

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The problems, practice and power of prayer

Presented by Bob Smith

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 religions.

Even in secular societies like ours, where relatively few people attend worship services, statistics show that the overwhelming majority of people say that they pray. *Newsweek* reported a Gallup poll finding that seventy percent of people who believe in God pray daily, and ten percent of people who say they don't believe in God also pray daily.

However, there are many variations in the way people think of it and practice it, and enormous questions as to why we need to do it – why we need to persuade a loving God to do things He ought to know about anyway. Prayer is something most of do, even though we wonder why .

There are few things we do more instinctively than pray, and few things that raise bigger questions. Does it really work? Why do some prayers seem to get answered while others do not? Why we need to ask God to do things He already knows need to be done; and if He needs us to tell Him, does that mean we are smarter than God?

We all love to tell stories about answered prayers, but what about the ones that aren't? I love to tell people about the time when my kids were young and we were driving down the south coast in the midst of a heatwave. The temperature was forty degrees and the car was not air-conditioned. The outside air was like a blast from a furnace. My two kids were in the back seat, surrounded by camping gear, and it was clear from their faces that they were quite distressed.

At about two o'clock in the afternoon, when the Sun was at its hottest, we were about thirty minutes away from Bateman's Bay, and I decided we'd stop there and let the kids swim until sundown, before travelling on.

Suddenly, my five year old daughter yelled out, '*God doesn't care about kids, He doesn't care about kids.*' I turned round and asked her what she was talking about, and she said; '*I've been sitting here for ages asking God to take the Sun away and He hasn't done it; He doesn't care about kids.*'

Well, I thought to myself, '*How do you tell a five year old, who is really distressed, that that isn't what prayer is about, when all her life I've been teaching her to pray to God when she's in need of help.*'

But then, literally out of the blue, a cloud appeared in what had for the whole day been a cloudless sky, and covered the Sun for about ten minutes, bringing instant relief. And I still remember Melissa's eyes opening wide and hearing her just say, '*Oooo.*'

Coincidence? Perhaps. Or was it Divine intervention in response to a child's believing prayer? I'll let you decide. But here's another story. A friend of mine who used to run a welfare agency told me about a woman who came to him for help. She had been badly beaten and was in great distress.

Amongst other things he talked to her about prayer, but she got very angry. *'That doesn't do any good,'* she said. *'I gave up praying when I was eight. My father used to rape me and I prayed to God every night to make him stop. But he didn't.'*

What does a minister say to that? *'You mustn't have been praying hard enough,'* or *'Perhaps it was not God's will to answer your prayer in the way you wanted.'* Responses like that may sometimes be appropriate, but not to a traumatised eight year old.

That's why I say there are few things we do more instinctively than pray, and few things that raise bigger questions.

Despite our intellectual problems, we have within us a need to pray; and that raises another problem, what's the right way to do it? Well, Jesus talked about this in his Sermon on the Mount. He began by telling us how **not** to pray; and said that there are two things we must be careful to avoid when we pray. The first is showiness and the second is garrulousness.

Jesus taught that there should be no hypocrisy in our praying. We must never do it to draw attention to ourselves and prove what pious people we are. 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 reminds me of a story about Lyndon Baines Johnson when he was the American President. He invited several guests for a meal at the White House and asked a journalist named Bill Moyers to say grace. As Moyers began to pray, LBJ interrupted him and told him to speak up. Without looking up, Moyers simply said, "I wasn't talking to you." The first principle in the practice of prayer, Jesus said, is sincerity.

The second is to avoid 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 and 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 that we should use this as a pattern to follow. Or perhaps he 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.

And what are they? Well, there are essentially two parts to the Lord's Prayer. The first is concerned with God's glory and the second with our needs. This keeps us from debasing prayer into a mere shopping list of things that we want God to give us, and leads us to what is the very essence of prayer, which is to align our wills with the will of God.

To really get a feel of what he was saying it's hard to beat the way it appears in that contemporary translation of the Bible called *The Message*: "... 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!*"

There's a wonderful line in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's famous novel, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, set in the horror of a Soviet prison camp. One day Ivan is praying silently with his eyes closed when a fellow prisoner notices him and says, '*Prayers won't help you get out of here any faster.*' Opening his eyes, Ivan answers, "*I do not pray to get out of prison, I pray to do the will of God.*'

That is the essence of prayer and therein lies the true power of prayer. That's what Jesus was trying to teach us in *the Lord's Prayer*. If we get the first part of the Lord's Prayer right – that part that seeks to align our will with God's – then we'll know what to pray for as regards our material and spiritual needs.

It's then that we 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 about getting our lives, wishes and actions in line with what God wants for us. It is not about pulling God to our will, it's aligning our will to God's.

Jesus said a similar thing in John's Gospel. '*If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given you.*' That is an astonishing statement, but we need to put it in its context. It follows a passage where Jesus was describing the relationship between himself and a believer as being like that of a vine and its branches. The implication is that if our relationship is like that, then the thing we'll be praying for primarily is to know and do God's will.

And sometimes it may even be that we get such an overwhelming sense that something is God's will that we will be able to truly pray for it in faith, and, in a way that is beyond human understanding, actually become part of the process by which God's Kingdom comes and His will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

I remember a time when I was at my wits end trying to cope with a situation that seemed about to have a disastrous effect on both my family and my ministry. I prayed many desperate prayers in which I prescribed solutions to the problem and sought God's help in making them happen.

Then one day a friend simply reminded me that the only place where you can be at peace is in the centre of God's will and, if you are there, you live with the assurance that "*God is at work in all things for the good of those who love Him.*" It was such a simple message I was amazed I'd forgotten it. But from that day on I stopped praying desperate prayers and started to pray that God would do what He knew was best and that I might be guided to play my part in it.

Now, I look back on that time and see how wonderfully all those insurmountable problems have been resolved for my greater good and my family and ministry, and how none of them was resolved in the way that, at the time, I thought they should be. It taught me that the real power of prayer is in aligning ourselves with the will of God and allowing his Spirit to make us participants in what He wants to do; even though we may not understand it.

I doubt we'll ever find a satisfactory answer to all our problems about prayer this side of heaven, but if we focus on the practice of prayer as Jesus taught it in *the Lord's Prayer*, we'll know its power.

But there's one other thing about prayer that Jesus stressed, and that is persistence. I remember hearing about the manager of theatre who told how a woman had phoned to say that she had been at the theatre the previous night and later had discovered she had lost a valuable diamond brooch. He told her to hold the line while he went to look.

He searched thoroughly and finally found the brooch lodged in a crack beneath her seat number. So he raced back to the telephone only to find that she had hung up. She had been so distraught by her loss that she couldn't endure waiting any longer and had gone on to call her next possibility. She never called back, neither did she respond to a notice he placed in the newspaper.

She reminds us of how we often are in our prayers. We tell God our needs, but when the answer is delayed we fail to hold the line. And that's why Jesus said you've got to '*Ask and keep on asking.*'