

## **Prayer with Attitude (a right attitude!)**

Last week Mike began his talk about prayer with claim “everyone does it”

Yancey makes the same claim, noting “even atheists find ways to pray.”

P.13:

During the heady days of Communism in Russia, party stalwarts kept a ‘red corner’, placing a portrait of Lenin where Christians used to keep their icons. Caught up in the fervour, *Pravda* ran this advice to its readers in 1950:

If you meet with difficulties in your work, or suddenly doubt your abilities, think of him – of Stalin – and you will find the confidence you need. If you feel tired in an hour when you should not, think of him – of Stalin – and your work will go well. If you are seeking a correct decision, think of him – of Stalin – and you will find that decision.

Prayer is, at its most basic, an acknowledgement of something greater than ourselves.

OR, better, as Thomas Merton expressed it:

Prayer is an expression of who we are... We are a living incompleteness.

THEREFORE, is a sense in which prayer implies/presupposes a certain humility: I, the lesser, am addressing someone/something greater than myself.

Want to begin here: While this is true in a universal sense (the need to acknowledge something/someone greater than self), it is true in a specific and deeper sense in the case of Christianity. Why?

Christian prayer requires a self-conscious humility.

WHY? Because God requires it:

“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” - Prov 3.34, quoted in both James 4.6 and 1 Peter 5.5

And Ps 138.6

“For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar.”

And Luke 1.51-52

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.”

A big part of coming to God with the right attitude/a right heart = acknowledging he is God and you are a fallen/sinful man.

Yancey:

Most of my struggles in the Christian life circle around the same two themes: why God doesn't act the way we want God to, and why I don't act the way God wants me to. Prayer is the precise point where those themes converge.

Adoration of God + Confession re self = starting points of prayer.  
Prerequisites for both = attitude of humility/a humble heart

## **2. 2 OT prayers which illustrate this – Pss 51 and 131**

Ps 51: acknowledgement of human sin and God's mercy, followed by repentance and plea to “create in me a clean heart... and renew a right spirit within me” ; an acknowledgement that “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise”  
cf. Luke 18.9-14 Pharisee and Tax collector.

### **Ps 131 as fitting starting point (I often use it as begin quiet time)**

A fitting sequel to Ps 130, as no doubt intended by whoever compiled the psalms in this order.

- Contrast in emotions between a man crying out desperately from the depths of the sea and a weaned child resting contentedly in the arms of its mother.

Psalm 131 captures precisely that movement from the former state to the latter, the kind of emotional transition which results from knowing God's gracious forgiveness.

Having experienced God's unmerited grace, David has humbled himself, becoming like a child, and now knows the contentment which can only be found in God's embrace (cf. 2 Sam 7.18-29). In order to do so he has had to renounce three attitudes (v.1):

- He has had to stop lifting up his heart; that is, being **proud**.

- He has had to stop raising his eyes too high; that is, being **too ambitious**.
- He has had to stop occupying himself with things too great and marvellous for him; that is, **tasks which God has not entrusted to him** (such as building God a house, 2 Sam 7. 4-17).

Before he renounced these attitudes he was like a suckling child who, once he smells his mother's milk, will not settle until he has had his fill. He was driven by his own self-serving passions. Now, humbled by God's grace and having put aside those passions, he is not only at peace with God, he is at peace within himself (v.2).

In Ps 131 - His soul has found the contentment which goes with godliness, which Paul describes as "great gain" (Tim 6.6).

The concluding verse of the psalm... the appeal is to place his/her hope in David's great son, Jesus the Messiah, whose invitation is to "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt 11.28f.)

This = what prayer about. First and foremost, a nurturing relationship of trusting and resting in Christ. Can only do that as still our heart and mind to rest in him.

One of the more often quoted verses about prayer, especially in times of difficulty, is found in 2 Chronicles 7:14: *"If My people, who are called by My Name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from Heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."* That passage powerfully directs us to the need for humble prayer, repentance, and a faith-filled desire for God's restorative power in whatever situation we are facing.

### **3. Let's explore further in the scriptures:**

Jesus = more concerned with *how* you pray than *what* you pray.

1. Forget about the words you use

- Matt 6.8 “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him”
- Ps 139.4 “Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.”

2. You cannot be too honest with God about yourself.

You can be sure that the more honest you are, the more God will extend his grace to you and draw you closer to himself – 1 Peter 5.5-7

God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Flip side = that you can’t hide anything from God/fool God anyway, therefore may as well be honest. Ps 139. John 2.24-25

**3. Pray as son/daughter to Father (12x ‘your Father/heavenly Father in ch 6)**

- Can and should be yourself (no pretence necessary or going to fool God)
  - No need to use a different voice or language from what normally use when talking to a parent/close friend.
  - Must be no pretence, but absolute sincerity.
- Draw aside to be with him, your sole focus, undivided attention  
Jesus’ example – withdrawing , being still/alone with God  
Recurring refrain (almsgiving, prayer, fasting) :  
“And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (vv.4, 6, 18)
- Regard him with fear though ‘good’. From *Lion, Witch and Wardrobe*:  
“Who is Aslan?” asked Susan.  
“Aslan?” said Mr. Beaver, “Why don’t you know? He’s the King. . . . It is he, not you, that will save Mr. Tumnus. . . .”  
“Is—is he a man?” asked Lucy.  
“Aslan a man!” said Mr. Beaver sternly. “Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don’t you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion.”  
“Ooh!” said Susan. “I’d thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I

shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver, “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

“I’m longing to see him,” said Peter, “even if I do feel frightened when it comes to the point.”

- Trust/faith that he is good and loving
  - Know father will give/do what’s best – Matt 7.7-11  
... which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!
  - Contrast between human father and Heavenly Father (Matt 7.11), between godless human judge and Heavenly Father (Luke 18.6-7)

George Buttrick observed in 1942: To some people prayer seems “a spasm of words lost in a cosmic indifference”. Nothing could be further from the Christian experience and understanding.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions**

**NB. I will preaching on our own quiet times and the Lord’s Prayer in a few weeks time, so maybe avoid delving too much into that realm this week – going beyond what these questions ask.**

1. What do you make of the claim that Jesus is more concerned with *how* we pray than with *what* we pray?
2. Public displays of piety, such as the Scribes and Pharisees performed, are probably unfamiliar to most of us. But in what ways might Christians be guilty of trying to impress people (probably other Christians) with our prayers today?
3. Do you use any of the many prayers in the Bible as a basis for your own quiet time? If so, which ones do you find especially helpful, and how?
4. How honest do you think you are with God about yourself? Do you pour out your heart to him? If not, is this an area you would be open to growing in?

5. Have there been times for you when the heavens have seemed like brass, i.e. God seems totally absent/unreachable? What kind of times were they for you? How did you get through them? What did you learn (about yourself and about God)?
6. When you pray, do you consciously hold an image of God in your mind? If so, what is that image? If Heavenly Father, how do you understand that, mentally and emotionally?