

Prayer! (Part 1)

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[0 : 00] I would like to go back this evening just for a short while tonight to look at Matthew chapter 6 and what Jesus teaches in this greatest of all sermons, what he teaches about prayer.

And it's great to be able to listen to what Jesus has to say about prayer. And I'm just going to do the first section from verse 5 to verse 8.

It's probably worth reading again. And when you pray, you mustn't be like the hypocrites for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and in the street corners that they may be seen by others. Truly I say to you they have received their reward. 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.

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. Do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

[1 : 07] So it's these introductory verses that we're going to look at this evening. Now both this morning and this evening there's a similarity.

You may be find there's a little bit of overlap between what I say. And also in both sermons we've stressed and we will be stressing our individual personal spiritual responsibility.

So it's very much I hope that we're taking scripture today. I guess we should always be doing this. But very particularly taking scripture tonight and looking at your life, looking at your spiritual life in the mirror of scripture.

So just pretend there's no one else here. Just yourself in scripture. And that you're listening to what God is saying and asking and challenging and thinking about prayer for our lives.

But at the same time by looking at prayer and the truth we've looked at today very individualistically by focusing in on our own hearts, by looking into ourselves, hopefully we'll see that that leads to, as we saw this morning and I hope that you'll see this evening as well, it will lead to more meaningful community, biblical community.

[2 : 34] The more that we are examining and looking at our relationship and developing and growing our personal relationship with Jesus Christ in an absolutely personal and private way, the more that that will enable us to relate to Christian community better.

So it's not either or. It's not like I'm a great individual, private Christian who knows the Lord really well but I'm rubbish at church and with other Christians. It's not an either or.

It is both and and the more that we recognize that relationship, I think the better it is for us in our lives. And obviously understanding prayer is good to start the year with very basic truths and very important and central truths of prayer.

You will know is so important and understanding prayer in our lives is so terribly important. I believe it's the marker.

It's a marker for us of genuine faith. So if we're allowed to examine our own hearts, do examine other people's, as we said this morning, but our own hearts will find that as we allow the light of scripture into our hearts here and this subject of prayer, it will really reveal something to us about our faith.

[3 : 52] It's a kind of chit-mark. You get the chit-mark on products which speak about authenticity and that the real, real McCoy is it where?

And they define the difference between something that's real and something that's fake. It's very difficult sometimes to tell the difference between what is real and what is fake in things we buy. I was looking at photographs and I was actually going to show it tonight but I just didn't get my life organized enough. There was a thing on the internet about photos.

Is this fake or real? and they had five or six photos and you had to click on fake or real and it was very difficult to tell which ones were fake and which ones were real.

Something with a photo-shocked and bothers were absolutely real and it just seemed almost like impossible that that was the case. Sometimes very difficult to tell what's real and what's fake.

[4 : 49] So again we use Scripture as the model and the guide for us and the line by which we examine our own hearts if we could be as bold as to say whether our Christian life is fake or real and whether we are faking it as Christians or whether we genuinely are following the Lord Jesus Christ and dependent on Him.

I think Jesus is highlighting that in this whole section where he speaks about giving and praying and fasting. And what the general kind of overview is that he's saying to the religious leaders of his day in a sense, beware of faking it because if all your religion is exclusively public and if it's to be seen by the public in the way you give to people, in the way you pray and public and in your fasting so that you look miserable and everyone knows your fasting, if that is the extent, if your faith and your religion is exclusively public at that level, if that's what you want to reflect, if you want to reflect a very public Christianity or to bring up today, but ignore.

I'm not saying public Christianity is wrong, please don't think that, but it's at the exclusion of having a private relationship, personal relationship with God.

What he's saying is you can tell the difference between faking it as a Christian and being genuine as a Christian in the privacy of your hearts, you know, in other words, in the privacy of your hearts. And nobody else knows the privacy of your heart tonight and you don't know the privacy of mine, but when there's nobody to impress and when there's nobody to compare our Christianity to or look at it in light of other people, that is where it really matters.

