

Understanding Prayer

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Date: 09 February 2019

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everyone. Great to be in church with you this morning. If you haven't met before, I'm Stephen, senior pastor here at St. Paul's, and I haven't preached in a while, so I'm looking forward to getting back into it today. And if you are new here, if you just missed us in the last couple of weeks, we're on five weeks of prayer. And today, our job is to try and understand something of the nature of prayer. One of the things that I've loved about being a father is seeing my own children develop in their prayer life and how children pray with a great deal of simplicity and ease. You just tell them it's just talking to God. And so they talk to God as if they're talking to anyone else. One of my girls consistently prays to this day, ends her prayers with, Dear Jesus, I hope you have a lovely day tomorrow. Now, I kind of work on the assumption because he exists in eternal bliss that he will. But she's kind of committed to the idea of Jesus having a lovely day each day. Sometimes, however, when your kids pray, some of the prayers you don't kind of want to answer, you know, Dear Jesus, help my sister to stop being a rat bag or stop picking on me or stop, you know, at that point, you kind of go, well, maybe it's more of an announcement, you know, than an actual prayer. But kids pray with such simplicity. Here's a few other samples from the lips of children. Dear God, my mum tells me that you have a reason for everything on earth.

I guess broccoli is one of your great mysteries. Dear God, please make my parents understand that if I don't eat salad, I do better at school. Dear God, please forgive me for hiding my sister's favourite doll and please don't tell her where it is. Dear God, I need you to make my mum not allergic to cats.

I really want a cat and I really don't want to ask my mum to move out. Dear God, can you get me a iPhone? It turns out Santa forgot. Dear God, when will my sister stop being annoying? I'm down to my very last patience. Dear God, please don't let it rain on Saturday. The first ball I hit will be for you.

Dear God, I hope my dog is in heaven with you. Please take care of him and sorry if he chews your sandals. It's just so easy for kids to pray. Much harder as an adult to say I'm meant to sometimes, but so easy to pray. But prayer is an almost universal activity. It's part of every culture, every generation and people group. Muslims pray five times a day while Jews have traditionally prayed three times a day. And each branch of the Christian church is saturated with various traditions of common prayer and private prayer and pastoral prayers. Buddhists use a prayer wheel which flings prayers for compassion into the atmosphere in order to knit the spiritual and the natural to relieve suffering and to release kindness. Hindus pray for help or peace in the world to any of several gods. And the ultimate goal of their praying is the union with their supreme being, Brahmin, and escape from the cycles of reincarnation. People in other cultures, like the Beaver Indians in southwestern Canada and the Papago Indians of the US southwest, pray through their singing.

Their poetry and their music serve their prayers that unite the spiritual and the physical realms together. Prayer is one of the most common phenomena of human life.

[4 : 10] Even deliberately non-Christian people pray at times. One study from 2004 found that nearly 30% of atheists admit that they prayed at least sometimes. And another found that 70% of non-believers in God prayed in fact regularly. Now though prayer is not literally a universal phenomenon in the fact that every single person prays, it is a global one. And it inhabits all cultures and involving the overwhelming majority of people at some point in their lives. In fact, there has not been a single culture yet discovered that does not pray in some form or another.

To say prayer is global is not, however, to say that all prayer is the same. You look at the same. You look at the same. You look at the same. You look at the religious trances of the Native American shamanists, the chanting of the Benedictine monasteries, the hour-long pastoral pairs of the 17th century Puritan ministers, the speaking in tongues in Pentecostal churches, Muslims with their forehead and their hands and their knees on the ground towards Mecca, the strict Orthodox Jew swaying and bowing in prayer, and the Anglican priests reading from the Book of Common Prayer. So what is prayer? That's really what we're seeking to do today, to try and understand something of prayer from a biblical perspective. And this is going to be a brief, no, this is going to be a summary, if you like, of it all, at least to try and capture an idea of it. I've got three main things that I want to try and understand this morning about prayer. So if you're someone who writes stuff down, this might be helpful for you. First of all, I'm going to ask the question, what is prayer? Followed by two kind of connecting answers that sort of, they do flow from one another. That is, it's conversing with God and it's encountering

