

## Intro

I dream of a praying church:

Where prayer is seen as a privilege rather than a duty,  
Where people expect God to hear their prayers,  
Where husbands and wives pray together,  
Where church members pray with and for each other,  
Where the leaders pray regularly together,  
Where the services are prayed for but where the needs of the world are not forgotten.

So, today we're thinking about prayer. Obviously, we've done this before but, if I'm honest, I don't think I've ever managed to get across how important it is that the people of God should pray together. We've not prayed together regularly as Elders or as a congregation; the 24/7 prayer room had spaces last year and the majority of members have never even spent one hour in the room during that one week in the year we give over to prayer. Some of you tell me you pray on your own and that's great. However, I wonder if it's a bit like what happens when you ask people about diet and exercise – they overestimate the exercise and underestimate the calories! I know I don't really spend as much time praying as I like to think I do. I don't know if it's apathy, complacency, fear or some other reason but I honestly believe that this lack of prayer is a problem for the church. I would encourage you to come to the prayer time after church today. Even if you don't speak out loud your presence will be an encouragement to the others who are there. And remember to sign up for the prayer room this year.

My reading this morning included these thoughts from Pete Grieg, founder of the 24/7 prayer movement:

*I've found that one of the most important keys to "keeping it up" in prayer is to develop the discipline of a daily "quiet time". Jesus once invited his friends, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest", (Mark 6:31 NIVUK) and millions of his followers, ever since, have allocated a little time each day to retreat with Jesus to a quiet place.*

*As someone who struggles with all kinds of self-discipline—attending the gym, declining the chocolate cake, going to bed before midnight, bothering to floss my teeth and, yes, even maintaining regular times of prayer—I hesitate to advocate the rigidity of any such routine. I don't want to put anything heavy or unsustainable on you as you seek to grow in prayer.*

*But here is the great and inescapable truth, taught in Scripture, modelled by Christ and advocated, without exception, by all the heroes of our faith: you cannot grow in prayer without some measure of effort and discomfort, self-discipline and self-denial. Just as you cannot get physically fit without regular exercise and a healthy diet, so your spiritual growth will be determined, to a very significant extent, by the prayer exercises you choose (or do not choose) to establish and sustain.*

I must comment on the picture – Google thinks that praying always involves clasping your hands together and usually sitting or kneeling with your eyes closed. That's nonsense! You

can pray anytime and anywhere you like – please don't close your eyes when you're driving or walking

Philippians 4:6 *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

We're going to come back to that in just a minute ...

But first I want to highlight something Jesus said about children, and you might remember this was our focus during Advent.

Mark 10:15 *“anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”*

Jesus isn't looking for religious FORM.

He's looking for childlike FAITH.

That is what impresses Jesus, and it's the same with our prayer life. God is NOT impressed with how fancy our prayers are. He's impressed when we trust him when we pray.

When Jesus taught His disciples what we call the “Lord's Prayer” it was because the disciples were worried about form. They said to Him: *“Lord, teach us to pray!”* (Luke 11:1)

They were asking Jesus to give them a formula for a successful prayer. They wanted to “do it right!” because they felt if they didn't do it right then God wouldn't hear their prayers.

Back when I was a child... folk had a formula they followed in prayer.

It went something like this:

“O God, Thou art a powerful God and we comest before thee and prayest that thou wouldst hear us in our hour of need.”

It was all King Jamesie with lot's of Thees and Thous.

Now today, there are people who pray more like this:

“Father God in the name of Jesus, oh Father God I just come humbly before you Father God in Jesus' name Father God, to ask Father God that you would just hear my prayer Father God in the name of Jesus.”

Now, why do people pray like that?

They pray like that because they've heard people they respect who pray like that, and they're convinced that if they want God to hear their prayers – THIS is how they need to pray.

Don't do that. Just talk to God. Talk to Him like a child would talk to their father.

TALK NORMALLY.

And talk with faith and expectation. That's what impresses God.

This sermon is NOT about a formula on how to make our prayers more likely to be heard by God, but there is an easy way to help us be a bit more child-like in our prayers.

It's by following an acronym known as A.C.T.S

Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication

Adoration:

“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

What’s that all about?

It’s all about realizing WHO it is you’re talking to.

I have heard people praying who aren’t talking to God. They’re talking to me... or to a group of people. They use prayer as a teaching tool. God isn’t being addressed – we are. And God gets to stand back and listen.

But real prayer is about talking to God - not someone else. And prayer is not just talking to God... it's talking to my FATHER.

Now, even the best of earthly fathers can fall short, but God is a FATHER the way real fathers ought to be.

Jesus talks about that kind of father when he said: Matthew 7:9-11

*Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him.*

In other words, when you pray you are NOT talking to an uncaring, uninterested, indifferent deity. He’s not going to give you a stone or a snake when you ask things of Him. You are talking to your Heavenly Father who cares enough about you to give you good things.

So we pray to our Father. A Father who loves us and wants to give us good things and who is also the God of the universe. The God who created all things by just speaking it into existence.

He has power beyond anything we can even begin to imagine.

One of my favourite verses is Romans 8:32

*“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all— how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things.”*

If He'd give His son to die for our sins... what else do you think He'd be willing to do?

The problem with adults is that they tend to DOUBT that God cares. And they DOUBT God will do anything. Children don’t have that problem.

You tell them that God hears their prayers... they pray. You tell them God cares and that God can do anything... they believe it.

That’s why we adults need to start by adoring God - we need to remember our God CARES and that our God CAN do anything He wants to do.

Then there’s CONFESSION.

What would we be confessing?