[6 : 51] So tonight, God's Word is asking us to look just very carefully in our own hearts tonight. Just please look into our own, all of us must look into our own hearts and because Christ is speaking here about the danger of externalism, of just being an outward Christian, being a Christian to impress or to be alongside or just for whatever other reason, and there is, there, that Christ doesn't have Lordship.

It is linked very much to this morning about trusting in the Lord of all your heart, that Christ is not authentically yours, that you are your own, that He's not authentically yours in your heart and that you have no living relationship with Him.

And I think that is the key to what Christ is saying here in all of these areas. He's warning the religious people of His day, don't rely on religion, don't rely on outward religion or on outward works or on simply being a Christian from the skin outwards, but He's asking them and He's challenging us also to think about our own hearts and our own lives and our own private relationship with Him and that will, I think, then affect how we work and how we live in community.

So He starts by saying something very obvious. He starts by saying, when you pray. We belong to the Lord, He doesn't even have any shadow of doubt that you will be praying.

You know, I've said, you know, this is Derek Lamont's old record that's getting played here this evening again. We always do, we play this record all the time in St. Columbus.

[8 : 43] You know, prayer is the key. If we don't pray, we can't claim to be Christ's because Christ came and you are, as it were, standing at the cross and His, your name was called as He died on the cross for you and He said, look round, calling your name and He said, look into the Holy of Holies.

What do you see there? You see a curtain that's been ripped from top to bottom, an 80 foot, foot thick curtain that's been ripped open and He says, that is for you.

That's so you have access to speak to the living God. Any time of day and night, you don't need a high priest. You don't need anybody else to go there for you. I've opened the way and the way is so for us.

Everything you pray is Jesus reminding us that that is what we will do if we are Christians. The life of faith is predicated on being a life of prayer and we need to be praying people.

And that's what we've done, isn't it? That's what you've done. You're a Christian. I'm a Christian. We trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. We've prayed. We pray.

[10 : 05] We cried out to God for salvation in the very first time we came to know Jesus Christ. It was because we cried out to Him and from that moment on we've worshiped Him.

We've bowed our knee. We've sat beside our bed. We've walked in the streets and we've prayed. We've given thanks. We've asked. We've pleaded. We've needed help. We've repented. We've wept tears. We've prayed. We've spoken to the living God. That's what we do. That's what we are as Christians and Jesus says when you pray. Because what has happened in salvation is that a rift has been healed and that the silent treatment is over. You know what it's like, don't you, when you fall out with your best friend? There's silence. You don't speak to one another. You know what it's like in your marriage. When you fall out, you don't speak to one another. There's silence.

[11 : 04] And what's the sign of that rift being healed? They're talking again. After 35 years. These neighbors, they started talking again. That's the sign, isn't it, that a rift has been healed? That something that's been broken where there has been a great relational fallout has been dealt with. They're speaking again. They didn't, these sisters, these old spinster sisters didn't speak for 45 years. They've forgotten what they've fallen out over. But now they're speaking again because the rift has been healed and that is what we do with spiritually. We're talking again with our heavenly Father. And if we're not talking with our heavenly Father, if we don't speak with Him, then we do, you do and I do, have to question the reality of what it is that we believe. And Jesus here is exposing what might be wrong and what is important to recognise. Because there's a radical change that's happened, isn't it, in salvation. Turn with me for a moment with, to Romans chapter 8 and verse 15.

[12 : 13] It's important that it's linked in many ways to this section. Romans chapter 8 verse 15, Paul is arguing for who we are in Christ and what important is in Christ. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery, verse 15, chapter 8. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you've received the spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry, Abba, Father. The spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. And if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him. So there's this radical change that we call God Father, that we speak to Him in the same way that He encourages the disciples here when you praise our Father which are in heaven. And there's an explosion of that use of the term Abba in the New Testament. Father's not a common Old Testament name that is given or I can't think of the word that I'm looking for here.

