

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Learning how to pray

Presented by Bob Smith

Matthew 6:5-15

If you were to ask me what is the most common and universal expression of spirituality I would have no hesitation in saying *prayer*. Prayer is the one thing common to all races and all religions. Even in secular western countries like ours, where relatively few people attend worship services, statistics show that the overwhelming majority of people say that they pray. But having said that there are enormous variations in the way people think of it and practice it. Praying has often been associated with trying to placate God to gain his favour or persuade him to do something we want; which, of course, raises the question of why we need to ask for something that a loving God already knows we need. There are all sorts of attitudes and practices that surround the subject of prayer. The one thing common to just about everybody is the need or desire to do it.

Since we have within us this need to pray, what's the right way to do it? Well, Jesus talked about that in his famous Sermon on the Mount. To really get a feel of what he was saying it's hard to beat the way it appears in that popular contemporary translation called *The Message*: "And when you come before God, don't turn that into a theatrical production either. All these people making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for stardom! Do you think God sits in a box seat? Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.

The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They're full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don't fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. Like this: Our Father in heaven, reveal who you are. Set the world right; Do what's best-- as above, so below. Keep us alive with three square meals. Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others. Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil. You're in charge! You can do anything you want!"

So, in teaching us how to pray Jesus starts by telling us how **not** to pray; and he emphasises that we should avoid two things that inevitably show themselves when people set themselves up as experts in praying. The first is showiness and the second is garrulousness.

The first thing Jesus says about praying is that there should be no hypocrisy in it. Don't do it to draw attention to yourself and prove what a pious person you are. In a secular society like ours it's not likely that people would want to draw attention to themselves praying. Most people today feel rather embarrassed about it. But in the religious environment of the church it's still easy for us to big note ourselves in our prayers – particularly in those public prayers. I constantly have to remind myself that when I am called upon to pray it is God I'm speaking to, not an audience.

It also reminds me of a story about Lyndon Baines Johnson when he was inaugurated as President of the USA. He invited several guests in for a meal at the family room of the White House. LBJ asked journalist Bill Moyers (an ex-Baptist minister) to say grace. As Moyers began to softly say grace, LBJ - who couldn't understand what was being said, interrupted him, "Speak up man." Without looking up and barely stopping in mid-sentence, Bill Moyers replied, "I wasn't talking to you." The key, Jesus said, is sincerity – avoiding hypocrisy.

The second thing Jesus taught us to avoid in prayer is meaningless chatter. The issue here is prayer that engages the mouth but doesn't engage the mind. Just repeating words meaninglessly does not impress God. Neither does the number of words we use or the length of time take. Rattling off prayers, parrot fashion, is not praying. So, to teach us how to avoid hypocrisy on the one hand, and meaningless chatter on the other, Jesus gave us what we refer to as the Lord's Prayer. The great thing about the Lord's Prayer is that it is so simple. It only takes twenty seconds to say it, yet it contains everything that true prayer is about. It only contains fifty six words; yet those fifty six words sum up everything prayer is about. Now when Jesus said "this is how you should pray" he might have meant, just say these words. Or he might have meant, follow this pattern of praying. Or he might have meant both.

Whichever, the point is that the elements we see in the Lord's Prayer are the basic elements that should be in our prayers. So what are they? Well, there are essentially two parts to the Lord's Prayer. The first is concerned with the glory of God and the second with the needs of man. In this way the Lord's Prayer parallels the Ten Commandments, the first four of which are concerned with acknowledging the glory of God, and the last six with acknowledging the rights of our fellow human beings.

And it is important to take note of that: God is given his supreme place first, and then, and only then, do we turn to our needs and desires. This keeps us from debasing prayer into a mere shopping list of things that we are trying to persuade God to give us. The very essence of prayer, you see, is to align our wills with the will of God – not the other way round. Then, each of these parts is broken down into three petitions. The first three express our concern for God's glory in relation to his name, his rule and his will. *"Our Father in heaven, Reveal who you are. Set the world right..."*

So we should always start by properly orientating our thoughts towards the one whose presence we are entering. We should not rush unthinkingly into God's presence, but do so remembering that this is the Holy One, our creator and redeemer. It is difficult for us to really understand what this means but one thing we can learn from those privileged few who have experienced a deeper sense of God's presence is that even the most fleeting sense of it leaves them with an overwhelming sense of light, love and purity against which they feel utterly unworthy. That has been the hallmark of every great religious revival in the history of the Church. We do God and ourselves a great disservice when we rush unthinkingly into his presence. We start by remembering that this is our creator into whose holy presence we have been summoned.

True prayer always starts by acknowledging God's glory. Then it moves on to his priorities: that his kingdom should spread throughout the world and that his will be done. So we pray for the work of the gospel, and we pray for peace, righteousness and justice in the world. After this, Jesus said, our prayers should move on to our needs: our material needs – *"give us this day our daily bread"*; our spiritual needs – *"forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us"*; and our moral needs – *"lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the Evil One."*

What Jesus teaches us here is that prayer is essentially about maintaining a relationship with God that enables us to bring our lives, thoughts and desires into line with his. It's not about proving our piety to other people; it's not about esoteric formulas whereby if you say the right words often enough you get the right result. No; it's all about a deep and precious relationship with a loving heavenly father, in which we give him

his rightful place as Lord of our lives, and desire that his kingdom will come and that his good and perfect will spread throughout this world. Then, with our thoughts and hearts aligned as best we can to his thoughts and heart, we pray for our own material and spiritual needs to be met, and for help in the trials and testings of life.

Now, I am not going to get into details as to what these requests should be. The point I want to make is that if you get the first part of the Lord's Prayer right – that part that seeks to align your will with God's – then you'll know what to pray for as regards your material and spiritual needs. It's then that you will start to understand the real meaning of prayer, and why it is that we should pray for things that God already knows we need and wants to be done. You will start to sense, in a way that defies description, how God calls us to be part of the process whereby his will is done on earth as in heaven. Real prayer is all about getting our lives, wishes and actions in line with what God wants for us. Prayer is surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I reach out with a boathook from a boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, I don't pull the shore to me; I pull myself to the shore. Prayer is not about pulling God to my will, it's aligning my will to God's.

I remember hearing of an elderly church deacon who, in the church prayer meetings, would constantly offer this prayer; "Lord, touch those who don't know you with your finger that they may see and know." One day, as he began to offer his usual prayer, he stopped in mid sentence and stood there in silence. People began to worry about him and asked him if he was feeling unwell. He said to them, "God has just revealed to me that I am God's finger."

Let me tell you one last story. A small boy, saying grace in a restaurant, prayed, "God is great, God is good, and we thank you for our food." And then he added, "And I'd be even more thankful if I could have ice-cream for dessert; Amen." Well, there was a ripple of laughter from the other customers except for one woman who remarked caustically, "That's what's wrong with this country; kids praying for ice-cream!" Hearing this, the little boy burst into tears. But an old man came up to him and said, "I happen to know that God thought that was a great prayer. Ice-cream is good for the soul, sometimes; and if your soul is good you'll know when to ask for it." Then he added, "Too bad she doesn't know how to ask for ice-cream." Well when that little boy got his ice-cream, he took it over to that woman, and with a big smile he said, "Here, this is for you. Ice cream is good for the soul, and my soul's good already." Well, I hope yours is too, and prayer will help keep it that way.

Lord, help us to pray as Jesus taught us, and in this to bring our hearts and minds ever closer to yours, for your glory. Amen.