

How to Pray - On Your Own and In Public

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[0 : 01] While you remain standing friends we'll pray. Father God we pray that you would teach us from your word today and encourage us and help us to live better before you. We pray this for the glory of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

Well imagine it's another ordinary day and Abraham enjoyed Marmara with its grand old oaks and now in the heat of the day he was sitting in the shade of the tent and just watching.

And then he saw them through the sort of shimmering over the heat of the desert he saw three men approach. He knew they represented the Lord and so he ran and he bowed and he offered them drink water to wash their feet, a rest and a meal.

And they agreed. And so Sarah made some cakes, animals were slaughtered, the men ate and they drank and Abraham looked on and then they spoke again.

Or should I say the Lord spoke because it was a bit hard to, it's as though these men represented the Lord in some way. And the Lord repeated the promises that he'd given many years earlier.

[1 : 14] Repeated the promises of children. And this time the Lord set a date for it, it would be a year away. And Sarah hearing all of this, she'd come to grow quite sceptical, she laughed.

She was confronted by the men. She denied it. And she was gently scolded. And then the men turned to leave in the direction of Sodom. And Abraham remained with the Lord.

And he told him of his plans for Sodom. And Abraham was aghast at what was going to happen. And he summoned up his courage and he confronted the Lord.

And surely he said, you won't sweep away the righteous with the wicked when you deal with Sodom. And so Abraham began to bargain with God.

Would the Lord spare the city if 50 righteous ones could be found? What about 45? 45? 40?

[2 : 17] 30? 20? Maybe even 10? At each step he was very apologetic, as one ought to be before God. But at each step he boldly pressed closer and closer.

And then the Lord went the whole way with him to 10. He had prevailed. Mercy would triumph. Friends, later on in this series on prayer, we're going to look at that passage in a little more detail.

But it was such a good way into what I want to say today. I wanted to refresh your minds as to what it looks like to see someone praying. Because actually, this is exactly what Abraham does here is exactly what prayer is all about.

Prayer is a person talking to God. That is prayer. It's a human talking to the divine. It's about approaching God. It illustrates that at the other end of approach, when you approach God, is God himself.

And God is a God who yearns for the approach and who longs for the prayers of his righteous ones. And Psalm 91 verse 15 says, The Lord is near to all who call upon him.

[3 : 34] That is, this is what God loves to do. He loves to hear the prayers of his righteous ones. He longs for their speech, their prayer, their cry, their call to him. He even longs for their objections, their arguments.

If prayer is the heart of faith, then a God who loves hearing is the fire which fuels our prayers. Now, before I press on today, I want to tell you that I have so much to say and so little time and space to do it in.

And I think I'm going to do it within time. But I want to warn you ahead, there's lots to do. The topic is how to pray. And I want to cover how to pray in private and how to pray in public. So, and you've got an outline there.

You can see where I'm going and you may want to take some notes as we go along. The way we're going to do it is this. First half of the sermon, I'm going to talk about private prayer, largely from the Old Testament. And then I'm going to focus on public prayer, largely as we see it in one passage in the New Testament.

And my hope is that this very brief exploration will give you a framework for your prayers, both in private and in public. By the way, I should say that by public prayers, I mean prayers that are said in the context of Christians meeting together.

[4 : 47] That could be a small group or a large group. Okay, let's talk about praying in private. First thing to say about prayer is to talk about prayer and listening.

You see, it has become very fashionable to think of prayer as listening. And this is wrong. Fundamentally, prayer is not about listening, but about speaking.

It is not about us listening, but us speaking and God listening. It is not... We listen to God when we listen to his word, read his word. That's when we are hearing from God.

He listens to us when we speak to him in prayer. Prayer is about speaking to God. And God loves listening.

He never tires of listening. It is the expression of a living, loving relationship with God that this interaction goes on between us and him. So what sorts of things then constitute prayer?

[5 : 48] What sorts of things should we be praying for in our private prayers to God? And I can only give you a sort of snapshot of some of the main ones. The chief answer, though, is everything.

Bring everything to God in prayer. However, let me just give you some broad categories that might get you started. The first element of good prayer is praise. So the psalmist says, and you see it both in the Old and New Testament, the psalmist says, and here's a reference for you, Psalm 34, verse 1.

He says this, I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise shall continually be in my mouth. Or Psalm 51, verse 15.

O Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall declare your praise. Now, if you came to the eight o'clock service where we say morning prayer every now and then, this is a very common response.

