

Getting the fundamentals right Prayers

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

We now come to the final topic in our series on, "Getting the fundamentals right", Prayer, in Acts 2 v. 42. Prayer should be an important part of every Christian's life whether in private, in the family or in your fellowship. Why do I say this? Because prayer is our only means of communicating with our Lord Jesus Christ, and, with our heavenly God and Father.

As we proceed, the English Standard Version of the Scriptures will be used unless otherwise stated.

The Lord Jesus as our example

In Mark 6 the Lord Jesus feeds a multitude. A multitude had come together, and when the Lord saw them, he had compassion on them and began to teach them many things. When it grew late in the day the disciples came to Jesus and said he should send them away so they can buy themselves food in the surrounding villages. However, the Lord Jesus puts a challenge to the disciples, you feed them. They rightly respond that it would cost more than half a year's wages to feed all this people. So, the Lord Jesus asked them to find out what food there was among the crowd. The result of the search was five loaves and two fish. The Lord now commands the people to sit down in groups of 50's and 100's. The Lord then proceeds to give thanks for the food and starts to distribute the bread and fish to the disciples to hand out to the people. When everyone was satisfied the disciples gathered up the leftovers into twelve baskets. Having done so the Lord sends the disciples away by boat while He dismissed the crowd. We are then told in verse 46,

After he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

There are two accounts of prayer in the verses we have considered in what is known as the feeding of the 5,000. The first is in verse 41, the Lord "looked up and said a blessing." We might call this giving thanks for our food. Here it was very public. We might do this at home before partaking of our meal. However, it gives us a challenge, are we prepared to give thanks for a meal outside the home? This is a public witness to being a Christian.

The second account of prayer is in verse 46 as mentioned earlier. This is private prayer. From this example we see the need for prayer after being involved in service. We often see the necessity for prayer before being involved in serving the Lord, but how necessary it is to be thankful afterwards.

Prayer guideline

At the beginning of Luke 11 one of the disciples asked the Lord to teach them to pray. What we then have has become known as the Lord's prayer, but should be called the disciples' prayer.

When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation (Luke 11 vv. 2-4).

In this short prayer we see the worthiness of the Father declared, and the desire to pray for the event of the coming kingdom. Then there is the dependence upon our heavenly Father for our daily needs. This links back to the previous section when the Lord Jesus went up into a mountain to pray. We also see the need to both confess any sins and to forgive others who are indebted to us. This is a spiritually healthy form of living to maintain good relationships. Finally, we have the desire not to be led into temptation knowing our own frailty to be easily led astray. Going back to the beginning of verse 2 where the Lord says, "When you pray" implies that His disciples should be a praying people, it was not "If you pray."

Extensiveness of prayer

Paul in his second letter to Timothy 2 vv. 1-2 states,

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

The scope of prayer is wide as it covers all people, and a specific mention is given to kings and people in authority. We can understand why we should pray for all people as God desires not the death of a sinner but would have all people to be saved. Those of authority need additional prayer not only to be saved but to allow God's people to live out their lives free from persecution. Therefore, we make supplications, prayers, and intercessions on behalf of others whether individuals or authorities for the well-being of God's people. What we must also do is to be thankful in our prayers whenever God has answered them.

However, we may not understand the scope of all people especially those in authority. But the remainder of the verse goes to show what kind of people Christians should be. These four features are opposite to what marks out unbelievers. We pray that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life that is both godly and dignified. In this way we honour the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thinking of the turmoil that is happening in the world today, riots, wars, and political unrest, we certainly need to be people of prayer.

Paul leads by example

In Philippians chapter 1 vv. 9-11 we have Paul's concern for the Philippian Christians. They were remarkably close to the heart of the apostle.

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Paul, by prayer is seeking the well-being of the Philippian believers. It is an extensive prayer that starts with their love abounding, includes spiritual growth with practical results in their daily lives. Lives that are fruitful by allowing Jesus Christ to have full control, so that glory and praise flows up to God. No doubt Paul's prayer would be a challenge to them as it is for us today.

