

# Prayer and Fasting

**Matthew 6: 5 – 18**

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This week's theme is prayer and fasting and in this text Jesus talks about both.

On the subject of prayer he gives us the Lord's prayer. It is a somewhat familiar prayer. – but that is reason to look at it rather than not to. Familiar can become overlooked. And don't write it off and say we did it at Sunday school – a sort of starter prayer – you can't actually exceed this prayer. This is God telling us how to talk to God. So let's look at the prayer given to us – again.

Our father it starts -

- shocking lack of formality and a great deal of intimacy in this. Conjures up the prodigal son type relationship [no matter how much you have messed up is just waiting opened arms to embrace you should you turn back to him] And then continues 'Who art in heaven'...one swings from sitting on his knee like a child to the image of the great heavens the cherubim and seraphim and throngs of angels!

Which is it? Both of course. God is both at one and the same time.

We battle with that because are we not usually scared of people we love and we are not usually in awe of those that love us totally. [perhaps we should be!] there is an apparent contradiction. We tend to see God as either the loving father or God almighty. We need to hold the 2 together. I think it's one of the most difficult things and important things to do.

It's important because if we don't we only know half of God. Like a child that doesn't know how respected and influential their aged parent was until they hear it at the funeral or the lowly employee that attends a function at the CEO's house and sees photos of him in shorts on a beach surrounded by kids. We need to see the other side of people to understand them and it's the same with God. We can never really understand God of course but we need to try to encompass both of these aspects of him when we think of God.

And as I said it's difficult and confusing but that must not put us off. As Judy mentioned last week we can't put God in a box. We can't expect to understand him and contain him within human logic. He is way beyond – if he were not we would not be God. We sometimes feel that we need to understand God to accept and depend on him. Yet most of us neither understand our cars or our cell phones but are happy to depend on them both.

So Jesus starts this prayer by reminding us to whom we are praying and yet inviting us to call him father – because he is both to us. Our Father who is God Almighty.

He continues -  
Hallowed be thy name....

The word `thy' is important here. We have 3 sentences in a row with `thy' in it and only then the prayers about our needs start [the `our' and `us' sentences. Jesus tells us how important it is to put God first.

As with any conversation – don't rush in with all your own stuff dumping it all on someone. But this isn't only about manners. It's about reality. If we start by focussing on him it helps put our own issues in perspective. There are much bigger things at stake here than our little lives. We need to put things in the right order. We are immensely important to God – but there is a whole world out there that needs attending to.

So we start with Hallowed be thy name -  
Hallow. Known, recognised, holy - Set apart. Different. Special. Holy Table - holy communion, holy day.

And what is a name? A name is a person's identity. Not a common noun – sitting on a chair like any other but the person next to you is an individual. They are unique. Their name is their identity. That we know God's name is a privilege - Jesus is saying don't trash it. Don't throw it around when you are short on vocab. We've talked about this many times before but it bears re-saying. If you think about the sentences in which people use God's name casually and then take the God or Christ out what would you replace it with? an expletive. Is that the way to use anyone's name? Let alone the creator of the universe. Using his name to express irritation when someone cuts you up or the power goes down in the middle of an unsaved document is not hallowing his name.

That in a way is the easy part – that's a bad habit.

The harder part is hallowing God's name with how we live.

When we as Christians live lives filled with fear and anxiety we are living as if we don't trust God. As if we don't think he is in control. As if we have no hope in him. And that is not hallowing his name. Life can be hard – very hard at times - and things often don't make sense and it is fine to be angry with God and frustrated and confused – but that is different from the headless chicken impersonation that we can fall into when we act as if there is no God.

Hard as it is in times of desperation we need to know God's love and power not act as if he has neither. As hard as it is - like Job – we need to trust that God is in control. Ironically when Christians are in deep crisis we often do hang onto God and amaze all around us – but often when we are talking about the crime rate, Zim, when we believe that and talk like that, act like that we betray little peace and trust.

Thy Kingdom come thy will be done..

Well we've been praying this for 2000 years – where is it? Unfortunately not a magic wand request. Not a case of begging God to make it all wonderful. God's kingdom starts with a relationship. Between him and us. And between us and each other. Personal and collective. When God rules in our hearts and lives we will change. And when we change the world changes. We have the power to bring in the kingdom and we have the responsibility. Remember at the start of the prayer Jesus says....don't use lots of words – God knows what you want before you ask – which rather begs the question well why can't he save us all a lot of time not to mention our knees and just deliver the goods. Cut out the middleman [and woman] so to speak. No.

