

Jesus Teaches Us How To Pray

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[0 : 00] If you could keep your Bibles open in Matthew chapter 6 that would be helpful. So we turn back to it. I picked up my magazine just before I left the house this morning, just in case there's any young ones here.

There's none in the building, well there's some relatively young, but there's no children in the building tonight. There might be some watching at home, but this is a magazine that I bought a while back. It might surprise you to know that somebody the shape of me would buy a magazine called Trail Running.

But I bought it and I've spent a few weeks flicking through it. And part of the reason I bought it was that there's an article in it which features the outer Hebrides.

Some trail runner decided that she would take a trip to the outer Hebrides and went to Uist and Lewis and Harris.

And having explored the trails she concluded in the article that this was one of the best and most beautiful places in the world to run.

[1 : 19] And I'm not an experienced trail runner, but I completely agree. And I have trainers at home that are trail running trainers.

And I've got some gear that I can wear that's trail running gear. I know the places to go, I know the trails in Harris that are excellent trails to run.

But the truth is, it's been a while since I've done it. I know the places, I have the equipment, but I'm just very, very rarely on the trails.

And that won't surprise you looking at the way this jacket is kind of sitting in the present. But the point is, prayer can be like that. This is likely one of the best known passages in the Bible.

For many of us, we come to Matthew 6. And even before we open Matthew 6, we know what it's about. There's some passages that if I was to mention them, Malachi 2 or 3, we probably wouldn't have too much of an idea.

[2 : 33] But Matthew 6, the bell goes off, we know this is about prayer, this is the Lord's prayer. And for many of us, we've known, we've memorised the Lord's prayer. We've known it since childhood.

I expect you've heard many, many sermons on the Lord's prayer. We could go through it line by line, spend weeks, I expect you probably have done here in the past.

And we have in this chapter, this model prayer, we have in this chapter, this short manual on prayer that Jesus, God the Son, has given us.

And I'm sure that everyone here agrees fully with everything that Jesus has taught us on prayer. But prayer can be like trail running.

We know how good it is. We know how right it is for us to be those who are praying. We're inspired to pray when we read in Christian books about prayer.

[3 : 38] We may not know a lot about prayer in theory and have great intentions, especially at the beginning of a year, to get up early in the morning and to pray. But like me with the trails, we just struggle to do it.

I imagine most of us, if we're honest, would confess that we struggle to pray.

We find it easy to be busy. It's very easy to be working on a computer preparing sermons because you know you have to stand here. It's very easy to be going out attending meetings when you're summoned to meetings.

It's very easy to go out and visit people because you know there's particular needs and particular places. It's very easy to go out and do these things that are seen. But it can be a real struggle to get into a secret place and to be still and to know God's presence in prayer.

And so at the beginning of a new year, I want to just look at this passage as an encouragement for all of us, me first, to be those who are praying.

[5 : 08] To take the instruction that Jesus gives us on how to be disciplined in prayer. And we get instruction on how to be disciplined in prayer.

And we get encouragement to pray as we look at this section in God's Word from Matthew chapter 6. So what I want to do tonight is kind of the opposite of what we did this morning.

This morning we focused on just a few words. Tonight I want to look at the verses, the span of verses that surround the Lord's Prayer. We're not really going to look at the Lord's Prayer itself. I want to look at the verses that surround the Lord's Prayer because Jesus gives us lessons on prayer as we look at these verses. So I think we've got four points as we go through this.

And the first point is we are taught and we are expected by Jesus to pray. We are taught very clearly and we are expected by Jesus to pray.

[6 : 14] And that's something that we cannot miss as we step through the verses before the Lord's Prayer. Jesus doesn't say to us as His disciples now, and He didn't say to His disciples back then, if you pray, Jesus says very clearly and repeatedly, He says, when you pray, there's an expectation.

There's a teaching here that disciples of Jesus will pray. Look at verses 5 to verse 8. And note that three times in these verses there is that instruction, there's that expectation.

And I've been using different translations and preparations, so if I'm reading a little bit, please forgive me. But Jesus says verse 5, and when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the street corners to be seen by men.

I tell you the truth, they have received the reward in full, verse 5. But verse 6, when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen.

Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. Then verse 7, and when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they'll be heard because of their many words.

[7 : 32] Do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Now Jesus doesn't expect us, all of us, to be preachers or church planters.

It's a particular calling. Jesus doesn't expect all of us to be elders or deacons, officers bearers within a church. He doesn't expect all of us to be missionaries, who go to far off places.

