

What is prayer? CC 9 & 10.30 7th Sept 08

I like the way Phillip Jensen and Tony Payne start their book "Prayer and the Voice of God", which is with this statement.

"Prayer is just about the most naturally unnatural thing it is possible to do."

Isn't that great? What they mean is that prayer is natural in that everybody can do it and at some point in time everybody does it.

The reason Jensen and Payne describe it as unnatural is that in prayer we are coming to a higher being, in a way we can't fully comprehend. But also it is unnatural in our own experience. We find prayer is often difficult for us. We may know it is good and we may know it works and yet we find it hard - that is unnatural. You may know eating chocolate is good - if so you don't find it hard do you?

So we are going to spend the next couple of months looking at prayer. The aim is to encourage us to pray.

As we begin our series on prayer this is the first question we have to face - what is prayer?

If I look at what we do when we pray the answer I would have to come up with is it is asking God for things. We have a prayer meeting and we ask God. If we meet a friend who is struggling we say I'll pray about it and we mean I'll ask God for a change in your circumstances.

If we sat down and thought we might add many other things to what we think prayer is but, as Derek Prime in his book 'Practical Prayer' writes, "However we define prayer at the top of the list we have to put prayer as asking."

Jensen and Payne in their book say "prayer simply means asking God for things." Why do they say that - because that is what the Bible means by the word pray. The word we translate as prayer occurs 121 times in the New Testament and each time the activity is described it is described as asking.

So if you ask the Bible what prayer is it will tell you it is about asking God for things. Yes it will tell you that we should praise our God and thank him, especially for answered prayer, it will tell you about being still with God and so on but the word of God tells us prayer is asking.

But then we need to fill that out and so I want to take us to Jesus and his teaching that we might learn what prayer is from him.

So turn to Matt 6:5-15 and let's look at v6, "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Now it may not come as a complete surprise if I say that I find three things here about prayer.

Just look again at the verse and see if you can see them and work out where I'm going.

1. Prayer is coming to a Father

At heart of what Jesus is talking about and at the heart of prayer is this relationship that Jesus describes here as the relationship between a child and its father. He said "pray to your Father" - ask your Father. As I said last week that is exactly what happens in our house, my son knows I'm a soft touch and so first port of call in any need is his father.

Now if Claire there were to ring me next week and say can you take me up to Oxford. I'd think it a bit odd. I might think well perhaps she is coming to me as the Minister or as her brother in Christ but, I'm sorry Andrew and Rhian, I still think her first port of call should, and I know would, be her parents. I hope you can see what I mean. It is natural to ask our parents because of the relationship.

Jesus here is putting the asking of prayer into a context and the first part of the context is relationship.

So often we find prayer hard. People describe prayer as a duty, as something I feel I ought to do. That doesn't seem to be what Jesus is talking about here does it? Pray to your Father - ask your Father. Where is the ought, the duty, the difficulty in that?

Perhaps the thing we need to look at is our relationship with God. If it is natural for children to ask their parents and we are struggling to pray then it may be that we have not really got to know God as a father.

I have been privileged to be the father of two children. Yes there were demanding in their early years, from about 0-24. You know what I mean, the constant "can I have", "I want, I want". But that was part of our relationship. They asked because I was dad and they were my children. To whom else should they go? As they have grown up what they have asked for has changed but there is still that relationship and they still ask because of that relationship.

Jesus was encouraging his readers to a new attitude in prayer. He was talking about a relationship of love in which the child can come to the Father and ask. It might be slightly irreverent but if we struggle to come to God and ask then perhaps to start our prayer with the words "Heavenly Dad" might get us right. Perhaps to imagine that we are on the phone to our Heavenly Dad might help and perhaps to remember that we are children and children ask for things - it is what they do - might help. Prayer, Jesus says is asking a Father.

2. Prayer involves faith

Jesus encouraged them to pray to their Father "who is unseen".

Richard Bewes in his excellent little book, "Talking about Prayer", writes this: "It was a cat or so I thought, as I stared through the twilight at the dark shape silhouetted on our grass. Better drive it off. Softly I walked up the garden path. Yes, it must be a cat."

'Hullo, hullo, hullo - psst!' I hissed menacingly into the gloom. Not a movement. I stepped a little closer. Suddenly I realized that I was talking to a watering can.

On such occasions you quickly look right and left, in case anyone has witnessed your foolishness! Nobody likes being caught jabbering into thin air."

I think there is for some of us the feeling that perhaps prayer is just that it is words into thin air, talking to the ceiling.

Jesus speaks of talking to a Father but a Father who is unseen and that is where faith comes in. Jesus was talking natural about a relationship with his Father and our Father and saying talk to him, ask him. He knew the Father was there and the Father was listening that is faith and faith for us is taking God at his word. Prayer is an act of faith, of believing that God is there.