God. So what is prayer? First of all, I'm using a whole range of different Bible verses. You might want to just jot them down as we go through. The Christian faith isn't surprised by the global phenomenon of prayer. That's because at the beginning of the Bible, we are told that all human beings are made in the image of God, Genesis 1, 26, 27. Bearing God's image means that we are designed by God to reflect and relate to him. And that's why the 16th century of former John Calvin wrote of the, what he said is the sense of the deity that, that all human beings have. He wrote this, he said, there is within the human mind and indeed by natural instinct and awareness of divinity. Other theologians have also understood this sense of the divine as the reason prayer is so pervasive in the human race. Romans 1, 19 to 20 says that we look at the world and we conclude that some great power created and sustains it. An experience of powerlessness in our world is often the thing that triggers this general knowledge into a prayerful cry for help. We see it in the media all the time, tragedy strikes and people are feeling powerless and they don't know what to say and how to close it off. And so they just would, you'd often hear them say our thoughts and our prayers are with all involved. I've heard that come out even in the, from the mouth of declared atheists, our thoughts and our prayers are with all that are involved.

So in a very basic way, you can define prayer as a personal communicative response to the knowledge of God.

All human beings have some knowledge of God available to them. And prayer is seeking to respond and connect to that being, to that reality, even if it's no more than calling out into the air randomly for help.

[8 : 44] However, because prayer is a response to our knowledge of God, it means that prayer is profoundly altered by the amount and the accuracy of that knowledge. Our prayer is shaped, it is defined by the being to whom we pray.

So the Buddhist spinning their prayer wheel, the Hindu sitting in mystic silence, the Muslim with his face facing Mecca five times a day, are all reflecting something of the character of the God or the gods to whom they're praying to and what they think their relationship with this being is.

Again, John Calvin observed that we are all, that all of us refashion that sense of deity that we have to fit our own interests and our own desires.

He says, unless that is, God clearly communicates to us about who he is, what he's like, that is, unless our view of God is corrected by God himself, we will refashion God into our own image.

So what that means for the Christian is that prayer is not just an instinct that we have common to all people, it is in fact a unique gift from God.

[10 : 30] Christians believe that through the Bible and the work of God's spirit in our lives, our understanding of God becomes unclouded because he makes it clear.

He clears the cloud. True knowledge of God is a gift from God. It's not because Christians are more clever or anything like that. It's because God has revealed himself clearly.

He has spoken and he has spoken clearly in the person of the Lord Jesus. In the fullest sense then, prayer for the Christian is really quite simply continuing the conversation that God has already started with us through his word and his grace, which eventually becomes a full encounter with him.

So let's have a look at the second point here, conversing with God. You see, what Christians know about God comes to them through the words of the Bible and its main message, the gospel.

What we discover in the Bible is that God is a personal God. We discover that he is a triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity teaches that there is one God in three persons who have known and who have loved each other before the dawn of time.

[12 : 00] If God is triune, then words and language are seen in a very new light. In fact, in John 14 to 17, we're going to be launching into that after we finish with prayer.

Jesus refers to his life within the Godhead before he even created the world. He says, speaking of the glory I had with the Father before the world began.

John 17, 5. And he also speaks of the words that he received from the Father in John 17, 18.

Sorry, John 17, 8. So within the Trinity itself, within the Godhead, there has been communication with words.

The Father speaks to the Son. The Son speaks to the Father. The Father and Son speak to the Spirit. And since the Godhead contains a community of persons, and because language is intrinsic to personal relationship, there is every reason to expect that God communicates through word.

[13 : 14] This is the nature of reality. And this is the gift and the wonder of prayer for the Christian.

What it means is we're not plunging ourselves into the abyss of the unknown when the Christian prays. Christian prayer is fellowship with the personal God who reveals himself and his plans and his purposes and befriends us through speech.

And we exist in a world of words. Apparently our information is doubling every six, seven years or something like that, which is just mind-boggling and helps you understand why we need things like Google.