The minister will say, open our lips, O Lord, and the congregation will respond with, and we shall declare your praise. You see, it's taken straight out of Psalm 51. And the prayers of God's people in private and public will always be filled with the praise of God.

[6 : 57] The prayers of God's Christian people are the same. They are filled with the praise of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Listen to how Peter starts off his first epistle.

He says this, 1 Peter, chapter 1, verses 3 and 4. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

So that's the first category. Second category is not that dissimilar, but it's the category of thanksgiving. It's different from praising God in that when you praise God, you praise God for who he is and what he's done.

But here you might, in thanksgiving, you might thank God for specific things that he has done or for gifts that he has given. It's often linked to praise, often not very far away from praise.

Here's Psalm 7, verse 17. I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness. Can you hear it? I will thank God. What for? Because of who he is, because of his righteousness.

[8 : 09] Then linked to praise. I will sing the praises of the name of the Lord Most High. Or you can, you have similar things in the New Testament. Listen to Paul as he thanks God for all that he is and all he's done in Christ.

Romans 7, verses 24 and 25. Paul starts off with a lament about his own situation. Oh, wretched man that I am. Who can rescue me from this body that is subject to death?

Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ. There's the action of God that is the element of thanks. Now, the third category of prayer is one very common in the Psalter.

Here, what a person does is they bring their grief at their circumstance to God. And that is that what they do is they pour out their innermost feelings to God.

And we saw an example of this in our first Bible reading in Psalm 6. Let me read it to you again. See, here's a man who's in very intense situation where things are not right.

[9 : 22] He says, my soul is in deep anguish. How long, O Lord? How long? Now, I think we Christians have largely forgotten lament. But lament is the cry of all of God's people who know that the world is not yet what God wants it to be.

And not yet what we've been led to expect from him it should be like. It's the cry, in other words, of people who want God's will to be done in his world. And so they say, how long, O Lord?

Please, God, set things right. Please, God, set me right. Please, God, fix all that is wrong. So we have praise and thanksgiving and lament.

Isaiah 6 shows us another aspect of prayer which is seen in both Testaments. And it comes out of reverence for God's holiness. And it is confession. Confession is what you do and say when you know that God is holy and you are sinful.

And you come to him and you acknowledge it. It's the verbalisation of your knowledge about your own sinfulness. Isaiah says, woe to me.

[10 : 31] This is Isaiah 6. Woe to me. I am ruined. I am a man of unclean lips. I live among a people of unclean lips.

And my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty. The Apostle Peter does it. When he's confronted by Jesus. And he blurts out to him, he says, depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord.

See, confession is part and parcel of our prayerful response to God. When we are confronted by him, we come back to him when we see his holiness and our sinfulness. And we tell him that we need to confess.

So we've done praise, thanksgiving, lament and confession. Confession is often accompanied by something else. Another broad category which is called petition. A petition can be very brief and very simple.

There's one in Numbers chapter 12 verse 13 where Moses, his wife Miriam, has been punished by God with leprosy. And Moses comes back to God and he says this very brief prayer.

[11 : 41] But it captures everything, doesn't it? Please God heal her. Four words, but it says it all, doesn't it? Please God heal her. However, things are not always that short in the prayers of God's saints.

Daniel 9 is a very good example. It's a prayer of confession, but also of petition. Daniel prays. Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant.

For your sake, Lord, look with favour upon your desolate sanctuary. Give ear, O God, and hear. Open your eyes and see the desolation of this city that bears your name.

We don't make this request of you because we're righteous. No, no, because of your great mercy. Lord, listen. Lord, forgive. Lord, hear and act.

For your sake, O my God, do not delay because your city and your people bear your name. You can see it there, can't you? He's bringing after confessing sin. He brings all that he needs to say to God and asks.

[12 : 49] So there are some of the main categories of personal prayer in the Old Testament. Most are repeated in the New. Now, just in passing, I want you to notice something. I've got to do this because, you know, I had this experience when I first went to college.

I came from a Methodist background and I went to an Anglican college and everything I'd been telling my minister ought to be done in church was done in the prayer book. That is, did you notice how many of those categories of prayer are just normal path for the course in an Anglican service?

A confession and petition and thanksgiving and so on. Cranman knew, you see. Thomas Cranman knew his Bible and he knew what should be prayed for and so incorporated it in a book that he called his prayer book.

Because that's what it was about. It's essentially praying in response to God and God's word. Now, basically what I'm going to do now is just give you some encouragements that arise out of all of this throughout scripture.

