

This month at NewLife we are devoting ourselves to a more dedicated time of prayer. Now, from a worldly perspective, prayer is a colossal waste of time. After all, if there is no God, why would we spend so much time communicating with a figment of our imagination instead of getting things done? **But the reality is that I would guess that even for many of you who do believe in God, you have probably not bought in to the importance of prayer.** Has this month's practice of prayer been any different? I would bet that for many of you, you don't even know what prayer is, why it is so important, or how to pray. Is prayer just a waste of time, an empty exercise? Or is there more to it?

At least we can take heart in recognizing that even Paul admitted that prayer is in many ways a mystery:

**Romans 8:26** - *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.*

So what is prayer? How do we pray? Why do we pray? There is much that can be said, books that have written about this subject. My plan this month is to look at how Jesus answered the question when it was asked of him (the Lord's Prayer is recorded in both Luke and Matthew).

**Luke 11:1** - *One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."*

They saw something in his prayer and life that made them want to know about it. Jesus answers his disciples by saying this (Matthew 6:9-13):

<sup>9</sup> *"This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, <sup>10</sup> your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us today our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."*

Over the next four weeks, we'll look at each sentence in that prayer in order to understand how to pray. What do we learn about prayer from the first line? Three things:

1) **Prayer is communication with God.**

It sounds obvious, but it's not as obvious as you think. Listen to how Jesus begins chapter 6 by talking about how NOT to pray before he tells them how to pray:

*"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. <sup>2</sup> "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. <sup>3</sup> But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. <sup>5</sup> "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 men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. <sup>6</sup> But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

You may think prayer is communication with God, but for some, including the Pharisees that Jesus criticizes here, prayer is a show for others, so that they might see you as holy and spiritual. Jesus calls them hypocrites, the Greek word for actors. He tells his disciples not to pray in a way that is play-acting, going through the motions, making an external show of piety but not engaged with your heart. It's not to be done for an audience of people. Prayer is communication with God. **That is why Jesus stresses doing it on your own with God. So what is your private prayer life like?** Who are you when no one is looking? That is what God sees. **Not that you can't pray in public, but it should be like someone eavesdropping on a conversation between you and God.**

*<sup>7</sup> And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

Going on, Jesus tells them not to think that they will be heard because of their many words. Prayer is communication with God. **It is not a magic incantation that achieves results, some sort of Law of Attraction whereby you get the universe to send things your way.** Jesus says in this chapter that the power of prayer is not in the words. **That is the irony of the Lord's prayer, that it has been turned into something where people think it's in the power of the words.** It's not about babbling many words as if it were some magical incantation. It is communication with God. It's like Brian Fearon used to say: sometimes the shortest prayer is just, "God!" Sometimes all you can do is to just say "Help!" or "Thank you." Just talk

to God as if He were there. You don't need to use some pious preacher voice or speak in some formulaic way. Just speak to God.

One of the most memorable prayer stories I have ever heard was one I read in the devotional book *Streams in the Desert* Aug 17:

*I went to America some years ago with the captain of a steamer, who was a very devoted Christian. When off the coast of Newfoundland he said to me, "The last time I crossed here, five weeks ago, something happened which revolutionized the whole of my Christian life. We had George Mueller of Bristol on board. I had been on the bridge twenty-four hours and never left it. George Mueller came to me, and said, 'Captain I have come to tell you that I must be in Quebec Saturday afternoon.' 'It is impossible,' I said. 'Very well, if your ship cannot take me, God will find some other way. I have never broken an engagement for fifty-seven years. Let us go down into the chart-room and pray.'"*

*"I looked at that man of God, and thought to myself, 'What lunatic asylum can that man have come from? I never heard of such a thing as this.' 'Mr. Mueller,' I said, 'do you know how dense this fog is?' 'No,' he replied, 'my eye is not on the density of the fog, but on the living God, who controls every circumstance of my life.'"*

*"He knelt down and prayed one of the most simple prayers, and when he had finished I was going to pray; but he put his hand on my shoulder, and told me not to pray. 'First, you do not believe He will answer; and second I BELIEVE HE HAS, and there is no need whatever for you to pray about it.'"*

*"I looked at him, and he said, 'Captain, I have known my Lord for fifty-seven years, and there has never been a single day that I have failed to get audience with the King. Get up, Captain and open the door, and you will find the fog gone.' I got up, and the fog was indeed gone. On Saturday afternoon, George Mueller was in Quebec for his engagement."*

The power is not in the words, but in the person of God. Speak to Him clearly and directly. I know that personally, my conversion came when I began to talk to God as if He were there, 5 minutes in the car on the way to work and back. Prayer is communication with God.

## 2) Prayer involves both intimacy and deference

Look at the terms Jesus uses: Our **Father** in heaven... your **kingdom** come – **He is both Father and King**.