[13 : 21] But by any description of God, it's not used very much in the Old Testament. But in the New Testament, there's a great explosion, particularly from the person of Jesus who is revealing to us the nature of both His relationship with God and our relationship through faith and by faith. It's only me, I think, Father's only used as a designee, designee, probably a good word I was looking for, of God in the Old Testament. Only eight times is it used. But in Matthew alone, it's used 37 times. So that Jesus, there's this great massive change in emphasis where Jesus is expressing and explaining what it is to belong to God and that He's our Father, He's our heavenly Father. It's the wonderful story of the prodigal, isn't it, the prodigal Son? It's not just simply the best story in the Bible for explaining salvation. We've got this wonderful story. It's the return. We are the returning prodigals. That's what we are. We come back and we see God in a completely different perspective in salvation in the same way that the Son saw God differently.

[14 : 33] He wanted God dead at the beginning of the parable. Just look at, okay, you're not dead, but at least give me your money. Maybe as well as dead, because I'm going to leave home with all the inheritance, just you and me. And He went and showed great disrespect and great carelessness and a lack of love for His Father, but He comes back with a completely different attitude. His Father hasn't changed. His Father expresses His love radically by running out to meet His prodigal and wasteful Son and welcomes Him back as a Fees, someone who's risen from the dead. And so the Son gets a new perspective of the Father. And so that in Christ, that's what we know. We know that the Father's not an ogre. God's not an ogre in our lives.

We don't kowtow to this God as if He's someone to be afraid of. We worship and respect and revere Him in awe, but He's also our Father.

[15 : 35] And Jesus is our elder brother. And the work of the Holy Spirit in us gives us that sense of intimacy and love and trust that we were speaking about this morning, belonging and communion and fellowship.

That is in many ways why we pray, because He's become our Father. He's become the one we relate to, the one that we're made in His image, the one that we love, the one that has our best. The one that we've seen has paid such a price to set us free and everything has changed and He is the one to whom we pray. I know in the world in which we live, that can be a difficult illustration to pick up on and relate to.

Some of us will have had really poor parent-child relationships, very bad. So we find it difficult to relate to this idea of a loving Father.

These relationships between parents and children can be really strained, can be broken, can be failed. It can also be amazing. You have great relationships, humanly speaking with your parents.

[16 : 50] But the very best human relationship between father and child, between parent and child, is only a shadow of what we're created to enjoy with our Heavenly Father, our Father to whom we pray.

This perfect Father who loves us and blesses us infinitely above and beyond what we can ask or even imagine. That's what prayer is.

That's why we pray. Our Father, when you pray, it is something that simply is at the core of understanding grace and understanding salvation and again understanding our own hearts, what we've been saved from and what we've been saved to.

Pray. Is that our experience? Is that your experience? Is that the core reality of your life? Not just of the spiritual bit, but of your life.

Is it your oxygen? Is it what you live for? It's the mark of authenticity that what we have is not fake, but it's real that we are praying.

[18 : 02] When you pray, now I know we all battle with that and we all struggle with it, but if you're not battling, if it doesn't matter to you, if prayer is at best perfunctory and just something that you go through ritualistically, then you must look at the word of God and the understanding of Jesus Christ and what He says here.

Because as I mentioned at the New Year's Day service, I'd read something about, that was very helpful saying that we don't pray, this is kind of wider issue about prayer, we don't pray for the work. Prayer is the work. So it's not like prayer is something added to an additional thing in our Christian life. Prayer is our Christian life because prayer is fellowship with the Father, the renewed fellowship with the Father.

And everything else stems from that. I'm not saying that's all we do, but everything stems from that. And so if we are claiming to be Christians, but we never pray, or if we're claiming to belong to a Christian community that doesn't value the significance and rattle on all the time about the importance of prayer, then that is simply unintelligible, spiritually speaking.

If the engine room of the church is not prayer, then the church is nothing. The church is nothing. If we don't see the value of corporately praying together, then we need to reevaluate what Christian community is.

[19 : 40] Because Jesus says when you pray, you don't say, my Father in heaven. You say, our Father. Because there's this huge significant recognition that prayer, both privately and corporately, is the work that we do.

It's the place, in other words, where mission, where obedience and mission and holiness can only be grounded. You know, it's not that like some churches are praying churches and then other churches are missional churches.

