

Prayer - Practices that lead me to pray without ceasing

Series: Habits of the Heart: Practices to Commune with God and Transform your Life

Date: 10 July 2022, 4th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 131; Romans 8:14-27; Luke 11:1-13

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. (Colossians 4.2)

Pray in the Spirit on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests.

(Ephesians 6.18)

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5.16-18)

Prayer is the easiest and the hardest thing in the Christian life. It is the most simple and most powerful thing that we can do. It's something we need to be taught. It's something we can always grow in. And yet everyone can pray. Children. The very old. The sick. The blind. The mute. Those with physical or intellectual disability. The athlete. The professor. The plumber. The politician. Prayer is our greatest privilege and our greatest work. It is the essence of the Christian life.

Today is the last in our series on spiritual disciplines, *Habits of the Heart: Practices to commune with God and transform your life*. We've looked at Worship and the practice of keeping the Sabbath. Opening yourself to God and the practice of the Examen. Relinquishing the False Self and the practice of Self Examination. Sharing your life with others and the practices of Witness and Hospitality. Hearing God's word and the practice of *Lectio Divina*. Incarnating the love of Christ and the practice of Creation Care. I hope you've had a go at some of these spiritual disciplines. I wonder how you've gone? Today we're looking at Prayer. In a sense all the spiritual disciplines are different forms of prayer. They are different ways to attend to our relationship with God, and ways in which we ask God to be at work in us by the power of his Spirit, and through us for God to be at work in the world. Today I wanted to answer 3 questions about prayer. To whom do we pray? Why do we pray? And then finish with some practical suggestions for How we can pray.

To whom do we pray? Prayer and the Trinity

Prayer is a great litmus test of spiritual maturity. To call out to God is a natural human impulse, particularly when we are in danger or distress. There are no atheists in foxholes as the saying goes. Many people have a sense that there is a God who made and sustains all things. But he (or she) is distant, impersonal, unknowable. Rowan Williams writes that, "the heart of Christian prayer is getting over the idea that God is somewhere a very very long way off."¹ The language we use in prayer reveals who we think God is and what his relationship is to us. There is an appropriate reverence for God as the LORD Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, Judge of all people. And yet the incredible

¹ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian*, SPCK, 2014: 66

grace of God is that he has come near to us in the person of his Son, come in the flesh as the man Jesus of Nazareth. Through Christ the barrier between us, as sinful humanity and a holy God, is destroyed and we are adopted as God's children. As such Jesus reveals the Almighty God to our heavenly Father. This is why when his disciples asked him to teach them to pray Jesus said we begin with the words "our Father".

But the grace of God goes deeper still. In our reading from Romans we saw that God has given us his Holy Spirit.

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. **15** The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' **16** The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

Through the Spirit Christ lives in those who believe, and we live in him.² In Colossians Paul says that this is the great mystery of the good news, "namely Christ in you, the hope of glory."³ Through the Spirit, we are caught up in the very life of the eternal Son with the Father. What is it then to pray, "Our Father"? It is to participate in Jesus' own prayer with his Father. It is only through the Son and in the Spirit we can come to God in prayer. Although the Son and the Spirit are equally God, we do not normally address them in prayer. They bring us to the Father. We can use the intimate language of the family because we come to the Father in the Son.

I love what Paul goes on to say in Romans 8.

26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. **27** And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

So often we don't know what to pray. But the Spirit helps us. He knows us even better than we know ourselves. This is what the Father does for us through his Son and by his Spirit. He invites us into his very life. This of course takes us into the mystery of the Holy Trinity, that God is One and Three and Three in One. God is a mystery whom we cannot comprehend. Do you find God remote and mysterious? Do you call on him as Father? Why not let the Bible shape and discipline how you pray. As we are deliberate in our words and pray to "Our Father", "through his Son", we learn more of how to inhabit this strange and wonderful thing to be the adopted children of God. As we practise standing with and in Jesus, we come to see that the Father loves the Son from all eternity, and in the Son he loves us with that same love. This is to grow in faith. God's love for us draws forth our love in return for him and then for his world.

If prayer is participating in Jesus' prayer to the Father, then there is a paradox in prayer. We are at our most authentic before God, and yet we are not at the centre. Jesus emptied himself for us out of love,

² Romans 8.9-10

³ Colossians 1.27

and so because we pray in Jesus, we too empty ourselves out of love for him. We let our selfish desires go, we give them to God, we let him take our scattered thoughts, we empty our hearts and minds so that the love of God can fill them. Our prayer is that we be made one in will and action with Jesus. This is, after all, God's purpose for us. There is then an element of self examination and struggle in prayer. To let go of our ordinary, selfish and defensive habits, and to see God and his world, through the eyes of Jesus.

Why do we pray? Prayer and the Will of God

This leads us to a second question. What do we pray for? It is easy to ask God for the things that we want. Some of these are good like healing from sickness, or the provision of a job when we are out of work. Much of the time though the things we want are more or less selfish and superficial. Jesus tells us that "your Father knows what you need before you ask him", and yet he also tells us to ask, because God is our Father in heaven who delights to give good gifts to those who ask.⁴ Beyond, "What do we pray for?" then lies a deeper question, "Why pray, if God already knows what we're going to ask?" Why pray at all, if God is sovereign and will do as he chooses? You may be relieved to know that this is not a new question. The theologian Origen asked this in the 3rd century, and his answer is still one of the best. Of course God knows what we will say and do, but God has decided that he will work out his purposes through what we decide to say and do.⁵

The Bible gives us plenty of detail as to what God's will is for his creation. Jesus' prayer is the best summary - Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. As we let the Bible shape our prayers we begin to pray more in line with God's will. God has chosen that our prayers be part of the set of causes through which he works in the world. So we had better get to the work of praying!