We exist in a world of words, lots of different words. Men apparently speak a minimum of 7,000 words a day, and women around 20,000 words a day. I think it's mainly because women have to keep repeating themselves because we're not listening.

We're not listening. And so we are inundated with information each day, and we are losing the ability to listen.

[14 : 38] We skim and we flick articles on our iPads and phones. We skim reading. We are losing the ability to follow a train of thought, to engage with a train of thought.

So why would we want to listen to God speaking? Why would we want to listen to the God who speaks? Why would we listen to his words? The reason we need to listen to God's words and know them and reflect on them and apply them is God's words have power infinitely beyond any other word.

More powerful than our words. See, God conversing with us is not a take it or leave it transaction. It is, in fact, a matter of life and death.

In Genesis 1-3, right at the beginning of the Bible, God says, Let there be light. And the very next statement is, And there was light.

The verse does not say, First of all, God said, Let there be light. And then he went and built a power station. When he speaks, It happens.

[16 : 08] His word itself brought the light about. Now, I can say, In this room, Let there be light. And then I've got to walk over to the corner and go, Flick everything up.

That is, my word in itself does not switch the lights on in this room. Because my words do not have power. They need actions to back them up.

Or they fail to achieve their purposes. We can make a promise to do something, but in fact lack the power to fulfill what we promise. We may have every intention of fulfilling the promise.

I might say to my kids, I'll pick you up at 3 o'clock this afternoon. And because of bad traffic or for some other reason, I get there at 3 o'clock. It's something totally out of my power. I cannot fulfill my promise.

Because my words do not have power. They need actions to make them powerful. God's words, however, cannot fail their purposes, because for God, speaking and acting are exactly the same thing.

[17 : 17] The God of the Bible is a God who by his very nature acts through speaking. God's word creates.

Jesus commands very specifically, Lazarus being dead in the tomb for four days, Lazarus come out. He didn't just say to the tomb, come out.

Everyone in the tomb would have walked out at that moment. Just you, Lazarus. Come out. He tells the waves to stop, and they do.

No further action. When the Bible talks of God's word, it is talking about God's active presence in his world. To say that God's word goes out to do something is the same as saying that God has gone out to do something.

To break one of God's commands or his words is to break relationship with him. So how are we to receive God's words? They come to us, and I'm going to shorten everything here, they come to us in the Bible.

[18 : 31] The Bible says that God will put his words in the mouth of prophets. Deuteronomy 18, 15 to 20, Jeremiah 1, 9 to 10.

And once a prophet receives God's word, they can be written down and can effectively be read as God's speech when the prophet is not present or even after he's long dead, according to Jeremiah 36, 1 to 32.

The Bible then is God's written word, and it remains God's word when it's read today. And the conclusion is clear. God acts through his word, and his word is alive and active, according to Hebrews 4.

And therefore, the way to have God active, let's just say active, in your world, in your life, is through the Bible.

You see, to understand the Bible is not simply to get information about God. When you attend to it with trust and faith, the Bible is the way God continues his conversation with us.

[19 : 45] It's hearing God speak. We know who we are praying to only if we first learn it in the Bible.

And we know how we should be praying only by getting our vocabulary from the Bible. which means that our prayers should arise out of immersion in the Scriptures, in the Bible.

We should plunge ourselves into the sea of God's language. And what we discover in the Bible about this God, and as we just read from Psalm 145, this God is simple and he's complex, complex, he's majestic and he's tender, he's holy and he's forgiving, he's loving, he's personable and he's mysterious.

Therefore, as we listen and as we study and we think and reflect and we've pondered this God in the Bible, our response to him in prayer in our hearts and our minds is going to be multifaceted.

It's going to be varied. It may be one of shame. It may be one of joy or of confusion or of appeal. Our prayer can never be primarily just confession or just praise or just appeals.

[21 : 16] It in fact can't be primarily any one type of expression. Some prayers in the Bible are like an intimate conversation with a friend. Others are like appeal to a great monarch.

others are the wrestling match. In every case, the nature of prayer is determined by the God who's revealed himself, by the character of this God who is at once our friend.

