

St John's
HIGHTON



Pray
Seeing Is Believing

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. (Colossians 4:2)

**3 Studies on the CONTEXT,
the CONTENT and
the CUSTOM of Christian Prayer**

St John's Anglican Church Highton
Term 4, 2014

Introduction

Prayer is an activity at the bedrock of Christian discipleship. In fact, perhaps the greatest Christian theologian of all time, John Calvin, said of prayer, "it is the chief exercise of faith". If you want to see faith in action, the very first place to look is... prayer! Prayer is the way in which we respond to the God who has addressed us with his promise of a gracious salvation in Christ Jesus.

As such, prayer is profoundly personal. In one sense, any speaking is – for it is out of the overflow of the heart that the mouth speaks (Matthew 12:34). But it is particularly the case in prayer, since our speech is directed to our God and Father.

And it is personal, because in the main the bulk of our praying is something we do on our own – "in the closet" (Matthew 6:6). It is not necessarily private, but it is perfectly appropriate that prayer should be a 'hidden' thing between the child of God and their heavenly Father.

As much as we might try to incorporate prayer into all out gatherings and even set aside special meetings exclusively for prayer, these studies assume that the lion's share of prayer happens privately. And these studies are not so much an attempt to bring prayer out of the closet, but to help you praying in there.

The burden of Jesus' instruction on keeping prayer private is to prevent the kind of perversion that can so easily come from doing anything publicly. Private prayer protects us from parading something which is not intended to be paraded.

But there is a flipside isn't there? Things that are private and personal, and hidden from public scrutiny can equally suffer from a lack of accountability. We can let things slip and do things so much more sloppily if no-one else is really going to notice!

Of course, all this ought to alert us to something about 'prayer' – that is, it's something very personal. And so, any discussion on this topic can feel exposing, and can tend to make us quite defensive.

We ought to anticipate that thinking this subject through will produce things which we are proud of, as well as things which we feel guilty about, things which we are deeply thankful for, as well as things which we are ongoing disappointments to us. Whether we emerge feeling thankful and encouraged or guilty and rebuked – or some measure of both! – these are hardly uncommon responses to the word of God. And our goal and duty is to be faithful to God's will.

And so in a spirit of love, and with a desire to be helpful in spurring one another on to life of love and good deeds, here are three studies on the subject of 'Christian Prayer':

- i) The CONTEXT of Christian Prayer
- ii) The CONTENT of Christian Prayer
- iii) The CUSTOM of Christian Prayer

Grace to you all,
Will

STUDY 1 – The CONTEXT of Christian Prayer

Introduction – do you tend to view prayer more as duty or delight? obligation or privilege? (honestly!?) why? can it be both? how might you determine this from the content & practice of your prayers? what do these reveal? what lessons have you learned on this front?

Read – Romans 8:12-17

1) Paraphrase – try to write these verses out using your own words.

2) What do they teach us about Christian prayer? (compare Hebrews 4:14-16)

a. In particular, what do they reveal about the One to Whom we pray:
(compare 1 Peter 5:6-7 & Ephesians 3:20-21 & Matthew 6:8 & 31-34)

b. And what do they reveal about us who do the praying & our situation? (compare Hebrews 4:14-16, Luke 18:9-14 & ff. 15-17)

3) How might your prayers get distorted if you lose sight of these truths? (compare Matthew 6:5-15)

4) If God knows in advance what we need, and we are encouraged at every point to pray “your will be done”. Why do we need to pray at all? What is the value of prayer?

a. Read James 5:13 –

b. Read Philippians 4:6-7 –

c. Read James 5:17 –

5) Take a moment to reflect on your own pattern of prayer – and particularly the things you pray for. How does it reflect upon God and upon ourselves if we:

Our Prayer Concerns	God	Us
Only pray for the really big things		

<p>Only pray for the small things</p>		
<p>Only pray for the impersonal affairs of the world</p>		
<p>Only pray for our own immediate concerns</p>		

Spiritual Check-up

1) Apart from prayer, how else might you express your dependence upon God?

2) If someone kept an inventory of all your prayers, what trends would you expect to see? Which trends would you be glad for? Which ones would you rather were different? How would they reflect on the Lord you are praying to? How would they reflect upon you & how you see your condition?

3) What has been your personal experience of times of prayerfulness & times of prayerlessness?

