



## Gospel / Life

### Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

#### **Study 29: Learning To Pray**

The disciples were so impressed and affected by hearing Jesus pray that they asked him to teach them to do so. Often we think that we have to arrive at prayer, or better praying, on our own, through our own efforts. God our Father is very interested in teaching us to pray: He knows the difficulty we have with it. One old prayer says it this way:

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and constantly give more than either we desire or deserve: pour down on us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those good things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.

So, how does our Lord Jesus teach us to pray now? We can't join in those prayer times that the disciples overheard. How does he impart his praying "expertise" to us?

#### **The Gift Of The Spirit**

Firstly, as we have seen in the past couple of studies, he gives us the Holy Spirit. The Spirit helps us in our weakness, firstly by revealing to us the deep things of God that we of ourselves could never comprehend, and secondly by taking the deep things of our heart and communicating them to God in ways that we could never do ourselves:

For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. (1Cor. 2:10-12)

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom. 8:26-27)

#### **The Circumstances Of Life**

When we are born we are the most vulnerable and helpless of all creatures, utterly dependent on others for nearly everything needed for survival. "Helpless" is an unusual way of speaking about this—it means our inability as babes to help ourselves; we're completely dependent on the help of others. This is not a wrong or a sin: it is an inherent part of being a child. We cannot explain our needs or concerns, but have to let someone else—normally our mother—know our need for *something* through persistent crying. This helpless cry persists until the mother discovers the problem and fixes it. The helplessness of the baby is part of the effectiveness of its communication with its mother. Of course over time we outgrow this particular helplessness, and this is good.

Life is a long process of discovering the extent of our spiritual helplessness. We have no ability to accomplish anything for ourselves spiritually: we rely on Jesus, on the

Holy Spirit, on the Father. This is not a bad thing: it is part of the ontology of being human. It is a helplessness that we never outgrow. We never become spiritually autonomous or self-sufficient. (The person who thinks he or she has done so is normally insufferably arrogant.) Our growth is not to independence, but rather to a deeper understanding of just how much we are beggars, criers, wailers in need of God's generosity and help.

It is the circumstances of life that work this deepening knowledge in us. The Lord leads us into the valley of the shadow of death. We face situations that we cannot overcome, that we cannot endure, that we cannot even understand. We are faced with our weakness and helplessness. Through these difficult events in our lives, we find more and more that we are driven to cry out, "Lord, have mercy on us!" Probably there is nothing more likely to kill prayer to God than the sense that you can handle everything yourself pretty well! "Only those who are really helpless can truly pray..." Olav Hallsby says this in his book on prayer:

I never grow weary of emphasizing our helplessness, for it is the decisive factor not only in our prayer life, but in our whole relationship to God. As long as we are conscious of our helplessness we will not be overtaken by any difficulty, disturbed by any distress or frightened by any hindrance. We will expect nothing of ourselves and therefore bring all our difficulties and hindrances to God in prayer. And this means to open the door unto Him and to give God the opportunity to help us in our helplessness by means of the miraculous powers which are at His disposal.

### **The Book Of Prayer**

When I was in an Anglican parish, I got a call from an older man, a friend from a previous parish I had been involved with, who had found that he had a large, slow-growing brain tumour that was beginning to be problematic for him, affecting his thinking. He was in hospital and knew he was "out of his depth". I went to visit him a day or two later, and found that something very wonderful had happened to him. These difficult circumstances that had faced him up to his weakness had led him to call out to God. In his fearfulness and anxiety, he had not been able to pray, overwhelmed by his difficulties and unable to be sure of having God's ear. So, he had begun to thumb through and read the Psalms. Suddenly, he was very aware that the Psalms were speaking to him, and he gained assurance that God his Father was listening to Him. He told me that he had read on and on through the Psalms: as he told me this, it was as evident as the sunshine that he had found grace to help him in his time of need.

There are two things to say from this: firstly we are taught to pray particularly when we become aware that God has bent down to hear our cry. Nothing teaches us to pray like the knowledge that the Father hears us. A good friend of mine describes his conversion as being when he prayed and *knew* that God had heard him. To know this is to know that God is for us, that our sins have been removed and we have a gracious God in Jesus Christ.

But secondly, we are taught to pray through the gift of the enscriptured word of God, and especially through the book of prayer in the Bible, the Psalms. In the Psalms we have the record of the prayers of people in all situations of life—joy, sorrow, anger, depression, loneliness, triumph, defeat, beginnings, endings, uncertainty... When we don't know how to pray, we find in the Psalms others who also did not know how to pray, but who were helped by the Spirit of God to do so. And their Spirit-given prayers have been given to help us in our neediness. We find that a psalm will express just what is in our hearts but which we have been struggling to put into words, or have been fearful to bring it to the Lord. Especially we find this last difficulty when it seems all that we have in us is failure, despondency, and lack of faith. How do we approach the

Lord then, and what words are right to use? The psalms give us words for these situations. Sometimes we are given words to just speak frankly to the Lord about how we feel (e.g. Psalm 88); other times we are given words of faith to claim (e.g. Psalms 42 and 43).

