

THE WALK 4

Some practical questions ...

'All that we think or feel about God comes to expression in our prayer' ... so, what does my prayer life say that I think and feel about him?
How do I express my humble dependence upon him?
How do I show my conviction about his excellent character?

Am I, in practise, a functional non-believer, an 'atheist' ... in that my lack of praying suggests that I do not really believe what I profess?

What do I think that the God I pray to is really like? (eg is he generous or stingy? is he quick or slow to answer? is he busy or attentive? is he distant or near? Etc)

What things are included in *The Lord's Prayer* that I don't pray about?
Do I care about the things Jesus tells me to care about?
Do I ask God for the things Jesus tells me I need from my heavenly Father?
How could I use *The Lord's Prayer* as a model for my prayer life?

When am I in most danger of false show or phoneyess in my prayers?
When are my prayers more pagan than Christian?

The Lord's Prayer

(Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4) *

Our Father in heaven

caring about our Father's reputation

Hallowed be your name

may your character be honoured by all

Your kingdom come

caring about our Father's rule

may your rule be established over all

Your will be done

caring about our Father's plans

may your plans be accomplished by all

Give us today our daily bread

needing our Father's provision

provide the resources we need for life

Forgive us our debts

needing our Father's pardon

pardon our sins to save us from your wrath

Lead us not into temptation

needing our Father's protection

protect us from trials and from Satan

* The headings here come from Our Father: enjoying God in prayer R Coekin (IVP 2009)

THE WALK 4

Talking to God

Matthew 6:1, 5-15

The theme of this study

Prayer is not so that God can find out what we need, because Jesus tells us that God already knows what we need before we ask him (Matt 6:8). God wants us to pray because **prayer expresses our trust in God** and is a means whereby our trust in him can increase moment by moment. All that we think or feel about God comes to expression in our prayer (as we express our humble dependence upon him and our convictions about his excellent character).

How about this as a definition: **prayer is talking to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, as we wait for glory**. In other words,

- it is speech, and its direction is from us to God;
- it is Trinitarian: our relationship with the Father can only be through the work of Jesus for us, and by the work of the Spirit in our hearts ... prayer is simply this relationship in action (or rather, in speech!);
- it happens whilst we are residents of a fallen world which is why it is a struggle: like every other part of Christian service, it's caught up in the battle with our own continued sinfulness, the temptations and hostility of the world, and the opposition of the devil.

John Calvin writes: *To know God as the master and bestower of all good things, who invites us to request them of him, and still not to go to him and not ask of him – this would be of as little profit as for a man to neglect a treasure, buried and hidden in the earth, after it had been pointed out to him ... It is therefore by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the heavenly Father ... We dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's gospel, and which our faith gazed upon.*

The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 6 is right in the middle of what we call 'the Sermon on the Mount'. As Jesus' public ministry begins (4:17), Matthew 5-7 introduces us to his words (cf the crowds reaction at the end, in 7:28-29) before two chapters show us his deeds (again, see the reaction of 9:33). The significance of this is that when John wants to know who Jesus is, the answer (given to him in 11:4f) is that what they could 'hear and see' make it plain that he is the one the OT promised, who fulfils the Law and the Prophets (5:17-20).

This Messiah calls his first disciples (4:18-22) and says that they are the blessed ones (5:3-12), not the Jewish nation. As he teaches them primarily (5:2), a key lesson is 'do not be like them' (6:8). The narrow way (7:13-17) to salvation/life is by hearing and obeying his words (78:21-27).

Right at the heart of this is his teaching on how his disciples, this new people of God, should pray, for prayer is how we express this relationship with our Father.

Group study outline

Introduction

A young Christian tells you that they're getting tied up in knots when they pray. Nothing seems to happen when they pray on their own, and when they pray with others they feel that it's like a performance. What would you advise?

AND / OR

List together all the ways in which you find prayer difficult.

READ Matthew 6:1, 5-15 (or you might prefer 6:1-18 or 6:1-22)

What is the alternative in 6:1? what does it mean?

