

What should I pray?

CC 9am and 10.30 Oct 19th 2008

Over the years I have met some very garrulous people. People from whom words flow not so much like a dripping tap but like a veritable torrent. However, often with such people when you ask them to pray the dam comes up and blocks the torrent. Then out comes the words, "I just don't know what to say."

Faced with the opportunity to pray we can be struck dumb, we can struggle to know what to pray. Or it may simply be that we are there in our room and we think I'm here to pray but what?

Well the answer really is whatever - as Jesus said in Matt 21:22, "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." So what should we pray for - whatever. But then that isn't a great deal of help so let me be a bit more specific. We can

pray for people.

That's what Paul was doing in our reading. He was praying for the Christians in that church in Colossae. Pray for people, for your family, your friends, your neighbours, even your enemies. But then we still ask but what? Again the answer could be whatever....

We will inevitably pray for the very practical things of life, for health and well being and many such things. Jesus speaking to the disciples in the sermon on the Mount told them not to worry about food and clothing because, "your heavenly Father knows that you need them." However, he then continued, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Matt 6:32-33. This gives us a pointer as we think what to pray for people. Not just the practicals but about kingdom things.

As we look at the passage we had read from Col 1:9-14, we see that Paul here is praying for a church, for Christians and he helps us see the priority of our prayer for other Christians.

Just follow the text through with me.

V9 - here is the regular prayer we were thinking about last week and also here is prayer as asking, "we have not stopped praying for you and asking God". So what was he asking God for them? Well that God would, "to fill you with the knowledge of his will." Paul wanted these Christians to know the will of God and that was going to happen through, "all spiritual wisdom and understanding," that is by the work of the Holy Spirit. We see a similar prayer in Eph 1:17, "keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better." This is Paul's basic prayer for these Christians that through the Holy Spirit they may know God and his will for their lives.

Friends if you want to know what to pray for your Christian friends then this is the answer, that God would help them to know him better. Everything else we might pray for them stems out of that.

I have said before that I make it a regular part of my prayers to pray through the directory of church members and this is what I pray for each of you along of course with any other things I may be aware of in your lives.

Paul's prayer for these Christians was that they would know God and his will for them.

Why he prayed that we see clearly in v10, "And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord." By knowing the will of God they would be able to live a life that honoured God and pleased him. I don't know about you but that is what I want for myself and for all of us, that the life we live would be worthy of God.

The rest of the verses fill that out for us. Living a life worthy involves, bearing fruit, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened to persevere and giving thanks supremely for their salvation.

I'd encourage you later to read this section and to use it for your prayers for other Christians.

What should we pray for - for people but secondly

Pray for the world

Now again to say pray for the world is like saying pray for any and everything. So I would encourage us, as I did last Sunday, to be watchful in prayer that is seeing what is going on around us and turning it into prayer. We will pray for the financial problems facing our world, for those struggling to get enough to eat such as in Burkina Faso which was the focus of our Harvest services a few weeks back. In other words we will pray for the needs of the world but again those words of Jesus come back to me, "seek first his kingdom".

So again I ask what should I pray for the world? Again I go to Paul and see what he prayed and encouraged others to pray and I go to 1 Tim 2:1&2, "urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone- for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."

Now can you see it? Pray for the world, for Kings and those in authority.

Elsewhere in the Bible we are remind that it is God who is sovereign and who raises up and brings down rulers. So as Timothy and his friends in the church were to pray for the Roman rulers, for Nero who was probably the Emperor then, and for the local provincial rulers we are to pray for the Queen, for Gordon Brown, for George Bush, for Robert Mugabe, for local politicians and councillors.

But what should we pray? Well if God is the true ruler and they are ruling under him surely you'd pray that they would rule God's way wouldn't you? This was so often the problem for the Kings in the OT they didn't rule God's way and they misled the people in their failure. What was the cry of Amos? "Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream." God wanted justice and

he wanted the leaders to lead in his ways of righteousness. Here are some things we can pray for our world.

But then when we continue with what Paul was saying to Timothy he said pray that we, that is the church, may live peaceful quiet lives. Were they really to pray that everything would be nice and quiet? It does seem a nice middle class prayer. What did Paul mean? I think the bottom line is that God wanted there to be peace not so that people would be able to live nice easy comfortable lives but rather so that the gospel could go ahead unhindered. In the next couple of verses we see this gospel aim, "This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth."

This friends is what we can pray for our world, that under God it would be so ruled that there is peace in order that the gospel may go forward. I am aware that in some parts of the world where there is persecution the church can grow but we also know that where there is warfare and fighting the gospel work is hindered. I remember a friend of mine who was brought up in a missionary family telling me of a time while his parents were in Uganda where they were unable to get out of their home because of the fighting going on. Pray for peace for the sake of the gospel.

Pray for people, pray for the world and thirdly

Pray for the gospel

In 1 Timothy we are reminded that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim 1:15) and then, as we have just seen, "This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." (1 Tim 2:3&4) God's great desire is to see people come to faith and be restored to him as we pray from people and for the world this should be central to our prayers. We should be praying for the gospel and for gospel workers. So in Col 4:2-3 Paul called on the Christians in Colossae to "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains."