Can you remember as a child waking up in the middle of the night because of a nightmare and screaming "Mummy or Daddy"? You couldn't see them but they were there. The cry was natural coming back to that first point about relationship but also it was a matter of faith. You shouted trusting that your parents were there.

If we know God, if we have come to trust him through his love shown to us in Jesus then when things get tough and we need him most don't doubt that he is there.

Prayer is coming to a Father but it involves faith because we cannot see our Heavenly Father. He is there.

3. Our Father is able

Can you see that in these words in Matt 6:6? "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Take the heart of that and what Jesus was saying to those listeners was "your Father will".

Later on in our series we will look at the whole topic of prayer but here I just want us to recognise that Jesus is saying that God our Father knows what goes on in the place of prayer. He sees what we do and he wills towards us.

What I think Jesus is saying is that in prayer we get the relationship with our heavenly Father right. He is God and we are his children. He is able and so often we are helpless. That is why we pray! We come and ask because we can't and he can.

Again we come to the natural nature of prayer for a child will naturally ask a parent to do what it can't.

I remember one day the children were in the garden and they had a frame on which you could climb and there was a swing and various bits. The swing broke and one of the children said, "Daddy go and get some sellotape and then you can mend the swing."

The expectation was that I was able - children soon learn don't they!!

The point that Jesus is making here is that our God is able. Part of our faith is that God is able to hear and answer prayer. As Paul put it in Eph 3:20, "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine".

Our God is **able**, he able to do what **we ask**. He is able to do **all** we ask. He is able to do **more** than all we ask. He is able to do more than all we ask **or imagine**. He is able to do **immeasurably** more than all we ask or imagine.

I hope you are getting the picture that our God is able to see what goes on in the secret place, the place of prayer and he is able and willing to act in response to our prayers.

Prayer is not futile. It is not meaning less because God hears and is able. I could not mend the swing with sellotape or anything else. However my Father in heaven, your Father in can do immeasurably more than all I ask or imagine.

Prayer is asking God. It is asking our Heavenly Father. It involves faith believing in he is there and trusting he is able.

My friends I simply want this morning to encourage us to pray. It is not beyond us because we can all ask. It is not strange because we are speaking to our Father. It is not meaningless because our Father is there, he does hear and he is able to respond.

I want to challenge us all as we close to take a step forward in prayer in these next days. Now I can't in tell each of you what that step forward should be. I'd be happy afterwards to talk with you personally and try and help. But let me make some suggestions.

If you are not praying at all then please don't say to yourself, "from tomorrow I'm going to pray for an hour a day." That may be too big a step forward. Perhaps just say I'm going to aim to pray once a day. It may only be for a few minutes as we come and talk to our Father and ask him for the things that are on our hearts, or it may only be one sentence. But take a step forward.

If you don't feel ready to pray yet then let me encourage you to take a step forward in other ways. You might commit yourself to coming to listen to the rest of the series so you can learn more about prayer or perhaps ask a friend about their prayer life, how they do it.

For others of you prayer may well be a regular part of your spiritual life and what you have heard this morning may be old hat, you know it and have been doing it. What step forward can you take? Well there are many I could suggest. The most obvious is to expand the focus of our prayers. It may be that you commit to regularly praying for the work of the church if you are not already doing that or for a different area of church life if you already pray for some aspects. In the Wesley Hall is the prayer board that was here in church on Monday to help us pray for the life and work of our church as we come to this new term. Or you might take on praying for persecuted Christians such as those in Orissa in India whom we mentioned earlier in our service. Or you could take on regular prayer for our mission partners or for Claire here as she goes on to train in Oxford.

Don't say because you have heard this before God has nothing to say to you this morning.

Another way to build our prayer life is through reading and there are plenty of books on the bookstall and I have mentioned three this morning.

Alongside developing our own prayer life we can encourage others in prayer. We can ask people what we can pray for them or how their prayer life is. I remember when I was at a church in the centre of London I met two guys who were punks on the street and as we chatted one suddenly said, "so how's your prayer life?" Well there's no better way to remind Ministers that they are ordinary Christians is there?

Yes it was a bit challenging and that was good. The point I'd want to make for those who are sitting thinking I do pray is how are you encouraging others to pray?

As you stand chatting over coffee after the service do you ever ask "what can I pray for you this week"? Why not? Are you not concerned for your friend, your brother or sister in Christ? Do you ever ask, "have you had any answers to prayer," (answer for Phil getting into the States).

I'm sorry but are we here to talk about the weather or about God. What is our point of unity is it Chineham or Jesus?

Many of us struggle in prayer and we need to help and encourage each other. Can you do that?

Prayer it is asking God our Father who is there for us and able to hear us and may God our Father help us as we reflect upon his word to us today to take a step forward in prayer with him.