

7:50 - A Biblical reflection

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[0 : 0 0] For those of you who are visiting with us tonight, our theme tonight is a kind of biblical reflection on a period of time we've had called 750 prayer, which was seven days of intense prayer every day, every morning and every evening as a congregation together, seven in the morning, seven in the evening.

And then we had 50 days when we encouraged prayer with a prayer partner on a daily basis. And so last evening at our preparatory service, we spent some time just sharing our experiences of answered prayer as well, which was hugely encouraging and a great joy to be involved with and to be at.

But I also wanted to spend a little bit of time with a hope not an abuse of the pulpit by giving a personal reflection because it is based on scripture and the passage you read because what we did last evening was we shared some of the experiences and answers.

And what I'm doing is I'm sharing the most important lesson I learned, hugely significant lesson I felt I learned from this period of this initiative that we had done and had considered together.

I wonder what your expectations were of 750 prayer or of hearing about it even if you weren't involved and what your experiences were as you came back from that.

[1 : 4 1] Was that a good time? Three months? Not quite, two months? Was it bad? Was it encouraging?

Or was it indifferent? Was it discouraging? Were you involved? Did you have a prayer partner over that period?

Did you see any fruit in terms of answered prayer? Were you relieved? Was there a great sigh of relief in this 750 ended so you could get back to kind of normal life?

Was it real for you? Or was it rather ritualistic? Or did you just simply not engage in it at all? Was it not something that you thought was relevant or significant to you?

And have you found that prayer as a result is more important in your life or less important or equally unimportant or more important than it was previously?

[2 : 4 4] I have to say that for me personally I was disappointed. And it's always dangerous to talk about your own feelings from the pulpit but I was disappointed.

I was disappointed at God. I was disappointed a little bit at myself. I was disappointed at the struggle and the battle. I was disappointed at the lack of answers that I thought.

I was disappointed that the church wasn't absolutely transformed. That we didn't have hundreds of conversions. That we didn't see people bursting out the doors.

Or bursting in the doors. Or coming in and then bursting out the doors when they've been here. Whatever. And there was a tinge of disappointment and it caused me to reflect on the nature of prayer and what 750 was about.

And why it was important. And it's led me to this passage in Matthew chapter 28 very strongly. To the prayer of Jesus.

[3 : 52] Repeated three times his prayer. Not only because it was important for him but always in repetition biblical truths when they're repeated three times are done so for emphasis I believe for us as well.

And we recognize it as being a unique prayer. And I know that and I know it's a unique prayer. But it's not just a unique prayer. There's something very significant and fundamental and foundational about Jesus' prayer to his father that will help you not to be disappointed and help you to learn the fundamental and basic and me to learn the fundamental and basic nature of prayer.

This is undoubtedly a unique prayer. But if we look at verse 39 Jesus as he the way of Calvary becomes much clearer to him.

He says my father if it is possible may this cup be taken from me yet not as I will but as you will as you will. So I know that that in itself with God the Son praying in this way to God the Father not my will but yours be done.

There's mystery in that prayer that is so deep that it reflect that it is too much for us to understand and recognize.

[5 : 19] Yet we can also say that this is a perfect prayer. Not my will but yours be done. That is in a short summary that is a perfect prayer.

It's a prayer that stems from this glorious relationship that God the Son has with God the Father which we spoke about last week. This tremendous love and unity between them.

We spoke about it in prayer on Wednesday evening. And there's incredible depth within that short prayer and incredible mystery. Here is God the Son wrestling with God the Father without animosity.

So there's a battle going on. There's a wrestling going on but there's no animosity and there's no lack of submission to God's word or God's will.

And in these nine words we have a kind of verbally visible insight into the fundamental nature of prayer.

[6 : 28] Something very clear for us to help us. And why I think it's important is because we are often disappointed with prayer. And we often give up praying.

And we often think God hasn't answered. And we often think God doesn't listen. And we struggle with prayer because very often I think our understanding of prayer is not biblical or is partly biblical.

And so in this prayer we find I think, I hope I certainly found because this is my reflection, my understanding of prayer being fashioned differently and being molded and being changed in what I hope is a real and life changing way.

So it very neatly divides into two. Not my will but your will.

