

'Prayer – Request', Matthew 7,7-12, October 3rd 2021. Jesus Lifestyle 15.

Father send your Holy Spirit, to teach us. As we dive into the Bible would you awaken our hearts, expand our minds and shape my identities and lives today. We want to live a Jesus shaped life ... Amen.

Prayer – Request

Nicky Gumbel tells this story.

Jonathan Cavan became a Christian on the Alpha Course and his life changed dramatically. As a young and successful businessman, working for Microsoft, he travelled around the world. On one particular journey he decided to write to his father for the first time in a long while, but he never finished the letter because he started to talk to his neighbor about Jesus.

Later on, he was explaining to his fiancée Helena, how he communicated with his business associates via email – *this was in the very early days of email*. He wanted to show her how he was able to communicate with different people all over the world. So he created an email on his laptop, which he addressed to all the general managers of Microsoft worldwide, all the sales people who look after banks worldwide, and to the chairman of the organization.

Then he demonstrated how he could embed documents into an email. As an example he attached the unfinished letter he had been writing to his Father on the plane.

He thought no more of it until one month later. A woman in his group at work borrowed his laptop, plugged it into the corporate network and received the message "You have an unsent message, would you like to send it?" She clicked 'yes', and that message hit the inboxes of over 500 senior managers and executives in the corporation. Jonathan did not realize this until he got a phone call later. At first he was very worried about it, but then he re-read the letter.

It went like this...

Dear Dad. At last I am writing to you. I have thought about you almost daily. I have not written because I have known that I could not write without saying something that would challenge your thinking and tug at your heart. However, my words aim to be an encouragement.

I am playing soccer weekly and play in a team which is doing well – we won our last game 9-1.

I have a vitality for life that makes me feel fitter, stronger, happier and more peaceful than ever before. God is restoring the lost years.

Many people at Microsoft really do not have a life outside of work. The organization plays an unhealthy central role to their existence. By worldly standards this may not appear a bad option ... but it is absolutely no comparison to having Jesus Christ as central to one's existence as he is to mine. He lives inside me and he is able to guide every one of my thoughts, words and deeds, if I am obedient to his will.

Do you know how much I have craved to speak to you, soft heart to soft heart even during my most rebellious years? For so many years we have communicated mask to mask...

Jonathan received some interesting responses, including two from Bill Gates. He had received a message from a director in Canada whose own father had died one month earlier, and he had never known a son to speak so lovingly to his father, and he had cried there in his office. A message of encouragement and support came from the President of Microsoft Europe, and one of his colleagues came into the office, confessing that he had left the Lord and now wanted to return as a result of reading the letter.

This incident, Nicky concludes, shows how powerful the relationship between a human father and a son can be. Gumbel, p208. This type of relationship is what Jesus points to now and encourages us.

Now Jesus points to prayer.

1. Prayer.

What exactly is prayer? The picture of prayer that comes from the life and teaching of Jesus, seems quite clear – at its heart, prayer is about asking – requesting things from God.

The Lord's Prayer indicates that – a model Jesus gives us how to pray - and we see this across the New Testament, and in the Bible as a whole. God is *not* a Sinterklaas, and the aim of the universe is *not* to fulfil my personal desires and needs. But as "We tend to use prayer as a last resort, but God wants it to be our first line of defense." (Oswald Chambers)

2. Unanswered prayer.

Before discussing requests, it is important to reflect about unanswered prayers.

This topic is a painful one for many.

24-7 has developed some excellent prayer course resources – called God on Mute – about unanswered prayer. It is sometime away, but in Lent we will preach on Sundays about unanswered prayer and hold a Lent series using their materials...

I have found it helpful to see in Holy Week examples of where prayers by Jesus are not answered. Three examples. On Maundy Thursday Jesus first prays for the Unity of the Church – this prayer is still being answered 2000 years later.

In the Garden of Gethesemane. Jesus brings his honest request. He asks that "the cup be taken, but not my will but your will be done.". He does not want to do it. The answer is no. Jesus is not spared great suffering.

On Good Friday, he prays, again honestly. 'My God my God why have you forsaken me?' There is no dove from heaven, no voice from heaven, no heavenly cloud of his presence. Silence.

I think, many unanswered prayers can come into three categories, we could call – God’s world, God’s war, God’s will.

God’s world. Some prayers are not answered because there are principles and laws that help the world go round and there is logic. Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War said – when there were committed Christians on both sides. *“Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. ... The prayers of both could not be answered.”*

God’s war. Some prayers are not answered as we have an active enemy in our world attacking and opposing the work of God. Sometimes as we pray for the people we are concerned about – there is a battle being waged and we need to persevere in prayer.

God’s will. Some prayers are not answered not because they go against laws of nature or because satanic powers resist them, but they are unanswered because the prayers are not aligned with God’s will and purposes.

Willard: “We do not know enough and our desires are not perfect or pure enough for us to be safely given everything we want and ask for. It is as simple as that.” P.263.

CS Lewis helpfully describes:

“Prayers are not always...“granted.” This is not because prayer is a weaker kind of causality, but because it is a stronger kind. When it “works” at all, it works unlimited by space and time. That is why God has retained a discretionary power of granting or refusing it. Except on that condition, prayer would destroy us.

“It is not unreasonable for a headmaster to say, “Such and such things you may do according to the fixed rules of this school. But such and such other things are too dangerous to be left to general rules. If you want to do them you must come and make a request and talk over the whole

matter with me in my study. And then—we'll see." (Willard, Dallas. The Divine Conspiracy (p. 264).

Pete Greig says: "There are many unanswered prayers I may never understand – Sammy's ongoing unhealed epilepsy, Floyd's coma, Tom's sudden death to name a few. But Jesus ultimately invites me to trust in his wisdom, love and power beyond my own limited capacity to understand, praying with him the hardest and most powerful prayer of all: 'not my will but your will be done.'"

