

What is Prayer? We rarely think to ask what prayer is! Prayer is talking to God. But I don't think this description adequately describes what prayer is. This simple description doesn't give any sense of the power or urgency or the need for prayer. Over the next few weeks we'll be focussing on prayer and I hope we'll consider our own response to prayer. You will have received a Try Praying Booklet with the order of service this morning and the idea behind giving you this is that you use it daily. you give it away. Next week, we will get another one to give to someone to encourage them to pray. But what is prayer?

Our starting point to answering the question: *What is prayer* is to define prayer in Scriptural terms. ***Prayer is the way we address God:*** Christians have an amazing privilege. Our God allows us to communicate with Him and He in turn communicates with us. God has made it possible for His people to call on Him. Paul teaches in Eph 6:18 to ***Do all things in prayer asking for God's help. Pray on every occasion as the Spirit leads.*** Our almighty God invites us to come to speak to Him, what an amazing privilege! What is prayer? Prayer is the privilege of God's people and it's something we should do joyfully. 1 Thess 5: *Be joyful always, pray at all times, be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants from you.* God gives us this privilege and calling to pray to Him.

People have different approaches to prayer. Some have no problem praying in front of people, while others prefer to pray quietly on their own. The devil loves to put us off communicating with our Father, and the devil makes us think we can't pray. So often we hear the prayers of others and we marvel at their eloquence, and think that we can't pray like that, but don't be fooled by this!

Matthew 6: *When you pray, do not use a lot of meaningless words, as the pagans do, who think that their gods will hear them because their prayers are long. Do not be like them. Your Father already knows what you need before you ask him.* God already knows what we need, but He still wants us to come to Him with our prayers. Don't get hung up on what your prayers are not: God knows you and He delights to hear your prayers. Prayer is our privilege as Christians and prayer is our privilege for we get to speak to God, so let's use that privilege.

What is prayer? Prayer is asking, seeking and knocking. God delights in our coming to Him with our requests for this signifies our faith in Him. If we didn't have faith in God, we wouldn't pray to Him. When life presents us with situations or questions that we can't cope with on our own; God invites us to ask Him for help regardless what our problem is. He invites us to come to Him for forgiveness, to receive Christ and the promise of abundant and eternal life. Prayer is faith giving and life affirming.

Prayer is an act of faith. We can't serve or receive from God without faith. To make meaningful prayers we must have a living faith. James 1:5 teaches: ***If any of you lack wisdom, you should pray to God who will give it to you; because God gives generously and graciously to all. But when you pray, you must believe and not doubt at all.*** The Bible's teaching is clear: *You must believe and not doubt at all!* We have a God of provision who gives generously and graciously to all. But a word of caution should we misunderstand this scripture. Do not use prayer as a substitute for working yourself. In all things we should work in partnership with God; prayer is not a substitute for service.

God calls and empowers us to work to further His kingdom here on earth, and He works in partnership with us. Pray for God's power and then work in that power. An example of how we work in partnership with God is found in the parable of the widow and the judge from Luke 18.

In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people. And there was a widow in that same town who kept coming to him and pleading for her rights, saying Help me against my opponent! For a long time the judge refused to act but at last he said to himself: Even though I don't fear God or respect people, yet because of all the trouble this widow is giving me, I will see to it that she gets her rights. If I don't, she will keep on coming and finally wear me out! Jesus continued: Listen to what that corrupt judge said. Now will God not judge in favour of his own people who cry to him day and night for help? Will he be slow to help them? I tell you, he will judge in their favour and do it quickly. But will the Son of Man find faith on earth when he comes?

There's only two characters in this parable told by Jesus: The powerful Judge who disregards God and all people, and the other is the widow. A widow in Jesus' time was a woman who was poor, vulnerable, lonely and isolated. The widow would have no chance of securing her rights from anyone, and so she turns to the powerful judge to resolve her conflict. We would expect her to make her plea timidly in a trembling voice, and then at the first roar of the judge's resounding *no*, she would slip away into the shadows. But not this widow! This woman had nothing; no husband or family to support her, and she's denied her rights from someone who is trying to exploit her. Although the judge denied her justice, she keeps coming back to court. All she asks for is justice against her opponent. Her case is trivial to the judge but it's of crucial concern to her.

This judge is characterised as one who *neither feared God nor had respect for people*, and he proudly acknowledges this assessment of his character! He feels no compulsion to make moral judgements. He has no respect for people so we can hardly expect compassion from him. He regards the widow as a nuisance and he dismisses her case. The widow appears to be without resources but she has weapons.

Her weapons are things that the judge doesn't understand because he lacks these things himself. Among her weapons are patience, persistence, integrity, a strong sense of justice and confidence in her cause. But more importantly, in faith she believes that through God, right will win over wrong and justice will triumph over injustice. She has faith that makes her pray that God will conquer evil!

Repeatedly, she comes before the judge with her request: *Grant me justice*. We're not told how many times she kept coming to the judge. Finally, the judge gives up and grants her justice. He doesn't undergo a sudden change of character or experience a dramatic conversion. He doesn't fear God or respect people but he finally grants the woman justice. His motives have nothing to do with compassion for the oppressed, his motives are self-centred and cynical. He's discovered that the widow is a formidable woman and he grants her justice to get rid of her. He makes him decision to get peace, and it's the decision that should have been made when the widow first came to him.

Luke records Jesus using this parable to stress the importance of prayer. Specifically, about our need to pray constantly and not to lose heart, just as the widow did. Jesus is speaking to people who knew how to pray but may have been discouraged. Since Jesus' time, Christians have been in danger of becoming discouraged because of persecution, rejection and even lack of faith. The story about this helpless widow who by faith prevails over a ruthless judge, should give us courage. It should bolster our resolve to continue in patient and persistent prayer.

Jesus used this parable to bolster the faith and hope for those first Christians, and many of them held on to hope and never wavered in their faith. Many of them demonstrated incredible patience and were persistent in prayer. Had they not done so, the Christian church would not have survived. Jesus' listeners were encouraged to be patient and his words gave them a basis for their hope.

They grasped the truth that God is not like the judge. Jesus makes the point by posing a question which puts the character of God against that of the judge: *Now, will God not judge in favour of his own people who cry to him day and night for help? I tell you, he will judge in their favour and do it quickly.* God doesn't have to be pestered or worn down, before He answers the prayers of his people. If a ruthless judge finally and grudgingly responds to faithful persistence, how much more will God?

What is prayer? Prayer is a faithful people bringing their requests, their needs, and their thanksgiving to a loving God. There will be times when we need to be patient and persistent in our prayers, but belief in the faithfulness of God makes such patience possible. Prayer is more than just wishful thinking, it's open communication between two parties; God and us. Christians through faith talk to God and He listens and then acts. Not always in the time or way we expect and that's where faith comes in: God does act, and He answers prayer.

Over the next few weeks we'll be focussing on prayer, and I will be encouraging us to think more about the power of prayer. Think about the Parable of the Widow and believe that God is listening. Have faith that God is with us, gently calling us to come to Him. *What is prayer?* Prayer is the gift that God has given us to allow us to communicate with Him. Don't be hesitant about bringing our needs, doubts and fears to God. We have a wonderful gift in prayer and we have a God who invites us to speak to Him. ***Amen and let's pray.....***

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