'm going to begin in verse 1. As Jesus launches into this chapter, he has in mind here actors and the theatre.

Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. And he refers to a specific kind of actor in verse 2, verse 5, and verse 16.

They're the ones he calls hypocrites. The word translated hypocrite was originally the name that was given to actors. The scene of the first half of Matthew 6 is a theatre performance.

Jesus says that hypocrites do their acts of righteousness before men to be seen by men. And so Jesus has specifically in mind here those who put on vulgar displays of religious piety in order to receive the applause of people.

[11 : 24] Have a look at verses 5 and 6. Back when Jesus said these words in the synagogue, it was fairly much common practice for the men to lead the times of prayer.

And this responsibility was passed around from bloke to bloke in the synagogue. There would have been at least some temptation to pray to the audience that had gathered. Maybe to try and outdo the last guy who prayed.

I don't know if you ever felt that temptation before. I can say I have. To pray in a way that people like, in a form that people like. Maybe to sound more spiritual or theologically informed than the last person who prayed.

Maybe to pray in a way that you're giving an announcement to those who were gathered rather than lifting your heart to God. A hypocrite prays to the people, not to God.

How should the disciples of Jesus pray? He mentions two things. Verse 6, firstly. But when you pray, go to your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who is unseen. Now Jesus is not prohibiting public prayer here.

[12 : 38] Because if he was, his disciples didn't get that idea. Because as soon as they were apostles and moved off into the church in Acts, that's exactly what they did, public prayer. Verse 6 is simply causing us to ask questions of our motives and our hearts.

Do I pray more frequently and more fervently when alone with God than I do in public? Is my public praying simply an overflow of my private praying?

What do I think about when praying in public? Am I so busy scrambling to find expressions that are going to be pleasing to my fellow worshippers that I'm not actually concentrating my attention on God or scarcely even aware of his presence, even though he's the one to whom my prayers are nominally addressed?

Who am I praying to? That's the issue in verse 6. The second thing Jesus mentions about his disciples or how they should pray is in verse 7. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans because they think they'll be hurt for their many words.

Do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. So some of the pagans in Jesus' time thought that if they named all of their gods and addressed their petitions to each of those gods and repeated themselves a few times, then they would have a better chance at receiving an answer to their prayer.

[14 : 10] And Jesus says to his disciples, don't pray like that. The prayer for the Christian should not consist of heaped up phrases, idle repetitions, and the ridiculous assumption that the probability of the answer is in total proportion to the number of the words used in the prayer.

Jesus wants to teach us here that praying to be a genuine act of righteousness must be without showiness. It must be directed to our heavenly Father and not to the people that are gathered and devoid of the delusion that God can be pleased or manipulated by excessive words.

Do you see what Jesus does here in this section? He connects true spirituality, true relationship with him, and a life of prayer, a life of certain kind of prayer.

Puts them together. Prayer is tied together with a genuine relationship with God. Now, thankfully to help us in our prayers, Jesus goes on to graciously give us a wonderful example of what prayer looks like for his disciples.

It is a prayer that has relationship with God at its very centre. It's usually referred to, traditionally referred to as the Lord's Prayer, but as the New Testament scholar Don Carson suggests, it is more appropriate title would be the Lord's Model Prayer, because Jesus himself actually never prayed this prayer.

[15 : 46] Carson says, it is less a prayer that Jesus prayed than the prayer that he gave his disciples as a paradigm for their own praying. And Carson goes on to suggest, it's also somewhat ironic that at the very place that Jesus tells us that we are not to keep babbling on like the pagans do, is the very place that he gives us a prayer that has regularly been babbled in churches ever since.

Tim Keller says that the Lord's Prayer is the greatest martyr on earth. Everyone tortures and abuses it, so few get comfort and joy from its proper use.

It is like a mine with precious jewels and diamonds that we can see, but that we just cannot extract. Jesus gave this prayer to us to unlock all the riches of prayer.

It is the single richest source in the entire Bible on how to pray, and yet it is an untapped resource, partly because it is so familiar to us.

