

Why Don't We Pray?

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[0 : 00] Friends, yes, sit down and we'll pray. Father, we thank you for your word. We pray today that you would help us, encourage us, strengthen us for the service of your Son.

And Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, I want to begin today's sermon with two words of apology. First, my first apology is to a particular and select group of you here today.

My suspicion is it may actually be a reasonably large group here at Holy Trinity. And I'm talking to those of you who find prayer easy and who pray well. That is, if that is you today, then this sermon may seem a bit tedious and redundant to you.

It is a sermon addressed not to you, but a different group of people. You see, my experience is, but however, if you are a person who prays easily, I do urge you to listen because I think you may very well learn some things about it, a bit more about prayer.

My experience is that most people, though, are not in that first category. Most people find prayer difficult. I am one of them. I have to work hard at prayer.

[1 : 15] However, some people find prayer so difficult that they don't pray at all or they only pray occasionally. This sermon is a sermon for such people.

So if that's you, welcome. I hope you'll find this sermon helpful. So my second apology is this. As you know, most sermons here at Holy Trinity take a passage of scripture. We work through it.

In fact, we generally work consecutively through the Bible or through passages from a particular book of the Bible. Today's sermon is far more topical. I'm going to take, I'm largely going to restrict myself to one passage, a very short passage, and I'm not going to go into all the detail of it.

I'm just going to give you an overall picture of it. So there's my two apologies. Apparently, the rules of preaching are, and I do teach preaching, that you should not begin a sermon with an apology.

So I've gone overboard, really. But it's a man-made rule, so no harm can come from breaking it just this once. Actually, I have done it before, but nevertheless. Having made apologies, let's get underway.

[2 : 20] Now, in this last week, I've been reading lots and lots of opinions as to why people don't pray. There are just hordes of them. And so the reasons are so multiple that I found that I had to categorize them.

So here it is. Here is Andrew's catalogue, or even taxonomy, of why people don't pray. As I go through them, I want you to see which ones you might identify with.

And if you look at the outline there, I've even given you a little box. If you wanted to physically tick them off, you could. It might help you to either physically or mentally do that, so that you can go back and think about it a bit later on.

The first set of reasons as to why people don't pray has to do with life circumstances. Many people find that the contemporary world is such that life is just simply too overwhelming.

They are too busy to pray. Some would go even further. Some would say that they live in a world where there's just simply too much to do, and prayer never rises to the top of their to-do list, so they never get around to it.

[3 : 24] It is not a priority for them. Others would confess that they are just basically lazy or slack, or that they just simply can't be bothered putting in the effort to pray.

Now, I need to say that I have particular problems with some of the things that are here in this list that I've just given you. I wonder if you can be Christians and confess some of those things.

So anyway, let's go to the next group of reasons for not praying. This group has to do with knowledge or doubt problems. They say things like this.

They say that they don't pray because they don't know what God wants, or they believe that they don't have anything important to pray about, or the things that they have to pray about are not really a big deal after all, and so why bother praying about them, or that they're too significant or too large to be prayed about.

But others say that their life experience has taught them that they don't need to pray. After all, they say, you know, well, if I don't pray, I still get paid. My house doesn't burn down.

[4 : 27] My kids get jobs, and good things still happen to me. And even if I do pray, bad things still happen to me. I still have car accidents. My kids still get ill, and so on.

So these people say, well, you know, it makes absolutely no difference, so I don't bother praying. That's the second group of reasons why people don't pray. There are a third group, and these are emotional or personal or practical issues.

Let me give you some examples. Some people, I think, don't pray simply out of fear. They fear how God will answer. Seems strange, doesn't it?

But there are people like that. Others don't feel good enough to deserve an answer from God, so they can't even front up to God in prayer. Others no longer have love for God or his will or his purposes.

Their hearts are cold toward God, and therefore there's absolutely no incentive for them to talk to him. Others are naturally proud people who can't bring themselves to ask God for anything or ask anyone for anything.

[5 : 30] Others are so full of shame or embarrassment that they can't face God in prayer. Others have lost any feeling toward God.

Others are scared. They fear that their prayers won't get answered, and therefore their faith, which is already quite fragile, will just diminish even further. Praying is therefore for them a too great a risk to take.