What does the person who does things 'to be seen' really want?

In what ways do we do 'prayer' 'before other people'?

(... push this beyond the obvious first answers)

What makes the hypocrites' prayer different from the Christian's prayer?

What makes the pagans' prayer different from the Christian's prayer?

What is wrong in their views of God?

When are we guilty of false show or phoneyess in praying?

When do we pray more like a pagan than like a Christian?

In what ways are we like the hypocrite, or the pagan?

Should we ever have prayer meetings?

What dangers should I avoid when I pray out loud in front of others?

What dangers should I avoid when I'm leading the prayers in church?

Should we ever pray for anything more than once? what is the danger in this?

What makes 6:9-13 different from these other kinds of prayers?

Try to summarise each of the six petitions in your own words.

What strikes you about its emphasis (in comparison with our praying)?

How should this six-petition format become more of a template for our praying?

(cf structure laid out on back page of these notes;

Nigel's sermon from 09/05/10 is available from the Emmanuel website)

Should we repeat 6:9-13 as a prayer in itself? what dangers are there in this?

Thinking it through

How could this passage help us to advise the young Christian at the start?

Seeing the vivid contrast that Jesus draws, what should our prayer feel like?

Why is our prayer often such an uphill struggle?

How will the things that Jesus tells us here help us to pray more?

Spend some time sharing good things/ hard things in prayer. For example ...

What particular things that make prayer hard could you do something about?

What things have helped you to pray?

(eg books, prayer lists, praying-triplets, longer periods, planning for it, etc etc)

Are there ways we can help one another in this?

Theme Sentence

How we pray depends entirely on who we pray to, and whose reward we seek.

Matthew 6:1-18

The main point of this section is 6:1's 'be careful'. Jesus is saying that we must choose between God's reward in heaven and people's praise here-and-now. In each of the three examples that follow, it is presumed that disciples of Jesus will give (2-4), pray (5-15) and fast (16-18) (which are the three fundamental acts of Jewish piety). The issue is not whether we should do them, but how we do them. Nor is it so much an issue of public *versus* private, but of motive: do I want to be righteous before God or am I seeking to be righteous before people? Is it his or their acceptance that matters most? (cf John 5:44; 12:43)

And when you pray ...

The key issue is who we are praying to. The 'hypocrites' are praying 'before other people ... to be seen by others'. The 'pagans' are praying to a god who is ignorant of our needs, and has to be told the same things over and over again!

5-6 *Don't be like the hypocrites*

This is similar to 2-4 except that *seen/unseen* is an added theme. Christian prayer is to a Father who is *unseen* and if the motive is to be *seen* then it is questionable whether it's 'prayer' at all. This doesn't prohibit prayer meetings: in v5, the 'you's are singular (ie the subject is private prayer), but in v9, they are plural (ie about praying with others, to our Father).

7-8 *Don't be like the pagans*

This isn't so clearly an illustration of 6:1 (though it is true that heaping up many words is an effective way to impress people in our praying!). But the link is another wrong view of God: he knows what we need so we don't need to keep telling him. And all the time we think that more-prayer equals answers-more-likely (eg half nights of prayer, breaking into small groups so that 'more prayer happens', etc) we are pagan (!).

In contrast, we pray not in front of an audience that we need to impress, and not to a useless god. We pray to 'our Father in heaven', concerned about his reputation, rule and plans and seeking his provision, pardon and protection.

A model prayer

Verses 9-13 (or 15?) is not so much 'the Lord's Prayer' but 'the Lord's model for our prayer'. Jesus is not telling us what to pray, but how to pray. His template has no complicated ritual/technique, no showy religious fervour, no babbling on for hours to twist God's arm. Unlike our contemporary concentration on 'feel'/place/atmosphere etc, Jesus' emphasis is entirely on the content. It is an example of v7-8 with its six straightforward petitions. One strong theme is its forward look: the first three petitions all lean towards the coming kingdom (when God's name will be honoured, his will always done), and so we pray for forgiveness (so we may enter then) and for 'daily bread' and protection (so we're kept until then).