

Walking with God through Prayer

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[0 : 00] Matthew 6, verses 5 to 18. Matthew 6, verses 5 to 18.

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or a lover of inspirational quotes. I just love these things in fridge magnets. And whenever I go into your house, I'll be maybe looking at your walls to look at the kind of inspirational quotes that keep you going.

[2 : 20] I read one the other day. It says, the distance between your dreams and reality is discipline. And I thought that was really quite good. Also, one of my great heroes and someone everybody loves is Nelson Mandela.

And Nelson Mandela was a cross-country runner in these younger days. And he said this, running taught me a valuable lesson. He says, in cross-country competitions, training counted more than intrinsic ability.

And so Mandela says that he wasn't maybe a great natural runner, but he had discipline and he trained. So here at Cornerstone for the next, today and for the next three weeks, we're going to be looking at spiritual disciplines.

And that maybe sounds a bit grim and a bit hard, but I think it will be really enjoyable. So today we're looking at prayer. And then next Sunday, we're going to look at the Bible and how to meditate.

And then we're going to look at money or stewardship, how we look after what God has given us in terms of possession. And then finally, we're going to look at the Sabbath principle, how it's good to just take a rest and stop the machine a little bit.

[3 : 33] So today is about prayer. I'm just a little dip into fasting, because for obvious reasons, some of us find prayer even easier, perhaps, than fasting.

But prayer is absolutely essential. A very well-known preacher, a Welsh preacher years ago, called Martin Lloyd-Jones, said, there is nothing that tells the truth about us as Christian people so much as our prayer life.

Everything we do in Christian life is easier than prayer. So right at the outset, if you are someone who finds prayer difficult, then you are in good company. We are all together struggling with this whole concept of prayer.

So we're all in the same boat. Let me just define our terms, first of all. What is prayer? It's really simple. Prayer is spending time and talking to God.

Love the West Wing. Really the best box set ever. Don't you wish Bartlett was president? You know, the world would be such a savor place.

[4 : 44] They've got this line in West Wing, whenever Bartlett wants to speak to someone confidentially. He'll say, give us the room. So there you've got, in the Oval Office, you've got Bartlett together with one or two people.

In a sense, that's what prayer is like, is when we have the room with God. We are there, we are spending time, and we are talking to God. It really is quite an extraordinary thing.

And in terms of discipline, prayer is something that we're called to do, not just daily as a legalistic requirement, but prayer is something that we've got to do on a regular basis.

So we're turning here to the passage, either having your Bible in front of you, or you've read in the screen, Matthew chapter six. What a tremendous passage of the Bible it is.

Who says it's not relevant? You look at verse six, and you see there, there's someone making a show of doing something religious. Now, can you think of anyone this week who made the show of doing something very religious, a photo op, so that anyone could see him?

[6 : 00] I'm not giving any names away, but it's completely irrelevant here. Matthew chapter six says, in verse five, when you pray, that you don't do it ostentatiously for everybody to watch.

Now, let me place Matthew chapter six in context. Even those of you who are maybe not, you know, familiar with church, you've heard of the Sermon on the Mount.

Maybe yes, maybe no. The Sermon on the Mount is a very famous sermon that Jesus gave on a mountain to lots and lots of people. And it's a great sermon because it tells the difference between religion and being Jesus followers.

You folk would say to us at Cordenson, are you religious? Well, I think if you asked us that question, we would pause a little bit because I don't think we like being called religious.

And the Sermon on the Mount really is about the difference between religion and being a Jesus follower. So, you know, Jesus is all about inner things.

[7 : 11] He says, if you've got hate in your heart, talks about a phrase a lot, in your heart, it's just like committing murder. So, he talks about inner changes rather than outer changes.

But in Matthew chapter 6, in chapter 5, he's spoken a lot about these inner changes and that righteousness is in the heart. But then in chapter 6, he says, yeah, but although there's inner things, there's also a lot of outer things also.

And these come under the idea of disciplines. And the wonderful thing is in Matthew 7, 28, it says there, there's a great line that Jesus was amazed that he did not speak like the other teachers.

And Jesus is amazing. And I encourage you all, all of us to read the Bible and to see what Jesus actually says. And so, the big picture there is in chapter 6, verse 1, Jesus is talking about praying.

It's one or two things about prayer then, this morning, fairly briefly. As we consider the discipline of prayer, the first thing I want to say is, it's natural.

