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Introduction

Three preachers sat discussing the best positions for prayer, while a telephone repairman worked nearby. "Kneeling is definitely best," claimed one. "No," another contended. "I get the best results standing with my hands outstretched to Heaven." "You're both wrong," the third insisted. "The most effective prayer position is lying prostrate, face down on the floor." The repairman could contain himself no longer.

"Hey, fellas," he interrupted, "the best prayin' I ever did was hangin' upside down from a telephone pole."

Today we are going to think about what we should do to do our best praying. For prayer is an important part of the Christian life, but I have rarely met someone who is happy with their prayer life. For if you are like me, you would love to pray more effective prayers, you would love to have more time in prayer, you would love for your mind not to constantly wander when you pray. You would love for your prayer life to move you closer to our wonderful God.

JC Ryle, the Anglican Bishop wrote about prayer in the late 1800's. Let me take two quotes from his writings that I think are as true today as they were in his time. "*There is no part of religion so neglected as private prayer.*" And a little further on he says this, "*I once thought, in my ignorance, that most people said their prayers, and many people prayed. I have lived to think differently. I have come to the conclusion that the great majority of professing Christians do not pray at all.*"

Now if that is true, then we need to find a way to change this. And what better way than to zero in on the Lord's Prayer. On Jesus teaching on prayer. So rather than having a sermon on what I think we should do to improve our prayer life, lets listen to the man who had a perfect prayer life and see what advice he has for us about prayer.

1. Jesus Advice.

Last time we saw that we shouldn't use prayer as a way of showing people how spiritual we are. In fact the best praying we do will be in secret, behind closed doors, where its just between you and God. But today Jesus continues on his look at prayer and starts with three piece of practical advice for us. So lets look at verse 7. "*And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.*"

Don't babble on in prayer! Don't think that longer prayers are better than shorter prayers. Don't gauge your prayer life on the length of your prayers. Don't say to yourself, I'm OK because I have prayed 10 or 20 minutes every day this week.

You see that with some people from other religions don't you? The Hindu has their prayer wheels or their prayer flags, with the idea that if there is movement, then these

objects are praying on our behalf and bringing our concerns to the gods in heaven. Or for the devout Muslim, he prays three times every day, but do you know what they pray? Normally they pray the same words, again and again and again, but they think that due to their length of prayers and their earnestness they will be heard.

But it is not by this sort of prayer nor by saying the Rosary, a few Hail Mary's or even the Lord's prayer every day that will get you heard. It is not by uttering the same grace before each meal that you break through with God. Length of prayers or amount of prayers are not the issue. In fact Jesus second piece of advice adds to this by saying, God knows what you are going to say even before you ask him. So prayer is not about giving him a shopping list of requests. Its not about wearing him down either. Its not a performance nor is it about changing his mind.

Its about approaching your father in heaven, that's Jesus third piece of advice. Its about a relationship with someone who is already committed to you. Its about enjoying his presence, its about growing in your trust, its about reaching out to the one who has all power and leaning upon Him, being open to Him, allowing his ways, his thoughts, his characteristics to rub off on us. So its not about technique, its about a relationship. Its not about time, its about trust.

I like what D.L. Moody once said: "Some men's prayers need to be cut short at both ends and set on fire in the middle." And John Bunyon once commented: "When thou prayest, rather let thy heart be without words than thy words without heart."

In our open prayer times on a Wednesday night and on Sunday night, we have started praying one sentence prayers. So one person says thank you Lord because you have given us our families. Thank you Lord for this place to worship. Please Lord be with those who have lost loved one. Please Lord help us to be good examples to our children, especially those who don't know you. Short, simple, from the heart prayers. God knows what we want, he is our Father after all. So don't babble on, draw near.

But draw near not just to God but to others. Because the Lords prayer doesn't mention me or I once. Its all about our and us. It's a prayer that we say together, a prayer where we are as concerned with our fellow Christians as with ourselves. It's a prayer that removes us from the centre of our universe and puts God and others before us.

2. God's Concerns

But Jesus continues, when you pray, start with God's concerns not your own desires. For we have to, in life, put first things first. Now the culture all around us encourages self centeredness. We are worried about our name, our reputation, how people see us, about our empire, whether we can persuade others to do what we want them to do and our will. But for the Christian, these things are not the most important things. Its not our name, our kingdom, our will but God's name, kingdom and will that is important.

And that is where the Lord's prayer starts. Not with us, but with God. Take a look with me. "*Our Father in heaven, hallowed (holy) be thy name.*"

I don't know about you but I am sick of God's name being dragged through the mud. People say "O my God" in epidemic proportions. "Thank God you are here," is now a

common expression. “Jesus Christ“, is put in the place of a swear word. In university lectures, in the salesroom, the factory floor and in homes, God’s name is mocked, belittled, ignored, laughed at.