STUDY 2 – The CONTENT of Christian Prayer

Introduction – what situations test you in terms of knowing how to pray (ie, what to pray for you)? how do you resolve this? how long do you keep praying for something?

Read Matthew 6:9-13 – here is the pattern / form of prayer by which Jesus taught his disciples to pray.

1) What do we learn from how God is addressed?

2) What does it mean to pray “your will be done”? Does prayer ever feel to you like a battle of wills (yours vs. God’s)? How often (or NOT) do you find yourself praying as Jesus did – “yet not my will, but yours be done”?

a. How do you work out what God’s will is? And how do you pray when you’re really not so sure what it is? What if you suspect this might not actually be consistent with God’s will?

b. How do you pray when you’re not sure what you want / think best? How does this affect your prayers?

c. How significant for you is what you expect *will* happen? How do probabilities affect your prayers?

3) How would you divide this prayer? Can you see any discreet sections? What defines / differentiates them?

a. If the first half concerns God's eternal plan & purposes (vv.9-10), and the second half concerns our immediate and daily concerns (vv.11-13) how well reflected are these two kinds of concerns in your own prayers. If you have a bias one way or another how do you explain / account for this?

4) We invariably conclude our prayers these days with "in Jesus' name" or "for Jesus' sake"? Why? What does this mean? How might this sentiment stand to affect our prayers?

Spiritual Check-up

1) If you woke up tomorrow, and all you had was what you thanked God for yesterday – what would you have?

2) If you woke up tomorrow, and everything you asked God for yesterday was granted to you – what would you have?

3) If God only answered the prayers that you presented to him on more than 3 separate occasions – what percentage of your prayers do you think would be answered? And what would comprise the bulk of your most oft-repeated prayers?

STUDY 3 – The CUSTOM of Christian Prayer

Introduction – If the content of your prayers is revealing, so too is your practice in praying. Apart from your own personal resources, what do you have at your disposal to help you make your way in life (eg, a spouse, some money, parental advice, connections,..). What do you tend to rely on most? Can you rank them? What do you think others would see?

Read – Colossians 4:2-18

1) What does the term “devote” (v.2) conjure up in your mind? (This is a favourite term used in reference to prayer – compare Acts 1:14 & 2:42)

a. What are the usual hallmarks of devotion?

b. Where do you see these in evidence in your prayer-life? Where are they lacking?

2) What do you think it means to pray “being watchful and thankful” (v.2)? Why / how might these be appropriate adverbs for praying?

a. for 'watchful' – compare Matthew 26:38-41, Luke 12:37 & Acts 20:31, 1 Corinthians 16:13, 1 Thessalonians 5:6, 1 Peter 5:8)

b. for 'thankful' – compare Ephesians 1:16, Philippians 4:6, 1 Thessalonians 1:2, 1 Timothy 2:1)?

3) As you read on down to Epaphras (v.12ff) – how is he an example of this instruction in practice? What does the term “wrestling in prayer” conjure up in your mind? How does this compare with your own experience of prayer (& particularly for others)?

4) How routine is your normal life? How regular are your meal times, bedtime, waking / sleeping hours, working hours, etc? How does this compare with your prayer life?

a. Compared to shopping, meal preparation, the newspaper (on-line?), facebook, personal grooming, etc – how significant a feature of your normal everyday routine is prayer? If you were to allocate minutes to these various tasks, how would the comparison rate come out do you think?

5) How much do you think your praying is connected to your personal circumstances at the time? Is it easier to pray in hard times? Is it easier to pray when it's smooth-sailing? How do your

circumstances affect not just frequency, but the fervency and focus/content of your prayers?

6) How responsive / reactive is your prayer-life to going concerns? And how much is it driven by more general & timeless concerns for all people everywhere in every age? How do you account for this? Are you happy with your balance? How might you be able to address this?

7) How much do you use resources (eg, written prayers, rote prayers, etc)? How do you feel about this?

Spiritual Check-up

1) How happy are you with your custom of praying? How does it stack up with the kind of principles & priorities we have covered here?

2) Where would you like to improve it? Do you have any good ideas for how you might go about this? Are there resources you could see working for you (folders, apps, etc)?

3) How much of your custom / practice made its way into a habit? How often do you change your practice according to other factors in your schedule? What impact does this have on your prayerfulness?