

The Privilege of Prayer



Luke 11:1-5

READING

11:1 One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." 2 He said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. 3 Give us each day our daily bread. 4 Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation." (TEV)

THE LORD'S PRAYER

**Our Father in Heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your Kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
And the glory are yours,
Now and forever, amen.**

THE PRIVILEGE OF PRAYER

You may remember that before Christmas I gave you a little taster of one of our central themes for 2012: to develop our prayer lives as individuals and as a church.

Right at the heart of this is the notion that the Creator of the Earth, the Almighty, the Holy One, our God and Father desires to know us, not as subjects, but as His family. His relationship is not a human one. Human parental relationships can be variable, from those where families have a very close relationship, to those where the parent is distant or even uncaring. A useful tip on the parenthood of God is to never use our own experience of parenthood to try to understand His nature as a parent. One of the thoughts we explored on Thursday is that the Spirit of God indwells all God's children – all those who have placed their trust in Jesus. He's in every fibre of our being, he knows our every action, He feels our every feeling, He knows our every thought. However intimate our human relationships may be, no-one can get that close.

THE PRIVILEGE

Staggering isn't it. That's why we're called the Temple of the Holy Spirit. God lives in us. He walks with us literally. Ever tried walking along with someone you are in love with and never speaking? It doesn't happen. Yet our experience as God's people we walk around with the Spirit in us and so often never communicate: and that's not for want of the Spirit desiring to speak to us. How many times have we seen a beautiful flower or a lovely sunset. The Spirit says with our spirit - "isn't creation amazing". We say "that's nice" and take a picture with our camera phone, but never say "thank you Lord". How many times have our whole beings been touched by God and over coffee we've said how wonderful the service was this morning, but never actually talked to God about it afterwards? How often have we needed help, but never prayed. How often have we been asked for prayer by someone, said we would, and then never did. All opportunities but opportunities missed. How could we do such a thing when we have the very presence of God in us! What a privilege!

RACHEL HICKSON

You know Rachel Hickson is coming in a few weeks. Don't miss it! She has a book with a rather alluring title. I think it's there to grab people's eyes and imagination. Communication with God isn't according to nature as we know it – it's supernatural. But it's not strange or eerie. It's more natural than natural and completely normal. Actually the book is about the privilege of prayer.

What happens when we are privileged? Well I know what I do. I make the most of privileges. When Rhiannon worked for London Transport, we got Privilege rail tickets at a fraction of their real cost. LT travel was free. So we rarely used the car, but instead took advantage of the privilege. Prayer is a privilege – take advantage of it!

WHY DON'T WE PRAY?

But we don't – why not?

LIST

Here's the list of a few things thought of. Maybe you could think of some more. Staggering isn't it. We have a privilege and our answer is "I can't be bothered, what's the point, God isn't interested. God doesn't answer prayers like that. I leave prayer to others."

Think obvious here. God is the creator of the universe. There's nothing he can't do. There is no limit to His power. He deeply loves us? Do we really think that he *can't* or *won't* communicate with us and minister to our needs?

A lot of people don't pray much at all. They know they can and should pray. But how? Sometimes it's just breaking ice. I'm someone who is fairly relaxed and informal with people I know, but can be a bit short of words with people I don't know and nervous when I come across bigwigs. Can remember sitting next to Tony Campolo at the Baptist World Alliance Assembly in Birmingham in 2005. I was on the front row with Rhiannon as there was no loop. He landed in the empty seat beside me as he was due to speak at the meeting. Great – a seat next to a great contemporary preacher! What remarkable words were exchanged? The most I could manage was, hello, how are you? I hope I'll be better with Rachel Hickson!

PRAYER HAS A PATTERN

So how do we pray? The disciple of Jesus knew how to pray – they went to the synagogue and temple. They had a life where hearing and saying prayers was routine. Why did they ask Jesus to teach them how to pray? Because they saw in Jesus a relationship with God that quite different to theirs and they knew they needed it and wanted it.

So Jesus gives them this pattern of Prayer – the Lord's Prayer. I know we pray this prayer occasionally, the version we pray is a mash of this one and a slightly different one Jesus gave in the Sermon on the Mount, as well as the addition of for the kingdom, power and glory are Yours etc. The difference in version between Matthew and Luke suggest that there's a pattern.

PRAYER HAS A PATTERN 2

I'd divide that pattern into four statements about the nature of the God we address in prayer.

Prayer is about authority How do we address God: our Father. In that one word Father, we define our prayer relationship with God. He's family. He's Dad. On Thursday I talked about how our concept of God was shaped by British imperial monarchy – formal, stuffy, sombre, heads bowed in fealty to the monarch. Actually, that wasn't the culture of the psalms and the NT gives us the true relationship for Christians: Dad! Dad's the mixture of parental respect and familiarity that God wants to have with us.

Prayer is about grace We have a God who gives us all we need. Prayer is a recognition that we have a God who hasn't just showed us His grace once in Christ, but continues to be the God who gives us all we need for today – our daily bread.