Yet this is his world. We are his creatures. This nation only exists because of his graciousness. So what better thing to start with when we pray but for us to acknowledge his name, for he is indeed our father in heaven and for us to pray that his name would once again be seen as holy. What do we sometimes sing, “O for a thousand tongues to sing my great redeemers praise.” O that God’s great name would be praised as it ought to be, by not just 1000 tongues but 6 billion tongues.

“Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come.” For its not just his name that we pray for but his kingdom. We pray that people would come into his kingdom and acknowledge God as their king. We pray that people who are in the kingdom would seek to extend that kingdom by living as if God is their boss, their Lord, their King and they would be active in extending God’s kingdom to their family, their neighbour, their world.

To pray for God’s kingdom to come is to pray that God’s kingdom would grow. And that one day that God would get rid of all other kingdoms and followers of those kingdoms and bring in his kingdom in all its fullness, glory and power. You see we want not just people to acknowledge God’s name, to hallow it, but to obey God’s rule. So that *“his will is done on earth as it is in heaven.”*

So that God’s will is known by all. So that God’s will is respected by all. So that God’s will is followed by all. Thus we are praying that all evil, all sin, all rebellion, all war, all selfishness, all slander, all apathy might go and instead God’s ways, God’s blueprint, God’s will might rise like the morning sun and touch every mountain, every flower, every animal, every person here on earth, as it does currently there in heaven.

That’s where we start, with our prayers. With God - his name, his kingdom, his will. So we ponder on God’s name, we reflect on his kingdom, we meditate on his will and that changes our outlook on life. That opens our eyes to the possibilities all around us. That puts our relationship with God firmly in the right place, and so by looking at Him, we begin to forget ourselves. And by reflecting on his ways, we start to catch a glimpse of what God really wants to happen, what God really wants us to do, what God really wants us to pray for.

So lets stop there for a moment. Is that how we start our prayers? Or are we so busy that we launch in to our shopping list full of requests? Do we take the time to ponder our God? To acknowledge his power, to marvel at his mercy to us and to our world? You see if we don’t do this we will pray for the wrong things. If we don’t get our focus right, we will not really believe that God would care about what I’m going to say, would have the power to change it or would desire to get his hands dirty in the first place!

Friends we have to get this right at the beginning, because human nature tells us that if we don’t put the most important thing first, it will be things that are no where near as important that will take its place. So Jesus starts us off with some words of advice, he then reminds us of God’s concerns before leading us to our own concerns, in the next part of the prayer.

3. Our Concerns.

But before we get to that, let me tell the story of a little boy and his father walking along a country road laughing and talking, just having a good old time. They came across a large stone sitting at the edge of the road. The boy looked at the stone and thought for a moment. Then he asked his father, "Do you think I can move that rock?" The father didn't hesitate. "I'm sure you can—if you use all your strength!"

That was all the lad needed. He ran to the rock. He pushed and he pushed. He grunted and groaned. Beads of sweat popped out on his forehead. But the rock didn't move. Not an inch, not half an inch! Finally, the boy slumped to the ground, defeat written all over his face. "I can't do it." His father put his hand on his son's shoulder. "I still think you can do it," he said. "You just didn't use all your strength." The boy looked up with raised brow. "*You didn't ask me to help,*" said the Father.

And that's where our concerns come into play. For us to live life, for us to follow God's will, to live in God's kingdom, to acknowledge God's name we are going to need all the help we can get. We are going to need to get with the strength. We are going to have to rely on God. You see many people don't pray to God for themselves because they think that is selfish to do so. It's not. In fact its arrogant not to do so. For you need your daily bread from him, you need forgiveness for your sins, you need him to deliver you from the evil one, because without him, you can't achieve absolutely anything. Zero. Zip. Nothing.

So that is why Jesus when teaching us how to pray now tells us to pray for our needs rather than our greeds. And he begins by saying "*Give us today our daily bread.*" Now in Australia life isn't as precarious as it was in the first century or as precarious as it is the developing world where almost 1 billion people live on less than \$1 US a day. We have more than just our daily bread in our fridges and our pantry, we could all probably survive for the next month or more.

But each day God has given us our daily bread and it is a sign of dependence upon him that we continue to ask. But it was Martin Luther who first saw that bread was a symbol for '*everything necessary for the preservation of this life, like food, a healthy body, good weather, house, home, wife, children, good government and peace, and probably we should add that by bread Jesus meant the necessities rather than the luxuries of life.*' Praying to God for our daily bread shows us that God is ultimately in control of all the little things that we need to live in this world.

