

How to Pray (Part 1)

(Dan 6 p891 Abridged; Matt 6:5-14 p970)

Today we begin our Lent Series on prayer. I hope that we will each be able to use this time to do some really practical work on learning to be more mindful in our prayer life. We will be working our way through John Pritchard's excellent handbook "How to Pray". We still have a few copies available for purchase at £10 each, in the North aisle after the service. If you haven't already bought one – please do!

In part 1, John's book presents two models for looking at prayer: The Lord's Prayer itself, and a model of Relationship. These two models match each other remarkably well, especially when we place both on the founding principles of Jesus' two greatest commandments – to Love God and to Love neighbour.

Many times each year, in preparation for our confession, we remind ourselves of Jesus' summary of the law. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." And "Love your neighbour as yourself." In many ways, these two commandments sum up a life of prayer.

Prayer is NOT an exercise in which we become "so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good". Quite the opposite. It IS to foster a relationship of love with God that spills over into the practicalities of every interaction we have with everybody we meet.

Prayer is essentially practical, it is the foundation on which we practice life in the here and now; life with all its ups and downs, all its joys and sorrows, all its failures and triumphs. That is why Daniel's story is such a powerful illustration for us. Prayer works itself out in practical living as we learn what it means to live out Jesus' second commandment "Love your neighbour as yourself."

The first commandment begins "You shall love the Lord your God..." What does this mean in practice? How do we express our love for God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength?

I believe it means to build and develop and foster and nurture a relationship with God. Not just a casual relationship, but a deep and intimate relationship. How can we do that? John Pritchard identifies four levels of dialogue within any healthy intimate relationship: Just getting on with it; Chatting; Talking; Intimacy. It's not a bad model for our relationship with God. John presents this as a personal check-list, you might want to use it over the coming weeks to see how you are doing!

"Just getting on with it" is the backdrop to any relationship. We can just get on with it because we are confident of our relationship with the other person. We don't need to be constantly checking up or overbearingly engaged all the time. It is a relationship of freedom and trust, not one of coercion and control. It's where we love God with all of our strength – the effort and energy we put into daily living for him.

"Chatting" is about all the everyday bits and pieces that ensure that life runs smoothly: would you get some more bread while you're in town? would you like me to put on another

load of washing? Lord, I'm struggling to find the time to get this done! Right now, I could really do with your wisdom on this one! When we know one another, we don't need to give a full background briefing, and a list of options with the pros and cons and a cost benefits analysis. God knows us, he's even numbered the hairs on our heads. He gets it! Our prayer need not be laboured. Even the pagan King Darius knew this as he accidentally prayed that God would rescue his friend Daniel from the lions' den. It's where we learn to love God with all of our mind, dealing with the practicalities of each day.

"Talking" is about the big things that really matter and takes us to a different level. Here you do need to put time aside to work through the issues, to share with God what is on your heart and mind. To give the space for you to be honest with yourself too. This is where prayer gets tough, because it looks at the deeper things of life. But it's worth it, because this is where we learn to go deeper in our relationship with God to. This is the shift from casual acquaintance to trusted friend. It's where we learn to love God with all of our heart, sharing with him the things that give meaning, shape and purpose to our lives.

"Intimacy" is where we move beyond words and engage our senses. Its where the "Holy Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express". Here is a time and place where words can actually get in the way. A place where we leave our agenda behind, and allow God to guide us into His intimate presence. A place where we learn to let go and let God be God in our lives. It's the place in which God can most readily reveal himself to us. It's where we learn to love God with all of our soul, sharing with him the inexpressible depths of one-ness – he in us and we in him.

Through the experience of such soul-mate intimacy, we build greater confidence in talking through all that's on our hearts. Such deep sharing builds the foundation on which we can trust God as we chat casually about all those daily practicalities that spring to mind. As we experience his blessing day by day, so we can relax in our relationship, knowing him to be there, and just get on with the practicalities of loving our neighbour in the strength he has given us.

When the disciples asked Jesus 'Teach us how to pray', he gave them The Lord's Prayer as a model. If we look at The Lord's Prayer, we can see and explore these four aspects of prayer within it.