Others are afraid of getting too close to God or too entangled with God. They want to keep a distance, and so they don't pray. Others simply find that in a world of good and interesting things, prayer is boring, and there's always something more interesting to do.

Others find it too hard. Others don't want anything to change, so they don't threaten change by praying. Others are simply not bothered with anything or anyone else, and therefore don't pray for things outside themselves.

That's the third group of people. Fourth group of people give these sorts of reasons, largely theological reasons for not praying. It may be that they've caved into the devil's influence, or maybe sin dominates their lives, or it may be that they think that they can make things work on their own.

[6 : 44] They don't need to talk to God and get him to do it. Or they think that God is too busy to be able to keep up with everyone's prayer requests. The next group of people don't pray because of a bad history in prayer.

And maybe you're like this. God hasn't answered prayers in the past, and so you conclude that he never answers prayers anyway. Others think God is distant or unlistening.

He's gone silent or he's absented himself for some reason. Others don't pray for much more practical reasons, or if you like, functional reasons. They don't pray because they don't know how to do it.

The disciples are in that category in Matthew's Gospel, aren't they? They look at Jesus praying and they say, we don't know how to do that, so teach us to pray. Or some others may not actually be able to concentrate.

I find concentration in prayer quite difficult myself. Or they're intimidated by the great prayers that they've heard, and they think, I can never do that, so I'm not even going to try. Or if I can put it this way, they are intimidated by the great prayers they've heard.

[7 : 46] And they think, I can't do that, so I'm not going to pray. Others have become faint-hearted because of failure, of lack of results, of tiredness, of lack of confidence, whatever. However, others find the whole business just too hard, and they say, it's too difficult, not going to do it.

And the last group of people are these. They have belief problems. This group are people who have, well, you might have on one side those who have very strong belief.

That is, they have belief in a sovereign God who knows everything and who's planned out everything ahead of time. This group can't see much point in praying. After all, if God is sovereign like that, it's not going to change anything for me to pray.

God knows what I need. He'll give me what I need. I just leave it to Him, and I don't therefore need to pray. Now, others in this category don't have that strong belief. They have weak belief.

They don't pray because they don't believe it's going to change anything. They don't have much faith in God. They stop believing in a God who answers prayer. Now, if you ask them, they'll say, oh yeah, of course I do believe in God.

[8 : 57] But deep down, they've actually stopped believing in Him and in His word. They don't believe God will hear. They don't believe God will answer. They don't believe it will make any difference.

Some still believe in God, as I said. However, they've come to believe that the things that matter can be accomplished by them, and they don't need God. They'll just get on with life, and they'll sort it out themselves.

Of course, they may never state this publicly, but deep in their hearts, that is what they believe. Now, if you dig hard enough, you'll find that in them. Friends, it's this last group of people that I think are most prevalent amongst contemporary Christians.

Christians. And you can see it in the fact that around the world, as I speak to other Christian leaders around the world, and here at Holy Trinity, Christians are no longer turning up to prayer meetings.

Now, some of them, they've got older and, you know, can't come out at night or whatever. But I think largely underneath it, it is that we don't believe that it's going to do anything to turn up and pray.

[10 : 00] We're not praying at home, so why pray it in public? It's that group of people I want to address today. It's this group of people that are the focus of the passage I'm going to look at, or not directly, but indirectly.

Now, I want to say that some of the other issues I have raised just in this introduction to this sermon will be addressed in the weeks to come. For example, next week, I'm going to talk about the specifics of how we pray, both in private and in public.

The week after, I'm going to give 10 top tips for improving your prayer life. Perhaps I'll even have a question and answer time sometime, or maybe an evening where you can come and ask questions to your heart's content.

Anyway, let's now turn to the main passage for today. So pick up your Bibles, please. Very important. It's a critical passage on this matter. Hebrews 11, verses 1 to 6, and if my memory serves me rightly, it's 12.12 in the Bibles in the pews.

Now, to understand this particular passage, you need to understand the context. The book of Hebrews is a book about people who are drifting away from Christian faith, from faith in Jesus.

[11 : 14] They're drifting away to a Jewish system which is much more visible and tangible. It had things you could see and touch, like sacrifices and temples and the like.

So the issue in the epistle to the Hebrews is faith. And so now, having reached chapter 11, the writer turns to define faith and give some concrete examples of it.

