

March 13th 2011: Non-Negotiable—Prayer: Luke 18:1-14

Over the last few Sundays we have been looking at some of the things that God expects us to do as believers. Last week for instance we thought about love. Loving God—loving fellow Christians—loving others as being a non-negotiable of the Christian’s life.

Well this morning I want to mention Prayer, but in many ways Prayer falls into a category of its own. Prayer is more than just a non-negotiable, it is an essential part of being a Christian. It was with a prayer that our Christian life began and prayer is like spiritual breathing that we have to perform to stay alive. It is through prayer that we communicate with God and He with us. There is more prayer happening in our lives than we would ever realize.

We discover at the beginning of the creation story in Genesis 1 that God decided to create something entirely different when He created mankind. And the Genesis account tells us in 1:26:-

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness

That was the incredible difference. That within man was that something, which sets us apart from the animals and enabled God to connect with us and us to connect with God.

And this connection was so obvious at the very beginning, when God and man enjoyed such wonderful fellowship together. Then, what the Bible calls sin entered the picture, and that fellowship was broken. The image of God in man was marred.

Yet strangely, there remained in man this desire to connect with God....or to substitute something or someone else for Almighty Creator God...and God responded to that by enabling mankind to re-connect with Him through sacrifices, that atoned for sin, and through prayer.

There is in Jeremiah 29 this wonderful statement that God makes to His people in the context of their future release from captivity, which I believe is also a promise concerning what happens when any person, be they really bad or really good in human terms, turns to God in prayer. Jer 29:13-14

***You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.
I will be found by you***

Then there is another beautiful promise in Isaiah 58:11:-

***Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.***

And then in Jeremiah 33:3:-

***'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and
unsearchable things you do not know.'***

God is all sufficient , but it is obvious that He created man to have fellowship with Himself and He yearns for that fellowship with us. That is why He came to this earth as a man, took our sins upon Himself and died upon a cross, only to rise again on the third day. It was so that He could once again offer to us as a free gift of His Grace, fellowship that will in eternity, be more beautiful and more wonderful than our earthly minds could ever comprehend. Fellowship that begins with prayer as we journey here on earth.

Prayer is many things for the Christian and we use it for many reasons.

Prayer is the vehicle for our praise, as we use it to glorify God, using our words, our voices raised in song, or our thoughts.

Prayer is the means by which we seek help. For ourselves or for others.

Prayer is the opportunity to open our hearts up to God. To share with Him our pain and our joys. To talk with Him of our dreams, hopes, fears, frustrations. To express our love and at times our anger. Our sadness but also our delight in Him.

Prayer is the road back into God's favour. The pathway of repentance, of confession, of renewal.

Jesus gave us a wonderful example of prayer, and often we hear about Him spending hours in prayer with His Father. He was showing us that we too need to cultivate an ongoing prayer life if we want to grow as believers and do the will of our Lord.

He also taught about prayer and gave us that wonderful prayer pattern that we call the Lord's Prayer—giving us that glorious and intimate title for God—Father.

The reading we had this morning from Luke 18 also contains teaching about prayer through two parables that we can all gain from. Luke 18:1 tells us:-

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

The story concerns a widow who really doesn't stand a chance of getting any help from a judge who is godless and probably corrupt with it. She has no power in that situation at all. She has no great resources, she's a woman, and being a widow she has no man to stand up for her. But she doesn't give up. She bothers the life out the judge until he makes sure she gets justice simply to get rid of her. (Thankfully this is not the way that Troy, as our Mayor does business)

But the important teaching is that it is not the way God the Father does business either. He is so opposite to that judge and even the most powerless individual is looked upon by God the Father with kindness and love.

We have every reason to pray and to keep on praying. And this parable teaches us that our prayers won't always be answered in an instant. We must expect delays at times, but it will never be due to God not hearing us or caring for us. He is not at all like that unjust judge—in fact He couldn't be more unlike him. So always pray....whether it's about you or about others....and never give up. And such encouragement to keep on praying we all need to hear, because we are not too good at persevering if the truth be known.

Note the final comment of Jesus after this parable at the end of v8.

However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Or as the Message paraphrase puts it: ***But how much of that kind of persistent faith will the Son of Man find on the earth when he returns?"***

How much of that persistent praying will the Lord find amongst His people when He returns? That's a challenge for us each to think about.

In the second parable the teaching about prayer is very different. Jesus uses it to show that there is a type of prayer that doesn't touch God's heart at all. It's the prayer this Pharisee prayed: Luke 18:11-12

The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

The Greek text actually says that he prayed to himself, and that really sums up his whole attitude in prayer. And consequently it was a waste of breath. He did not connect with God, but the repentant tax collector did. He was sincere in prayer and it's the sincere prayer, however short, awkward, and incorrect it may sound, that connects with the heart of God every time.

And that really brings us back to where we started, seeing prayer as this precious God given means of connecting with Him. And consequently, whatever we are praying about, those prayers are extremely precious to God.

I had already started preparing this message when I read the Word For Today for last Friday. And what was written there was just so relevant to the thoughts about prayer that I wanted to convey to you this morning. And part of that devotion were these words:-

"The prayers of all God's people went up to God. Isn't that awesome! Your words don't stop until they reach the heart of God, so keep praying. Notice that the friend who went to Jesus on behalf of Lazarus said, 'Lord, the one you love is sick.' He didn't base his appeal on the imperfect love of the one in need, but on the perfect love of Jesus. He didn't say, 'The one who loves you is sick.' He said, 'The one you love is sick.' That's different. The power of prayer doesn't depend on the virtue of the one who prays, but on the unchanging love of the one who hears. Aren't you glad? You may be deeply flawed, you may not understand the mystery of prayer, but this much is clear: action begins in Heaven when someone on earth prays."

Yet having acknowledged all that we know that prayer on our part is something that we have to develop. We have to want it to grow from an activity we have to deliberately make time for, to something that is so natural that we couldn't consider life without a ribbon of prayer constantly flowing through it.

It's rather like an exercise programme. At first it is so hard to find that 30 mins a day we are told that we need, and we make do with 15 or 20 or 3 or 4 days a week. But then as we begin to get into the habit of exercising, and start to gain the benefit of it, we find that we increase the time we exercise

because we actually start to enjoy it, until we could hardly envisage life without it.

It's similar with prayer. Make the time to connect with God every day for a set period of prayer. At first it will seem strange and hard and evasive. But it's from that disciplined beginning that you will begin to grow in your appreciation of prayer as connecting with God and he with you, and after a while you will find that praying has infiltrated every part of your day.

That's the way I developed my prayer life and I can assure you it was not easy at first. Neither was it without its stops and re-starts. But for quite a while now that period of time I spend with God first thing in the morning is the most precious part of the day. But more than that, it has built such a relationship that I find myself constantly talking to God through the remainder.

Prayer is how we connect with God and how God connects with us. And the more value our prayer times, the more we will sense the beauty of that connection. A connection with God for which we were created.