God knows what we want because he made us and he knows before we do what we need – but he made us co-creators. We have an active role to play in our lives and the direction of this world in which we live. By praying for things we make things happen – he has given us this power. It is good – good start. Not perfect – not complete – here Adam and Eve - you finish the job. As we have seen we can and do effect the environment. We also know that our behaviour affects the people around us. Negative talk breeds negative talk – corruption breeds corruption – gossip breeds gossip. How we behave and how we pray effects the kingdom. By not praying and not caring we dis-empower ourselves and abdicate responsibility. It's a dangerous thing to not do. Prayer is our part and once we bring things to God he'll act [not sometimes as we'd like because God reserves the right to do what he knows to be best - but that's another sermon]. Remember in this morning's text Jesus says whenever you pray – the assumption being that we do. In this line Jesus is telling us to ask for help to bring in the kingdom. Help us to make you king in our lives God and therefore king in the world.

Give us this day our daily bread.

3 things here.

1/ it reminds us that we depend on God for everything. Not only salvation and the birth of our children - but bread. I am hoping most of us sitting here do not struggle to put bread on the table. We may feel more grateful to the Spar or Pick and Pay at some meals. There is a danger there that we forget how dependent we are. We feel powerful because we don't have to worry about basic foods – but that power comes from God. [not a reward – a gift]. The fact that we have the brains, the able bodies, the breaks in life or whatever is due to God and so we give thanks for that good fortune.

2/ God cares for our physical needs and therefore so should we. Sometimes the physical side of life is seen to be a lower part of us – in response to the excess of some – but it can be an over response. Whenever we want to know about God we look to Jesus. He did not tell the 5000 to drift off and find a 7/11 on the way home. And he healed people. God cares about our physical lives – and keeping perspective on it – so should we. We are not

talking about opulent excess – but health and rest and balance. Good food and sleep and time out. We are whole beings and we need to attend to the whole to feel whole.

3/ OUR daily bread. We may have enough – millions don't. Jesus is telling us to pray for our communities and country and world. We are in this together and thing about living her is that we have constant reminders of the way the other half live – or in many cases - dies.

Forgive us as we forgive others

Now we as Christians kind of understand that we need to ask for forgiveness. Christ died for our sins – we are offered total forgiveness all we need do is acknowledge this and receive the gift. its simple and wonderful.

However – there's that other bit the forgiving others bit that is not so simple or wonderful.

Notice what Jesus says just after the prayer – v 14 he says For if you forgive when they sin you will be forgiven – but if not then God will not forgive you. Backed up by ch 18 v 23 – 32. Man owes master money.....[to be sold, debt cancelled, fellow servant, prison..]

This is not a kind of arbitrary 'keep off the grass' rule. Or God being vindictive.

If we ask for forgiveness we are saying we have done wrong and are worthy of forgiveness. How ever unworthy we feel we are asking for it because we know God has promised to give it to us. How undeserving we can apply if you like. If we ask for forgiveness but are not ready to forgive someone else we are then saying that they don't qualify for forgiveness. Why? Was their sin worse. They have done worse than we. They are less deserving. ? We are then judging them. That is not our job. That in itself is a sin. So here we admitting to one sin but committing another. Like submitting a partial tax return – we admit to some guilt but don't admit to the other.

And which hurts God more? Imagine you have 2 children and the one breaks a plate by accident [he was clumsy] and comes to say sorry which you are happy to accept – but in the same breath he goes on to say that he hates his brother because he stood on the game boy and broke it. What hurts you more – the broken plate, broken game boy or the broken relationship?

Grudges eat away at us. They undermine relationships, they prevent healing. They consume and destroy all those ensnared in them.

Now I know it's pretty easy to forgive anyone that says sorry to you. Most times that's ok. The real problems are those irritating people that hurt you and don't seem to care or even know. But how often have we hurt God and not known? Either because we haven't thought things through, take n time to reflect and pray – or we're just too self focussed to think – we hurt God often. But he still forgives us. Thru Jesus we are going to be with God. Thru Jesus we are his children. And if in his perfection he can forgive us with such grace ought we not be able to reach out and forgive one another too? It is not easy.

Some times we are just hanging onto something – but with some others we are hurt badly. And that isn't easy to walk away from. But we must try – we may need to get help, talk it over, have therapy and of course pray. God is the expert at forgiveness.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil...

Why on earth would he want to lead us into temptation? – what sort of God would? Why test us?

Imagine a life without tests. None at school – no presentations at work and no sermons to prepare and even worse deliver on a Sunday morning.

