

## PRAYER

Luke 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."*

***'Lord, teach us to pray.'***

I often get asked questions about prayer. People say things like: *'I know I should pray. I believe in prayer. And yet I find it so difficult to do. Either the time, or the concentration, or even knowing what to pray for. I wish I could improve my prayer life.'*

Maybe you can identify with some of those sentiments. 'I want to pray. But how do I go about it?' But at heart, prayer is really not difficult. Prayer - at its most simple – yet also most profound - is time with God. It's not about what we say, or what we do – just like any other friendship or relationship that we have – we just have to put a bit of time and commitment into it. So prayer is friendship with God – just being with God, and sharing our lives and experiences with Him. And just like friendship with any other person - if we don't spend time on it, it's not going to happen.

Psalm 42 begins: 'As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.' Imagine that deer – out in the harsh, fierce, sunburnt desert, panting for a drink .... Is that how we thirst after God?

That's the starting point for prayer: to want to know God so much that we can't get enough of Him; prayer is about becoming aware of how God alone can satisfy our innermost needs. When the disciples watched Jesus going off to pray, they knew what it meant to him. They could see the effect it had upon him, and whatever it was that he got from it, they wanted some of it. They could see how much good it did him.

No wonder the disciples came up to Jesus and said, 'Lord, teach us to pray.' They wanted a relationship with God like the one they could see in the life of Jesus.

We need that kind of longing. Prayer isn't just a chore, or a burden to be got through before we get on with the real work of the day. At its most simple, it's an expression of our relationship with God. So the first step in learning how to pray is quite simply, wanting to pray. You can't force anyone to pray any more than you can force a child to enjoy school. You can encourage them; you can point out the benefits of education, you can try to make it interesting, but you can't oblige them. So the best advice on how to pray is quite simply, 'Just do it.'

Prayer grows out of the awareness of our relationship with God. It grows out of a longing to deepen our spiritual lives. It expresses our growing awareness that there is more to life than the constant round of physical self-gratification. So the first tentative step in learning how to pray is to utter, 'Lord, I want to pray. Help me!' Like the deer panting for water, we too need to pant for the living God in our lives.

Then, if you want to deepen your prayer life, the next step is to find a pattern of prayer that's right for you - a way of ensuring that you keep close to God.

Lesson 1 from the Prayer Course tells us: Keep it simple; keep it real; keep it up.

- Talk to God, just like you talk to anyone else. Tell God what you are feeling. Intercession is an important part of prayer. Intercede for those around you. Keep it simple – no need to get out the dictionary when you are praying, or to learn Tudor English.

So prayer is about making space for God in our lives. How easy it is to fill up our time with all sorts of worthy and righteous activities! Well, that's better than unworthy and unrighteous activities, but even so, do they leave room for God? When Jesus calls his disciples, he challenges them to renounce the world and to live as his people. How easy it is to squeeze God out: love of money, zealotry at work, infatuation with the car, the sports hall, - not necessarily wrong in themselves, but so easily, even the most worthy of activities can leave no room for God.

Make space for God – space in your day; space in your home. That's why it is so important to have regular times for prayer: moments that punctuate our lives, and help us to order our priorities. They enable us to keep ourselves focused, and to ensure that we deepen our relationship with God, our Creator and friend. We can't maintain a relationship with anyone unless we invest some time in it.

And at the heart of this relationship must be the need to express our thanks to God. Paul urges us to offer thanks for everything, and only then, in the context of thanksgiving, to make prayers and intercessions to God.

So we must desire God, like the deer longing for a drink in the desert. Make space for God, by ensuring that you have time for him in your life. Thank God for all that He does for you. And then, endeavour to keep God at the centre of your life. Think back to that deer, finding an oasis, drinking, and being satisfied. When we drink in God's love, we know that we drink the best water on offer - water that will never run dry. We can never drink too much of God's love. So part of our regular praying should involve reading the Bible, taking time to meditate on His word. Take time to let the message sink in. Talk about it; share it with others; find a good verse and learn it, off by heart. Take time to think about God, learn about God, allow your love for him to penetrate downwards - down from the brain, into the heart. How important to belong to a group of like-minded believers! What about finding a friend to pray with on a regular basis?

Maybe you go along with everything I've said so far, but we're still left with the 'how' question. I want to pray. I know it's right to pray. But how do I keep it up?

Find a pattern that suits you. Don't feel guilty about what you can't do, or haven't done in the past – today is a new day. Find a pattern that suits your life-style. Look at your day, and see where you can find a moment to stop and pray. Some people pray well on their own; others really benefit from the regular discipline of meeting with others.

