

Study 9. We love talking with God (practice of prayer)

Big idea: prayer is continuing the conversation that God has started in his word, and can include praise, thanksgiving, confession, lamentation as well as petitions for things we want.

When the Bible uses the word "prayer" it usually means it in the narrow sense of "asking for things" - speaking with God about what you need or are anxious about. It is closely related to thanks (which is expressing gratitude to God for all the good things you have received), confession (where we acknowledge and turn away from the things we've done against God), lamentation (when we bring up things that trouble us) and praise (which is noticing the amazing things about God).

So when Christians say "prayer" they usually mean all these forms of conversation with God. Tim Keller has an excellent definition of Christian prayer:

"Prayer is continuing a conversation that God has started through his Word and his grace, which eventually becomes a full encounter with him." (*Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, chapter 3, 'What is Prayer?')

Opening question: If you could have three wishes come true, what would they be? (One has to be food related.)

Read today's passage, Philippians 4:4-9.

Any words or phrases that people didn't understand?

Last week we looked at an important part of any good relationship: listening. Today we're looking at the flip side, speaking.

After hearing from God in his word, we know what he is like, and so we can speak to him as a Father.

Sharing question: What has your experience of prayer been? Is it hard, or easy?

Observation and Interpretation

Read again Philippians 4:6

- Paul says “do not be anxious”. There’s nothing worse than someone telling you not to worry when you’re worried. Is Paul being annoying here? What do you think?

Focus on the words as an encouragement, and an invitation to an alternative to worry. We are not told to ignore threats or avoid problems, but by drawing on the power of God we can persevere and come out on the other side.

- What do you think it means to present our requests to God “with thanksgiving?”
- Is there any point telling God what we need if he already knows? [Hint, see Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 6:6-8]
- Can prayer actually change God’s mind?

Read 1 John 5:14-15

- If God hears our prayer does that mean he’ll do what we ask?

It is true that God knows everything and is not surprised by what we pray. But in his love for us he lets us into his decision making process, by listening to our prayers. This is an area in which we have to take seriously both his sovereignty and his promise to listen and act on our prayers. The Bible never teaches the sovereignty of God in a way that makes it pointless to ask him for something, quite the opposite: James 4:2, Exodus 32:9-14, James 5:16-18, etc. Part of loving God is doing things we know please him - talking with him pleases him, so prayer is both an act of faith and an act of love.

God sometimes says no, or wait, to our prayers. Often this is a good thing - imagine if God always gave everyone exactly what they prayed for!! 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 is an important verse to demonstrate that even when God hears our prayer the answer is sometimes no, for reasons that are always good but often hard to swallow. In these situations he is asking us to trust him in perseverance. We need to remember the times in which we live - a broken world, in which there is death and decay. God has promised to remake the heavens and the earth, but until then sometimes our deliverance from suffering must wait until the new kingdom. (Not that we shouldn’t also expect that future kingdom to break through in marvellous ways here and now.)

Read the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-15)

- How come we can start our prayer talking to God as “father”? [Hint: only because our adoption as sons and through the Spirit: Romans 8:15]
- What difference does it make to start your prayer “Our Father in Heaven” rather than “God in Heaven”?
- What elements does this prayer have that would be helpful to include in our prayers more often?

Implications

Read Colossians 4:2. What would it look like for us to be a group of people devoted to prayer?

Why is it sometimes hard to be devoted to prayer?

Some pastoral notes: Try to keep in mind where people are at in their Christian walk. The last thing we want is to lay guilt on people.

Many people have prayed for a long time for things that haven't happened. Be sensitive to this. Sometimes it seems like God is not able to help, either because he is not powerful or because we misunderstand what it means for God to be sovereign. Sometimes it seems like he is not willing. The hard truth is that sometimes God answers our prayer through hard times in ways that we would not have chosen: by strengthening us to persevere rather than taking away our pain (see Paul's story in 2 Cor 12:7-9), or by using evil to bring about good (Gen 50:20). We must remind ourselves in this situation of who God is, that he cares for us (1 Pet 5:6-7), that there are things we don't know (Deut 29:29), and that his future plans involve us (Jer 29:11).

What tips have you found worked well for encouraging you to be devoted to prayer?

Here are some suggestions:

- When you are starting out and not yet in the habit of praying, it can be good to start with praying regularly for a short period of time (say, five minutes) until a routine is established. The alternative (feeling convicted to pray more, praying for one hour the first day, but then being overwhelmed and so not praying at all the rest of the week) can just lead to feeling guilty.
- Pray until you pray: God isn't interested in long prayers but you'll find it easier if you give yourself a good bit of time.
- Short little prayers are fine: as you see something beautiful or are reminded of a friend you are concerned for.
- Habit is your friend: morning or night, having a quiet and beautiful spot to sit in. Or a routine, like buying a coffee at a coffee shop and praying there. Some habits, like kneeling in prayer, can help focus us as well.
- Let God choose the topic of conversation by praying out of Scripture - using the words of the Bible, process the things you read aloud to God. I.e. reading Psalm 8 you might pray "God, I read here that you created the universe, so it is amazing that you would pay so much attention to me. Thankyou so much!".
- Using mnemonics like "teaspoon prayer" (TSP, which stands for Thanks Sorry and Please).
- God is not against pre-written messages. Some words gain meaning the more they are said, like song lyrics. Use set prayers and make the words your own. For example, the Lord's Prayer, or the prayer of general thanksgiving from the Prayer Book, or a book of puritan prayers.
- Use lists of people to remind you who to be praying for on each day of the week (Monday is family day, Tuesday is school friends). Try not to just recite the lists, but focus on a few people each day and pray through what Scripture suggests is good for them.
- Take initiative in relationships with prayer - when friends come over for dinner, or when spending time with a loved one.
- If you find it hard to pray at a regular time, try short prayers throughout the day: as you wake, as you read the morning news, as you go to work or uni, before you meet up with people, after you have met them, at lunch and dinner, as you go to bed. Some people find it best to have a conversation with God that waxes and wanes all day.

Tim Keller's book *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* is an exceptional modern guide for those who want to go deeper in their prayer life.

Prayer ideas

There will hopefully be many ideas coming out of today's study you can put into practice. You could also begin with the Lord's Prayer, pausing between sections to add prayers which expand on the themes of that section. For example:

Our Father in heaven
hallowed be your name
your kingdom come
your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Here you might open it up to the group to pray for ways in which we long to see justice brought to earth, or particular people or groups changed to embrace the gospel.

Give us today our daily bread
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.

Here you might invite the group to have a time of specific confession (silently or out loud).

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

This is a great point to pray for the church (local and global) and all its leaders and members!

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.

You could follow that up with this general thanksgiving:

Gracious God, our heavenly Father,
we humbly thank you for all your gifts so freely given:
for life and health and safety,
for power to work, leisure to rest,
and for all that is beautiful in creation and human life.

Above all, we praise you for our Saviour Jesus Christ,
for his death and resurrection,
for the gift of your Spirit,
and for the hope of sharing in your glory.
Fill our hearts with all joy and peace in believing;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.