

DISCIPLESHIP IN ACTION: PRAYER

(1 Samuel 3.2-10 and Matthew 6.5-13)

Children's Talk

Play "God help the outcast" from Disney's Hunchback of Notre Dame

Who did Esmerelda pray for? What did others pray for?

We can say thank you to God

We can ask Father God to help other people including our friends, our family and those we love.

We can ask Him to help us

And the good news is we can talk to God anytime that we want to!

Adult Talk

Introduction

Firstly thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today about prayer. Pam and I have really valued being a part of this church fellowship over the past twelve months and in particular for the warmth and kindness you have shown to us. In the light of this I count it a real privilege to share a few thoughts with you today.

I would start by acknowledging that prayer is not a topic I relish talking about even though we have discussed aspects of prayer in house group some months ago.

The Vital Importance of Prayer

For a disciple of Jesus prayer is not an added extra that gives us a lovely warm feeling but rather it is an essential aspect of our lives and is as important to us as breathing. Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones a famous 20th century Welch Baptist Minister and theologian stated: *"Prayer is beyond any question the highest activity of the human soul"*.

Martin Luther is reported to say that: *"to be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing"*.

How many references are there in the bible to the words pray/prayer/prayed do you think? A 129, B 367, C 534.

The answer is C and it is worth noting that prayer is mentioned in the bible nearly as many times as heaven! Prayer runs through the bible right from the book of Genesis and this again emphasises how important prayer is.

Despite this I am also conscious however that for me prayer is an area in which I can feel a bit inadequate, believing that there are many people out there who probably spend a lot more time in prayer and who are much more conscientious and consistent in their prayers than I perceive myself to be. Perhaps you feel a little like this too and if so my hope and prayer is that something of what we share today will be helpful to you.

If prayer is so vitally important it is worth us stopping to ask the question What is prayer?

The Oxford Dictionary defines prayer as *"a solemn request for help or expression of thanks addressed to God or an object of worship"*. This however gives a very inadequate insight into prayer.

Mother Teresa's definition of prayer is very different. She stated: *"Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at His disposition, and listening to His voice in the depth of our hearts."*

What is prayer to you?

I suspect if we were to break into small groups and ask this question we would get different answers from each group. The list might however look something like this:

Talking to God

Listening to God

Making the needs of others known to God

Saying we are sorry to God

Giving thanks to God

A form of worship

Being in God's presence

Making our own needs known to God

You will appreciate that this not an exhaustive list but it might capture some of the essence of prayer. To explore prayer further I would like us to look briefly at how as disciples of Jesus we might experience and express prayer.

Personal Prayer

Jesus himself although perfect in every way took time out to walk away from his followers and other distractions so that He could communicate with His Heavenly Father.

For Jesus spending time with His Father was vital and so how much more important is it for us today as His disciples to spend time with Him in prayer. In Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus we read: *"And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people."* (Eph. 6: 18)

We are exhorted to keep on praying in the Spirit, with variety and with intercession. The apostle Paul when writing to the Thessalonian Church encouraged the disciples of Jesus there to *"pray without ceasing"* (1 Thess. 5:17 NKJ) or "pray continually" (NIV). You might reasonably ask is this at all possible?

Brother Lawrence who wrote the book "Practice the Presence of the Living God" also wrote these words: *"He does not ask much of us, merely a thought of Him from time to time, a little act of adoration, sometimes to ask for His grace, sometimes to offer Him your sufferings, at other times to thank Him for the graces, past and present, He has bestowed on you, in the midst of your troubles to take solace in Him as often as you can. Lift up your heart to Him during your meals and in company; the least little remembrance will always be the most pleasing to Him. One need not cry out very loudly; He is nearer to us than we think."*

My own experience has been that when I turn my attention to God He is there. The question is then how often do I turn my attention to Jesus? I

became a Christian at the age of 18 years old, nearly 40 years ago. I started work at the age of nineteen and on my very first work day in ICI's Wilton Centre, I walked along a long straight corridor. As I did I heard a distinct voice tell me that I would be doing this work until my middle years after which time I would be doing something totally different. No one was near me and this wasn't something I was used to hearing. Despite this I knew it was God speaking to me and just over twenty years later I took off my laboratory coat for the last time and embarked on a very different path. I wouldn't say that I am a prophetic person but there are times when as I pray I hear that same distinct voice. I therefore know that prayer definitely involves talking to God but that it also involves listening. In the words of Brother Lawrence "He is nearer to us than we think" and our reading from the 1st book of Samuel emphasises this in a very clear way.

Our God is willing to speak if we are willing and able to listen. My experience has been that I increasingly find myself praying as I go about everyday life. Sometimes being thankful, occasionally saying sorry and often asking for help for myself and others around me. When things are difficult my prayers seem to get shorter and when I can't find the words I pray in the spirit.

Unlike some other people I have never found it rewarding or easy to stay in one place and pray for a long period of time unless I am with other praying disciples of Jesus. Martin Luther for example said "I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer" and the Psalmist also exhorts us to "seek Him early". What I would want to emphasise this morning, above anything else is that "He is nearer than we think".

I am firmly convinced that our Heavenly Father responds to our prayer and because of this many situations are changed and often in ways we can't imagine. A valid question however is, how does prayer effect the person who is praying?

How does Prayer affect us?

Rick Warren, the American church leader who developed the Celebrate Recovery programme writes: *"The more you pray, the less you'll panic. The*

more you worship, the less you worry. You'll feel more patient and less pressured."

Mother Teresa states: *"Prayer makes your heart bigger, until it is capable of containing the gift of God himself. Prayer begets faith, faith begets love, and love begets service on behalf of the poor."*

Craig Groeschel, who is pastor of one of the largest churches in the USA, postulates that: *"Your prayer for someone may or may not change them, but it always changes you."*

This isn't our motivation but it does seem to be one of the many benefits of praying to our loving Heavenly father. Whenever we draw close to Him we can't help but be changed.

In summary

We have considered the vital importance of prayer.

We have considered what prayer actually is to each one of us as disciples of Jesus.

We have explored aspects of personal prayer and in particular the potential for each of us to pray continually.

We have also briefly considered the effect prayer has on ourselves

In closing

I am going to lead in a short time of silent prayer by asking questions and pausing for a few moments to allow each of us to talk to our Heavenly Father.

- How do I feel about prayer?
- Can I turn to our Heavenly Father more often and develop a constant attitude of prayer?
- Are I willing for my heart to be changed as a pray?

- What is our Lord saying to me in this moment?

After the service there will be opportunity to receive prayer in the Londonderry Chapel to the side. Please feel free make use of this opportunity. Thank you for listening.