Prayer is about forgiveness We have a God who readily forgives. Yes, God is One who hates sin and is angered by our sin. But most of all, He readily forgives when we ask for it. When you're loving you're forgiving. God is characterised as the one who is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness when we confess them to Him (1 John 1:9)

Prayer is about protection Finally, God is one who delivers us from evil. He's our protector and like a great parent, He's more than ready and willing to extract us out of the mess we get us in – or make sure that we don't go there if we willingly follow Him.

So that's what we learn about the God who we pray to – He's Father, gracious, forgiving and protecting. But what does the prayer say about us? Quite a lot. If we are praying to the God who is characterised in the way I've just outlined, then our response in prayer should reflect what He's like. Let's look at these statements again in this context

PRAYER IS ABOUT SUBMISSION

If God is my Father, then even though I can be familiar with Him, He's still Dad. If you think about it, it's not worth not being familiar with God as we have the Spirit so there's nothing we are, think or do which He doesn't know about anyway. But He's Dad – and we submit to His authority *your kingdom come* or as Jesus adds in Matthew's gospel – *Your will be done*. In the end Father has His purposes and we need to fit around them, not Him around us. It's the most fundamental principle of prayer – we do what He wants, not what we want. Too often prayers we give tell God what we want – but do we ever try to work out what He wants and ask for that will to be done in our life and the lives of those we pray for. Our prayer lives would be totally revolutionised if we just listen and do what He says.

PRAYER IS ABOUT RECEIVING

This may seem a strange thing to say, but prayer is all about receiving from God. We often think in terms of the Christian faith about what we should do, never about what we receive. We are the children of a Father who gives because He's gracious. The trouble is that so often we want what we want and never look at what God is giving. Give us today our daily bread. But we are like a child who is offered sprouts and wants pizza. Is there a comparison between pizza and sprouts? Yes there is. Most of us were put off by sprouts because if they're not cooked correctly, they taste foul, rather than having the crunchy nuttiness which they are supposed to have.

We are so infatuated by wanting what we want and rejecting something good God offers because of bad experiences of other people making a mess of it. What a shame. God wants us to receive nothing but blessings. He wants to pour them out on us. But we want pizza because what we do now keeps us comfortable but in the end harms us.

PRAYER IS ABOUT MY FORGIVENESS

God is forgiving, yes. But if we want to go anywhere in prayer, we need to forgive. It's non-negotiable. If we want a vibrant prayer life, then we've got to deal with our un-forgiveness or we're not going anywhere. If you want a deep prayer life and a proper relationship with God, then you must understand this – you will always hit a ceiling if there is unforgiveness in your life. Deal with it. Deal with it now. Don't make excuses or complications. The statement in the Lord's prayer is bald and unconditional. *Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us*. Jesus was uncompromising on this.

PRAYER IS ABOUT MY WEAKNESS

Why does God have to deliver us from evil. Because we do things our way we get ourselves in a mess. Actually we also have this phrase "and lead us not into temptation". The sense isn't that God leads us into temptation to trip us, but He takes us into testing situations if we're not walking properly with Him to make sure we do. This is a phrase that recognises my weakness. Because when I call for deliverance from evil, I'm trusting Him so He doesn't have to bring me to the point of actually having to specifically ask Him to get me out of a mess. Prayer recognises our weakness and dependence on God. We can do nothing without Him. Never try to think you can. If you're in a mess today, then stop struggling and recognise your weakness and God's power to deliver us from evil. See the change.

PRAYER IS ABOUT WALKING WITH GOD

In all the Lord's prayer is about relationship – our relationship with Our Father – our Dad. It's a relationship based in grace, forgiveness and protection – something all true parents are about. But most of all prayer is not about the once a day, or the once a week. If we are God's temple and the Holy Spirit is with us, then talk to Him wherever you are and what you're doing. Whether it's driving the car, cleaning the house, doing your job, sitting in the bath, mowing the lawn. Talk to God about it. As you see the problems, pray to Him. As

you see the blessings, answer Him. When you see other believers, don't just chat with them – pray with them. Make prayer characterise your life, because where you go, He goes too – you are now inseparable from the Holy Spirit. So make the most of your privilege. He's always there – take advantage of the Spirit's presence and power!

But just one point to finish. I see a lot of my wife. I obviously live with her, but as I do a lot of work from home I see a lot of her. But we find that we need what Rachel Hickson calls “table for two” - that time when we just take time out to talk together in a more intimate way. It's part of the pleasure of married life.

It's the same with our relationship with God. *Supernatural Communication: the privilege of prayer* God's relationship with us is intimate – very intimate. He's always with us. But as well as being aware that He's always there and tempering that privilege in our actions, we also need “table for two” Time. Time just spent listening to His voice. Never think putting time aside with God as something that's an extra. For a healthy relationship with God it's an essential. Prayer is a privilege because we have a God who wants to spend quality time with us? Let's make sure that we make time for that table for two.

*Preached by Mark Reid
MRBC Felixstowe 22/1/12
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Do look at *Supernatural Communication: the privilege of prayer* by Rachel Hickson, 2006