I want to talk about how you pray. Now, one unusual one comes from the writer of Ecclesiastes. You see, he's talking about vows, but he could be talking about prayer.

[14 : 01] And the writer of Ecclesiastes says this to his readers and his hearers. Don't be quick with your mouth. Don't be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God.

God is in heaven and you are on earth. So let your words be few. I think he's talking about reverence, isn't he? He's saying when you come before God, don't just be spouting things out without thinking.

Think. Realize that the God you are speaking to is the God of all the earth. He is God. And you are a human being prone to sin. Recognize this and recognize that he alone knows what is good.

Although you are. And what about us as Christians? Although we are friends because of Jesus with God, we do still need to approach God with some caution. Having said that, let me give you my other encouragements about how you should pray.

The first one, having said what I've just said, is to be frank with God. Too many Christians, I think, worry too much about words and covering up their inner feelings.

[15 : 07] No, you can be frank with God. You see, God knows your heart anyway, doesn't he? So you're not going to hide it from him. So why not just be frank? Why not tell him what's on your heart?

Why not be frank? The psalmist is like this. He tells it how it is. Listen to Psalm 39, verses 12 and 13. Hear my prayer, Lord.

Listen to my cry for help. Don't be deaf to my weeping. I dwell with you as a foreigner, a stranger, as all my ancestors were. Look away from me that I might enjoy life again before I depart and am no more.

That's a very tough prayer, isn't it? You're saying, no, I'm a bit overwhelmed by you. You've left me. Where are you? Or listen to this coming from Psalm 89.

This is a critical time in Israel's history. The psalmist begins by recounting God's great promises to David. And then he reaches this crescendo. Now listen very carefully.

[16:06] He cries out in brutal frankness to God. But you have rejected. You have spurned. You have been angry with your Christ.

You have renounced the covenant with your servant. You have defiled his crown in the dust. You have broken through his walls and reduced his strongholds to ruins.

And all who passed by plundered him. He's become the scorn of his neighbors. Can you hear his frankness with God? He's saying, God, you haven't lived up to expectations here.

So be reverent and respectful. Be frank as well. But be expectant. You see, people are like... People in the Old Testament are like this.

They come to God expectantly. They expect that he'll be at the other end hearing. And they expect that he will listen. And they expect that he will answer. And how much more should we Christians do this?

[17:06] Who know that God has not held his son back from death for us. We know God is good. We know he's a good father who loves to give good things to his children.

So when we come to God, let's expect answers. And we should persist in prayer and not give up in it, knowing that God hears and loves to give good things.

I wonder if I could just close this little section on private prayer with some other advice. I need to tell you, it's not in the Bible. It's not from the Bible. It's bits I've collected throughout my time.

Advice people have given me. Advice I've given other people. It might help you. My advice is this. Remember that prayer is affected by both your mood and your character.

Prayer is affected by both your mood and your character. If you are a distracted or depressed person, prayer will be very different than it is for other people.

[18:06] If you are introverted or extroverted, prayer may be very well different for you. If you are an ordered person, you may very well find that your prayers are ordered as well.

And you might get a bit uptight with those whose aren't. But if you're a shambolic person, you might find that your prayers are a little shambolic as well. If you pray better walking, then walk lots and pray lots.

If you see me walking around the block around our house, it's because I find walking and praying much easier when I'm walking. So if you see me just walking around those few blocks there, that's what I'm doing.

I'm praying because I find it easier to do prayer that way. So if kneeling helps you, kneel. If you find lists helpful, write lists to help you pray.

If you cannot concentrate, write out your prayers and say them out loud. You might want to find a room where you can do that, but you're not going to distract other people. But, you know, if you can't concentrate, do that.

[19:11] If you're a forgetful person, then how do you deal with your forgetfulness in the rest of life? Why not apply that to your prayer life as well? If you're an unimaginative person, then pray unimaginative prayers and don't worry about it.

If you're a literary person, write out your prayers, say them out loud and enjoy it. If you don't know what to say, get a book of prayers or get online.

There are very good, solid prayers online. Particularly look for Puritan prayers. There are some great ones online. But use the prayer book. I've done that at times. I've snatched bits out of the prayer book and put them in my daily prayers.

Because there's so many good prayers within our prayer book. I use some of the great prayers that are there. In other words, can you hear what I'm saying? This is my very practical advice about praying.

Find ways to pray that match who God made you. Find ways to pray. Don't mirror other people necessarily. Find ways to pray that match who God made you.

[20 : 13] Don't feel you have to be like anyone or everyone else. Pray in ways that mean that you pray. Whatever helps you to pray, do it.

