

Reading: Matthew 6:5-15

Theme: How to pray in private.

In this short series on “How to...” series I hoped to give clear and practical pointers to help and encourage young Christians, as well as stir up and refresh more mature believers. Today we are looking at an area that is so important in our Christian lives. If we are not a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour, then it will be an area in which we will not be able to function or operate at all! We have seen how to read the Bible, how to listen with benefit to a sermon, but this area of how to pray will be one where we will have to realise that as a non-Christian we can listen in on, but only spectate to its reality. We may question why that is and I hope we will realise that as an unbeliever we will be unable to pray in the way the Bible teaches.

Prayer is not just a matter of saying words, no matter how nice, how fluent, how many religious phrases are used at the start of the end of the words; it is not feeling low or humble as we do so; it is not feeling elated when we have prayed. True prayer is a matter of relationship as we ask of, we praise, we adore, humble ourselves before the God we have a relationship with. Such a relationship is only possible when we believe, trust the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour. That is why only God’s children can really pray, only they can say “*Our Father...*” “*My Father...*” Only those who know God as Father through trusting the Lord Jesus as their Saviour have this relationship. That’s why I said earlier that we cannot truly participate in prayer if you’re not a Christian, we cannot function or operate in this great privilege of prayer.

People may say “*Ah, but so-and-so prayed they were not a Christian and God answered them!*” Yes, God does hear the cries of His creation and in His kindness, goodness and mercy He hears the cries of even those who do not love Him, who have no claim on Him and He answers such begging cries because He is good. Yet they are begging cries and not the prayers of a child of His who has legitimate

claims upon Him. I wonder how we would want to be able to call upon God - as a beggar that deserves nothing from Him, or as His child knowing His love, grace and forgiveness?

Prayer is the simplest and yet greatest thing a moral creature can do - in that it is calling on the God with whom they have a relationship. Even though that sounds simple, prayer is the most difficult area of any Christian's life! Ask any young Christian and prayer is difficult, ask a mature Christian and prayer is still difficult! Yes, the mature Christian would have grown in prayer and ability to pray, but prayer is not always an easy thing.

The moment we determine to be a person of prayer then we can expect battles, troubles, distractions, inability to concentrate, but I urge us to be determined to pray. It is such a vital and important part of the Christian life - whatever our age, our age and maturity as a believer. I want us to consider a number of brief practical points about how to pray in *private* (Matthew 6:6) as praying in public, leading in prayer in a service is a different matter - even though it is still prayer. I have 3 main points, with the 3rd having 4 sub-points:

1. Make Time.

It's been said that if we are too busy to pray, we are too busy! In fact, we are too busy *not* to pray! As with reading our Bible regularly, we need to plan and purpose to pray and make time for it. What great privileges we have provided by God - we can read His word and so learn of Him and His ways, yet not only that, we have the great privilege to go and spend time with God our Father, to ask, thank, praise, worship Him, to know something of His love and a deepening relationship. Yet many do not bother, or may fit it in when they feel like, or we think perhaps we better had because...

We are wise to take, make time and plan to have time in prayer and reading God's word. We are to work these things out practically in our lives depending on our pressures, lifestyle, abilities and the like.

It could be times of prayer throughout a day, or short times in a day, can be a long or short time. Whatever and whenever, we are to make time for the purpose of prayer.

2. Wandering Thoughts.

Personally, as well as pastorally, I have had to deal with this problem. People set times to pray when they're not disturbed and yet they can find a whole host of various thoughts crop up, things from long ago arise and they find themselves wandering in "*thought land*" rather than praying. Why is this? We may be overtired, have many pressures on us, be unwell ... We are also to realise that the devil will use such things to prevent us from praying. When Christians pray, the devil hates it with an intensity that is only eclipsed by the intensity of the Lord Jesus' love and delight when we pray. The devil will use our natural bodily weaknesses - tiredness, lack of concentration, worries and the like to cause us to wonder in our thoughts.