He is our father, our lover, our shepherd and our king. We pray in response to God himself and only if we respond to his word will our own prayer life be as rich and as varied.

Edmund Clowney, a theologian, wrote this for all of you who want to get a book on or love to just get to the cut of the chase on how I should pray.

He wrote, the Bible does not present an art of prayer. It presents the God of prayer. It doesn't present the art of prayer.

[22 : 29] It presents the God of prayer. The more clearly we grasp who God is, the one who has spoken to us, the more our prayer is shaped and determined accordingly.

But be patient, my friends. This journey may be just as slow as a child learning to speak. So who is the God that we encounter in the Bible?

If prayer is continuing a conversation that God has started through his word and his grace to us, which eventually becomes a full encounter with him, prayer is continuing a conversation that God has started with us through his word and his grace, what is this God?

Now for the Christian, as I've said, prayer is a gift where God comes to us by his spirit and illuminates the darkness in our lives so that we might see him, the God who has revealed himself to us.

Conversations, however, can be mere exchanges of information that do not always lead to true personal encounter or relationship.

[23 : 51] Have a think about that in terms of the relationships that you have and if you're married or in a relationship with someone, have a think about that. Your conversations, are they just mere transfer of information or is there a desire to seek the person?

You see, we do not want to just know about God, but to know God, to seek his face and his presence. Truth is crucial for knowing. But what we really need is to experience the truth.

We need an encounter with God. And one crucial thing that the Bible reveals about God is that he is supremely powerful and can achieve anything that he wants.

Jeremiah 32, 17, our sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and your outstretched arm. nothing is too hard for you.

We've just sung that as a church. But we also read in Psalm 145 that this is the God who sustains and uphold all things, all things that says look to you for their food.

[25 : 03] Now it's often this instinct about God that causes many to pray. I'm feeling powerless and I need something that's more powerful and so God, you solved this problem.

We have this instinct of the divine who is supremely powerful in some way. But another crucial thing that God tells us about himself in the Bible, as I've already said, is that he is a triune God.

He is a personal, relational God. And in the New Testament, the triune nature of God becomes explicit, but few places are as compressed and as direct as Matthew 28 19.

And this is where Jesus sends his disciples out into the world to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It does not say in the names of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but the name.

They have a single name. Now for us, the term name may be just a label or a brand that can be discarded, it can be changed at will.

[26 : 19] But in biblical times, first century Palestine, it denotes the very nature and the being of the person. This means the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit all share one divine nature.

They are one being. There is only one God, not three. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all equal. They are three persons within the unity of God's being who are all equally divine, who know and love one another, and who from all eternity have been working together for the salvation of humanity.

And the implications of the Trinity of God for prayer are just never-ending. for starters, it means that God has always had within himself perfect relationship.

The Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are adoring one another, giving glory and love to one another, and delighting in one another. God, therefore, in and of himself, is infinitely, profoundly happy, filled with perfect joy.

Not some abstract tranquility, but the fierce happiness of dynamic, loving relationships. And knowing this God is filled with glorious love and joy because that is what he has in himself.

[27 : 56] which means the only reason that this God would have had for creating us was not in order to abstract some sort of cosmic love and joy from having relationship with us because he's already got that, but to share his cosmic love and joy with us.

And this is why this God of this Bible calls us to converse with him, to know him, to relate to him. Christianity is the only religion in the world of all time that declares that God is not just all-powerful, but that he's all-personable, all-merciful and all-loving.

this God wants to share the joy he has. Prayer is our way of continuing the conversation that God has started with us by his grace and entering into the happiness of God himself.

what we also discover is that when the Trinity becomes explicit in the New Testament, the character of God's fatherhood also becomes prominent and clear.

It's mentioned a couple of times in the Old Testament. It becomes explicit in the New Testament. In Ephesians 1 verses 3 to 10, the Father sends the Son to save us from our sin that we might become God's adopted sons and daughters.