Martin Luther said in one of his works on prayer, how many pray the Lord's Prayer a thousand times in the course of a year, and yet if they were to keep on doing so for a thousand more years, they would not have prayed or tasted it at all.

[17 : 13] Our world is starving for spiritual experience, and Jesus gives us the means to it in just a few words here.

It's like Jesus saying, wouldn't you like to come face to face with the Father and the King of the universe every day to pour out your heart to him and have a deep sense that he is listening to you and that he is loving you?

And that's what this prayer does for us in its proper use. So let's take a very brief tour of the Lord's Prayer. It consists of six petitions, but it begins with an address.

Verse 9, As John Calvin said, who would break forth in such rashness as to claim for himself the honour of being a son of God unless he had been adopted as children of grace in the Lord Jesus Christ?

And so what he's saying there is that this opening address of God as Father in the Lord's Prayer is not so much a call just to plunge right in and start talking to God as much as it is a call to first pause and recollect our situation and realise our standing in Christ before we proceed in prayer.

[18 : 48] It's a recognition of everything that we have in Christ to be able to call the unapproachable God of this universe Father.

That's what Jesus has done for us. We should start by asking God to implant in our hearts a comforting trust in his fatherly love and our status in him.

And then comes the first petition. Hallowed be your name. Now the word hallowed doesn't get much use nowadays, but then again neither does the notion of hallowedness because it means holiness. Doesn't get much of air time in our secular society. But when you look at it on its surface it seems a little bit odd that we should be asking God for his name to be holy when it already is holy.

The issue seems to be not that God's name is not holy but that our use of it is not holy. That seems to be the issue here.

[19 : 53] You see, when we declare ourselves to be Christian we identify with God's name. As his name bearers we represent a good and a holy God.

And so we're praying with this first petition that God would keep us from dishonouring his name the name by which we are called and that he would empower us to become holy ourselves.

That our lives would display his character his holiness and his goodness to this world that they too might honour his name with their lives. The second petition verse 10 your kingdom come this is a lordship petition it is asking God to extend his royal power over every part of our lives over our emotions and our desires and our thoughts and our commitments.

We're asking God to so fully rule rule us that we would want to obey him with all of our hearts and our bodies and our souls and our minds and to do it with great joy to want him to rule over us and to pray your kingdom come is also a yearning for God's total control his total rule to be taken up over

all things it is a yearning for him to usher in his final eternal kingdom a perfect future where all peace and justice reigns.

The third petition is your will be done verse 10 let me read to you Martin Luther's paraphrase of this petition your will be done grant us grace to bear willingly all sorts of sickness poverty disgrace suffering and adversity and to recognize that in this your divine will is crucifying our will.

[21 : 58] Now that is a bold paraphrase that is a bold paraphrase but unless we are profoundly confident in being able to say my father in heaven then we will never be able to say your will be done unless we are totally confident that he is my father because of the work of Christ and everything that I have in being able to approach him then we will never be able to say your will be done in my life.

Only if we trust God as father can we ask for the grace to bear our troubles with patience and grace. This is the only part of the Lord's prayer that Jesus himself prayed the only bit.

It was the garden of Gethsemane under circumstances far more crushing than any of us will ever face he submitted to his father's will rather than following his desires and what was the outcome? It saved us. Because he submitted to the father's will we can call him father just like Jesus did and that's why we can trust him.

He always works everything out for the good of those who love him. And so these first three petitions are the beginning of prayer and did you notice they're all about God?

[23 : 40] They're all about God. Our own needs and issues are not the beginning of prayer. We are to give pride of place to praising and honouring him to yearning to see his greatness and to see it acknowledged everywhere and to aspire to full love and obedience.

Adoration and thanksgiving, in other words God-centredness comes first because it heals our hearts of their self-centredness which has a tendency to curve us in on ourselves and to shut down our vision of God and distorts our vision of all things so that we wallow in our circumstances.

we begin in the Lord's prayer with a vision of the all sufficiency of God. We look to our needs in prayer in the fourth petition, verse 11, give us today our daily bread.