Yet do not give up, tell the Lord about such and ask for His help. At such times we can pray audibly, not just quietly or silently as it helps us concentrate better. Also, it gets us used to hearing our own voice in prayer and prepares us for praying aloud in a prayer meeting. To help us structure our prayer it may be worth having a prayer list or diary to use. Though we're not to be ruled or limited by such. It could be a simple notebook, or a small ring folder or binder, or a sheet of paper, or on our mobile phone. Some missions print a prayer calendar, so use those as well. On our prayer diary keep and update various bits of information to turn into prayer. Also add to it a hymn or song quote, a precious promise from God's word, lessons learned on previous days, answers to specific prayers, reasons for thankfulness, as well as prayer requests for our self, our family, friends and others.

We can include, on a separate sheet or page, details for needed prayer for our family, the church members, things that are ongoing, as well

as other items that are coming up, which we can update as necessary. Such a list can be carried in our Bible, on our mobile phone or other electronic device and we can pray through, guide our thoughts and attention in prayer as we have opportunities throughout the day.

If we link both our Bible reading and prayer time together, thank God for Creation, life, especially for His word and what we have learned from it, get things from our prayer list for praise and thanksgiving. Even stop there and at a convenient time later, turn to asking God for our self and others, including confession of our failures, reflecting on what we prayed earlier. This could all be carried out at the one time.

We could take the Lord's Prayer as our pattern and develop a pattern based on its headings - who God is, who is to us and other believers, the need to Hallow His name, for His kingdom to come - so pray for preachers, missionary and church work etc. for our needs, our relationship with God and others; our protection - then end with giving Him glory. They are big areas to pray, the Lord's Prayer gives us much scope. These are some suggestions to help prevent our thoughts from wandering. But realise there are:

3. Different Prayer Parts.

There are different ways to pray - Philippians 4:6 *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present our requests to God.”* Ephesians 6:18 *“pray in the Spirit on all occasions with **all kinds** of prayers and requests.”* I do not intend to isolate and investigate each one. One book suggested our prayer time could include 12 parts of prayer, but it was really 11 as we began and ended with praise - which is good advice! I don't think I would get through of them all in one sermon, so I'm going to suggest 4 parts or avenues of praying to include some time or the other in our prayer life. Jon Hickman liked this approach when he led the monthly prayer meeting and he used the word ACTS.

Adoration: we could call it praise, worship. It will include those terms and ideas. This is delighting in God for who He is. It is considering God, our thinking about Him, what we know or have learnt of Him, His character, ways and thanking Him for that. It is saying to Him *“How great Thou art”* and trying to put into words how much we appreciate God for who He is and what He is like. Appreciating God as God. Adoration is derived from an ancient word which means *“to kiss the hand”* - to show respect, awe and submission.

As we learn of God as God, apart from what He has done for us, we have to praise Him as God. Of course, as we learn of who He is to us in Christ Jesus, we are given even further reasons to adore and praise Him. This means it is a good place to start - exactly where the Lord’s Prayer starts - God is God, hallowed, glorified and praised as our Father in heaven.

Starting here means we avoid the danger of self-centred prayers, coming with a list of our wants, imagined or real needs. We begin with God, His greatness and we will find remarkably we have our sight refocused - off our problems and onto God, so by the time we get to make our requests, we realise this great God can deal with such and we are able to confidently cast our cares and burdens on Him. Begin with adoration of our great God.

Contrition or Confession: as we adore God for His greatness, character and Being, we soon realise and have to speak of His utter holiness and purity. This should cause us to see our lives, the life of the church, the life of the nation in the light of His holiness. First and foremost, we will see our personal sin, coldness, failures, lack of love, not doing our duty, as well as that of our church and nation. Such things need to be humbly confessed i.e. contrition, sorrow for our own sin. This needs to be confessed. Andrew Murray wrote *“God cannot hear the prayer on our lips because the desires of our heart after the world cry out to Him much more strongly and loudly*

than our desires for Him.” We need to own our sins - failures of word, thought, desire and action need to be confessed. The Lord will hear and forgive such (1 John 1:9). My old Pastor used to say “Keep short accounts with God.”