Wouldn't life be great – wouldn't life be a tad dull? What would you work for? What would you have left school with – a colouring in certificate? Exams are stressful but they focus us they of get us to work seriously help us grow - and once they are passed they give us great satisfaction and confidence. This is the same with all the tests we go thru in life. They focus us and help us grow. They stretch us.

And seeing as our spiritual growth is our most important growth, God tests us. Because we don't live in a sterile environment in which there is no evil. Life is not a controlled experiment – it is real and there is evil. There will be times pf doubt and distraction. How will we face these if we have not been tested? We need to be equipped to deal with them.

If you have ever been tempted to accept a back hander and have resisted, if you have ever had illicit info that you could have used to your advantage but you haven't, if you have ever resisted someone that tried to distract you from you marriage, if you have ever not lied to save your face, then you are stronger for it. And better equipped to deal with it next time.

So being tested is good but, Jesus says – don't go looking for it!! Don't ask God to test you – in fact the opposite. We need to know our weaknesses and avoid them! Don't flirt with danger.

Recovering alcoholics know their weakness and work hard to keep away from danger. They show daily strength in this. We all need to exhibit that self knowledge and strength.

Martin Luther said you can't stop the birds flying over your head but you can stop them nesting in your hair. In other words can't help being tempted but you can control how you respond and how not letting it get too close is the first defence. Don't invite temptation in for tea.

2 quotes I love re temptation – Wilde I can resist everything except temptation.

And Grocho Marx – giving up smoking is easy – I've done it hundreds of times.

For thine is the kingdom and power and the glory..

We could pick this apart and analyse this word by word but the gist is what is important here and its easy to grasp. The Kingdom Power and the Glory remind us that God is in control, he has the power to create us to sustain us and to rescue us. As a result he is due glory for ever and ever. It is right and proper to end the prayer as we started it focussed on God. And having asked him for help in making the world a better place and for forgiveness and deliverance and for practical things like bread – it is reassuring to close by acknowledging that we have asked someone powerful enough to produce the goods. Jesus reminds us that we have come to the right person – or rather the right God. The only true God. WE are not putting our trust in ourselves, our money or other people and institutions – but in God.

Now as I mentioned the theme and the text are about prayer and fasting so I want to look at fasting briefly. It ought not be looked at briefly – because it is an important topic so please don't read the brevity as an indication of how little importance we attach to it here. I am simply being practical about sermon length and how much we can take in. When I spoke to Duncan about it he directed me 2 articles written by John Hewitson and in a way I could do not better than encourage you to read them. They are concise and to the point. But in order to encourage you to do that I want to say a few things.

Firstly - in this text Jesus says 'when you fast' – same as he did 'when you pray' – but we tend to overlook fasting. This probably because fasting developed a bad reputation because it was being practised in an excessive way in the middle ages. Real spirituality was in the decline so the outward forms were being stressed and when the outward forms of a faith are being practiced with no inner reality then they can become excessive and legalistic. In a response to this fasting fell out of use in many circles. Added to this we live in a satisfy every need now asap and earn points while you're at it culture. Going without is distinctly out of vogue. But we can't deny that it is very clearly practised in the Bible and we are expected to by Jesus to do it.

Secondly - What is the point? [Direct from Johns article] - Fasting is a spiritual discipline more than a physical one – it is an outward sign used to signify what is happening inwardly [which is why things went so wrong when there is nothing happening inwardly]. By fasting we physically submit ourselves to God to represent and focus ourselves on the fact that we need to spiritually submit to God. We are seeking his will instead of satisfying our own. Going without food or drink or puddings or TV is not the point – they are just the outward reminder to ourselves that we submitting to him, seeking him, listening to him.

We use fasting either on a weekly basis or in times of specific need or in preparation for something. Now as Lent approaches we remember Jesus prepared for his ministry by fasting and it is good time for us to do so in prep for Easter. I realise I am at present making myself deeply unpopular with most of you – my dear husband saw ....

And no one can make us – we have to do it with conviction from within or it is empty and pointless. But as this year begins as we listen to what God wants us to do with it, as we think about what Duncan had to say us about our part in building community and growing disciples to bring in the kingdom as we prepare for Easter fasting would help us to submit to God and therefore to hear him. So if you think you may want to fast [maybe you could fast to find out if you should] I would advise you to go to the web site and down load John's articles to help give you clarity.

If we as the Christ Church community were praying and fasting together [in what ever form we feel led] we will be far better equipped to bring in the kingdom and to give God the glory for ever and ever. Amen.