That message comes clearly to you and I today that we should be devoting ourselves to prayer that is putting prayer at the top of our priorities and as part of that, because there is no point praying for Paul, we should be praying for those specially called and gifted in gospel ministry. We should be praying for the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world. But supremely here in Chineham, in Lychpit, in Basingstoke, Sherfield, Bramley and where ever we live. But again what, what should we pray?

Can I take us to a familiar verse in Luke 10:2, "Jesus told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Here was Jesus he'd gathered 72 people to be with him and was about to send them out ahead of him to places where he would go and he first called them to pray. Pray God would send out more workers into the harvest field. We need to do just that, to pray that God would raise up more men and women gifted in sharing faith and that they would be sent out into the harvest field of Chineham, Lychpit, Basingstoke, Sherfield, Bramley. Will you do that? Will you pray and pray regularly for more workers. But it doesn't stop there for Jesus then sent out the 72 and, as we saw in Lifeshapes when we got to the Octagon while we may say that sending out the 12 apostles doesn't speak to me this sending out of the greater group does. We are included here and, again as we saw in the Octagon the 72 were sent out to find their "Person of Peace". So in Luke 10:6 "If a man of peace is there your peace will rest on him;" The idea as we seek to share our faith is to look for our "person of peace." This is the person who likes you, who wants you around, who shares a chemistry with you, who is open to talk, who responds positively when you mention your faith. And what I said during that session and want to repeat now is that, As we go out each day our prayer should be "Lord bring into my path today the person of peace and give me the grace and courage to speak your words to this person." Our daily prayer should be, "Lord bring into my path today the person of peace and give me the grace and courage to speak your words to this person." This is what we should pray for through it the gospel will be spread by you and by me. If you find that a bit scary then we need to go back to the prayer partnerships that we were talking about and that Gordon and Maurice were demonstrating last week and through those partnerships find the encouragement to pray for our person of peace.

What should I pray for? We should pray for people and especially that through the Holy Spirit they may know God and his will for their lives. We should pray for the world and for the leaders to lead in his ways of righteousness so that the spread of the gospel may be unhindered. And we must pray for that gospel that it would spread and through it people may come to faith. In all these things we are seeking first the Kingdom of God.

Can I just as we close this morning and as we finish this series on prayer quickly say one or two more general things?

The first is can I suggest we try as best we can to make our prayers

specific

What I mean is that "God bless mummy and daddy" may be Ok as a start to prayer but if we are to know our prayers are answered and see the answers it helps if we are more specific.

If I pray God bless our congregation today as I preach your word well I may see an answer but more likely I will not. If I pray a more specific prayer such as "Heavenly Father may your word preached today bring a clear response." Then that is specific without telling God what that response must be. Do you see what I'm trying to say. I wonder if part of the reason we are not aware of our prayer being answered is because we are not specific enough.

But then along with the specific our prayer should be

expectant.

So after the service I shall be looking for an answer to my prayer, which I know now puts you all under pressure because some will think that if you say anything I will think you are only saying it so as I get an answer. But as we pray we should be expectant. Some years back I heard a story from a clergyman. He'd been a Vicar in Liverpool and one day a lady came to him and asked "Do parakeets eat celery?" When he asked the reason for her question she told him that while she had been doing her work as a cleaner

at the docks that morning she'd seen a shipment of parakeets. However, she'd been told by one of the dockers that, because of a strike that was taking place, they would probably die of malnutrition. She was upset by that and prayed that God would do something. On her way out of the docks she came across a pile of celery that had fallen off a lorry. Was this the answer to her prayer and hence the question, "Do parakeets eat celery?"

There was expectancy a looking for the answer. Let me encourage us as we ask God for people, the world and the gospel to be specific and to be expectant and then finally to be

thankful

Psalm 66 is a great Psalm of praise and the reason, as shown in the last couple of verses, is because "God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer." There is thanksgiving from the Psalmist for answered prayer and that was because somewhere along the line the Psalmist had stopped and reflected upon things and realised that the prayer he'd spoken had been answered. He'd taken stock of where he was and realised that God had heard and God had acted positively on his behalf and so he praised God. It was the reflection the looking back and recognising what God had done that caused him to praise God. For me I think this is a very important point.

I have often said that it is good at the end of the day to sit down and look back at what has happened, to see where God has been at work. To remember prayers asked and see where prayer has been answered. The reflection part is very important and yet I know for my own self that I'm terrible at it. Because I don't reflect I don't see what God has done in response to prayer. I was often amazed when I was in the car with the family and I was driving that I would see something off to the side and say did you see that and the others would say no. I was amazed how little they saw. However as I move through life with my times of regular prayer but also special moments of prayer with other people or on my own it is amazing how little I see of what God is doing around me in response to those prayers. Reflection is a greatly neglected part of our prayer life individually and corporately.

Whether we are praying for people, the world the gospel or whatever let's be and encourage each other to be specific and expectant and to reflect that the cry may often be on our lips "praise God who has heard and answered my prayer."