"*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" But there are more than just our physical needs, there are spiritual needs as well. And right at the top of the list of our spiritual needs is for forgiveness of sins. Each day we need bread for our table and we need our soul released from our sins. Each day we need to remember that it was Jesus death on the cross that brings me back into relationship with God. Each day I need to jettison my spiritual pride as if somehow I am better than anyone else and acknowledge my failings and seek to lean again on God's wonderful grace. For forgiveness is as indispensable to the life and health of the soul as food is for the body. But once I do that, I have a duty to pass that forgiveness on. And so I pray also that other might be forgiven as well.

I must let go of the debts that people owe me. I must allow the forgiveness of God to pass right through me to my neighbour. This prayer reminds me that one of my spiritual needs is to forgive those who have hurt me because if I don't or can't or won't forgive, the scar left on my soul disables my spiritual walk.

And finally "*lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.*" Now these last two requests, I believe are the two sides of the one coin, one positive, the other negative. The first positive, *lead us not into temptation.* Now from first glance, God would never lead us into temptation anyway would he? And besides isn't it the temptations, the testings, the difficult times in life that God often uses to help us grow in our faith? So what does he mean by lead us not into temptation?

I suppose a better way to put would be this. Do not be allowed us to be led into the temptation that would overwhelm us. Don't let the devil who is often too strong for us, to over power us. Help us to stand up to him. Help us each day to reach out for your guidance, your strength, your hand.

So these three requests are incredible comprehensive. They cover in principle, all our human need, material (daily bread), spiritual (forgiveness) and moral (deliverance from evil) so what we are doing when we pray is to express our complete and utter dependence upon God in every area of our human life. No wonder, the early believers added a note of praise to the Lord's Prayer when they added the words "For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen." For they wanted to end on a note of praise and thanks to God that he would provide all our needs.

So this prayer is about our needs, not our greeds. And so it concentrates again on the important things. But it still doesn't guarantee that God will give us all these things, for there are Christian people who don't have their daily bread, others who won't have their sins forgiven because they will not forgive others and some who will go the way of temptation because they refuse to change the sort of lifestyle that constantly takes them to harm's way.

4. Our Actions

So that is why Jesus ends his teaching on prayer with a mention of our actions. Because we can't just pray and then tick the box as if its all done and dusted. For what Jesus is saying is that you can pray all you want, you can have all the right words, you can know all the catch phrases, but if you are not willing to forgive others, God will not hear your prayers. If your not willing to do something about your prayer, then it's a waste of time. What did one person say?

"I cannot say "our" if I live only for myself.

I cannot say "Father" if I do not endeavour each day to act like his child.

I cannot say "who art in heaven" if I am laying no treasure there.

I cannot say "hallowed be thy name" if I am not striving for holiness.

I cannot say "thy Kingdom come" if I am not doing all in my power to hasten that event.

I cannot say "thy will be done" if I am disobedient to his Word.

I cannot say "on earth as it is in heaven" if I'll not serve him here and now.

I cannot say "give us this day our daily bread" if I am dishonest or seeking things by deception.

I cannot say "forgive us our trespasses" if I harbour a grudge against anyone.

I cannot say "lead us not into temptation" if I deliberately place myself in its path.

And I cannot say "deliver us from evil" if I do not put on the whole armour of God."

Doesn't that put the whole of the Lord's Prayer into proper perspective? Its not just giving your requests to God, but it is a battle plan for our own lives as well. Its not just talking to God, its asking God for help. Its not just saying words, its building a two way relationship.

That's why prayer is so, so hard. Its not a secret formula. Its not a silver bullet. Its not about letting go and letting God. Its about building the most important relationship in the world. Its about changing our focus, our thinking, our aim, off ourselves and onto Him. Its about depending upon Him and Him alone. And then its about going out and living the prayer not just praying the prayer. Making sure we are not hypocrites, but being whose lives are becoming more and more like Jesus.

Let me end with another poem...

I got up early one morning and rushed right into the day;

I had so much to accomplish that I didn't have time to pray.

Problems just tumbled about me and heavier came each task.

Why doesn't God help me, I wondered, He answered, you didn't ask.

I wanted to see joy and beauty but the day toiled on grey and bleak;

I wondered why God didn't show me, He said, "but you didn't seek"

I tried to come in God's presence, I used all the keys in the lock,

God gently and lovingly chided, "My child, you didn't knock."

I woke up early this morning, and paused before entering the day;

I had so much to accomplish, that I had to take time to pray."