[8 : 32] Now, as I say it's natural, I kind of hesitated to put this down as one of the points I would raise. Prayer is natural, but that's not to say that it's not difficult.

It is difficult. So there's a kind of paradox, but I'll stick to that idea that prayer is natural. It's crazy to say that there is no effort in being a Christian.

Of course, there's a lot of effort. It takes effort to pray, although it's natural to speak to a Father, it's also something that we find really, really difficult.

But prayer is natural because it's a fundamental act of what a Christian is. A Christian is someone who's changed. We've gone from darkness to light, from death to life.

Our whole default settings of our lives have changed. There's a change in our spiritual DNA. And so that's why we pray at Cornerstone during the evening.

[9 : 45] Some of us have been studying a book by the Apostle Paul. And the Apostle Paul wasn't always a believer or a follower in Jesus as the Messiah.

But one of the signs was that he is someone who prays. So we're saying here that prayer is natural. And if we want to cultivate the discipline of prayer, we've got to realize one fundamental thing.

And more than anything that I say today, this is important. When we realize that Jesus is our Father, we will pray. If you've got your Bibles open in the passage, you see that in verse 6, the word Father is used twice.

The word Father is used again in verse 8. It's used again in verse 9. It's used twice again in verse 14. It's used in verse 15.

And it's used in verse 18. In fact, in this passage, the word Father is used of God 10 times. So that's what prayer is.

[10 : 52] Prayer is an intimate, private conversation with your Father. And our relationship with God and who we see God as is fundamental in how we pray.

So if we want to get our discipline right, we've got to go right upstream and ask ourselves, what is our relationship to God? In this chapter, Jesus is sparring with another group of people.

The Pharisees, he mentions them quite often, do not be like the Pharisees. Do not be like the hypocrites. The Pharisees were religious people and they turned God into a tyrant.

When I was, I used to be a real minister back in the day and when I did a school assembly with someone and my co-presenter was one of the parents was drafted in and she said to the kids, I want you all to draw a picture of God and you know that song, There May Be Trouble Ahead.

That's kind of what went in my mind because how can you draw a picture of God? God. And you know, a lot of kids drew kind of monster characters.

[12 : 17] Is that your idea of God? Is God a tyrant? That's the devil's presentation of God. There's a part in the Bible in Genesis that talks about everything went wrong in the world.

We call that the fall. Satan said to Adam and Eve, Did God really say that you've not to take the fruit? And the subtext is God's heavy.

God's a tyrant. God's out to get you. Watch out for him. He's going to smash you. He's watching for you. He's like one of those folk just now who are twitching the curtains, watching their neighbours breaking the COVID rules.

That's not what God's like. We've got this idea here that God is our Father. And they've God is our Father. Our prayer life will reflect that.

The passage also speaks of reward, isn't it? You see that in verse 6, verse 16, and verse 18. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

[13 : 28] Well, the reward is actually God himself. We will be rewarded with God. outward, outward, formal prayer has no reward.

But if God is our Father, it is natural to speak to him. We speak to him freely. We speak to him as one that we can come to at any time with all our problems.

So, that also raises an issue about Christianity. Christianity. For those of you who are listening, some of you will kind of got this. Others of you will be really just wondering about Christianity.

What is Christianity? It's not a get-out-of-jail-free car. A lot of folk have that minimalist view of becoming a Christian.

You know, it's getting right with God. It's been right with God. It is that. Absolutely. But it's so much more. It's to have a relationship with God as a father.

[14 : 37] Discipline and devotion are twins. If you love something or someone, then discipline is so much easier.

It's said of work that someone who enjoys their work will never work again. The idea there is that work is so enjoyable that you just have this sense of, it's not like putting hard days and you just enjoy it so much.

So that's the first thing about prayer. It's natural if we've got a relationship with God right, if we view him not as a tyrant, but as a father whom we can come to and we can have that relationship with.

So discipline then is natural. The second thing I want us to notice in the passage is that discipline with God is private. Now that's true of both prayer and this passage and also fasting.

They're both things that are done private. Yet, of course, there is public prayer. Jesus is not saying that public prayer is wrong, but he's saying that the essence of prayer, the real work of prayer, is something that's private.

[15 : 53] So verse 6, when you pray, that shows the natural thing, when you pray, go into your room and close the door. It's the same with fasting.

Verse 17 and verse 18, when you fast, do it in private. When you fast, you put up your makeup, gender appropriately, of course, you put up your makeup and you don't make a big show of it.

