



Praying in Relationship

Matt 6:1-15

What sort of God? So what?

In my first three sermons here I've highlighted the truth from Scripture is that our Father desires relationship with us. In love he has shown grace – His unmerited favour – to us to open up the way so that those who trust in Him receive “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”. This is our God!

We need to cultivate our relationship with our Father and in the next few evening sermons I'm going to explore a few themes in prayer – some of which are familiar and some which may not be.

What is prayer? Talking to God, anywhere, anytime. He's only a prayer away.

Someone said once that prayer is the Christian's vital breath – we cannot function without it.

But to some people, that's not what they see prayer as and in this passage Jesus explores just what praying to Father is about. For people like the Pharisees and those today who follow other religions or even some flavours of Christianity, God is distant – transcendent – not to be known or approached.

If God is a distant creator, who somehow must be pleased and appeased, then prayers will be formal and the people who practice them will attempt to keep the law - or their version of it - religiously. Usually this will be out of fear rather than devotion to appease God's wrath and gain kudos or themselves.

The "hypocrites" that Jesus were referring to - inevitably the scribes and the Pharisees were perfect examples of this kind of person.

In this passage in Matthew Jesus condemns them roundly on the most public of their devotions - almsgiving, fasting and prayer. They made it public so that everybody knew they were "spiritual". What did they think they were going to get out of it? A better status in heaven? Probably. But what does Jesus say?

6:1 "Make certain you do not perform your religious duties in public so that people will see what you do. If you do these things publicly, you will not have any reward from your Father in heaven."

Do you want to do your devotions to God - the do them in private. Why - because the hypocrites were using God as an excuse to bring glory to themselves. So they had their reward - they weren't going to get anything else. What Jesus is saying is that public prayer *per se* is not wrong, but that public prayer they were performing was to impress people and the result they got was the reward they deserved.

That principle hasn't changed and is a warning to all those of us who stand out at the front and pray - or who teach. For whose glory are we doing it? Are we enjoying their affirmation - "Thank you brother, that was wonderful" Well, doesn't it give you a glow when your name is on their lips with compliments! You've had your reward! You don't need any more!

These hypocrites - the Pharisees - were masters at drawing attention to themselves and produced eloquent prayers - to them that was their public or religious duty.

Do you ever feel that about praying out loud? Then listen to Jesus' words - if your doing prayer to impress others - then your reward is here on earth.

Because prayer is about relationship - it's about our relationship with the true and living God.

So what's important is that when we pray to God it is for His glory and for His benefit, not for ours or for man's consumption. Look at the Lord's prayer:

"Our Father in heaven: May your holy name be honored; 10 may your Kingdom come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us today the food we need. 12 Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us. 13 Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One."

What do we find here? All prayer starts with God and a recognition that His kingdom should come and His will be done. That's the perspective of our prayers. Not just something we say in the pattern of our prayers - but a statement of our submission to our Father God and His will.

What this passage brings out most of all is the need for proper relationships as we communicate (for that's what prayer is) with God, with others and for ourselves. Jesus resolves these issues in this part of the Sermon on the Mount and in this rendition of the Lord's prayer.

Relationship with God

What sort of God? A transcendent one? For the Pharisees, God was distant, impersonal, needed appeasement and required then to do religious acts to find favour with Him.

5 "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites! They love to stand up and pray in the houses of worship and on the street corners, so that everyone will see them. I assure you, they have already been paid in full."

Sadly that's the problem with many Christians - or its the other way around - God is our cosmic chum and we babble to Him. Based on the idea that God is immanent. That means that He's always with us and available through His Spirit. So we can have a chat with Him at any time. And boy, can some people chat!

"When you pray, do not use a lot of meaningless words, as the pagans do, who think that their gods will hear them because their prayers are long."

Babbling. Do we think it's going to impress God that we babble pointlessly on to God. There is no virtue in long prayers as such - particularly in public. The longest public prayer in the Bible is Solomon's dedication of the temple - about 15 minutes depending on how fast you read. So what's wrong with a long rambling prayer - we're doing all the speaking and not listening to the voice of God. Besides that God knows already - so all we have to do is ask.

Testimony about long prayers.- Brethren, Pentecostals.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't spend a long time in prayer - what matters is the relationship with God with which we approach our prayers. So what sort of God. If He isn't distant, but not our cosmic chum either, then how do we balance his transcendence with His immanence? Simple God is our Father - and a true father-child relationship is one of respect and familiarity. He is the God that is Abba - daddy. That fact gets rid of a lot of woolly thinking straight away.

6 But when you pray, go to your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what you do in private, will reward you."

So when we speak to our Father, then what really counts? Praying in private. I don't think Jesus is condemning public prayer - He's saying that the prayer God values is prayer that is communing with Him. That can be done as a group or as an individual. When we come together to pray - remember that God is with us and has something to say. We've got to learn to listen and to recognize His voice.

The prayer that matters, the prayer that is rewarded, the prayer that is answered, is done when people actually commune with God. Why do you think Jesus spent so long communing with His Father? By the

time we get to Acts we see the disciples doing the same - together and separate of the passage we did two weeks ago.

Prayer is about our relationship with others

Another idea that Jesus clearly brings out in this passage, is that prayer is not just directed at the Father, but is directed at strengthening our relationship with others. This is a dominant concept in the NT and we will surely be visiting it again and again. The Father's desire is that we love one another.

The Christian faith does three things, it brings you into relationship with God, it brings you into relationship with other Christians and your individual needs then come into play. You can't leave out your relationship with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Look at these verses again.

12 Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us. 13 Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One.' " 14 "If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done.

Isn't that pretty bald stuff - if you don't forgive sins, then your Father will not forgive you. Forgiveness lies at the heart of a love relationship. If we love our brothers and sisters in Christ then we will readily forgive them and get back into relationship with them.

But if we're not, then we're out of relationship with God. God isn't prepared to forgive us if we don't forgive us. This isn't an eternal life issue. This is a relationship issue. The frog in the pipe illustration.

The issues are connected. If you don't love your brother, then you don't really love God either - so why should he bother to oblige you?

Do you bear a grudge? Are you unforgiving? Then don't expect your prayer life to be dynamic!!

Prayer is about yourself

The trouble is for many of us is that our prayer IS about ourselves! - and nothing else. Then if we don't recognize our Father and our brethren - then I don't think our prayer life is going to get far. It's just as selfish as those Pharisees.

So what do we pray for ourselves?

12 Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us. 13 Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One.' "

Give us our daily bread, forgive sins, lead us not into temptation. All these involve just one basic issue. Because two out of the three concern our relationship with the Father - sin and allowing to be led astray by the evil one are all things that damage our relationship with God. Daily bread is conceivably for our personal provision.

So what is the emphasis of our prayers. Is it just Give us this day our daily bread? Or do we value our relationship with God.

What sort of God? God is our Father - He wants our relationship to be personal, intimate? How do we value it? Does our prayer honour Him? Does it honour His desire that we love one another? Is our prayer about us? Or is it about Him? Is it about us, or is it dedicated to loving our brothers and sisters in Christ - to love them and forgive them.

Do you want a dynamic prayer life. Look at the challenges here - let's take them on board and go forward your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.