Pray humbly and graciously

In Luke 18 vv. 9-14, the Lord Jesus spoke this parable.

He (Jesus) also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt: Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get. But the tax collector, standing afar off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner! I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

In this short parable we find both the misuse of prayer and the right attitude in which to pray. The Lord Jesus was speaking to those who trusted in themselves and thought that they were righteous. This appears because they fasted and gave tithes. That they could attain righteousness by outward observance of rituals. Sadly, this Pharisee also looked down with contempt at the tax collector. Outwardly they were at the opposite ends of the social spectrum. Tax collectors were hated because they worked for the Romans. But it was to these that the Lord Jesus came to bring salvation not those who were self-righteous. Tax collectors were open to the message of grace. This was evident by the way he addressed God, "Be merciful to me, a sinner." The Lord stated that, this man went to his house justified rather than the Pharisee. Scripture reminds us that we are all sinners. As such we are at a distance from God. Nearness and the forgiveness of sins only comes through trusting the Lord Jesus and asking Him for forgiveness. Jesus said while He was here in this world, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14: v 6). So, what I have just said shows that there is a right and a wrong way to pray. We are only deceiving ourselves if we depend upon telling God how good we are.

Believing Prayer

In Mark 11 v. 24 we have an incredibly challenging Scripture about prayer.

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

This verse is from the section on the withered fig tree and the Lord taught a lesson on having believing prayer. As the Lord draws to a close on the lesson of the fig tree He comes and speaks in this particularly challenging way about believing what we are praying about. To pray in such a manner as though you had already received the answer is challenging indeed as I am sure most Christians will agree. This requires a close walk with the Lord to be in His will. Now let us look at the next Scripture in Acts 12 where an angel brought Peter out of the prison. Peter goes to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark where a company of the believers were praying for Peter.

And when he (Peter) knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. Recognising Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, You are out of your mind. But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, It is his angel! But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed (Acts 12 vv. 13-16).

At the house of Mary, Peter realised that believers would be gathered to pray for him. Upon knocking at the door the servant girl Rhoda went to see who it was. In those days believers needed to be careful because of king Herod. He had already killed the Apostle James and then put Peter in prison intending to kill him also. But Rhoda recognised Peter's voice, and in her joy forgot to open the door but ran to tell the others. Sadly, they did not believe her but eventually they

opened the door and there was Peter. In our previous Scripture, the Lord spoke of believing prayer. Here we have the opposite, they did not believe that the Lord would answer their prayers. With these two Scriptures together we see the challenge about believing prayer. Those in Mary's house were praying but did not believe that their prayers would be answered.

Praying in God's will, 'Gethsemane'

The clearest example of praying in God's will is found in the Lord's prayer to His Father in the garden of Gethsemane. We will read a few verses from Matthew chapter 26.

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to His disciples, Sit here, while I go over there and pray. And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me. And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will (Matthew 26 vv. 36-39).

Here, we are at the last hours of the Lord's earthly life just before Judas leads a group of men to arrest the Lord. Before that happens, the Lord is with His disciples in the quiet of a garden and He is burdened about what was going to take place. Not only the arrest or the mistreatment during His trial by the Jews, Herod and Pilate, or the brutality that He would suffer before and on the cross, but the fact that He would be the sin offering who endured the holy wrath from God. It is this latter point that now burdens the Saviour. He alone appreciated the suffering which is beyond human understanding. He would drain the cup of judgment in order that a righteous and holy God would be satisfied in dealing with the whole question of sin thereby making it possible for salvation to be available to sinners. Using this example of 'Praying in God's will' is the ultimate example. It is not something that anyone else could do.

Constancy of prayer

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: grace to you and peace from God the Father. We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing – as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit. And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light (Colossians 1 vv. 1-12).

