



*from the East Mercia Methodist Circuit*

## **Session 2.4: GROWING IN PRAYER**

### **INTRODUCTION: HOW AND WHY DO WE PRAY?**

Our relationship with God, through the Holy Spirit, is expressed first of all through prayer. St. Paul tells us that the Spirit helps us to pray – when, in our weakness, we cannot find the words (Romans 8: verses 26-27). Sometimes prayer is word-less, even just like a groan. But it is always directed to God.

We might worry about not being 'good' at praying, or not having the confidence to pray out loud. Jesus said prayer was best done in secret, behind a closed door (Matthew 6: verses 5-8). Finding the right words is not important to God. Having our time and attention is.

To pray is to spend time with God; directing our thoughts to God; involving God in our daily thoughts and decisions. Not always expecting an answer or a miracle, but just having God with us in the ongoing conversation of life.

Sometimes, God calls people to have a ministry of praying for others or with others, or leading God's people in worship. Here, skills can be developed and certain forms of prayer can be useful. But prayer, essentially, is between you and God – in a way and a language you find comfortable – but always remembering the wonderful awe-inspiring mystery that the holy God who created the universe wants to relate to us at all!

Prayer is a massive and complex subject, and yet it can be done by infants and understood by people of every ability. God's love for us invites us to pray, and God's Spirit enables us. In this session we will think a little bit about how God's Son teaches us to pray. We hope, with God's help, we might be able to help each other grow in prayer as we explore it together.

## **PREPARING FOR THE SESSION (before you arrive)**

### ***Group leaders:***

You might like to prepare a 'prayer jar'. It could be a simple, ordinary jar (like a jam jar or coffee jar, cleaned out), or you might like to find a larger sweet jar or something more special. You can decorate it if you're feeling creative. There should also be small pieces of paper (cut into shapes, if you wish) and pens available.

### ***For all participants - preparing ourselves at home:***

*Find a quiet space in your house. Find a quiet moment.*

*Give yourself five minutes to be still.*

*Close your eyes and breathe. Just become aware of the life that is in you. Breathe in thankfulness for the day, and ask God to give you peace as you breathe out.*

*Just direct your thoughts to God. What is on your mind? Is there any stress or anxiety? Is there anything you want to say to God, or ask?*

*Be aware of God's loving presence. God will not count the days since you last did this, but will delight that you are here in this moment.*

## **STARTING THE SESSION: FINDING OUR ROOTS!**

Questions to get us started:

*What is prayer for you?*

*What different ways are there to pray?*

*How many different kinds of prayer can you think of?*

*What enables you to pray best? Do you find it most helpful on your own, or with others, guided in worship?*

*What questions do you have about the subject of prayer?*

### **A PRAYER (the first part is Psalm 139:1-4)**

Loving God,

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me.*

*You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away.*

*You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways.*

*Even before a word is on my tongue,*

*O LORD, you know it completely.*

And yet, Lord, despite all you know about us,

you long for us to come to you;

you want to hear from us;

you desire to be at the heart of our lives.

You take joy in our prayers;

you delight in the worship of a heart that trusts in you.

The prayers of your children are always heard by you;

although the answers may wait for eternity.

Your ways are too great for this world to hold,

but even so, you call us to come to you and trust.

Be with us and all around us as we come to you today.

Amen.

## READING THE SCRIPTURES

*The Sermon on the Mount* in Matthew's Gospel chapters 5-7 is one of the key parts of the teaching of Jesus. It is a collection of some of his words to his disciples (overheard also by an eager and astounded crowd), reflecting Jesus' interpretation of some of the important parts of the Law of Israel. It begins with the 'Beatitudes' or 'blessings', which give an upside-down reflection on who is truly blessed in God's eyes, against the ways of the world. Jesus then goes on to give his unique take on some of the Ten Commandments and other ancient Old Testament laws. He challenges the prevailing attitudes and practices of the time, but much of his teaching still seems radical today ('*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*' – Matthew 5:44). In chapter 6, Jesus explores religious practices of giving, fasting, and praying. On the subject of prayer, he not only explains how to pray, but also gives them some words which have become the most famous prayer in the world: ***The Lord's Prayer***.

A shorter version of this prayer is found in Luke chapter 11, after Jesus' disciples have asked him: "*Lord, teach us how to pray.*"

### **Matthew 6: 5-15 (New Revised Standard Version)**

*[Jesus said:] 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*<sup>7</sup> 'When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

*<sup>9</sup> 'Pray then in this way:*

*Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.*

*<sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come.*

*Your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.*

*<sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread.*

*<sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

*<sup>13</sup> And do not bring us to the time of trial,  
but rescue us from the evil one.*

*<sup>14</sup> For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

*What is prayer?* In this passage, and in his life's example, Jesus portrays prayer as a relational conversation with our Father in heaven.