And that for me is a fundamental recognition that needs to be at the basis of all our prayer and of our understanding of prayer.

[7 : 40] Not my will. Not my will. That's an amazing description of what prayer is, not my will.

Often, isn't it for us? Think of your last prayer. Think of when you prayed last. Isn't it often exactly the avenue that we use to get our own way?

To get our will? To get what we want? Now, I made a quick caveat here about that because we know the Bible encourages us to ask for our desires.

And that's right. And that's good because He's our Heavenly Father and we make our requests known. But we do so humbly and we do so recognizing that we don't come to Him not just with our desires but we don't come to Him with the way He will answer our prayers.

We certainly do ask for our longings and our desires and that is right. But we recognize in so doing we are opening up something very dangerous.

[8 : 53] For example, we know that we can ask for anything that's according to His will, can't we? You know as a Christian that one of the fruits of the Spirit is patience.

So you can ask Him in prayer for patience and you will be guaranteed that He will give you that. But how does He answer that prayer?

How does He give us patience? We sung this morning, Psalm 65, a fantastic Psalm.

And in verse 5 of that Psalm, the Psalmist says, you answer us with awesome deeds of righteousness, O God our Saviour.

Now in the old version of that Psalm it says, by fearful works unto our prayers, your answer, line answer, dust express.

[9 : 55] Awesome deeds of righteousness. So if we pray, we pray for patience, God may answer that prayer with awesome deeds of righteousness, with experiences that are brought into our life that we neither look for nor want, but that will bring us patience if we allow Him to work through them.

So we humbly ask for God's will and we ask for our desires. But very often our motive and our attitude is different and we simply use prayer as a way of getting what we want ourselves.

There's two dangers, I think, that are evident in our prayer life. One is that we use prayer to control God and the other, we use prayer to change other people.

So we can use prayer to want our will to be done by controlling God. Well, you look at with me James chapter 4 towards the end of the New Testament.

James chapter 4.

[11 : 13] And James is talking about quarrels and fighting within the church, but then he goes on to talk about prayer. He says, what causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

You want something but you don't get it, you kill and covet, but you cannot have what you do, what you want, you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask God, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

So it's about wrong motives. We don't get what we ask for in prayer because we're wanting the wrong things for the wrong motives and our prayers about controlling God.

We want God to give us what we want and we want to be in control of that. It's a bit like the disciples who are walking with Jesus and they'd gone to Samaritan village and the Samaritan village rejected the gospel and what they said and as they walked with Jesus they prayed to him and said, Jesus will you not ask God to bring down fire on this people because they've rejected you and Jesus rebukes them because they want to control God.

They want to tell God what to do. God, you know, if we were you, we would bring down fire here and that's what you should do. God, in our prayers, this is what you should do.

[12 : 32] God, this is what I want you to do. God in my relationships, in my circumstances, with the weather, God, with the wealth, I want this.

I want to control you. I want to be in control of the situation and that's how we pray. And when that doesn't happen, when our prayers aren't answered according to our will, then we say God doesn't care.

God isn't listening. God isn't playing ball. Is that why we give up praying? How often have you argued with God or accused God of not listening, of not caring, of not giving you what you've asked for and could it possibly be that it is my will that I am looking for rather than God's will to be done?

Or can it be that like the Pharisees or the Pharisee who went up to pray with the tax collector and he basically said to God, Luke God, you're going to answer my prayers because I'm not like this tax collector.

I'm not a sinner. I give a tithe of all that I get. I worship in the right way. I'm morally upright and therefore you will answer my prayers.

[13 : 51] You're manipulating God by saying that we're good enough to have our prayers answered, that it's our right for God to answer our prayers.

It's a quid pro quo prayer. I come to you. I live a good and moral upright life. Therefore you will answer me. How often have we thought that we will have a good day because we began it with prayer?

I prayed this morning, God will give me a good day. It's a quid pro quo thing where we go into His presence and we think I'll give Him prayer and I'll give Him worship and He will give me a good day as it were manipulating Him in order to get what we want.

My will be done. So very often our prayers and my prayers are about controlling God.

And more so they can also be about my prayers about changing other people. So the situation we find ourselves in, we pray about it.

