

One of the questions this exploration of prayer has generated is, **Does prayer work?, How does it work?**

We started by exploring, **Why Pray?**, followed by, **To Whom do we Pray?** Last Sunday we laid the foundation of, **What do we pray for?**, appreciating the three requests Jesus suggests we pray for (sustenance, forgiveness and temptation), transports us back to the fall of human race, when humans exchanged God's truth, that we are made in God's image, for a lie, that we can become **like God**.

As we delve deeper into Jesus' suggested framework for conversations with God our Father in Heaven, which we call prayer, we begin to appreciate our weakness and helplessness to control our lives and the things happening around us, and recognise, the creator of this world is indeed in control of His creation. So the attitude with which we approach God in conversation, is one of humility, that we really cannot solve the problems of life (ours, others and the world), without appealing to God who has a plan for His creation.

Two of three things Jesus asks us to pray for, first, to be spared of weeds-on-steroids, ravenous thorns and thistles, and voracious slugs working against our efforts to grow food for our physical **sustenance**<sup>1</sup> (the avid gardeners among us would know the effort it takes to keep a weed free garden!), and second, to be **forgiven** as we forgive others, these two are "present continuous" activities, to use a term which might remind us of learning high school grammar! It is worth noting, these two have nothing to do with our past - Jesus does not suggest we pray repeatedly, to be forgiven for things in our past; if we pray daily to be forgiven for hurting God today, then true to His Word, we are forgiven today<sup>2</sup>; there is no reason to come back to this moment in time in the future, reminding God to forgive us, again and again.

Today, we shall explore two of the three requests, alongside the question, **What then, should we expect in prayer?** The two go together.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3:17-19

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 103:12 "*He has removed our sins as far from us, as the east is from the west.*"

**How** we pray and **what** we pray for, says a lot about our belief, our knowledge, our understanding of the person of God, and more significantly, **how** we pray and **what** we pray for, speaks volumes about our relationship with God.

There are many who believe God is a demanding taskmaster, who commands allegiance by making us do things. If we don't do what he wants, then we must be prepared to take the consequences handed out by a god who delights in retribution, in revenge, in punishment.

If we believe this describes our God, then yes, most certainly, His wish would be our command - do this every day, do that 5 times a day, recite scripted prayers 20 times an hour, etc., and dare we break what we believe is his wish, we would get the Dickensian boys boarding school treatment of lashes across our bottom, or back, or caning the palm of our hands! To those who believe this describes god, then anything that happens which we might consider "bad", is the result of an angry god getting back at us for not doing what he wanted, and reminding us all the time, how bad and unforgivable we are.

The God of the Bible, God who reveals Himself to us in the pages of its history, is so very different.

Jesus' disciple John says, "**Anyone who does not love, does not know God, for God is love**"<sup>3</sup>. We are **made** in the image of God, and loving others is part of our natural character. The way it works is this. When asked by a wise and learned man, which of the many commandments of the law, was the most important, Jesus replied, "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first and the greatest commandment. AND there is a second one, and it is as important as the first, which is, 'Love your neighbour, as yourself'. Everything in God's Law, and all the messages from God the Prophets have spoken, is rooted, in these two commandments.** i.e. if you can exercise your will to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself, then you

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<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:8

will discover the God of the Bible, the god of history, and living in obedience to Him and His laws, will come naturally. You will not struggle to live by them.

If we spend time in God's Word trying to discover Him, you will uncover and recognise God as a person who knew us from before we were born, who knit us in our mother's womb, who breathed into us His Spirit and brought us into life, who cares for our well-being, who wants us to know Him and experience first-hand, His love and His personal care; yes, God will reveal Himself to you, and your prayers will be as conversations with a loving God, a caring Father. You don't need scripted prayers, memorised and recited; you will find yourself conversing with Him, talking and chatting with your loving "Father in Heaven".

In your daily and frequent conversations with Him, should you ask him to spare you from having to toil and work hard to put food on your table, He will answer!