1 Corinthians 4 reminds us what do you have that you did not receive and if you did receive it why do you boast as though you did not? The Bible teaches us that God is the ultimate source of every good thing, food, clothing, work, leisure, strength, intelligence, friendship, whatever you want to name and our ingratitude to him is an affront to him.

How do we express our ingratitude to him? By assuming that he owes us these things. And when we work on the assumption that he owes us these things, when these good gifts dry up, our tendency is to complain and grumble and whinge.

[25 : 30] Our joy is lost. As our heavenly father we come to him as his dependent children with our needs in prayer expecting a positive response from him.

Because he is a good God. But we do it so changed by our satisfaction in him and our trust in him that it's whatever his will is that matters.

The fifth petition is in verse 12, forgive us our debts as we also forgiven our debtors. This petition concerns our relationships both with God and with others. Martin Luther said that this petition is not only a challenge to our pride, but a test of true relationship with God.

If we find confession and repentance traumatic and demeaning, he says that means that the heart is not right with God and cannot draw confidence from his gospel.

people. He says if regular confession doesn't produce an increase of our confidence in who we are in Christ and in fact joy in our life, then he says we do not understand that salvation by grace is the essence of the Christian faith.

[26 : 49] God and our relationship with others together. If we have not seen our sin and sought radical forgiveness from God, we will be unable to forgive and to seek the good of those who have wronged us.

And so Martin Luther suggests that unresolved bitterness, unresolved bitterness is a sign that we are not right with God. It also means that if we're holding a grudge, it would be somewhat hypocritical of us to seek forgiveness from God for our sins as verse 14 warns us.

The sixth petition is in verse 13, lead us not in temptation but deliver us from the evil one. temptation in the sense of being tried and tested is not only inevitable but it's also desirable in the Bible.

The Bible talks of suffering and difficulty as a furnace to which impurities are burnt off and we become to a greater sense of God's love for us and greater self knowledge and humility and faith and love and endurance.

However, to enter into temptation according to Matthew 26 is to entertain and consider the prospect of giving into sin. And so this petition here is a hefty reminder that just as we ought to consciously be dependent on God for all of our physical needs, which is why we pray, give us today our daily bread, so also we should consciously sense our dependence upon him for all moral triumph and spiritual victory.

[28 : 42] This petition reminds us that we are morally weak and any virtues that we possess at all are because the fruit of the spirit.

It reminds us that our hearts are so deceptive and the evil one is malicious and cunning and we need our father's help for any moral triumph.

We are dependent upon God for all of our physical needs and for all moral triumph. And so what Jesus does here in these verses is he tests the reality of God in our hearts.

These words would have hit the original hearers like a bomb blast and it's what these words are meant to do for us as they reach into the depths of our hearts.

God looks right at the heart. He doesn't look at the external acts of piety. We can hide the depths of our hearts from each other but we cannot hide them from God.

[29 : 50] And Jesus tests our hearts to see if God himself is in fact our sufficiency. Jesus is calling for a radical reorientation upon God himself in the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is pushing us to have a real utterly authentic personal relationship with God through Jesus.

Jesus is pushing away from us as a church. This prayer is addressed to the church, the disciples of Jesus.

He is encouraging us to push us away from a stale repetition of words and a form and pushing us away from vain, showy, external piety into a relationship with God that goes right to the heart and flows out from the heart.

A relationship that says God's at the centre. A relationship that will express itself in a prayer life that is modelled on a prayer like this.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, we thank you for the work that you've done in the Lord Jesus Christ in calling us to know you. You, the unapproachable, perfect and holy God, have come to us so that we could come to you.

[31 : 12] We thank you for all the privileges of being able to call you the great God of this universe, our Father. Thank you that you listen to our prayers even more than we are willing to say them.

We thank you that you have control over all that is and we pray that you would help us depend upon you. And we ask tonight that you would teach us to pray. Amen.