[15 : 02] Lord please change them. Change that person. They're so mean and so thoughtless.

So in spiritual. Change them. Change the situation. Find myself, change my family. Change my husband. Change my wife. Change the minister.

Change the elders. Change everybody else. There's a classic situation in Luke 10. Maybe look this up with me. Luke 10 and at verse 38 it's well known to us.

Jesus the home of Martha and Mary. And lots has been said about Martha and Mary in this situation and how it seems that Martha seems hard done by and that Mary seems to be a bit casual in what she's doing.

Jesus and disciples on their way, they came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said but Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.

[16 : 09] She came to him and said, Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me. Because her prayer was that Martha, that Mary would be changed, that she was doing all the hard work.

Mary was the one that was not helping and not doing what is important. And so she says, Lord, please change her and ask her to help me.

Now, what Martha was doing was fine, it was good work and what Mary was doing was great, it was fine work as Jesus went on to say. But it was Martha's attitude that she saw Jesus place was to change other people and not to deal with herself and her own situation.

And it's a classic situation, isn't it, for us, that we find ourselves in certain situations and we say, Lord, change them. Change the situation.

Change the circumstance. Change the people around me. Then I'll be able to worship you. Then I'll be able to follow you. Then I'll be able to serve you. This is what prayer is about, Lord.

[17 : 13] Change my family. Change my job. Change my circumstances. Change Mary. Help her to see. If Lord, it's not me that needs changed, it's other people.

I've been so sinned against. Things have been so difficult for me. Lord, I know, I know that that person is a speck and that I, please Lord, take it out.

Please change it. Lord, feel free to ignore the great beam that's in mind. But please change them and their situation so that my life will be better and then I will be a better Christian.

We spend so much of our time and can do judging others and blaming God for where we find ourselves and wanting him to change others, wanting to control him so that he is our cosmic sugar daddy and wanting others to be transformed.

And yet, could it be that God is using these situations to transform us, to be forgiving and patient and compassionate and to glorify him, exactly where we are, so that our very core of praying isn't, my will be done, but your will be done.

[18 : 46] You know, halfway through this period of prayer, I was praying for three people and I was beginning to say, well, God, you know, why aren't you changing their hearts? Why aren't you, I can't do it.

They're spiritually dead. I'm giving you the glory. You must change them. You must bring them to life and praying for them fervently.

Could Christ be saying, good Derek, but I want to use you. I want to use you to speak to them, to be a witness to them by your consistent life, by your being unashamed to tell them that you love and serve Christ, by your thoughtful witness, by the fact that whatever you do, you live in such a way that speaks well of Jesus.

Could that be His answer to my prayer for these people? I want you to have the courage to live in such a way that they will come to know Christ and I will do the work He says, but I want to use you.

Sometimes, is that why we give up on prayer? Is that why we stop praying? Is that why prayer isn't important to us? Because we've tried it and we've wanted our will to be done, but we haven't thought about whether this is what God wants and what God is saying to us through it.

[20 : 20] Because the foundational reality of Jesus' perfect prayer here is He says, not as I will, not as I will, that's hugely significant.

Do we use prayer to control or hopefully to control God in our circumstances and our people around us so that our life will be on more of an even keel?

Not my will. Embed that into your thinking. That's not my will so that when we pray that we're thinking, is this simply what I want?

Is this simply my desires and are these desires ones that are in line with God's will? And that takes us to the second part of the prayer.

Not my will, but yours be done. Your will be done. What a great statement at that point from the Lord Jesus Christ.

[21 : 26] A willing acquiescence in the deepest suffering imaginable that has ever happened.

Great terror in the prayer, yet a humble submission as you see the second prayer, the second time you praise it.

My Father, if it's not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done. Is this willing wrestling as it were?

This wrestling without animosity where we have this perfect recognition that Jesus is willing to go to hell and back for us.

That He's willing to take that suffering because it's for the Father's glory and because it's what they have preordained to do and because it is an act of ultimate justice and ultimate love.

[22 : 32] And there's total trust in this prayer, not my will, but yours be done. There's total commitment. There's total love. There's total faith in the goodness of God that this is the right thing to do.