David the Shepherd-King knew this well. ***Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you my Father, you are with me. ... you spread a banquet table before me, so sumptuous and abundant, my enemies will be green with envy.***<sup>4</sup>

You see, this request in prayer, ***Our Father, ... give us this day our daily bread***, is neither begging nor pleading God for daily necessities, nor ordering Him to provide. Jesus says very clearly, ***Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; or about your body, what you will wear. ... Consider the birds of the sky: They don't sow or reap or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth more than they? ... And why worry about clothes? Observe how the wild flowers of the field grow: They don't labor or spin thread. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was adorned like one of these. If that's how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and thrown into the furnace tomorrow, won't he do much more for you—you of little faith?***<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 23

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 6:25-31

The request, ***Give us this day our daily bread***, is in fact, a plea for mercy. i.e. “we know we don’t deserve it, but spare us from the hard graft of getting food on our tables.

***What then can we expect when we*** converse/ talk **with** (not **to**) God about these things?

Jesus responds, ***if a child asks her father for bread, will he really give her a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will He really give him a snake? Think about this, If you, who are surrounded by evil and constantly tempted by it, yet you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.***<sup>6</sup>

God’s response to our second request in prayer<sup>7</sup>, reveals His concern for all of humanity. Matthew refers to the forgiveness of “debts”, and Luke refers to the forgiveness of “sins”, the former referring to financial liabilities, is a metaphor for the second, i.e. when we owe money to someone and in debt to them, there are two ways of being free of the debt: either we pay it back, or the debt is written off, i.e., we are forgiven for not paying it back. In the event we cannot pay it back, don’t pay to back or refuse to pay it back, we are in serious breach of the law, because we will lose everything we have, to clear the debt.

We can never pay God back for the debt we owe Him by our disobedience. One act of disobedience early in human history, jeopardised the entire human race, and there is no way we can pay it back. But someone stepped in and discharged the debt for us. God, in the person of His Son, steps in and pays the debt.

What is this debt for which we are supposed to be grateful, which we cannot repay? Disobedience opened the door to death. Death separates us from God. God’s Son, Jesus takes on the “sin of the world” (disobedience by one person which after all human history), the liability we owe, which we cannot repay. He

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 7:9-11

<sup>7</sup> Matt 6:12/Luke 11:4

takes on death, but being the Son of God, death cannot hold him forever, because in Him is only life. Jesus' takes on the form of human life and paid the price for our death by surrendering His life to death. His resurrection, closes the door to death, and opened the door life without death - eternal life.

As a result of Christ's action, we are forgiven by God, who loves us so much, that He put His Son through it, to pay off the debt we owe.

So He says, ***I have done this for the whole world, for all of humanity - I have paid your debt caused by the sin of one person. As a race of people you are free, but to enjoy this freedom, 'forgive those who have wronged you, said things they should not have said, done things they should not have done, led you to places you should have gone, made you believe things you should not have believed; forgive them, as I have forgiven you.***

The exchange implied here is, the person who cannot offer forgiveness, cannot receive it, and enjoy the benefits of a forgiven life, but those who can forgive will be forgiven. ***"Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray".<sup>8</sup>***

What should we expect when we pray this?

God opens for us the storehouse of His blessings. To each of us He says, ***I have come so that you may have life, and have it in abundance.<sup>9</sup>***

We know what it means to have life, for we are grateful for it every morning when we awake, but how much is God's abundance?

The prophet Micah tells us what would happened to the nation of Israel should they choose to obey God and live by His laws. ***Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do,' says the LORD of Heaven's Armies, 'I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won't have enough room to take it in! Try it!'"<sup>10</sup>***

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 18:21-35; Luke 15:11-32

<sup>9</sup> John 10:10

<sup>10</sup> Malachi 3:10

This was God's specific promise to the nation of Israel; it is not a prosperity gospel principle: anyone who give their whole tithe to the Church, God will give you what you want. Nowhere in the Bible does it teach that.

There is a principle in God's command to the nation of Israel: when we choose to make the greatest commandment a priority, to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and love our neighbour as ourselves, God **pours out blessings so great, you won't have enough room to take it in! Try it!**

What can we expect when we pray, converse with God they way Jesus taught us?

Every person who prays, **spare us from thorns and thistles and weeds that make us work harder to put food on our table**, Jesus says, **Our Father in Heaven will lay a sumptuous banquet before you, to the envy of your enemies.**

Every person who prays, **Father, forgive us our sins, as we specifically forgive our family, friends, colleagues, neighbours who have sinned against us, who have hurt us in word and in deed**, God pours Heaven blessings until your cup overflows, to bless you and everyone around you.

**AMEN.**