There are two points to consider in these twelve verses. First, "We always thank God ... when we pray for you" and "we have not ceased to pray for you." We gain an understanding that Paul

always had the Colossians in his prayers. He desired their fullest blessing to grow in the understanding of the Christian life. A good report was brought to Paul by Epaphras and although they were doing well in the Christian faith there was always room for more progress. This would be a good feature of our prayer time both at home and in the assembly.

In 1 Thessalonians 5 v. 17 we have this short verse, “pray without ceasing.” This does not mean every minute of the day but rather that we should not forget in our prayer times those things that God has laid on our hearts. An example of this is in the book of Daniel. It is recorded that Daniel prayed and gave thanks to God, three times a day with his window open towards Jerusalem. He was a man who structured his day to enable him to pray three times each day. He was unceasing in his prayers for Jerusalem, the land of Israel, and for the people. He was aware of the destruction of the city including the temple and would no doubt long for its restoration.

Praying for others.

In Matthew 5 v. 44, Jesus in the sermon of the mount states,

Love you enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

This was difficult for the people of Israel who had always been told to destroy their enemies who persecuted them. But in the Lord's teaching He was bringing a new way to respond to the unbelieving people of the world, love, and prayer. Love is what drives the Gospel preacher to go and preach the good news of salvation. Prayer is the Christian's greatest weapon to support the preaching. There are no limits to the amount of love believers can expend on others and likewise there are no limits to the amount of prayer that can be offered up to our heavenly Father on behalf of others. Prayer is the key to opening hearts and doors.

Praying for Gospel labourers

In Matthew 9 vv. 37-38 Jesus said,

The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest.

The Lord Jesus was looking at the people coming to Him, bringing with them those that were ill and afflicted and He also saw into their hearts - that they were harassed and helpless. Just like sheep without a shepherd. This touched the heart of the Lord Jesus as the One who described Himself as the good Shepherd. So turning to His disciples, He pointed out that the harvest was plentiful but there were not many labourers. His exhortation was to pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers.

We might often think of this as the sending of the Lord's servants to distant lands. But we should not forget our own country - that there is a vast harvest here to be gathered in. We live in what we would call a post-Christian country and as such the Gospel is very much needed.

Too late for prayers

You may be familiar with the story in Luke 16 concerning the rich man and Lazarus. Some may discount this as only a story but as it is the words of Scripture from the lips of the Lord Jesus, I believe the Lord has opened the veil to see what it is like after death. Its setting is Jewish, but it is equally relevant to us today.

Let us read Luke 16 vv. 19-31.

There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man

named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame. But Abraham said, Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner terrible things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And beside all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed in order that those who would pass from here to you may not do so, and none may cross from there to us. And he said, Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house – for I have five brothers – so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment. But Abraham said, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, No father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent. He said to him, If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.

Although the words pray, or prayers, are not mentioned in the above verses the language of the rich man in Hades reminds us of someone praying and interceding for his five brothers. We have no knowledge of the spiritual state of the two characters in the story, but it becomes apparent that the poor man had a relationship with God, pictured for us as Father Abraham, but the rich man had not. For all his riches he was not thankful. Once these two people were in their appointed places, they could not pass between each other, their eternal destiny was fixed. Abraham was the father of the faithful, hence Lazarus we can assume exercised faith towards God. The rich man could not receive help from Lazarus, not even a drop of water. He thinks of his five brothers, he needs to warn them. Send Lazarus was his plea. But this also was not possible. Abraham states that they have Moses' and the Prophets' writings in the Scriptures. But the rich man wants Lazarus, someone from the dead, to go back to them. This was not possible, if they do not listen to the Scriptures, someone from the dead will not persuade them.

Today we have both the Scriptures, and the Lord Jesus who has risen from the dead. The Gospel message is centred around the work of Christ on the cross and the fact that He rose from the dead. Faith in Christ is essential for He said, "No one comes to the Father except through me." There is a lot in the above verses which are well worth reading again and meditating upon at your leisure.

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