Our sins, right? How many of you have sinned? Me too. Have you ever felt you’ve messed up so badly, or you’ve done, thought or said something that shamed you so much that God wouldn’t listen to you? Me too.

That’s why God told us 1 John 1:9 *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

That’s God’s promise... a promise we can accept with child-like faith.

I want to take thanksgiving and supplication, or making requests, to God in prayer.

Philippians 4:6 says *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”*

God has NO problem with us presenting our requests. He’s NEVER had a problem with that. It doesn’t offend Him when you ask Him for anything. Matthew 7:7 *Jesus said “ASK and it will be given to you; SEEK and you will find; KNOCK and the door will be opened to you.”*

Just ask!!! Can God say “no”? Of course He can. Would you be any worse off if He said "no" than when you were if you hadn’t asked? Of course not. So ask.

Ask big – really go for it in your prayers.

If the answer would be too big for you to handle, God won’t give you everything you ask... but He will hear. And He will be honoured by your faith. And He MIGHT just give you part - if not all - that you ask.

So ask. You're not going to offend Him. But when it comes to prayer, a lot of church goers don’t ask. I think there are people who believe God will do whatever he’s going to do anyway, so why bother.

Another problem for Christians is that they don’t ask because they don’t want to bother God. Sure, they're troubled by something in their lives, but it’s not that big a deal. They can take care of things themselves. They want to save their prayers for the “big stuff”.

But there is nothing you could ask that would “bother God.”

The Lord's Prayer is as specific as bread and debt. You don’t get any more basic than that. Plus, if it’s big enough to bother you, it’s big enough to pray about.

But, now, the question is: WHY? Why would people NOT believe God would care... or that God would bother?

Well, they don’t believe... because they missed THE major component of their prayer time.

Remember the acronym: ACTS

Adoration

Confession

T...

Supplication

What’s missing? THANKSGIVING

If you miss out on the thanksgiving part of your prayers there will be no JOY in your praying.

Let’s look at it again: "Do not be ANXIOUS about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with THANKSGIVING, present your requests to God."

A lot of people – when they come to God in prayer - are anxious. They’re anxious because they can’t see any way out of their problems. They’ve come to God as their LAST resort. They can't think of anything else to do so their prayers go up in kind of a "Hail Mary" style.

And they didn't pray to begin with because they weren't quite sure He would or could do anything about their situation. So there’s no peace in their hearts. And there’s no power in their prayers.

But Paul writes:

"Do not be ANXIOUS about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with THANKSGIVING, present your requests to God."

But he doesn't stop there. Paul goes on to say that when we DO THAT (when we flavour our prayers with thanksgiving) *“the PEACE OF GOD, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* Philippians 4:7

Did you catch that? If you focus on thanksgiving in your prayers you'll have a peace from God that doesn't even make sense.

It's illogical. It's irrational. It goes way beyond anything you'd expect... but it happens anyway.

Why? Well, think about it for a moment:

When you flavour your prayers with Thanksgiving... what are you thanking God FOR? You are thanking God for what He has already done in your life. You are remembering the times when God DID CARE and the times God DID DO something in your life.

YOU ARE CALLING TO MIND GOD'S FAITHFULNESS.

And Paul says when you do that – you can have God's peace.

In fact, right after this Paul writes this: Philippians 4:8-9a

*“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy— think about such things.”*

In other words – crowd your mind with God's faithfulness. Crowd your heart with the beauty God has given you. And you know what will happen when you do that?

Paul writes: “put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.” Philippians 4:9b

In other words: IF you sprinkle your petitions with thanksgiving – THE PEACE OF GOD will guard your hearts and minds. And if you continually focus on the good stuff God has given – the GOD OF PEACE will be with you.

You get BOTH His peace, AND Him... all in one package.

As a result you won't have to be anxious about anything.

Why? Because you have a God who can give you peace.

All you have to do is remember what He's done in the past and then use that memory as your measuring stick of what can happen in your life in the future as a result of His powerful response to your prayers.

Why should we rejoice like that? Because we have a Father who is faithful. We have a Father who cares about us. We have a Father who can do whatever HE wants to do.

In the garden of Eden we're told that Adam and Eve spent time with God every day. What did they talk about? There was no suffering to be dealt with: no war, famine, drought, flooding or viruses. There was no sickness to be cured. There was none of the things we often pray about. So what did they talk about? Surely they talked about ordinary, everyday things – the wonder of creation. We must bring our requests to God, but that should not be the only thing we do when speaking to God. We must just talk about ordinary everyday things as well.

As Christians we need to have a child-like faith in a God who is so much bigger than we are. Let me close with this story:

There was a boy who went with his mother to an old fashioned sweetie shop and there was a jar of sweets on the counter. The mother went about her business of getting some sweets to take home while the boy just stood there in front of the candy, mesmerized.

The owner spotted the boy looking at the sweets and when the mother went up to pay the owner said to the boy “Would you like some sweets?”

The boy nodded, and the manager said well go “ahead and take some”.

But the boy just stood there.

Again the owner said “go ahead and take a handful of sweets.”

But the boy still stood there.

Finally the owner reached into the jar and pulled out some sweets and gave it to the boy and the boy filled his pockets.

When they got outside the mother said “why didn’t you take a handful of sweets? The man told you it was O.K.

The boy smiled and said, “because his hands were bigger than mine”.

We have got to get to the point where we realize our God’s hands are bigger than ours.

We can do some things in our lives, but our hands aren’t nearly as big as His.

That’s why we need prayer.

We need His hands to do what we could never do as well ourselves.