

Prayer

1 Timothy 2:1-10

1-3 The first thing I want you to do is pray. Pray every way you know how, for everyone you know. Pray especially for rulers and their governments to rule well so we can be quietly about our business of living simply, in humble contemplation. This is the way our Savior God wants us to live.

4-7 He wants not only us but everyone saved, you know, everyone to get to know the truth we've learned: that there's one God and only one, and one Priest-Mediator between God and us—Jesus, who offered himself in exchange for everyone held captive by sin, to set them all free. Eventually the news is going to get out. This and this only has been my appointed work: getting this news to those who have never heard of God, and explaining how it works by simple faith and plain truth.

8-10 Since prayer is at the bottom of all this, what I want mostly is for men to pray—not shaking angry fists at enemies but raising holy hands to God. And I want women to get in there with the men in humility before God, not primping before a mirror or chasing the latest fashions but doing something beautiful for God and becoming beautiful doing it.

When I looked at the readings for today, I first thought that I should do the gospel readings, but I wasn't sure how to approach that, so I thought it would be safer and more honest if I spoke on something that I knew how to tackle. And so today we are going to look at the readings from 1 Timothy and look at what prayer is all about.

As we make prayer a constant, daily, hourly part of our lives, it becomes part of who we are, and our walk with God is just that little bit closer. Throughout the Bible, and particularly I think, throughout the New Testament, we are told of the importance of prayer. The Apostle Paul says to pray without ceasing, and elsewhere he says to be thankful in all things. Jesus sustained himself by literally spending whole nights in prayer on his own. Luke's gospel tells us that he used to get away to remote places to pray, as if it was a common part of his life. You also may have heard about the preacher, I think a well known one from a couple of hundred years ago, who would say "I've got so much to do today that I need to spend 3 hours in prayer first to prepare myself".

So prayer is a major part of the life of the Christian. It is not just a discipline, although we can learn a lot from our Muslim friends who pray 5 times a day. But for us it is more than that. Because Christianity is about a relationship with the God of the universe, and when you have a close relationship with someone you communicate with them and you tell them things that you might not tell other people. It's a relationship of trust where, as we grow closer to God, we come to realise that he is actually on our side and wants the best for us in a way that we can never really comprehend.

As we come closer to God too, we will find that God actually answers our prayers and we see more clearly how he works in our lives. If you're like me, you will look back and see how, in hindsight, God has been using you. I've seen this happen at least 3 times in my life over the last couple of months. It's probably happened a lot more than that, because I think God is always using us for his purposes and moulding us, but these 3 instances are the ones that have stayed with me.

Firstly, there was an instance a few weeks ago when someone turned up at church who I knew but hadn't seen for a long time, or maybe once or twice in the last couple of years. So when I saw him sitting there by himself I went over and said g'day to him. When he saw me a big smile came over his face. We asked each other how we'd been and it was then that he told me that he was going to call me that morning to see if we could catch up and talk about a struggle that he was going through. This guy never calls me, never. Then we bump into each other at Collingwood that morning. He had come to be there because he called a church during the week, wanting to see what churches were in the area. Someone told him about St Martin's and so he got onto Marshall, had a chat to him and ended up coming along, he had no idea that I attended St Martin's. We ended up having a great intimate talk, there were tears and we had a very moving time of prayer after the service. I went home that day amazed and wondering why God would use me, me, to help bring healing to someone. I shook my head at how God works and felt so privileged that the Creator of the universe would want to use a broken person like me to do his work.

The next thing that happened was when another friend of mine called me one evening when Nell had gone out for a while. I felt like I needed to call someone when my mobile rang and it was a friend who I see regularly, but again, when he calls me, never calls me at night, never. I told him about that, and he said "is that odd or is that God?". I didn't need to be convinced.

The next thing that happened was a couple of weeks ago. Part of my walk with God recently has involved me looking at myself as being a true man and looking at issues to do with my relationship with my father when I was a boy. I've often struggled to see myself as a man among men, so to speak and I prayed about that on this particular morning. I told Nell about it and she suggested that I go back and have a look at Steve Biddulph's book called *Manhood*. It's a brilliant book and has helped thousands of men since it was published in the mid-1990s. You may have read it yourself. As I walked out the front door that morning to go to work I specifically asked God "help me be a real man". I quickly forgot about it as I walked to the station and went to work. Then Nell called me that afternoon and told me that she had just found out that Steve Biddulph was speaking that night at a church in Blackburn, about 10 minutes from home, on the topic of manhood. So I went and it was fantastic. There were probably about 200 men there and I was quite moved at times as Steve spoke about the struggles that men go through.

These are 3 things that have happened to me recently which you could call a coincidence. You could ask, like my friend did, is that odd or is that God? I don't see it as a coincidence. In fact, I don't think that anything that happens in our lives is a coincidence. How privileged are we that the God of the universe chooses to do his work of saving the planet through stuffed up broken people like us.

When I thought back about those things, I shook my head and wondered that God would use me of all people to do his work when he could do a much better job himself. But it's about relationship. It is grace at work. For all the things that I have done in my life which have hurt people and hurt God, the fact that he still wants to use me is surely grace at work.

I don't believe in karma where you get back your due. God doesn't work like that. He works on grace. He wants to have a relationship with us. He wants us to pray to him, to talk with him, to commune with him. The passage in Timothy says "pray every way you know how, for everyone you know." Nell and I have been praying together for a few years now, in the morning before I go to work and at night before we go to sleep. I am convinced that it has helped our relationship enormously, because it is something that we're doing together. Together we're inviting God into our lives. You may know the old saying that the couple that prays together stays together.