3.Requests

"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you then though you are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

We have a heavenly father. The child who makes the request of the parent - prayer is about a personal relationship between us and God. Natural concerns are naturally expressed – and with that, Jesus promises God will hear our prayers for ourselves as well as for others.

Willard says many people have found that prayer becomes impossible because they thought they should only pray for wonderful but remote needs, they actually had little or no interest in or even knowledge of." Willard – p.266.

He goes on "[Prayer simply dies from efforts to pray about "good things" that honestly do not matter to us." P.266.

Paul says: ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Do not be anxious about anything - we are to pray for what concerns us.

Yes, there are disciplines where we focus on God's purposes and plans, such as praying for our governments as 1 Tim 2 suggests, or for the ongoing work of world evangelization etc etc.

But pray for what concerns you...no masks, to quote Jonathan's letter. I believe that the circle of our interests will grow over time as the Lord works, as we follow Christ. I think of where my heart for persecuted Christians really caught fire. It came during my curacy – when Jolanda and I met a few passionate women in All Saints Burton who were giving and praying and organizing things. But the initial spark, that was God breaking in...

Willard shares: prayer is "Talking to God about what we are doing together." Willard, p267. I love this phrase.

Prayer is about where we are at, at the moment. But also reminds us that it isn't all about me! **Prayer is a matter of sharing with God, talking with God, about my concerns**
And also about my concerns about what he is concerned about in my life!

Of course God is concerned about my concerns,
but he is concerned that my concerns should coincide with his....

So prayer fits into the Jesus Lifestyle we have been exploring. Much of what Jesus has taught is part of our daily lives. When we are insulted or mocked for being a Christian and how we respond. When we are angry at someone; when we are in a marriage and are struggling with lust for another person; when we find it hard to be single; when we are in the pain of divorce and need healing and restoration...

When we are hurt and face the temptation of revenge or how we love our enemies... and so on... God's concerns how to live in his kingdom, how do we live these out, we bring our concerns about his concerns to him...

Now, as the Lord's prayer indicates, there are many aspects to prayer. Adoration. Confession. Reconciliation. Spiritual Warfare. Listening for the will of God revealed in scripture or through other means. Yet as we said at the heart of prayer is request – Petition and Intercession.

The Lord's prayer shows God's agenda for our praying:
that the name of God would be regarded with the utmost respect and endearment, as a child wants his Dad's name to be respected;
that his kingdom would fully come on earth.
That our needs for today be met today
That our sins be forgiven and not held against us – we are forgiven in Christ, yet we need to bring to God our confessions as 1 John 1 reminds us.
That we are permitted, kept from trials or protected from bad things happening to us.

4. Does Prayer change things?

God's response to our prayers is not a game. He does not pretend he is answering our prayers when he is only doing what he was going to do anyway. Our requests do really make a difference in what God does or does not do. That is the promise of Jesus in these verses.

If everything would happen exactly as it does, regardless of whether we pray or not, it would be prayer psychologically impossible – it becomes dead ritual.

Moses in Exodus 32. God knows about the golden calf idol. He tells Moses to go back down the mountain, the teaching session is over, God is going to destroy the people. Now this is no idle threat – Moses has seen how God has in effect destroyed the nation of Egypt...

Moses will not let go. He reasons with God. 'Why should your plans be defeated, why allow the Egyptians be able to say that God had nasty plans for the Hebrews.' And he states the promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. V12 Moses calls on God to change. The result. V14 – God decided

to do it differently. We see similar things in Abraham and God over Sodom and Gomorrah.

When you read Paul's letters, you see a man who believes his prayers will make a difference in the lives of the congregations. He is constantly praying for individuals like a Philemon or congregations near Colosse or Ephesus. The early church in Acts met constantly in prayer before Pentecost and then even though the Spirit had come, we see examples of prayer – of requests being made – in the gatherings afterwards.

God listens to requests.

Willard: "God is great enough that he can conduct his affairs in this way. His nature, identity and overarching purpose are no doubt unchanging. But his intentions regard to many particular matters that concern individual human beings are not. This does not diminish him." Willard, p270.

Prayer is about coming to the One who has repeatedly invaded human history and continues to do so. It is asking him to do something we cannot do ourselves. We work with God to accomplish ends that fulfil his purposes in our world. P.273.

5. Ask and keep on asking.

Jesus words - Keep asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking. Prayer often requires much effort, even continuous effort, and some matters, years of effort. Prayer forms character.

God's intention is that we become increasingly like his Son Jesus - transformed into his likeness. Part of our formation will be through waiting for God to act / move, and not to leap ahead and take things into our own hands.

Sometimes we must wait for God to do as we ask because the answer involves change in a person or even change in ourselves and that change often takes time. Sometimes as we said, the changes are connected to conflicts going on in the spiritual realm as Daniel 10 shares. But Jesus

teaches here and elsewhere – we stay with the request. We stay with the issue – like in other relationships – until it is resolved or not.

In Luke 11 he shares: Suppose you have a friend who visits and asks for bread. Jesus says – the man will not get up due to friendship, but because of the man's boldness. He stays there at the door, knocking or simply standing waiting. Jesus integrates this into his teaching on prayer. Jesus suggests – the request does not go away, it is there to stay, that is our part.

"If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven, give what is good to those who ask Him!

Shall we pray.

Our Father in heaven,
as Jesus taught his disciples to be persistent in prayer,
to ask and keep on asking, to bring our requests before you,
give us patience and courage never to lose hope but to keep knocking,
help us and heal us where we struggle with unanswered prayers,
may we always to bring our prayers before you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.