

NCMI EQUIP South Africa 2013

Session 3a



Please Pray

by Shaun Mackay

I take nothing for granted and I don't know where you're at as I present two small words as the title of this message – a simple title but one that is difficult to live by – *Please Pray*.

Have you ever wondered what it was like for Jesus to pray the whole night? What was going on there? Was it like one of our church prayer meetings? What was he saying? Did he say one word over and over again? It doesn't seem as if he prayed in tongues. What was happening when Jesus stood at a tomb and said only one sentence: "Lazarus, come out!"

And before that he reveals something else. He prays, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me." Then, "Lazarus, come out!" and Lazarus comes out. What was going on there?

I wonder what your prayer life is like. What happens when you stand to pray for someone? Are you concerned with your words? Worried about prayer? I wonder what it was like for Jesus - getting up early in the morning; praying the whole night. Have you prayed the whole night? I wonder how many can last for an hour - most of us pray for five minutes and it feels like an hour. (There are those seldom occasions when one hour feels like five minutes.) Although we all know that prayer is an essential part of the Christian life.

Jesus teaches some foundations in Matthew 6. I take nothing for granted - I don't know how easy or difficult it is for you to pray. I just want to encourage you to do it for the rest of your life. And to grow in it and deepen in it and see God take you where you and all of us need to go, with prayer intact and happening.

Jesus says in Matthew 6: 4b:

"...and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

He's busy talking about the secret life, the things we do that no one sees. Then he says:

5 "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 6 But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

7 "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.

Then possibly his most profound statement:

8 Do not be like them, *for your Father knows what you need before you ask him*. 9 Pray then like this...

There are two things I notice here and three ways of praying I'd like to touch on:

1) The unseen things in the Christian life carry a lot of weight

When you listen to yourself pray it tests you to your core. I listen to the prayer requests people have and mostly it's practical needs. There's nothing wrong with that. But not once have I ever had anyone ask me to pray that they would be able to pray. In my ten years of ministry I've had four people ask me to pray that they would be able to reach the lost.

I've prayed for a thousand jobs and that's okay. But the deep, hidden, spiritual things of the Christian life – it seems those things don't matter so much these days. Wrestling with the depths of God in prayer is what's on offer here – the deep Christian life, the satisfaction of God, the knowledge that you and God are working together; living with God, experiencing him. This is all on offer.

2) God offers reward

In parenting, I wonder if you've heard this idea that we shouldn't manipulate or coerce our kids with some kind of reward. So don't offer them sweets for good behaviour. Don't say to them, "If you do this, I will..." But have you noticed what God does here? The Father says, "If you come and you pray, I'll reward you."

So badly does God want us to talk with him that he says, "If you do this, I'll give you something for it. If you come and you sit with me and spend time with me; if you come and talk with me; I'll give you something for it."

I think mostly he'll give us himself. The deep things of the Christian life are on offer here. He'll give us a sense of knowing that he is there and a real, personal knowledge of who he is and we'll grow deeper in this knowledge of him. But so badly does he want this from us that he'll reward us for it. Isn't that a motivation? What a great motivation.

I don't know if you've heard of J. John – he is a well known British preacher. He went to India and spoke to a lady there with a well known gift of the Word of Knowledge. He asked her to tell him whatever God says to her. She replied, "I have one thing to say to you. God enjoys that you spend one hour a day with him. He'd really like two."

It didn't hit him at that moment. But he says that his life has never been the same since. Everything has been different since then.

Getting this right

So how do we get this thing of prayer right? Not everyone finds it easy. We have ups and downs in it. But we can see in this passage that Jesus teaches us, at first, to consider very carefully who it is we're talking with.

There are so many balances when it comes to the Lord. At times you'll be speaking to the sovereign One who is in control of everything. And when you approach him he listens. At times you'll be speaking to the One who is tender, with whom you can share everything on your heart – you can say to him whatever you want.

But consider who you're talking with. If I really knew that God is actually who he says he is, I'd speak to him differently, I'd trust him differently, and I'd speak to him way more often. If I knew he really cared; if I knew he was really powerful; I'd go and talk to him. I'd consult less other voices. I would go straight there and I'd wrestle it out with him, knowing he is listening, ready to act.

Think of Psalm 18. God hears a cry and the Scriptures don't just say, “God answered” but instead give us phenomenal picture language – he tore the heavens open; he took a burning arrow and shot it down. All to answer what was being asked. Wow. I'd ask him a few more things if I knew that would happen.

Jesus teaches in this scripture two good ways *not* to pray and one good way *to* pray. Let's look at these:

1. In verse 5 we see prayer that is concerned with prayer

5 ‘And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others.