And then there's the teaching churches. They're kind of higher up. They're better than any of them. It's not like that. It's not. We don't have that gradation. Because unless we are grounded as a people in prayer, then learning and teaching and discipleship and mission and all of these things are simply going through the motions.

There's no value in them whatsoever because we need to be holy, but independent. We need to be people who pray. Do you pray? Do I pray?

When you pray, Jesus says here, it's a mirror to your soul. Read this. It's a mirror to our souls that we need to look at. So how do we pray very briefly then before next week when Chloe's going to look at the prayer itself?

[20 : 59] I love this introductory section, which is very clear and very simple. And it's great, isn't it, when Jesus gives very clear guidance. You know, some of the Bible's really difficult to understand. Some things we don't really know about.

There's different opinions. You know, it might be because of a baptism and opinions about church polity and all different things that are going to. Jesus is absolutely clear on these essentials. And he's, you know, in words of not many syllables, he makes it clear for us what matters.

He gives us principles here that don't just, I don't think reflect, don't just only apply to prayer. They can be broader principles as well for us.

But he says a couple of don'ts and a couple of do's. Very simple, very clear for us. We can all take it away. Don't he say, don't. When you're praying, and isn't it good, Jesus is, we are terribly conscious about not saying negative things.

Jesus isn't like that. You know, because life isn't like that. It's good to be a parent and say, don't do that. Do this. As long as it's right. And we do it in love.

[22 : 04] But here it's very clear. He says, don't do certain things, do certain things when it comes to prayer. Because he wants us to know. He wants us to understand. So he says, don't pray to impress other people.

Don't pray like that. He says that very clearly in verse five. He says, when you pray, don't be like the hypocrites. What was the hypocrite? Hypocrite was somebody who was wearing a mask. An actor was wearing a mask.

Wasn't the real person, it was just a mask. Don't be like that. They love to stand and pray in the synagogues in the street corners that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

Don't pray says to impress other people. I find it quite difficult to apply that because I'm not sure we do. We're not in a situation where we do.

Are open to do that maybe very often. You know, I don't imagine there's many of us here that kind of brag about how long we've prayed. Or how often we prayed. Ah, it's a great morning. This morning I prayed for an hour and a half.

[23 : 04] You know, I don't see many people thinking and acting like that in the church. But maybe sometimes in public prayer, maybe this is more of a danger for the minister and for people in position of leadership, public praying to impress, you know, that you're really trying to impress people.

Or maybe in a public prayer meeting, you're praying in such a way that you really want to impress others about your depth of knowledge and your depth of insight and the godliness with which you're living your life.

But at the same time, you're hiding your soul. You're not exposing it. Because you're praying to impress other people. Now you can broaden that principle out, can you?

We can broaden that principle out. To say that nothing in your Christian life should be a pretense. Your prayer life shouldn't be a pretence. You shouldn't be doing it to impress others.

But nothing we should do should be to impress other people, to impress other Christians. That's not the motive. That's not why we're doing it. If that's why we live our Christian lives, then God says you've got your reward when people pat you on the back.

[24 : 09] When people say, aren't you an amazing Christian? That's your reward. God isn't saying it. To be seen. You know, making it a pretence so that your morality, your church attendance, your theological muscle, the knowledge that you have, the way that you would never miss something religious.

It can all be about seeking acceptance or praise or even comparison with others to make us look better.

Being part of something attractive so that you can say, I'm part of this great church. I'm part of this great community. And I belong to this fundamentally dishonest.

Because God is not the focus in your heart or in my heart. When we are praying or living our Christian lives in such a way that we want to impress other people.

Proud. And it's missing the point altogether. So he says, don't pray like that. He also says, don't pray to impress God. This might be more of a subtle problem in our lives.

[25 : 22] We may not pray to impress others, but sometimes maybe we try and pray to impress God in our lives. He says that when you pray, don't heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think they'll be heard, that God will be impressed by their many words.

Don't be like your father knows what you need before you ask him. And then he explains what to do. Now he's not saying your father knows what you need, so don't pray.