American pastor Tony Campolo tells a story of when he was speaking at an event. A group of pastors prayed for him beforehand, but one had very specific prayers about Charlie Stoltzfus, including where he lived, the street name and all. "Lord," he prayed. "Charlie told me this morning he's going to leave his wife and there kids. Step in and do something God. Bring that family back together." On his drive home from the event, Tony picked up a hitchhiker. A few minutes into the drive, he said, "Hi, my name's Tony Campolo. What's yours?" The hitchhiker said, "My name is Charlie Stoltzfus." Tony turned around and started driving to the man's house. "Hey mister, where are you taking me?" "I'm taking you home." "Why?" "Because you just left your wife and three kids, right?" The man sat there shocked, eyes bulging as Tony pulled the car into his driveway. These events put Charlie and his wife in a receptive frame of mind. And Tony was able to lead them to Christ and save their marriage.⁶ Now we don't often get to see God answer our prayers in such dramatic fashion, but Jesus tells us to ask and to keep asking our Father.

⁴ Matthew 6.8, 7.11

⁵ Williams, *Being Christian*, 65

⁶ John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, Zondervan, 2002: 104-105

How to Pray? Praying without ceasing

With our remaining time let's have a look at a few suggestions on how we can pray. Our lives are always in the presence of God. Paul tells us to pray continually. I think that this at least means that we are to cultivate an awareness of the God who is always there. We've seen so far two kinds of prayer. The first is what you might call introspective or contemplative. These are practices that help us pay attention to God and see ourselves before him. The second kind of prayer is outward focussed. This is the ministry of intercession, where we pray for others and for the world. Paul speaks of Epaphras, who planted the church in Colossae, and how "He is always wrestling in prayer for you that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured."⁷ I can't claim to always be doing this like Epaphras, but that is certainly my prayer for each one of you. I am conscious of how great the burdens are that you carry, how great the challenges are that you face, and how little power I have to change things for you, let alone change you. But God is powerful. When I am weak, he is strong. So we pray and ask him to move. You might like to join in Morning Prayer, each weekday 8:30am on Zoom. Pray for your brothers and sisters here at church. Pray for our children and grandchildren. Use the prayers in the epistles as your guide as to what to pray. Pray for your friends and family. Pray for the needs of our community and our world. Bang on the doors of heaven! Do not stop until God has given what he has promised. This is a mighty ministry! Your prayers are the means by which God works!

In terms of contemplative prayer, we've already looked at the Examen, Silence, Solitude, Self Examination, and *Lectio Divina*. These can form the basis of a rich life of prayer, morning and evening. As you come to pray, you may, like me, find that your mind races to all sorts of different things. That is ok. You can notice them and offer them to God in a form of conversation, telling God what is on your mind. But you may also find it helpful to have a set prayer that centres you and helps you focus. The Lord's Prayer is of course the most memorable and comprehensive, and I would encourage you to pray at least daily, if not more. Another prayer you may find helpful is what has been called the Jesus prayer. This has been practised by the Orthodox church for centuries as a way of living out Paul's command to pray without ceasing. It combines Luke 18:39 "Son of David, have mercy on me", with Luke 18:13, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." You can use this as you breathe. Breathing in, pray, "Jesus, Son of David," breathing out, pray, "have mercy on me, a sinner." Praying this prayer as you breathe can help you pray in your body, not just your mind. It breathes a rhythm of surrender, reminding you that "in him we live and move and have our being."⁸

Finally, there is no substitute for routine. When I wake up, before I get out of bed, I always try to pray the morning collect from the Anglican service of Morning Prayer.

Lord our heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God, we thank you for bringing us safely to this day: keep us by your mighty power, and grant that today we fall into no sin, neither

⁷ Colossians 4.12

⁸ Acts 17.28

run into any kind of danger, but lead and govern us that we may always do what is righteous in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

You may like to try praying at fixed times throughout the day. First, find a place where you can be comfortable, alone and quiet. Turn off your phone. You may like to kneel. Then, work out when in your daily routine you can pray, starting for just 5 minutes. The 5th century monk John Cassian says, “Let your prayer be frequent and brief”.⁹ The idea is that prayer becomes habitual, part of your daily routine. The *Didache*, an early manual of Christian practices, encourages believers to pray the Lord’s Prayer three times daily.¹⁰ St Benedict famously taught that “To pray is to work, to work is to pray”. He believed both prayer and work were in God’s hands and sought to structure each day with a rhythm of work and prayer.¹¹ So, you could set a time for prayer and scripture with lectio divina in the morning to begin your day by feeding on God’s word, set a short 5 minute time of prayer at midday, and finish your day with the Examen. I’m really bad at this sort of routine, which is partly why I’ve done this series, to help me work on spiritual disciplines! One thing I do to help is try to use a prayer app that buzzes me at 8:30, midday and 4:55pm. This has a list of everyone at church, family, friends and other needs and gives me 7 things to pray for each time.

Prayer is first and foremost God’s work in us. It is opening ourselves to the Father and asking him to work through his Son in whom we live and who lives in us by the Spirit. Prayer is Jesus coming alive in us, shaping us to be like him by the Spirit. Prayer is from our point of view, about fidelity, that desire to be with our Father, in the end to be still and content, like a weaned child on his breast.

⁹ Williams, *Being Christian*, 78

¹⁰ *Didache* 8.3

¹¹ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 224