It seems illogical. It seems hard. It seems difficult, but I'm willing to acquiesce in your will because your will is perfect and good.

Not my will, but yours be done. What do we notice about that? A couple of things. It's relational, primarily, not ritualistic.

My Father, He begins. We look to that on Wednesday night, the importance of this great, fatherly, perfect, trusting relationship between God the Father and God the Son.

I wonder if you see prayer in that way, relational rather than ritualistic. If you regard prayer as ritualistic, I do it in the morning.

[23 : 44] I do it in the evening. I do it whenever. I ought to pray as an act rather than a relationship. Then you'll find it difficult to carry on.

It will become for you legalistic. It will be the outworking of what you want, if that is simply what it is. If you saw 750 as a prayer initiative that was simply a ritual, a church thing to do, even coming together, then at the end of 750 you would have been glad to see what I'm glad that's over.

I'm glad that period is done. I'm glad I can move on in my life because it was a ritualistic thing and it will become legalistic. If you struggle with prayer, it's because you see it as legalistic and not as relational and you will be disappointed when prayers aren't answered and you will give up and walk away because it's something you do.

There's something I do rather than something that I am and it needs to be that ongoing expression of a perfect relationship of trust in God when He brings into our life things that we don't understand.

We wrestle with Him in prayer and ask that He would work out His good and perfect and loving will for us. Not my will but yours be done.

[25 : 10] Yours be done. So the essence of prayer in the second section of His prayer is to recognise that prayers about surrender, not about control.

That's the heart of worship and it's the heart of prayer. It's being able to get on our knees and say He is Lord. That's what prayer is about.

Prayer is not about saying I am Lord, God give me what I need. It is saying that He is Lord. And James says you don't have because you ask for the wrong motives.

And the wrong motives are that we try and pray without recognising our need for surrender and submission to His will. Prayer is recognising and working out that He knows best.

It's not a theologically kind of isolated statement. Every time we go to prayer, it's the recognition that we are going to prayer because He knows best.

[26 : 22] Even when we don't know what He knows, even when we don't know what we want, we are saying that Lord, you know best. Not my will but yours be done.

It's about giving our lives into His hands. When we haven't prayed for a month, it means we have no concept of giving our life over to Him and saying you know better Lord, I need you to take me through this day.

It's that willing act of commitment and that act of trust. It's about recognising that we surrender to what He wants. Before you look up Galatians 6, as you surrender to His will, very well known passage in Galatians 6, don't need to look up, the sins of the flesh are, the fruit of the Spirit is.

So we immediately know what the will of God is and we read a passage like that which tells us that as we pray we are surrendering to His will, that we don't live sexually immoral lives and we are not angry and aggressive and unforgiving and careless and proud and covetous.

These are sins of the flesh that belong to an old life. He says that we surrender to the fruits of the Spirit, to the love and the joy and the peace and the patience and the gentleness and the meekness and the self-control.

[27 : 44] And as we do so, we recognise that He uses the rubbish circumstances that we find ourselves in sometimes, the poor responses of other people, the carelessness, the way that we're treated.

We use them not to pray to God for asking Him to change these circumstances but rather to transform us so that we through these circumstances reveal the fruit of the Spirit.

He uses them to test us, to challenge us, to lovingly rebuke us, to show us what it is, to surrender to His will.

Can a monk ever surrender to God's will? I don't think so. We were never asked to surrender to God's will in isolation.

Sending to God's will means allowing the fruit of the Spirit, the sins of the flesh to be dealt with, to allow transformation in community.

[28 : 53] Where His people are? What do we see about Jesus? Yes, Jesus went to solitary places to pray but He didn't stay there. He was in solitary places praying with His Father in order to live among people and in order to respond perfectly when He was sinned against.

The answer is not to escape. The answer is not monastic. The answer is not separation because that invariably for us is self-righteous and it's saying we are better.

We are holier. We want things to be different. It's about surrendering to God's will and recognizing He uses community to do that.

True prayer is never going to be a church initiative, however long or short. It's never going to be a meeting of people together to pray, however significant and good because that's always outward and invariably even a pagan could go to a meeting like that.