God is a loving Father who 'knows what we need before we ask him' (verse 8). *What do you make of this statement?*

*If God knows what we need, why then do we need to pray?*

*And if God loves us, why don't we always see the answers to prayer that we want?*

Perhaps for both of those questions we need to re-think the purpose of prayer. What if prayer is not just in order to tell God what we need? And what if the point is not simply to get what we ask for? God is not an eternal Santa Claus, or a cosmic *Amazon*. The Bible explains that God's purposes are far beyond what we can ever fully understand.

It can be helpful to notice what the Lord's Prayer does NOT say...

There's no request for personal happiness other than 'give us this day our daily bread'. *What does this tell us about the importance of contentment, or reliance on God for our essential needs?*

There's no request to be free from illness, pain and death, only a plea that we're not brought 'to the time of trial' or 'into temptation', and that we'll be saved from evil (or 'the evil one'). *Is there something in this about our lives on earth being not the most important thing, but rather our eternal relationship with God, as forgiven children?*

Finally, there's no 'I' in the Lord's Prayer. No 'me'. It's **Our** Father... Give **us** this day... Forgive **us our** trespasses... etc. *What does this tell us about the importance of praying in community? Or the importance of including others in our prayers?*

*What does the Lord's Prayer mean to you? Do you see it as a pattern to prayer, a guide to our relationship with God, or is it just something we ritually recite in church?*

Here's one way of looking at it:

- The Lord's Prayer puts our parent-child relationship with God first.
- We come to God in worship, respect, and awe.
- We put our lives in perspective, knowing we are but part of a greater kingdom.
- We ask for God's will to be done before our own, and we pray that we'll see the results here on earth (usually through that will of God enacted in our own lives).
- We trust in God's provision for our daily needs (not just bread, or physical things, but spiritual needs and the strength to get through the day).
- Forgiveness is vital, for ourselves, and also in relationship with others.
- Prayer against temptation or the 'time of trial', as well as the evil one, is essential in terms of the spiritual dimensions of our lives, and understanding who is our true Lord.

In a world where our 'free will' and 'God's will' are two different things and often very much at odds with each other, we can think of prayer as 'a closer walk with God', listening to God (with the help of the Bible

and the Christian community of the church), trying to align our wills and desires with God's purposes.

It is sometimes said that the answers to our prayers are not always 'Yes', but sometimes 'No' or 'Not yet'. *Do you find it helpful to think that God always hears our prayers and knows our needs, but cannot always give us what we want at that time?*

Still, 'unanswered prayer' can be one of the most painful parts of the Christian life. Especially when we are praying for people we love. Good Christian people, in a loving relationship with the Father, believing in Jesus and the power of God's Spirit, can at many times find that their prayers do not give the results they hoped. God's apparent answer to our prayers (or not) is not based on any measure of our 'faith'. (Even though Jesus did say some things to his disciples which are unhelpfully definite: "*If you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it*" – John 14:14, and similar in John 16:23-24.) May we take courage in the fact that many wiser Christians than us through the ages have also struggled with the subject of prayer, and yet still continued to pray, knowing God's love fully. *(Is there someone you can talk to about how you feel about the pain of unanswered prayer?)*

## ACTIVITY – PRAYER JAR

On a piece of paper, write on one side **a prayer for yourself**. You don't have to put your name on it, and what is written need only be understood by you and God. It could be a prayer for something you struggle with, a confession, or a prayer for healing. It could be for a closer walk with God, or growth in faith. Or whatever comes to mind.

On the other side, write **a prayer for someone else, or for the church**. It could be for healing or wholeness for someone who is ill or struggling; a friend or family member. It could be a prayer for strength or encouragement for someone facing daily trials in their life. It could be a prayer for the church, for growth in a particular area, or for healing or reconciliation where there has been a rift or argument.

Spend a few moments pondering your prayers, direct your thoughts to God, and then place them in the jar, where they will be collected together and prayed over.

## PRAYING TOGETHER

- Offer to God any prayers written down (and placed in the jar);
- Pray for any who are struggling to find time for God, or who are finding praying difficult at the moment;
- For a growing relationship with God for the group members;
- Pray for those who are suffering in our world or community;
- Pray that God's will may be done, and for a better understanding of God's will in your lives;
- *Say the Lord's Prayer together:*

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your Name,  
your kingdom come, your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins,  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,  
now and for ever. Amen.**

## SUGGESTED SONGS TO LISTEN TO (or your own choice)

Available on YouTube using the links below:  YouTube

***In Jesus' Name*** by Katy Nichole

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VukxLI6HLE>

***Father, I place into your hands*** written by Daniel Shiells

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PwuM4Div-y4>