Let's see what he has to say. Look at verse 1. The writer says, Now, faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

That is one of the closest verses in the New Testament to a definition of faith. Let's see if we can just unravel it a bit. Two words, two key words, confidence and assurance.

Let's have a look first at confidence. The Greek word has been translated in various ways and by various translations. The old King James version translates it this way.

[12 : 14] Now, faith is the substance of things hoped for. In other words, what he's saying, if that is the correct version, I think it's probably the closest to what the Greek is meaning.

Faith is something that exists in the here and now that gives some firmness or some substance to the things that you are looking forward to in the future.

In other words, faith is something that gives firmness and reality to your hope. Even though those things are yet in the future still unseen, to the person of faith, they are as solid as anything.

Now, I see this regularly amongst people here at Holy Trinity, particularly when they're dying. Because when they're dying, they say to me, Andrew, it's okay.

It's okay. I am confident in Jesus and that when I die, I will be with him. Can you see what they have? They have a faith that is the substance of things hoped for.

[13 : 15] They are convinced. They are sure. It is as though it's actually there. So I think the King James has got it right. Faith is the substance of things hoped for.

That's the first tricky word. Second tricky word is assurance. And the Greek word is only here in the New Testament. Anyway, I think that the sense of it is proof or demonstration or evidence.

So I think the King James version is right again. Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. In other words, faith is something that demonstrates the reality of something that you cannot actually see.

In both cases, I think the things hoped for and the things not seen are the future that God has prepared for his people. We believe in them because we believe in what God has done in the past in Jesus.

God's past deeds in Jesus assure us of a future that we don't yet see, but we're sure is going to come about. That sort of faith in God's future is the sort of faith we see in the saints of the Old Testament, isn't it?

[14 : 27] And that's what the writer says. Look at verse two. He says, this is what the ancients were commended for. You see, when Joseph died, he said, take my bones.

When you go out of the land and you enter into the promised land and bury them there. Why? Because he knows that hope is in the future.

And so he looks forward and he's so confident. He says, my bones, here they are. Well, when I die, they'll be here. You take them and you put them there because I know that is sure. I know God is going to give you the promised land.

So put my bones there. See, can you see what's being said? That's what the ancients were commended for. That hope, that assurance of faith, that substance of faith.

Now, we haven't got a full definition of faith yet, but we're well on our way. Now, let's turn to our next verse. Verse three begins with the phrase that will mark the rest of the chapter. By faith.

[15 : 28] However, the rest of the chapter is all about the faith of the ancient ones. Here, it's about the faith of the writer and his readers.

He says, we, by faith, we understand that the universe was formed at God's command so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

That these readers, you see, knew from scripture that the universe was formed by God's word. They understood by faith that what was seen was not made out of things that can be seen.

That is faith. Faith does this. Faith puts confidence in God, his word, his promise. Friends, this is the very first truth about God in scripture.

That he created the world. Now, we can debate as to how he did it and when he did it and how long he took to do it. But scripture is patently clear that he did it.

[16 : 29] He made the world. He created it. Do you believe this? Because if you do, you believe in a creator. And a creator who can create a universe like the one we live in can do anything.

If we are Christians, we believe this. By faith, we understand that the universe was created at God's command so that what is seen was made out of that which was not visible.

This is an act of faith. Faith in God, the creator. Now, verses four and five. The writer begins his catalogue of saints. He starts off with Abel, then Enoch.

And I'm not going to spend much time explaining those two. I want to look at the final sentence of verse five. Look at it with me. The writer says of Enoch this. For before Enoch was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.

What was it in him that pleased God? It was his faith. Friends, faith pleases God. Faith in creation or in God's work of creation.

[17 : 35] Faith like Abel's faith. Faith like Enoch's faith. This sort of faith pleases God. Now look at verse six. This is a general and universal truth from God.

Listen carefully.

Read carefully. It is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who comes to God must believe.

They must believe certain things about him and of him. First, they must believe that he exists. Second, they must believe that he rewards those who seek him.

This certainly says that he generally rewards those who seek him. But it probably primarily means that eternal, that eternal reward that he has kept for us.

[18 : 38] I want you to stop and imagine and do some reflecting with me. Do you believe, friends, that God made the world? Do you believe that were he to withdraw his word, the universe would come apart?

Do you believe that God sent Jesus his son into the world? Do you believe that that son of God was crucified on a cross outside Jerusalem?