Significant though these times are. Not is it a ritual where we present merely a request to God. It is a heart matter where we are surrendering control and saying not my will but yours be done where we are in that relationship of trust where we recognize Him as God and where we say you know better and we trust in Him to do His best.

[30 : 43] So surrendering to God not controlling Him and it's about changing us not changing others. Prayer will be done not my will.

That's I would regard it as probably the most crucial lesson Murdo mentioned that last night and what he'd learned about prayer over this period.

He said the most important lesson he learned was his own need to be changed by ongoing prayer and the significance and importance of that.

It's an uncomfortable reality for us and I think that sometimes why we stop praying. I think we stop praying because it enters us into the presence of the inscrutable light of God's will and in our sinful hearts we don't like that.

We don't like his inscrutable holiness entering into our hearts. We don't like his perfect will exposing sometimes our motives and our desires so we stop praying altogether.

[31 : 56] That's why we stop praying because God exposes what our need is and sometimes we would rather just party on and forget the realities, spiritual realities that I think I've often said as I said this before not so much here but in my previous congregation because it was a community congregation and because we lived in two villages as it were, there were two big towns and villages there that if someone was in the church was spiritually struggling and had stopped coming along and stopping part of the fellowship and was really maybe wrestling with God.

Very often if I was walking down the street to get the paper they would cross the road to avoid me because they saw me as kind of representative I guess of the minister of God.

Stupid I recognise but nonetheless that's what it is. So they would avoid that. They would rather avoid facing up to feeling guilty about not being involved in church and maybe in their spiritual relationship and isn't that what we can sometimes do with prayer because it makes us feel sometimes as if things aren't right.

I would rather just avoid it altogether and it's an uncomfortable reality to think that when we open ourselves to prayer God will primarily say I'm here to change you not to give you what you want and to change other people because it's about changing the sovereignty of our lives to being where God is in control and where we stop manipulating, we stop complaining about others and blaming others and blaming God for our circumstances and we start beginning to see that God says look I want you to be transformed here, I want you to be changed, I want grace in your life and I want to see you become in Christ like because I love you and because I have vowed to do this with you.

Is that why we stop praying? Because God isn't changing others, God isn't giving us what we want and we aren't in control.

[34 : 06] Do we blame God after a period of 50 days because he hasn't answered our prayers? I've certainly come to see that his agenda is to change my heart, is to change my soul, is to deepen my faith and trust in him, that his will is absolutely pure and perfect and to know that the circumstances that I find myself in and the requests that I make are ones that he hears and will respond to but may not respond to them in the way that I expect or I think he will do.

So for me, I will carry on praying until I die. If he doesn't in my understanding answer one more prayer, I will carry on praying until the day I die and I hope that I'll be able to say not my will but yours be done and I'll do that because he is Lord and he is God and through that he will change me.

Amen. Let's bow our heads and pray. Dear God, we ask and pray that you would teach us your will and do so through the amazing example of the Lord Jesus Christ who as we heard this morning is the way for us and as we follow you and as we trust in you, then we too with this amazing knowledge of your grace and your goodness as Jesus could trust the Father so we can trust you that you will mould our prayers, that we can humbly ask for our desires but seek primarily to see your will being done, not us manipulating or controlling or using you to give us an easier life or whatever it might be that is not a God glorifying motive.

Give us that courage, that steely determination, strip back our prayer lives to be more than simple shopping lists of requests and help us as we pray to see how you are using our circumstances and our relationships to be the answers, how you are taking people who love us into our lives to challenge us to expose our folly sometimes and our pride and our ignorance and our greed and to use the injustices that we face to give us much more forgiveness and patience and to put ourselves in other people's shoes and to remind ourselves that you have forgiven us 70 times 7 and that we would therefore not have an unforgiving, judgmental spirit and that we would not seek you to be the one who changes other people for our ease.

But Lord may we often see that in open and loving relationships we might be used to challenge one another about our lives, our lifestyle, our choices and the way we are living.

[38 : 03] So Lord bless as we pray and give us an ongoing determination to pray, to pray in our partners, to pray in our marriages, to pray in our families, to pray in our city groups, to pray this great prayer that your will would be done and that we would submit to you and that we would recognise this great inward transformation that you long for us for we ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.