Our world is obviously different these days. No one stands on a street corner to pray while people listen! But what he's teaching us is there is prayer that is concerned with prayer. We've all done that. And we feel the pain of it and it demoralises us. It's when you're worried about your words. It's when you're very concerned with your sentences and how they're flowing and whether it's all sounding good.

The teaching is so simple that sometimes we miss it. He says we should not be overly concerned with language. Jesus is saying we must simply talk to our Father. Fair enough, he's not your average friend – he's not your 'bru'. But he's also not the Queen. You just talk to him. You just act naturally. You say what you want to say.

I wonder if you sometimes take examples of prayer from too many preaching prayers? Have you heard those? I've heard so many. I wonder if people are talking to God or trying to tell me something, trying to teach me something. “Please would you just pray” is my question. I wonder if you don't have the spiritual language that seems to be required? I don't have a clue where you are in your walk with God, but I want to encourage you to just pray nevertheless.

Sometimes we believe there are special mantras. Have you noticed this? It doesn't really matter what you say, as long as you finish the prayer with, “in Jesus' name”.

I'm not joking, but it seems as though some people tend to believe that this phrase carries the most power. But that's not the idea of praying in Jesus' name. The idea is that you pray in the name of our saviour, this redeemer, this Jesus, who comes to rescue and says, “You can now talk to the Father and I'll take your prayers, just as you are, and you say it the way you want to say it, as best you can,

and you just talk. And while you're praying, at some point you realise, I'm the one who's authorising your prayers and you're praying in my name as if the Father is listening to me." It's as though you're standing there with Jesus, and the Father is willing to listen to you just as he would his Son, and there you are, praying, talking in simple language.

Sometimes prayer is too concerned with prayer. Is my hand in the right place? Am I saying the right thing? I've said 'be healed!' four times instead of three, so now I don't know if it's going to work.

There are lots of problems we have that puts us off. But Jesus says we must get away from formulas. Please just pray.

2. Then there is prayer that's concerned with self

Jesus says in verse 7, "Do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words." I wonder if you spend time talking with the Lord and you just feel as though you shouldn't be there, that you don't have a right to be heard? It's dirty conscience prayer; anxious prayer. God will have to help us with that. He'll have to clear our consciences and tell us that we're able to come and talk with him.

Sometimes we also indulge in impersonal prayer. We go into a prayer mode, we blurt it out and get it over with and then afterwards ask, "Who was I talking to right there?" Or we think, "Wow, that was a really good prayer."

Or sometimes we're very worried while we're praying and we want to know how we can get God to answer. We think, "I don't know how to get him to listen to me. Maybe if I cry, or maybe I'm supposed to shout now – yes, if I shout, I've seen other people say that that works... Or maybe if I go on my knees God will hear and see I'm serious." It's all this prayer that's concerned with self. We're asking, "What do I have to do to get this God to listen to me?" If that goes on for longer than a week you get very discouraged. Please push through it. Please pray.

3. Then there's prayer that's concerned with the Father

Jesus says you shut the door, you bring all your faculties together, and now you talk with your Father. Concentrate on who it is you're talking with. Weigh your words carefully with him. It says in Ecclesiastes 5 that we should make one thing clear: God is in heaven, we're on earth. Sometimes, a few words are enough.

"Lazarus, come out!" I want to pray a prayer like that one day. I so badly want to say those three words to someone. I've prayed for two people who were dead, neither of them were raised, and I was stuck in prayer worried with self and prayer worried with prayer. They didn't get raised from the dead. I'm working on this one. Will you join me?

This is my last thought on talking with the Father: Most Christians have the biggest battle with prayer because they believe that God orders the world. And they're right. They believe that God will do what he wants to do. And they're right. They believe that even when you make your own plans, God will work it out his way. And they're right. So their question is, "Why on earth *should* I pray?"

I'll give you one hint that will bring these things together: God will do what he wills to do but what

he will do is, along the way, reveal to you what he wants to do and he just wants to hear you ask for those things.

So the day that something is burning on your heart and you can't stop praying because you so badly want this thing to happen – you're trusting that God will work this thing out – the very reason you're so desperate to ask is he wants to hear you ask. He wants to do it anyway. So no need to be worried, you just ask him. What's on your heart? You ask. You go, you question, you trust, you talk, you be yourself, you bring him your language. Maybe the thing you want to happen so badly is the very thing he is going to do, it's the thing he wants to do. So ask.

Romans 8 highlights one weakness in prayer. Sometimes we won't know exactly what to ask. And that's where you and I have to go deeper. What are we to ask? What does God need in this situation? The minute you ask the right thing he does it. That's why we see that all of Jesus' prayers were answered. He asked the right thing at the right time and God did exactly what he wanted to.

I want to encourage you to pray and continue in this. You may consider it infantile. I don't at all. I know too many pastors who can't pray for more than two minutes in a week. I know too many people who struggle with prayer. Please continue in prayer. Please will you pray.

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