And get on with it. Alright, so that's praying private prayers. Let's now talk about public prayers. I think in general we're pretty good here at Holy Trinity. However, there are always some new things to learn.

And I want to start by reflecting upon our God. To do so, I want to reflect on what is probably the most meaningful and most central and revealing act that God has done in Christ.

And I want to take John 3.16 as a place to start. Most of us here will know John 3.16. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Now, what does that tell you about God? Well, it tells you that at the core of his being, he is love and generosity, doesn't it? He loves us so much that his love will drive him toward generosity.

[21 : 18] And his generosity is costly generosity. It costs the death of his precious son. And the goal of this love and generosity is that humanity does not get what it deserves, but it gets eternal life instead.

So there's the nature of our God. Overwhelming in love. Overwhelming in costly generosity. All so that we might have life through his son. Now, that in mind, I want you in your Bibles to turn to 1 Timothy chapter 2.

Because I've got some questions I want to ask you about 1 Timothy. You've got to do a little bit of work yourself. 1 Timothy 2 is addressed to God's people meeting together.

And it gives them various commands. And we're only going to look at the first half, to which some of you may breathe a sigh of relief. Anyway, I want to concentrate on what it says in those first half.

I want you, as you read the passage, to ask yourself, what is God's desire? This is the easiest question of the lot, I think. What is God's desire? Scan through it.

[22 : 25] What does God want in his world? Look at verse 3. Verse 3 tells us what we learnt from John 3.16. That is, it spells it out. God is a saviour.

And as saviour, he wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. That is, God wants all to be saved, come to a knowledge of the truth. That's his desire, the salvation of all people.

So that's the answer to the first question. Second question is this. What does God's desire cause him to do? Again, take a quick scan through the passage.

Verses 5 and 6 in particular tell us about this. It causes him to send a mediator into the world. That mediator's role is to bring God and humankind together.

And his means for doing this is to make his son a ransom for many. In other words, God's great love and generosity drives him to send his son into the world to die for the world so that people might be brought back from sin.

[23 : 30] So God's desire is salvation and the knowledge of truth. And God's means is the ransom-giving death of his son. That leads us to the third question.

What should our goal as God's people be? What should our goal as God's people be? Well, you've got to scan the whole seven verses to see if you can find an answer.

But I'll give you a clue. There are two. One is in verse 2. One is in verses 6 and 7. So what should our goal as God's people be? Look again. Verse 2 talks about God's people living peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

That is, God wants us to be able to live this is what God wants of us in his world he wants us to be able to live in his world in the way he intended.

That is, at peace with him and with other humans. In godliness and holiness. That is, he wants us to live with him and rightly with him and rightly with each other which is what he set up the world for.

[24 : 34] Right relationship with God right relationship with each other. So that's the first goal of God's people our actions, our godly living. But there's more.

Look at verses 6 and 7. If God's actions are to reconcile humans to himself and if he does it by sending his son as a ransom for all then all people will need to know that won't they?

If it's to be appropriated. That's what verse 6 says. God's deed in Jesus has now been witness to at a proper time moreover God has appointed heralds and apostles so that it might be made known.

So a second goal of God's people therefore would be have to do with proclamation and speaking. Now here the focus is on Paul the apostle who's God's herald to the Gentiles.

However, elsewhere in the New Testament the task is given to all the people of God. They are to witness to what God has done. So there's the summary of the answer to our third question.

[25 : 36] God's people, what is their goal? It is that they act, that is they live peaceful and godly lives. They speak, that is they witness to what God has done in Jesus. So that brings us to the final question.

How do we reflect that in our prayers? Well, look at verse 1. I urge you then first of all this is his first bit of advice to a congregation about its meeting together.

I urge you first of all that petitions, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for all people then he narrows it down a bit for kings and all in authority that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

I wonder if you can see what Paul is saying. He says, yes, pray for all people. Pray particularly for good rule for those who rule.

Pray for a context of peace. Why? So that we can live godly and holy lives. It is far easier to live before God where there is good government.

[26 : 42] Some of you will have seen an email on our prayer circle that's come round from Peter and Elspeth Young about their time away and how Christians are being persecuted and where governments are not looking after them.

It's much easier where you've got good government, isn't it? Because where good government can restrain evildoers you can get on with living the Christian life in peace.

See, pray for the context of peace. Why? Peace. Why? So we can live godly and holy lives. Why? Because God wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

And that can be accomplished best when there's peace and good rule. So let's see if I can summarise where we've been. First, when God's people pray, they should pray for all people, especially for salvation.