We are to recognise that the devil will use our sin and failures, confessed or unconfessed, to discourage us in prayer and in the Christian life. We are not to let him trick us, but take 1 John 1:9 to God in prayer and realise it is true for us. Confessed sin has then to be forsaken and we are to treat it as if we will never want to think of it, let alone do it again. Remember that if we regard iniquity, sin in our hearts, then the Lord will not hear us (Psalm 66:18).

Confession of our own sin in personal prayer is not easy, as we have to own our sin and then recognise that we have the responsibility to change and reform our ways to please God. This is not to be morbid, self-beating and pulling down, but it is to be a true realisation of something of what we are like before this holy God, owning it and seeking Him for His grace and help.

We could say much about this area. One consequence is that if we know forgiveness, restoration of relationship with God, then we are to forgive those who trespass against us - we hold no grudges or bitterness, no unforgiving spirit; else we could become bitter, hard and not fully experience the sense of God’s forgiveness or the joy of our salvation. Confession also involves dealing with our grievances against others.

Thanksgiving: if Adoration is for who God is, Thanksgiving is for what He has done, is doing and will do for us - it includes our salvation, our growth in grace, our family, the church family, health, strength, loved ones, possessions and their right use, Answers to prayer on a personal and church basis. There are so many things we can thank God for as we count our blessings. Thanksgiving is basically giving thanks! Saying to our God our appreciation and

gratitude for all He has done for us. It causes us to focus on God's faithfulness. It could also be seen as confession - not confession of our wrong, but a confession of God's blessings upon us! Prayer of thanksgiving can spring to our hearts, minds and lips at any time - as we can realise how good is the God we adore and marvel at the many things He has done for and given to us and we find just want to thank Him for the riches of His kindness to us.

It is at this point a wandering mind can be a benefit! Let our mind go through all you've been involved in - that day, week, month, even life and see how God has helped we and thank Him for it. One writer suggests thanking God for spiritual blessings both in private or public worship - material and physical blessings, external blessings such as peace in our land, missionary successes we have heard of, as well as past blessings such as the first person who ever told us of the Lord Jesus, maybe godly parents, Sunday school teachers, young people's leaders etc.

Yet remarkably we can say we have nothing to say in prayer! Yet with a little thought and effort we will begin to see we have so much to say as we count our blessings and name them one by one - the surprises we get, we can turn into Thanksgiving to our great God and Saviour.

Supplication: at this point we can pray for needs – our own and for the needs of other people. It is a good point, as we don't *ordinarily* leap in with requests at the beginning. Yes, they may fill minds and hearts and, at times, arrow prayers may be used for help in... Yet in a planned time of prayer, leave our requests until we have considered God and His greatness (*adoration*), till sin has been owned and *confessed*, until we have thanked God for His blessings (*thanksgiving*) answers to prayer - as all these things will develop our confidence that God can, does and will answer prayer and we can go boldly, confidently to Him in prayer. Such a delay will refocus our swirling hearts and minds off the things we consider

problems and they will be placed in the context of our great God and all He has done for us and we can find ourselves thanking God for the assurance He will work things out.

Our requests then - for others and for ourselves - are made to our Father in heaven who cares for us. We do not demand of Him, nor is prayer a slot machine into which we place our required tokens and down drops the answer we want. Because we are seeking God in a right way and we want Him to be glorified. We then find our desires coming more into line with His desires and we find we pray for His will to be done – thing that please Him and glorify Him.

Here we find it good to use a prayer list, diary to work through and we can update things regularly, adding more information, noting answered prayer to be used in thanksgiving. I wonder if we thank God for a prayer answered as many times as we asked for it!?

Pray for people by name, whether on a daily or weekly basis e.g. a church prayer list. Specific praying will give specifically recognised answers to prayer for individuals, churches, missions and situations. Here is an area in which we will have much to pray about. It is right and good to couple this with other the areas of prayer and not to wade in as we may often do, with a shopping list type of prayer.

I have been praying this will have given some practical helps and encouragements on how to pray in private - our own personal prayer times, but praying when *leading* a service or praying in public is a different subject - not to be divorced from or independent from our own private prayer life. May we learn to pray, to personally ask, with the disciples of the Lord Jesus, “*Lord, teach us how to pray*” and do so for His glory and for the greater benefit of our Christian lives and those around us.