[29 : 49] In John 1, 12 and 13, we see that when we are born again through faith in Christ, we receive the right to be called God's children and we have the right to call him Father.

In first century Palestine, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray and said, you can call him Father, that was offensive.

It was offensive to the Jew and it was offensive to the pagan. No religion would ever declare such intimacy with the universal everlasting God.

Galatians 4 verses 4 to 6 puts it succinctly. God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those under the law that we might receive adoption to sonship.

Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, Abba, Father. Daddy.

[30 : 52] Daddy. To be adopted is a legal event. But of course it means more than that.

To be adopted into a new family means a revolution of how you live your life day by day. In Jesus, believers are not only legally, but personally established in God's fatherly love.

John 17, 23 is a remarkable verse where Jesus prays to the Father for his followers. And he prays, the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

To be adopted means that now God loves us as if we had lived, as if Jesus had lived, in the way that he lived.

We can run to this father without fear. We have the most intimate and unbreakable relationship possible with the God of the universe.

[31 : 58] To be a child means free access. And prayer for the Christian is offered on the basis of God's free, saving grace and his steadfast, endless, fatherly love.

How is it possible that we would have that access and that freedom the only time in all of the Gospels, the only time, you hear me say only, the only time in all of the Gospels that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, prays to his Father but doesn't call him Father is on the cross.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why have you abandoned me? Jesus lost his relationship with the Father so that we could have relationship with God as Father.

Jesus was forgotten so that we could be remembered forever from everlasting to everlasting. Jesus Christ bore all the eternal punishment that our sins deserve. That is the cost of our prayer.

Jesus paid the price so God could be our Father and we could have free access to him to continue the cosmic conversation. and the Christian who understands this good news by the power of the Holy Spirit, it's a gift, doesn't seek God primarily to gain reward or to avoid punishment.

[33 : 36] Instead, Galatians 4 verses 6 and 7 says, the Spirit leads us to call out passionately to God as our heavenly Father, our loving Father. Paul refers to this experience as knowing God.

God. That's the ground motive of Spirit-directed, Christ-mediated prayer, to simply know God, to encounter God better, to enjoy his presence.

Prayer is about encountering the God who has already communicated to us. friends, just pause for a moment and consider how different this is from the way we normally pray.

In our natural state, we pray to God to get things. As I've said before, he's like the cosmic vending machine. Drop the coins in and get the product you want.

We may believe in God but our deepest hopes and happiness often reside in other things, in how successful we are, for instance, or in our social relationships.

[34 : 50] And so, we pray mainly when our career or our finances are in trouble or when some relationship or social status is in jeopardy or some other things need fixing.

See, when life is going smoothly, our truest heart treasure feels safe. It does not occur to us that we need to pray except out of a sense of duty to God.

It also means that our prayers are not varied. They consist usually of petitions and occasionally some confession, particularly if we know we've done something wrong and God might slap us on the wrist by taking something we want or that we like away from us.

Seldom, never, do we spend sustained time adoring and praising the God who's revealed himself to us. That is, we have no positive inner desire to pray.

We do it only when circumstances force us to. why? Have this sense that God's there but we tend to see him as a means through which we get the things that make us really happy.

[36 : 13] For too many, he's not our happiness. He's not our joy. We haven't truly encountered the God who exists in supreme happiness and joy.

we therefore pray to get things not to know him. All these changes when we discover that we have been bogged down all of our lives in all kinds of different forms of self-salvation and we turn to Christ.

We surrender to him. When we grasp his astonishing costly sacrifice for us, we transfer our trust and our hope from other things to Jesus and we ask for God's acceptance and his grace.

We begin to realize the Spirit's help, the magnitude of our benefits and the blessings that we have in Jesus and then we begin to want almost desperately to know and love this God more.

To know him for himself, for who he is. his love and regard make popularity and worldly status look just so pale and thin.

[37 : 29] Finally, the God who has spoken, the God who has conversed with us, we've finally encountered him and being delighted in him and delighting in him becomes inherently fulfilling and beautiful.

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