That again, it's a particular calling. It's a burden that He places on some. There are particular callings for particular people, but prayer is a calling for all of the Lord's people.

Wherever we are, whatever measure of health and strength we have, whatever our circumstances, whatever our stage in life, Jesus teaches, He expects that every follower, every disciple throughout the ages, will pray.

Jesus does not say, should you pray, He says in verse 9, you should pray, or as the ESV has it, there's that real instruction, there's that drive in it, Jesus says, pray then.

[8 : 55] It's not a question to an instruction. The person who buys a trail running magazine, should not just read the magazine, but they should put on their trainers and get out on the trails and run.

The person who takes driving lessons and tries to memorise the lessons in the Highway Code needs to get behind the wheel of a car. The person who takes swimming lessons and wants to be able to move around in the water needs to actually get in the pool.

And the person who is following Jesus, the disciples of Jesus, we should pray. We need to pray. We are taught to pray. It is expected that we will pray. Remember the slogan for a night, I think they probably still have it, just do it.

It's what Jesus is teaching His disciples. As they gather round Him for this lesson in prayer, Jesus is saying to them, just do it.

[10 : 16] Malcolm McLean, the Reverend Malcolm McLean who is in Grapefriars, N.S. He's probably the best read person that I know. And you could ask Malcolm a question about almost any theological book, whether it was published 600 years ago or whether it was published six minutes ago.

And it seems he's read it almost immediately and he's taken it in and he's grasped it, then he can give you a view on it. But one day when a few folks were speaking about prayer, he was brought into the conversation and he said, in conversation, he said, I read a lot of books about prayer.

But he said, I haven't found many of them, all that helpful. Because prayer, he said, is just speaking to God.

And that's the simple and yet it's the deepest, most profound truth.

When we pray, we are speaking to God. And God the Son teaches us, He expects us.

[11 : 39] He enables us through all that He's done to do that. We can speak to God. It's an amazing thing to think about.

The God who made everything. The God who is sovereign. The God who is majestic. The God who is perfect.

The God who is eternal. The God who is able to do anything. The God who is perfectly just and holy.

Loving, gracious, kind. We can speak to Him. And He listens to us when we pray.

Listenes intently. You know, sometimes we speak to people and we know that they're not really listening. They're trying to retain eye contact, but they're looking at six people over your head.

[12 : 42] They're distracted, their phones are buzzing, they're wanting to see their phones screen. They're not really listening, but when we pray, as we say in God, He hears. He listens.

And when we take time to actually meditate upon that, we're now inspired, how encouraged we should be to pray. We're not speaking to ourselves.

We are connecting, we are speaking to the all-powerful God. And Jesus is teaching us here. That's what we're to do.

He's never going to push us away. He's never going to say, I haven't got time for you today. He's never going to say your request is too small and trivial.

He's never going to say, this is too big a job you're asking me to handle. God our Father loves to hear His children coming to Him and praying.

[13 : 48] So we are taught here. We are expected here as we listen to the words of Jesus. We are taught to pray. And then in verse 9 through there to verse 13, we have this model prayer.

We have this structure, this instruction on how we are to pray. And these are familiar words you can meditate upon them perhaps this evening. But I want to bypass that and look at the words around the Lord's prayer.

So the first thing we learn as we look at the verses before the Lord's prayer is that we are taught and we are expected to pray. And the second thing we can note as we glance at verses 16 through to 18 is that we need time to pray.

We need time to pray. And that's what he reflected on this morning. Time is something that often seems, and it only seems, it seems to be in short supply.

We are very often saying that we don't have enough time for this and we don't have enough time for that. We're pulled this way, we're pulled that way. And we see people who we think have lots of time and we maybe don't have as much time as them.

[15 : 07] But the reality is we all have the same amount of time. The difference is how we use it. All of us have 60 seconds in this minute. All of us have 60 minutes in this hour.

All of us have 24 hours in this day that the Lord has made and given to us. But we differ on how we view time and how we use time.

And when we take a whole lot of things into our lives and when the cares of this world start to dominate very often our prayer lives suffer.

And Jesus is the thing that's unseen that we may neglect. And Jesus makes clear in these verses that we need to make time to pray.

And I think this teaching on fasting in verses 16 to 18 it speaks into this problem that we have of struggling with time.

[16 : 09] Jesus says in verses 16 to 18, when you fast, notice again there's the expectation, not if you fast, but when you fast. When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others.

Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret.

And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And so Jesus here, he speaks about something that we don't often talk about and that's fasting.

So what is fasting? Well, at the most basic level, fasting is when we stop doing one thing in order to make time to do another thing.

Warren Wearsby, the commentator says, fasting means giving up a lesser thing to gain a greater. And we tend to read verses like this.

[17:17] And we think in terms just of food. Fasting is something that we relate back to various passages in scripture. And it's withholding food.

It's going a day or two days or whatever without food. And in the time that we don't have food, we make time to pray.

But fasting can be more than food. And I think that's a lesson that we should take on board today. In Jesus' day, a meal took a long time.

People would sit down and they would enjoy friendship and fellowship and they would be very leisurely over a meal. It was a time of getting together. It was a time of closeness and intimacy. But today, we're rushing through our meals. We zapped something in the microwave for 30 seconds. We maybe finished our meal within 10 minutes.

[18:19] So if we decide to give up the time that we're going to use to eat, we probably aren't going to gain that much time. But if I decide to put down my phone and come off various apps or platforms and use that time, that's considerably more.

Or if we determine that we're going to come off our television watching for a period and see how much time we can gain from that, that can be a lot.

To fast may not just be food, it can be to come off social media for a period or gaming, to close the laptop.

It can be to forsake Netflix for a few days. And to use the time that we may normally spend on a screen with the Lord in prayer.

So there are many things that can be fasted, not necessarily food. And we may gain a lot of time from fasting one particular thing that we can then use in the place of prayer.

[19:39] I watched an interview just there a few weeks back and it was a football player who was being interviewed, John Stones from Manchester City. And the interviewer said to him, I've been trying to research you before this interview and I can't find you anywhere.

You're not on any social media platforms. There's nothing on Twitter. There's nothing on Facebook. There's nothing on Instagram. You know, where are you? And he explained that he wasn't on any of these things because as a Manchester City football player, he felt he could use his time in much better things.

And I was thinking of a football player. It can be that disciplined in his use of time. As disciples of Jesus, we need to be disciplined and make time to pray.

There's a hymn that we sometimes sing where that message comes through very clearly. It says, take time to be holy.

Speak off to the Lord. Abide in Him always and feed in His word. Make friends of God's children. Help those who are weak. Forgetting and nothing is blessing to seek.

[21:00] Take time to be holy. The world rushes on. Spend much time and seek it with Jesus alone by looking to Jesus, like Him thou shalt be.

Thy friends in thy conduct, His likeness shall see. Take time to be holy. Let Him be like I. And so the hymn goes on.

But the emphasis in that hymn is that we are to take time to be with God. It won't just happen.

Disciples are to be disciplined. And time is one of these things that we are to be most disciplined in. We take time. We make time to be with the Lord in prayer.

So that's the second lesson. We are taught and we are expected to pray. The second thing is we need time to pray. And the third thing we can note here is that we treasure God when we pray.

[22:02] And we treasure God in prayer. And the reality is that what we treasure will shape how we live.

Our treasure will determine our priorities and the shape of our lives. You know, if our treasure is money and success, our whole lives will be devoted to work and succeeding in the career that we've chosen.

If our treasure is being popular and getting the approval of others, we'll probably spend our whole lives living online, trying to get likes and positive comments and people to follow us.

If our treasure is in material possessions, we'll live for the shocks in the online marketplaces. If our treasure is relaxation and comfort, we'll always be focused on that next holiday.

And yet all these things are passing away. Not bad things, perhaps. But if transient things, they're passing away things, because this world and times is passing away and then there is eternity.

[23 : 18] And Jesus in this next section from 19 to 24, he points us to eternity. Jesus says, Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body, so if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness.

No one can serve two masters. For either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

And we might kind of struggle to figure out how does all this connect to each other. But I think when you look at the sweep of this whole chapter, this lesson of Jesus on laying up treasures in heaven flows very naturally from his teaching on prayer.

[24 : 38] It's all joined up with prayer. Because when we pray, our focus in these moments when we are in prayer shifts from this world to heaven.

And yes, we are praying for situations and people in this world, but we are reaching out to our Father in heaven. And when we pray, the things of this world that capture gaze seem so shiny and so attractive and so compelling, they grow strangely dim.

Because as we pray, we are setting our minds, as it says in Colossians 2, on things above, and not things in this earth.

There's a hymn, I don't remember who wrote it, and it says, Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. And that happens when we pray. When we pray, the darkness of this world is chased out of our hearts.