That's not what he says. He says your father knows before you ask him. He still wants us to ask. But he's a sovereign God, we are not out to try and impress God with our Christian lives, with our fine words in prayer, with our long explanations of theological truths to God.

They are gods. He knows them. The theology is the knowledge of God. He knows himself perfectly. We don't need to tell him all about his attributes in long and impressive phrases in order to impress him.

I'm not saying we don't want to worship him by telling him who he is, but in order to impress him, we don't give him advice in our prayers, impressing him with our wisdom and tell him what he should do with our lives because we know better than him.

[26 : 44] We don't pray in his presence and then rise from prayer and look at the clock virtuously about how long we've managed to pray and therefore how God will be impressed by that.

As if we're looking at the watch and saying God will be impressed with me today. I prayed for 27 minutes. It reflects, all of that reflects in our lives.

And you know how I speak so expertly about this, don't you? Because I know it and I see it every single day in my own heart. It reflects a lack of heart understanding, doesn't it?

It reflects a lack of understanding of grace and of God's sovereignty that we don't need to add to him, that we don't need to change him, we don't need to correct him, we don't need to earn from him.

He has given us all. He's our Father. He loves us. We don't need to impress him and he's not impressed with us trying to impress others. So he gives us the don'ts but he also gives us within that the do's, what we are to do.

[27 : 50] And he encourages us and challenges and I get, this is where we link very much with this morning. We do pray from the heart. You know, he gives the negative and then he gives the positive.

He says truly, I say that you've received the word. And when you pray in verse eight, verse six, go to your room, shut the door, pray to your Father who's in secret and your Father who's in secret will reward you.

God is giving us very simple guidance about prayer life here. He's saying pray from your heart. The key to this is not absolutely literalistically saying that this is the only genuine prayer is when we go and find a room and close the door and then that's us really praying because you can still be praying to try and impress God that way.

That's the point is not that we go somewhere and lock the door in a ritualistic kind of way. What he's saying is prayer, genuine prayer is the activity of our heart of this relationship with God that needs privacy, that needs time and that it's an awareness that God is seeing our heart, he knows our soul and so we go into his presence, recognizing that it's not about other people.

It's not about impressing him. It's about doing business and speaking with and talking to this living, glorious, loving Father. And so that therefore speaks of our prayer life is being utterly honest.

[29 : 22] I think that's why they need to be private. I would die if you heard my prayers. I would die if you heard the kind of things that I wrestle with and battle with because they're not for public consumption.

Not are you a wrestles and battles. Generally speaking, at least many of them for public consumption is utterly, we have to be free and private prayer to be utterly honest before our God. Hide nothing from him. Don't try and pretend that we're better than we are. Tell him about our fears and our lusts and our impurities and our greed and our grumpiness and our struggles and the deepest, darkest things that are going on in our hearts.

He wants us to be praying about them, utterly honest, therefore intensely personal. Again which is why we go on our own with him.

He's died. He's not just died for St. Colombo's. He's not just died for the Christian community. He's died for you. You know, we take him personally as our saviour and there's an intensely personal communication that we develop in prayer.

[30 : 29] You know, that is what he's saying. That's what he's teaching here. A personal relation is not once removed. It's not relying on other people, on your spouse or on your father or your mother or other people.

It's an entirely intensely personal reality and at the same time that it's therefore deliberately intentional. It's intensely private or personal but it's deliberately intentional.

We make the effort to be in his presence alone. You know, he says that, doesn't he? He says, you know, you've got to be someone who goes into your room, shuts the door, prays to your father who's in secret.

There's an intentionality there that prayer life, our prayer life needs privacy, it needs time and it needs effort and energy to do that.

And you know, the paradox of all of this teaching is that what we do in secret, God's ACO reward us, it becomes something that is, will be seen.

[31 : 40] We don't intend it to be seen. It's a byproduct. If we're in relationship with God in our own hearts every day, in our own lives, that will out.

It will show itself because we are dependent on him and we will live our lives in relationship with him. So it's to be prayer from the heart and it's also lastly to be prayer with our minds.

Okay, pray from our heart and that's why we don't need to impress others and it's prayer with our minds and that's why we don't need to impress God because we've learned about who God is and we've learned about our relationship with him.