As we use the Scriptures to inform and train us in prayer, we start to discover the largest part of prayer is not our speaking, but our listening. Like a great iceberg, most of prayer is what is not seen or said: it is when we are finally silent that the Word of God speaks to us and then we may be able to pray in response. If we have made our praying the measure of our spiritual state, we have turned the gift into a demand. We are to turn from reliance on ourselves and our performance to reliance on Jesus: we move from vocal and mental speech to affective and contemplative listening, from giving to receiving. Soren Kierkegaard put the matter clearly:

A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end he realized that prayer is listening. (*Christian Discourses*, qu. in *Grace Upon Grace*, John Kleinig, p. 178-9)

Within the Scriptures there are many statements of just what the Lord has done, and many promises of what He will do. In prayer we may take these statements and hold onto them in His presence. In some ways these affirmations and promises are given to us to use like vouchers, to present them as claims upon God. The prayers of the Old Testament often show this: in the face of a seemingly opposite will of God, the pray-er reminds God of His word, His covenant, His promise. Circumstances do not actually tell us the will of God, though often we seem to think it does. Circumstances of disaster get interpreted as being a sign of God's displeasure, a sign of His turning against us. Against all that is the word and the promise of God. In prayer we are trained by the word to approach God even against His seeming displeasure. Psalm 60 is a good example of this kind of praying.

### **The books of prayer**

Every gathering of God's people in the name of God—to worship and adore Him, to receive from Him through word and sacrament, and to make our requests known to Him together—is essentially a gathering of prayer. We learn much about prayer personally through the corporate prayer of the church. Those who do not gather with others to pray miss one of the great schools of prayer given to us by the Lord Jesus. Corporate prayer is not a second-rate form of prayer compared to personal or private prayer. In fact, since all our prayer is in union with Christ, *all* prayer is essentially corporate.

There are books that collect the prayers of people to help us in our own praying. Having these resources at hand can be very helpful in our prayer life.

Different congregations and denominations have various forms and approaches to prayer and worship. They all have their "book of prayer", even if that has not been written down in a formal liturgy. (As I go around churches, it is remarkable to me how similar the pattern is across the various denominations.) In some denominations, that pattern of worship has been written down, and some set prayers have been collected. What is most memorable and most helpful in these forms are not the theologically complex and wordy prayers, but the shorter, simpler, direct, Scripturally-shaped prayers. The Lord's Prayer is one such prayer, taken directly from Scripture. There are others, and these can be found in service books.

Here are some of those that are most beloved to me:

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love You and worthily magnify Your holy Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Eternal God and Father, by whose power we are created and by whose love we are redeemed: guide and strengthen us by Your Spirit, that we may give ourselves to Your service, and live this day in love to one another and to You; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord our heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God, we thank You for bringing us safely to this day: keep us by Your mighty power, and grant that today we fall into no sin, neither run into any kind of danger, but lead and govern us in all things, that we may always do what is righteous in Your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have strayed from Your ways like lost sheep. We have left undone the things we ought to have done, and we have done what ought not to have done. We have followed our own ways and the desires of our own hearts. We have broken Your holy laws. Yet, good Lord, have mercy on us; restore those who are penitent, according to Your promises declared to mankind in Jesus Christ our Lord. And grant, merciful Father, for his sake, that we may live a godly and obedient life, to the glory of Your holy Name. Amen.

Almighty God, we confess that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves: keep us outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities that may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We do not presume to come to Your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own goodness, but in Your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under Your table. But You are the same Lord whose nature is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of Your dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.

Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off, You met us in Your Son and brought us home. Dying and living, he declared Your love, gave us grace and opened the gate of glory. May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. Keep us in this hope that we have grasped; so we and all Your children shall be free and the whole earth live to praise Your name. Amen.

Blessed Lord, You have caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that, encouraged and supported by Your holy Word, we may embrace and always hold fast the joyful hope of everlasting life, which You have given us in our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Be present, merciful God, and protect us through the hours of this night: that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this fleeting world, may rest on Your eternal changelessness.; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Discussion: Read through (some of) these prayers. What do you notice about them? How do they reflect any of the things that we have been saying about prayer? In what situations could you use these prayers? More generally, how do you feel about using "set prayers"—what is good, and what is bad about such praying?*