You don't look as if you're going through something that's difficult. Don't go around with a glum face. In the Bible here, in the passage of Matthew 6, notice the two men.

In verse 5, it says, one man was in the synagogue and the other one was in the room. One had an audience of many, the other one had an audience of one.

And so it's private. You're in the room with your father. I like watching meaningless films.

[17 : 00] So last night I watched Ocean's 11, and our Ocean 11, my colleague Neil, he watches these Swedish philosophical films.

He's very philosophical. I'm empty-headed. So there's a bit in Ocean 11, when the hero Ocean is taken into this room and he's being beaten up.

I won't spoil it. But he's taken into a room because there's no cameras and nobody can see. He's in a casino. Nobody can see what's going on. That's the thing about going into a room with nobody there.

Nobody sees. It's just you and God. There's an audience of one. John Stott, he's a commentator on the Bible, says that the Greek word for room here is the same word that's used with a storeroom with treasure.

So you're in a room alone with God and you're there to really enjoy him. It's private. You can say anything to him.

[18 : 09] There's no judgment. There's no condemnation. There's you and God honestly talking. And that is private. That is a marvellous, marvellous place to be.

And the wonderful thing is that prayer, because it's private, nobody can stop you doing it. You can pray in many ways. You can have a classic prayer time.

You put aside a fixed time during the day to pray. That's a good thing. That is a good discipline. You can pray on your own in your bed. You can pray in a quiet walk.

You can pray in tears on your pillow. Sometimes prayers are articulate. Sometimes they're groans. But the essence of prayer is just a private time with God.

Seek privacy and close the door. And so prayer is natural. Prayer is private. But prayer also, if we get the discipline of prayer, it's also something that's done in faith.

[19 : 16] If you look at verse 7, it says this, when you pray, do not keep on babbling like the pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

Now, the pagans had many gods, and they used to kind of hedge their bets. They used to talk to all these gods, and they would go on and on and on and on.

With prayer, it's not quantity. With prayer, it's quality. Less is more. He hears us. We don't need to badger him.

We don't need to just keep on going on and on and on. Less is more. Our father knows what we need.

He knows us better than we know ourselves. And coming to a father who knows our needs is really quite a wonderful thing.

[20 : 22] Let me let you into a little secret here. Those of you who are children, parents love giving things to their children.

There is something within a parent that delights, that they feel free enough to ask, that they feel free enough to approach a parent and ask for something.

And that's the wonderful thing about prayer. The main beneficiary of prayer is us. It does us more good. Prayer is not there to feed the ego of God.

God has no ego. He does not need us. But yet he loves to hear us speak. And in the lockdown just now, it's wonderful isn't it, when you're able to talk to your children.

Some of us have not seen some of our families for a long time, apart from on Zoom or apart from on a screen. And that shows us that it's so good. Now of course there are mysteries in prayer.

[21 : 26] I don't have all the answers. We don't have all the answers. If God knows what we need, why do we pray in the first place? That's an element of mystery. But we do know that he loves to hear his children.

prayer is something that we find a natural thing to do. Prayer is something that we do. It's done in faith.

Prayer is also something that's structured. There's a structure there. Now, remember that prayer, although it's structured, it doesn't need to be fancy.

some of the best prayers in the Bible have been really short. Lord have mercy on me a sinner. I believe, help my unbelief.

Remember me when you come into paradise. Even so, come Lord Jesus. These are really short prayers. But there's a structure in prayer. And we've got an example there and it's one of the best examples of all, the Lord's prayer.

[22 : 34] And you see the structure there. The Lord's prayer is split into two. The first three petitions are focusing on God. The last three are focusing on us.

Prayer. Let me just conclude this. Our 21 minutes have gone since the 30 o'clock. Let me just conclude it and encourage all of us to pursue the discipline of prayer.

Not just from some sort of empty religious ritual, but that we would just begin to really enjoy time with God.

Cornerstone is a church where we, I'm not saying we're trying to create a culture, we're not trying to create a culture, but I suppose that one of the things that we want to do is we want to have a sense of joy when we come together, even virtually and certainly when we come together physically.

And that joy, if we look upstream, comes with our joy in God. And if we enjoy God, we will meet with Him and we will pursue that discipline of prayer.

[23 : 54] So, in this, the first day of the week, have a great week and please, let's enjoy God together and let's speak to Him on a regular basis.

Make an appointment with God every day and as we do that, it will become a habit, a good habit. May we know God and may we enjoy Him forever.

Bless you. Thank you.