So in verse eight he says, you know, that we are to not be like the Gentiles who heap up or the pagans who heap up empty phrases. They think they'll be heard for their many words.

Empty phrases, mindless phrases. We're not to be mindless in prayer. You know, it's not about the word, wordiness of what we're saying or babbling as it were.

[32 : 50] We're to pray with our minds. We're never going to be telling God what he doesn't know. We're never going to be trying to persuade him.

And as we pray with our mind, we have come to learn the kind of God into whose presence we've come. We need to know who he is. If you're building up a relationship and you need to get to know that person at a human level, how much more so with God?

That gives prayer its understanding. That gives our prayer life depth, a three dimension. It makes it real in our lives. And so prayer is recognizing who God is, recognizing what his will is, knowing what his will is and praying that.

And therefore prayer becomes something that changes us. It doesn't change God. But he delights in hearing our prayers.

He delights in us being informed Christians and knowing what to pray for. Do we so that you know, we're not praying for a Rolls Royce.

[34 : 07] We're praying for what he promises us in his word. And when we are praying for what he promises, we will receive that. We will be praying in his will, we receive that and it will transform our prayers when we pray with our minds as well as when we pray with our hearts.

So it's not good enough for us just to say, you know, I will, I'm just, I'm just genuinely praying from our heart. It's great to pray from our hearts.

But it's both of this, isn't it? It's praying with our hearts and with our minds coming to know this living God better. And we pray therefore as we pray in that way, we will pray more together.

So we understand that that's how Christ works. That's how his kingdom comes. Our Father, our Father in heaven, your kingdom come.

The kingdom in Edinburgh comes when we're praying together. Every, every single instance of God at work comes through the prayers of his people in this kingdom because that's his chosen way.

[35 : 25] That's because the way is open to us through Jesus Christ's blood and he wants us to walk there. That's the greatest thing, you know, we're his children and we come to know and learn and love him.

And may it be that this year, if it hasn't been for us, that it would be a year, I'm not saying that this is easy for us. It's an ongoing battle.

We work in our lives with remaining sin and we battle against it, but we must battle. And when we battle, we will know blessing. That's undoubtedly the case, so maybe a year of prayer for us. May you be challenged tonight in your conscience if you haven't prayed yet this year. Challenge to think about what kind of relationship that you have with Christ and what it means and that your conscience will be struck.

I hope that if you haven't prayed this year as a professing Christian and you've heard the message from Christ, you will not sleep one wink tonight until you deal with the living God and speak to him and come back into his presence.

[36 : 41] Think of the prodigal father and his arms open wide. And if this becomes a year of prayer for us, it will be the best year of evangelism ever.

I guarantee that in our lives also. Let's put our heads in prayer. Lord God, we ask and pray that you would help us to understand you better. Forgive us and may this people and may this congregation know that I preach on this subject from a place of weakness, not a place of strength.

And that there is a great deal of self-reflection and self-recognition of failure in these words.

And may it be that we are a people of prayer by the grace of God. May we be an eldership and a diaconate of prayer here in St. Colombo's.

May we be a people of prayer. Not as some kind of monastic sideshow, but may it be our very lifeblood.

[37 : 51] May it be what reflects our sense of need and our understanding of your own diagnosis and above all your own remedy. May we all understand ourselves as the prodigal children returning to their father.

And may we constantly see his arms open wide as we battle to come back and as we battle with our pride and our independence and our self-righteousness and as we battle with all that separates us from you.

May we see your open arms, not just of the prodigal father, but of the crucified Saviour on the cross. May we remind ourselves that that is the bread of his love and that is the immensity of the way that's been opened for us.

May we not despise that by being prayerless. May we not misunderstand who you are. May we not seek fine words or great phrases before we will pray.

May we not be people who think that prayer is anything else other than speaking to you as our King and our Head and our Lord. And may you guide us and teach us and lead us and educate us and refresh us and renew us and forgive us and redeem us in all that we are as our people and as individuals at this time.

[39 : 17] For Jesus' sake, Amen.