After all, that's what God wants most of all people to be saved. Second, when God's people pray, they should pray for authorities and the good order of society because this is a good context for godly living and proclamation of the gospel.

[27 : 53] Now, both of these things will work towards people coming to know God and experiencing his costly generosity. Now, I've got a diagram that might help us here and I'll put it in the outline and you can fill in the gaps. So, there it is.

Let's see if we can put this together. Starting at the bottom, here is God's desire for all to be saved. Second up, so what has he done?

What is his action in Christ? Jesus gives himself as a ransom. Third, so what then becomes the goals of God's people? It is to act in a godly manner and to speak the gospel, to live godly and peaceful lives and to be heralds.

And then fourth, how is that then reflected in the prayers of God's people? Well, they pray for all, especially for the salvation of all. And they pray for authorities, that is, for peace and good order.

Now, let's see if I can put all of this together. Here's my suggestions. We'll have the next slide. My suggestions as to how this might work out in public prayer. Whenever we meet together and pray at Holy Trinity, here is my view about what we should be doing.

[29 : 04] Primarily, there'll be lots of other things we do. We should pray for all people and for all needs. It's entirely right to be doing that. Two, however, we should especially pray the prayers that arise out of God's character and reflect God's desires.

Especially pray for the prayers that arise out of God's character and reflect God's desires. In other words, what should we particularly pray for in our prayer times together?

Gospel proclamation here and everywhere. That's why we pray for our missionaries, by the way. Because that's gospel proclamation. But we should be praying for it for here as well.

Gospel proclamation here and everywhere and gospel living. That we have a context in which we can do it and so on, but more that we actually get on with doing it. And then thirdly, pray for the things that will make those first two things possible.

What will make gospel proclamation and godly living possible? Good governance, good order in society, peace, and so on.

[30 : 10] So, there's my summary of where the focus of our prayers according to 1 Timothy should be when we meet in public. Now, I wonder if I can make a final comment about something that I've noticed in some of our prayers as a congregation, particularly amongst the younger members of our congregation, so it's not mostly you here, but it does happen in our evening congregations.

Occasionally here, but not so much. Sometimes, you see, sometimes when we pray publicly, we get the persons of the Trinity all mixed up. Have you noticed this?

There's very bad Trinitarian theology and since I'm emphasising Trinity today, I thought I'd talk about it a bit. Sometimes I hear people praying to the Father and thanking Him for dying for us.

He ain't done it. He sent His Son to do that. Okay? Or I hear people praying to Jesus, the Son, and thanking Him for sending the Son.

That doesn't work. God the Father sent the Son. God the Son didn't send Himself. Sometimes, I'm not sure who people mean when they talk about Lord.

[31 : 16] When they pray to the Lord, I think, are you talking about the Father or the Son? So, you probably learnt, as I did when I first became a Christian, a general rule of thumb.

And there are special occasions when you might change this. However, in general, pray to God the Father, through God the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the name of Jesus Christ.

Does that make sense? Okay, so, pray to God the Father, through God the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the name of Jesus Christ.

And that's what, generally, you will see happening in the New Testament. There are some times it's broken, there are occasional prayers to Jesus, but the general rule of thumb is, as I've indicated to you there.

One more thing that I just want to say before we finish up, both in private and public prayer, the issue is not eloquence. The issue is not eloquence. When praying, be yourself.

[32 : 29] Pray how you speak. Pray how you talk. Pray as it reflects who you are. When praying, be yourself. The psalmist is, Job is, David is, the apostles are, so you can join them.

Pray as you are. Don't worry about whether your words don't quite meet up to everyone else's. That's all right. God doesn't care. He's not impressed by eloquence.

He's impressed by the things that arise out of people's heart. And he wants that to be said frankly and openly and honestly. So just pray who you are and don't worry about it. Because I think we do.

We think about these things and we think, oh, I can't ever do that. No, you can. You can pray. Just be yourself and say the things you need to say to God and he'll understand.

Sometimes you don't have words to say. That's okay because we're told in Romans 8 that God's spirit is given to help us even in those situations. Now let's pray together now.

[33 : 33] A gracious God, thank you so much that you are the Father who longs to give good gifts to his children and who yearns to hear their prayers.

Thank you that you are the God who is speedy to respond. Father, we pray that you'd help us to pray because some of us struggle with it.

Please help us. Please be at work in us. Please strengthen us for this task by your spirit. And Father, we pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.