

Prayer

Many books have been written on prayer. Our main task here is to consider prayer as a means of keeping united with Jesus the vine.

This is to copy Jesus, who himself stayed close to his Father in prayer. He often withdrew to lonely places and prayed (Luke 5:16). Before big decisions, he would spend long hours in prayer, even a whole night (Luke 6:12-16). But this is not to encourage babbling on in prayer, at great length (Matt 6:7). It is the depth of relationship that counts, not the number of words said, and you cannot build a relationship with anyone without spending time together.

Indeed, the relationship between Jesus and his father was such that he could say that his father was always with him; he only ever did what he saw the father doing, and only ever said what he heard the father saying (John 5:19, 12:49). The impression given is that nothing Jesus ever said or did was original. It all came to him from God. He knew what it was to pray continually (1 Thess 5:17).

We will look more deeply at receiving from God in the chapter on prophecy. For now, we note how difficult it is to talk about praying to God in isolation. True communication is two way. This is another reason why the idea that God no longer speaks today is hard to sustain. If it were true, then prayer would become the equivalent of talking to someone who has had a severe stroke; able to hear and understand, but unable to communicate back. Anyone who has tried talking to someone in this state knows how frustrating it can be. Can we really envisage God as handicapped in that way?

Having said that, however, there is much in the gospels that suggests that prayer is not an easy matter. It can feel like asking and asking, and yet receiving nothing for a long time, or like knocking and knocking, but only being too aware that the door has not yet opened (Luke 11:9-10). This is often the experience when people pray. It is tempting to think that maybe God does not respond to us, like a stroke victim. It can be tempting to give up. Jesus once told a story about a widow going on and on seeking justice, in order to encourage people never to give up praying (Luke 18:1-8). Why did he tell this story, if it was not the case that prayer often seems to go unheard?

It seems there are two things to be said here. Firstly, many people have missed the clear principle of Scripture that if we do not listen to what God asks us to do, then he will not listen to what we ask him to do (Jer 11:9-14, Zech 7:13). This fact alone could account for the low success rate that many believers and churches achieve in prayer. If disciples ignore God's call, then he will ignore theirs.

There may be other blockages to prayers being answered, such as lack of forgiveness, or asking for our pleasures (Matt 6:14-15, James 4:3). But the chief of these seems to be lack of faith. People without faith should not expect to receive anything from the Lord (James 1:6-7). Jesus' story about the widow seeking justice ended with the words, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? (Luke 18:8)." Maybe this too is the reason that God delays to answer prayer. He values faith so highly, that he will go to any lengths to develop it in his followers (1 Peter 1:7). One way is to delay his response. Then those without faith will fade away, but those with faith will persist.

So we are given tantalising statements by Jesus, which make the whole business of prayer sound so easy. If he has only a little faith, a believer will be able to say to a mountain, "Go throw yourself into the sea", and it will be done for him (Mark 11:23). It sounds as if believers will tackle mountainous problems as easily as Jesus himself did. Again, whatever believers ask in Jesus' name, they will receive (John 16:23-24). These verses too imply no difficulties in prayer.

There is clearly a great deal to learn about prayer. One thing is certain. Disciples have been given impossible tasks by their Lord. The temptation down the years has been to pretend that Jesus never said these instructions, as we have seen. If we choose to jettison this approach, and follow his commands, then we have no alternative but to develop a life of prayer. Believers need to learn to keep in close touch at all times. They need to go on asking, trusting God to work things out as is

best. Maintaining this attitude will prove difficult, and it is tempting to give up, but if believers have the faith to persevere, the result will be very good.

One useful model for us is Moses. In leading the people through the desert, he achieved an astonishing amount by God's help, perhaps more than any other human being. The secrets of his success seem to have been twofold. Firstly, he did everything in the pattern he was shown on the mountain, ie. according to God's instruction (Exod 25:40, 27:8, 39:42-43). In this he anticipated Jesus. Small wonder that God's presence filled the tabernacle, and accompanied them on their journeys through the desert (Exod 40:34-38). Secondly, Moses never became proud, despite all the miracles that he performed (Deut 34:10-12). He was described as the humblest man on all the earth (Num 12:3). It seems wisest to always come to God in empty-handed poverty.

Maybe this is why fasting can be a help. It is not easy to be full of yourself when your stomach feels empty. Although on one occasion Jesus seems to have discouraged fasting as a religious act - his comment was that you could not take an old piece of cloth and hope to join it to new, at another time he seems to have expected his disciples to fast (Matt 6:16-18; see also Acts 13:2). Perhaps we might say that while fasting as a religious duty may be unhelpful, fasting carried out in order to draw near to God is helpful.

In other words, although we are sons, and have a lovely relationship with our Father, just like Jesus, we are not to presume on God. He is the maker of heaven and earth, no less, and it is wise to come into the throne room humbly (Eccl 5:1-2). Jesus himself cried out with loud cries and tears to God, in reverent submission (Heb 5:7).

We do not want to presume upon God. Perhaps it is best to see prayer in terms of discipline, which does not seem pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it (Heb 12:11).

Talking of harvest, there is one particular prayer that Jesus called his disciples to make. They were to ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field (Matt 9:38). One of the concerns closest to God's heart is that people committed to him should give their best energies in serving him. There is always a shortage of Christian workers around. Believers are to pray for this situation to be remedied.

Prayer, then, is essential for the believer, even if it feels like hard work. We do well to persevere in it.