There was a German theologian named Joachim Jeremias who researched the use of Father in Judaism, and found that there were no examples of someone addressing God as Father in either the Old Testament writings or the rabbinic writings until the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Father was never used as a direct form of personal address to God. Yes, God would call Israel His son, but they never addressed God as Father. But in every prayer but one of Jesus', he addresses God as Father. He was radically departing from tradition. Notice:

***John 5:17-18** - Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." <sup>18</sup> For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*

The Pharisees understood that he was making himself equal with God (John 5:18), saying that there was a sense of intimacy as the unique son of God.

And now amazingly, Jesus tells us in the Lord's prayer that just like Him, we can come to God not just as a King or Sovereign Deity, but as our Father. **And as we call him our Father, we are reminded of our adoption**. The Bible tells us that by nature we are children of wrath. We are not his children naturally, despite what you may have thought. But in Christ, we are adopted into the family of God. We can call him Abba (Mark 14:36, Gal 4:6).

***Ephesians 1:4-5** - For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love <sup>5</sup> he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will*

***Romans 8:15-17** - For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "**Abba**, Father." <sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. <sup>17</sup> Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory*

When you come to faith in Jesus three things happen. **Justification** – you are pronounced not guilty, perfect in the sight of God (God as judge). **Regeneration** – you are given spiritual life as He puts His Holy Spirit in you and gives you a new heart (God as surgeon). And **adoption** – you are adopted as His child (God as

Father). We go from enemies under His wrath to children under His love. We call him Abba – poppa. **The words that the Father spoke over the Son at his baptism in Luke 3:22 – You are my Son, who I love, in whom I am well pleased – He speaks over us now.** You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased. This is only by Christ's work that we can approach God as our Father. **This is why adoption is such a Christian thing to do.**

**Now, just to clarify the term Father: God is not biologically male.** According to John 4:24, God is spirit. But He describes himself in ways that accommodate our human understanding. He speaks in a way that communicates reality in a way our limited minds can understand.

**So we can approach God as beloved children approaching a loving father, and that is incredible. But God is not just Father. He is also the King.** We pray for His kingdom to come, His will to be done. In the end, we are not talking to an equal. We are talking to someone who loves us but who is above us and knows what is best for us. We can not demand, can not claim things he has not promised. We bend to His will. **Think Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane – not my will but yours be done (Luke 22:42).** The real prayer of faith is the one that trusts God whether the answer is yes or no.

**Don't lose either aspect of God's character.** Lose the intimacy and we are just coming before a King with no love towards us. Lose the deference and we forget that God is not our equal.

### **3) Prayer brings our perspective and priorities in line with God's**

This is the heart of prayer. As J. I. Packer noted, "Here more clearly than anywhere the purpose of prayer becomes plain: not to make God do my will (which is practicing magic), but to bring my will into line with his (which is what it means to practice true religion)."

Look at how countercultural this prayer is:

**Firstly, he begins with OUR Father** – not individualistic but corporate. We are part of a family, a people, a community.

Secondly, the focus is not on our needs, our agenda, our wants, but on His:

**Hallowed be your name.** Jesus tells us to pray that God's name, His reputation, would be treated as holy, with respect. This goes back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment in Exodus 20:7 - Do not take the name of the Lord in vain. Pray that God's name would be treated with reverence. There won't be any godliness or transformation if God is not honored. How we live towards God is influenced by our attitude about him. We won't worship or obey if we have no respect. Think of how you treat a parent, a coach, a teacher.

Our prayer is not to make a name for ourselves but for Him.

And then he goes on to pray: **May your kingdom come, and your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.** It is not primarily about our agenda, our needs, but God's kingdom

**God's kingdom is essentially his reign over his people for their good and his glory. In God's kingdom, everything is exactly how God would have it to be.** The kingdom of God is already here but not fully present. It has been inaugurated but not consummated. Rev 11:15 – the kingdom will be His.

To pray for God's kingdom to come is to bow our knee to Him, to allow Him to have His way. When we pray "your kingdom come," we are praying something incredibly dangerous because it may make us uncomfortable. Jesus teaches us that we are ultimately meant to value God's agenda, not our own.

And ultimately, we are praying for Christ's return, that every knee would bow, that death would be no more, that creation would be made new.

**Your will be done.**

Praying "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" also reorients our own sense of personal autonomy and sense of control over our own lives and situations. This petition causes us to forfeit all our personal claims of control over our lives.

You may say, but isn't God's will always done? It depends. Let me explain the two kinds of will that the Bible talks about:

**His sovereign, efficacious will** – the will that causes whatever he decrees to come to pass.

*Isaiah 46:10 - I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.*

**Preceptive will** – law and commandments that can be violated every day.

*1 Thessalonians 4:3 - It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality;*

On earth as it is in heaven hints that this will is not always followed. There is no sin in heaven.

To pray for His will to be done is to once again bow our knee. It changes our priorities and perspective. Our lives are not about our will but His will, not about our glory but His.

**This is where prayer is not an act of therapy done to alleviate anxiety or fear.** It may do that, but it may also heighten our anxiety as we conform our will to His.

**To sum up: Prayer is communication with God that involves both intimacy and deference, with the purpose of bringing our perspective and priorities in line with God's.**