The passage in Timothy also says to "pray especially for rulers and their governments to rule well so we can be quietly about our business of living simply, in humble contemplation. This is the way our Savior God wants us to live". How relevant is that right now, as we face an election that will decide the future direction of our nation for at least the next 3 years, probably for the next decade. We have a responsibility to pray that we will be led by people of integrity, who have the interests of the people at heart and who rule with love, justice and mercy.

And as far as living in a way that "our Saviour God wants us to live", a lot of Christians talk about trying to find out God's will for their lives. I used to think about that. What should I do with my life? Well I don't worry about that now. God's will for our lives is to live as he wants us to live. Each morning I ask God to fill me with his Holy Spirit and help to do His will that day. If we offer ourselves to Him to do with us as He wills, that is God's will for our lives. I then believe we will be wiser about making the bigger decisions, which we should never make entirely by ourselves anyway. Those are the sort of things we need to consult other wise Christians about as well as praying a lot about.

We are also called to pray for our enemies. Who are our enemies? Well, it is anyone who we have a negative attitude against. How about the driver who, as you're about to cross at the pedestrian crossing, drives straight through it without even looking to see if anyone is there? You suddenly feel resentment well up inside you at him and you imagine arguing with him and telling him that it is people like him that kill people on the roads. Or you take the other option, of realising that, while he or she is in the wrong, you can't control his behaviour, so you pray for him or her, that God will give them today what you would want for yourself. Prayer is a great way of getting rid of resentment. When you pray for the person you are resenting, you are doing an act of service to them and are giving to them, so it is impossible to resent them at the same time.

There is so much in this passage, probably too much to focus on in one sermon. But let me just talk briefly about the next part which talks about Jesus offering himself for everyone being held captive by sin, 'the sin that so easily entangles' as it says in Hebrews. The great songwriter, Keith Green, in one of his songs, sang that Jesus came to set us free from ourselves and our despair. Set us free from ourselves. We are a selfish species and we live in a selfish age where excitement and feeling good is our goal in life. If you're sick of that, well Jesus came to set you free from that if we'll only accept it.

Our passage also says “since prayer is at the bottom of all this, what I want mostly is for men to pray—not shaking angry fists at enemies but raising holy hands to God. And I want women to get in there with the men in humility before God, not primping before a mirror or chasing the latest fashions but doing something beautiful for God and becoming beautiful doing it.”

Over the last couple of years I have come to see the beauty of Nell's personality. I have come to be more grateful for her and that God has given me such a woman as her. I'm convinced that is at least partly because of prayer, us being in an attitude of prayer together and also her becoming more beautiful because of her relationship with God.

And to us men the passage says to raise holy hands to God rather than shaking angry fists at enemies. How I need to hear that at times like I mentioned before with the driver at the pedestrian crossing. Of course if I'm the driver, then it's the pedestrian who is walking too slowly or something like that. Communion with God helps me to change my attitude by seeing my own faults and not seeing everyone else as always in the wrong. It helps me to be humble and to see my judgmentalism and arrogance for what it is, not something that makes me feel powerful but something ugly and divisive.

We pray to a God we can't see, to a God we can't touch, but to a God who we can trust is there and is on our side, a God who listens intently to us and who bends down to listen to us as Hosea in the Old Testament says. Listen to what he says about God (READ HOSEA 11:1-4). When we talk to a child, they feel so important when we physically bend down to their level and talk to them, rather than standing over them. That's how God listens to us when we pray.

Often in our finite understanding of God we don't understand when he seems to not answer our prayers. But it's really just that the answer is no. If you look after children in any capacity, you will know that you often have to say no to a child who wants something because you know that it wouldn't be good for the child to have what they were asking for. It's pretty simple but when God says no we doubt that he loves us or that he's even there.

Prayer is something we can do any moment of any hour of any day. God never sleeps and he always listens. I think prayer is also an attitude. In its essence it is coming to God in humility. We talk with him because we recognise our need of him.

One of the best prayers I have heard is one by a man called Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision. When thinking about the plight of hungry children around the world, he simply prayed that our hearts would be broken by the things that break the heart of God.

We come to God in a humble and contrite spirit. Remember the Pharisee and the tax collector in the parable that Jesus told. The Pharisee stood there and thanked God that he wasn't like that miserable tax collector over there. He tithed his 10% and said all the right things. But the tax collector couldn't even look up. He just beat his chest and said 'God have mercy on me, a sinner'. That is a humble prayer and it is why Jesus said that it was the tax collector and not the Pharisee who went home righteous before God.

Of course the best example of how to pray is given by Jesus himself in what we call the Lord's Prayer. It puts things in proper order and helps us see our rightful place in the grand scheme of things. Jesus starts this prayer with adoration and reverence for who God is – hallowed be they name.

Then he asks for what we know that God's will is – your kingdom come on earth as in heaven. The he asks that God give us what we need to live – our daily bread without which we would die.

Then there is a humble request to forgive us our wrongs as we forgive others. Notice the condition of us forgiving others. We have no integrity if we ask God to forgive us but we will not forgive others.

Then he asks that we be delivered from evil, and then he finishes with another acknowledgment of who God is and what his place is. All is his, now and forever.

Notice that when Jesus teaches us this prayer, the only asks that he says is that we be given all we need to serve him – our daily bread for sustenance and strength, and to be kept away from evil. When we pray, let us ask only that we be given all we need to do his will for that day and nothing more.

One of the simplest and best prayer books I have found is Leunig's 'A Common Prayer'. He offers prayers about the ordinary things of everyday life. He gives thanks for the birds who leave their droppings on commoners and kings alike. He gives thanks for our gardens and for winter. He also offers prayers about love and fear, and for the lost, the confused and the bewildered. He also offers a prayer about prayer. He calls it the breath of the soul and the vitality of the spirit. What a wonderful prayer to finish with.

by Nils von Kalm
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