We begin with 'Our Father'. Two such simple words that we're likely to skip straight over them. We're not asked to come to God in some kind of formal ritual, such as visiting the Queen might entail. No, the invitation is one of an intimate relationship between a child and their dearest parent. The word for Father is Abba, more like daddy than Sir. At this point we could just let the rest of our agenda go, and relish the moments when God tells us just how precious we are to him, how much he loves us, how he wants us to be soul-mates. Our response is one of great intimacy too. As we declare "Hallowed be your name". Like Moses at the burning bush, we stand on hallowed ground, and are asked to take off our sandals. This taking of sandals is not to do with keeping the house clean of outside dirt, the holy ground is itself outside. It is to do with intimacy, we stand with bare feet on bare soil as we

enter into the space of praise and worship. We let the Holy Spirit free us from the constraints of words as we reach out to a loving God in loving abandon.

My most intimate times with God are sometimes accompanied by intimate visuals. For example I might sense myself sitting on the ground, a small figure leaning against the softly cloaked calf and ankle of seated man who disappears into obscurity above the knee. Such is the intimacy of presence and senses that lie beyond words. I wish I could learn to do that more often!

We move on to the big things that give shape and purpose to our lives; the things we need seriously to talk through with God. "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We pray that our heart-felt desires align with God's purposes. We seek to share his heart as he seeks to share our heart. We might be deeply aware of where we struggle to see how this is happening in our lives, or in the world in general. We mix our disappointment and sadness, with hope in the greatness and goodness of God. We become aware that we can't do this alone, no matter how much we would like to! We need God's resources in our lives if we are to play our part in his kingdom plans.

For me, the word 'surrender' becomes important in these moments: surrender my agenda to God's agenda; surrender my diary and watch to God's timing and priorities; surrender my sense of what needs doing to God's direction. I wish I could learn to do that more often!

So we move into the chatting style of prayer. We apply our minds to the practicalities. "Give us today our daily bread" – for bread, think of any resources we need to help bring God's life and love into the lives of others. But also we can't do that if we ourselves have been distracted, lost focus, gone off-piste. So we pray for the other resource we need day by day – God's forgiveness, and the grace to be forgiving too. We enfold our love for our neighbours into God's love for us as we pray "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

I can't remember the number of times when I would be about to go into the office and pray "God, I just can't fit it all in!", "Lord Help me!" or something similar. To my amazement, when I remembered to do this, things would happen, stuff would shift, and the day would pan out in ways I could never have expected. I wish I could learn to do that more often!

Now envisioned, empowered and equipped, we just need to get on with it. But as we do so, we also need to trust God to be our guide. We ask him "lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil." Knowing God's presence in our lives, even when he's in the other room; being aware that he enfolds us in his love, even when we don't hear it, see it or feel it. This is the protection and guidance we need in the ordinary grind of daily life. As the psalmist would have it "You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me" – isn't that the most wonderful way to be upheld by God's love as we try to love our neighbours in his name!

For me, prayer is not an abdication of responsibility, but an acceptance of my role. I like the idea that when I face a problem, it can be shared with God. I should do everything I can to sort it, but I also have the responsibility to discern what I can't sort, to place that in God's

hands and then to let go of it. In that sharing, God will often also guide not just what I should do, but how I should do it – “lead us not into temptation, but delivering us from evil”. I wish I could learn to do that more often!

Knowing all of this, we follow the Lord’s prayer with a great acclamation of hope and faith and truth “For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.” - ready now to face the world again.

In the final analysis, prayer is not about the words we use. It is not about the quantity or the quality of our words. At its deepest it is beyond words. It is about our heart and soul relationship with God. It is about honesty and integrity, trust and faith. It is about knowing we are loved and expressing our love in return. It is about allowing God to infuse every part of our lives, to guide our minds and be our strength as we navigate life’s practicalities. Its about sharing our lives with God, and seeking for him to share his life with us. You don’t need a theology degree, just the vulnerability to love and be loved in return.

Prayer is the fullest expression of our relationship with a loving Father; and equips us for the fullest expression of our relationship with neighbour, as we seek to bring about his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. My prayer is that this Lent, we might learn together to dive deeper into prayer, and to do so more often.

Amen