Do you believe that his death was a death for sin? Do you believe that he rose again from the dead, even though you've never seen him physically? Do you believe that he sits now at the right hand of God the Father, praying for you, even though you've never, ever heard him do it?

Do you believe that when you die, you will go to be with God because of Jesus? Do you believe that Jesus will come again to judge the earth, even though it has been 2,000 years since he died?

Friends, if you do not believe these things, then perhaps you're not Christian. For Christians believe these things. And if you believe them, there is, let me tell you, no excuse for not praying.

[19 : 57] Because prayer is what believers in these things do. Because they believe God exists, and that he's the rewarder of those who seek him, they seek him.

How do they seek him? In prayer. Friends, you've got to make up your mind. Are you a believer or not? If you are, then believers belong on their knees.

Friends, please bear with me as I push this home to each one of us. And let me tell you to myself, because I'm preaching this sermon to myself. We have deeply absorbed the culture of our age.

We have soaked up the spirit of our age. We have drunk long and hard at the spirit of the enlightenment. And we have come to believe in the tangible, the things we can see and touch.

Little else is real for us. And so deep in our hearts, there is a functional deism. Deism. Deism believed in a God who created everything, but who was not personal.

[21 : 08] He was sort of like some cosmic watchmaker who created the clock, which is the universe. Then he went off for something that looks like an extended coffee break, while the universe ran its course.

Now, most of us don't actually believe in deism. But because of the pressure of a post-enlightenment world, we have been brought up on its presuppositions like mother's milk.

It has formed our thoughts of the world. It has formed our thoughts of God. We live in a world where humanity thinks it can do anything.

We live in a world where humans are dabbling with things that virtually no one ever thought anyone could do but God. Our scientists can now turn cells into organs.

They can clone animals. They can sequence DNA. And in such a world, we begin to wonder deep inside whether God is actually a necessity any longer. We become and we live in things that we ourselves have built.

[22 : 25] We drive things that humans have built. Every part of our existence is surrounded by things that humans have made. And we have become confident in our own ability.

We even see it in our churches. Churches that think that if we've got the resources, programs, buildings, then we'll get people in. And then the church will be built. But our functional deism is most clearly displayed in our prayer lives.

Friends, can I ask you? Have you ceased praying? Have you ceased praying? Well, if you've ceased praying, then I suspect you are on the edge of no longer believing in the God of Scripture.

Hopefully you haven't stepped off the edge yet. Spurgeon has a wonderful quote. He says, there is a similarity between a prayerless Christian and a corpse.

Sorry, there's a similarity between a prayerless Christian. It's not going to work for me. Between a prayerless Christian.

[23 : 47] No, I better leave it aside. Otherwise, I'm going to get into trouble. It'll come back to me later. If you have ceased praying, then you're on the edge of no longer believing in the God of Scripture.

Friends, if you cease praying, you are teetering on the edge. Look again at verse 6. And without faith, it is impossible to please God.

Because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists. And He rewards those who earnestly seek Him. Friends, do you believe it? Then get on your knees.

Friends, prayer is the heartbeat of faith. Prayer is faith expressed. It is prayer that keeps faith alive.

Prayer is one of the most important things that we can do as individuals and as a congregation. Please, please, please listen to God in His Word here. Please believe it.

[24 : 54] Please go to Him in prayer for all things. I'm not promising you it will be easy. Paul talks in his epistles about how hard it is to pray. How people labour in it.

It is hard work. Please go to God though. In prayer for all things. Particularly pray for your leaders in this contemporary world that they might be people of faith and of prayer.

For a year now. Because I realise how I am on the edge of this myself. For a year now I have been praying this daily prayer. Will you pray it with me?

It goes like this. Dear God and Father, Please cause me to have a growing confidence in and belief that you are.

And that you are the rewarder of those who seek you. Let me read it to you again. Dear God and Father, Please cause me to have a growing confidence in and a belief that you are.

[25 : 57] And that you are the rewarder of those who seek you. I'm going to pray that for us all. Let's pray. Dear God and Father, Please cause us, As your people here at Holy Trinity, To have a growing confidence in And belief that You are.

And that you are a rewarder of those who seek you. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Spurgeon.

These two are alike. A pulseless person and a prayerless Christian. They don't exist.