Some people will say that it becomes all too formal if you have organised prayer meetings, and sit down together. They can pray anywhere, anytime. My answer to that is fine – go for it - providing that you actually do it. Of course, we can, and we should, pray anywhere, anytime. But I still have to say, from my personal experience, that the pray 'anywhere anytime' philosophy is greatly enhanced if I also have regular, committed times when I stop, and 'Be still, and know that God is God.'

In a similar way, we can eat food anywhere, anytime. But it doesn't half help to regular meals and a good diet.

So what is your routine for prayer?

- Find a pattern of prayer that suits you. Don't feel guilty about what you can't do, or haven't done in the past, find a pattern that works for you in your life-commitments, now. Look at your day and decide where you can build in time to stop and pray e.g. early morning, coffee break, lunch hour, evening. If you read the gospels, you can't help but notice that Jesus was good at getting up early in the morning and finding a quiet place to pray. And it has to be said – early morning is good – before prayer gets squeezed out by the events of the day. Before the phone starts to ring; before you start

reading messages; before you look at social media, and suddenly – whoosh - time has run away with you. But if you're a mother with 3 three school age children, you might laugh at me – how can you possibly find time for quiet in the morning? Of course you can't! But you can look at your daily calendar and work out where even a few minutes of quiet would be possible, at some point in the day. Some people pray well on their own. Others benefit from the regular discipline of meeting with others – not instead of – as well as - private times.

- Find a place that suites you – a comfortable place, with no distractions – a place where you can be quiet and give yourself time to talk to God.
- Routine is important. Like brushing your teeth. If I don't brush my teeth in the morning, I can survive the day, but I just don't feel right. It's the same with prayer. A regular routine helps to set the day off right.
- Use your Bible – read it regularly. Prayer and Bible reading are closely related. Take a few verses to meditate on and think about – allow God to speak to you through Scripture. Some sections of the Bible lead more obviously to prayer and worship than others. Learn to use these sections devotionally. (More on Bible reading another time!)
- Think of prayer as being 'normal conversation' simply talking to God just like you talk to your closest friends. However, if sometimes, you feel as if your prayers are drying up, use printed prayers – you can get books with prayers that other people have found helpful. Or download prayers – there are plenty available on the net. You can even download The Prayer App and keep your own prayer journal. We have so many resources available to us these days.

So how do we begin? There's lots of simple catch phrases to help us with prayer – I've already given you one this morning from the Prayer Course: Keep it simple; keep it real; keep it up. So let me offer you a tried and tested pattern for prayer, one that's been around for 2000 years, is completely free, comes from the mouth of Jesus himself, and it works! When the disciples asked Jesus, 'Lord, teach us to pray, he gave them the Lord's Prayer. It has everything we need.

It's the prayer that Jesus gave us, and it breaks down into 5 simple sections: the 5 'P's of prayer.

**Praise; Power; Provision; Pardon; Protection.**

Pray the Lord's Prayer slowly and thoughtfully.

**Praise:**        *Our Father in heaven,  
                      hallowed be your name.*

**Power**         *Your kingdom come,  
                      your will be done  
                      on earth as in heaven.*

**Provision:**    *Give us today our daily bread.*

**Pardon:**       *Forgive us our sins  
                      as we forgive those who sin against us.*

***Protection: Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.***

When Paul writes to the Philippians, he thanks them for praying for him, and assures them of his prayers. It isn't a sign of weakness to ask for prayer, but a sign of strength. We all need it. I thank God that there are people who tell me that they pray for me. I need it. It is good to share prayer requests. Whenever we meet together as God's people, an important part of the process is that we pray for each other. As a consequence, we should always go home feeling better than when we arrived.

But the best way to learn how to pray is to stop talking about it, and have a go. And the more you do that, so the easier and more natural it becomes. Think of it as a natural extension to your normal, daily conversation with those around you, always remembering that we can pray with confidence because Jesus is our great high priest. He holds our prayers before God. The whole purpose of his death and resurrection is that we may have direct access to God, and so bring our prayers and intercessions to Him.

So – don't just think about it – just do it. Pray.  
Make time to be with God.

Let us pray to God, who alone makes us dwell in safety:  
For all who are affected by coronavirus,  
through illness or isolation or anxiety,  
that they may find relief and recovery: Lord, hear us,  
**Lord, graciously hear us.**

For those who are guiding our nation at this time,  
and shaping national policies,  
that they may make wise decisions: Lord, hear us,  
**Lord, graciously hear us.**

For doctors, nurses and medical researchers, that through their skill and insights many will  
be restored to health: Lord, hear us,  
**Lord, graciously hear us.**

For the vulnerable and the fearful, for the gravely ill and the dying,  
that they may know your comfort and peace: Lord, hear us,  
**Lord, graciously hear us.**

*Take time to be still and bring to God the needs of the world.*

We commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray,  
to the mercy and protection of God. Merciful Father,  
**accept these prayers  
for the sake of your Son,  
our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.**