[26 : 03] And the light of God floods it. And when we pray, we come to realise that this world's treasure is not really treasure.

It's more tinsel than treasure. And we know what we're doing with tinsel. It comes off the Christmas tree, it's in a box, and it's there for the next 12 months. It's not treasure.

The real treasure is in Christ and knowing Him. And we are closest to Jesus. We know Him best, you could say, when we pray.

There is intimacy with God. That we find and know other place. We treasure God, our relationship with God, and we meet with Him in prayer.

So we treasure God in prayer. We need time to pray. We are taught, we are expected to pray. And the final thing is we trust God in prayer.

[27 : 17] If we think in terms of opposites, the opposite of loving, you would say, is hating. The opposite of helping is harming. And the opposite of praying is worrying.

Now when we pray, we are expressing our trust in God. Now when we pray, we are taking the things that we are most anxious about, and we are taking it to the Lord, and we are handing it over to Him, and we are asking for His help.

We are saying, I can't handle this. This is too heavy for me. I can't see a way through this, but you are God. I trust you.

So please help me. We trust God when we pray. But when we worry, when we fret, as it sounds 37 style, when we are running around like headless chickens, trying to fix everything in our own strength, that stifles prayer.

That chokes prayer. That uses up all our nervous energy and we channel it through worry.

[28 : 45] And as we worry and run around and charge about trying to fix everything, it's an expression of our lack of faith in God.

And Jesus seeks gently, you could say, to correct that in this last section from verse 25 down to verse 34. Jesus says, therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life.

What you will eat or what you will drink, not about your body, what you'll put on is not life more than food and the body more than clothing. Look at the bars of the air. They neither sown or reeked or gather in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Are you not more of more value than they? And which of you, by being anxious, can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing?

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow, they neither toil nor spin. Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

[29 : 48] But if God so closed the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you or you of little faith?

Therefore do not be anxious, saying what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear? For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them, but seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Therefore do not worry, do not be anxious about tomorrow. For tomorrow will be anxious about for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

And so in this last section, we see Jesus, and he takes all the cares of this world, all the things that he occupies us and distracts us, all these things that we fixate on.

You know, our worries about clothes and how we look at appearance. Our worries about food and drink and how we're going to make ends meet, and how we're going to pay our bills.

[30 : 58] Our worries about our health and how long we're going to live. Jesus, he takes all these worries, all these things, and he says, he says, you can trust your heavenly Father to deal with all these things.

So do not worry about all that stuff. Trust me. And we do that. We respond to Jesus in faith. We trust God as we pray. We trust God in prayer.

And let's remember as we finish the cost for the lines of prayer were opened.

Now, we're not paying a cost per minute in prayer. But if we go back to Calvary, we remember that as Jesus died, the curtain in the temple was torn from top to bottom, which demonstrated that through the death of Jesus, through the work of salvation, the lines were open.

[32 : 35] And as we come in Jesus' name, as we come trusting in the finished work of Christ, we are promised that we can approach God in prayer.

And he will listen. He will hear. He will answer. He will spend time with us. He will deal with our worries.

He will draw near to us so we can know that intimacy, that treasured of God as we pray. So be encouraged at the beginning of this year, not to neglect prayer, but to spend time with God in prayer.

And let's do that now as we close. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you once more for this lesson in prayer that Jesus gave to his disciples back then and a lesson which is given to us through the words of Scripture this evening.

We confess, Lord, that we are those who are quick to run around trying to fix things in their own strength. We are those who are, we find it very easy to be active in the open place where people see us, and yet it can be so difficult for us to take time to be with you in prayer.

[34 : 12] We pray that you'd forgive us for that. Help us to see clearly the futility, the lack of wisdom that there is in being prayerless.

Forgive us, Lord, for the leanness of soul that we bring in on ourselves when we neglect the secret place.

Forgive us for the way that we can be preoccupied by the cares of this world and we can drift out of prayer even when we're determined to bow before you in prayer.

Forgive us for the fact that we can be distracted by the people around us and what they will think of our prayers. Help us to remember the truth that Jesus teaches and the wonder of the fact that we as your disciples can come and call God our Father through all that was done for us on the cross.

To enable us, we pray, as we step out into a new year to heed the teaching of Jesus, the hearers and doers of the word.

[35 : 35] Enable us to take time, to make time to be with you in prayer. We pray all these things in Jesus' name.