Sermon- The Jesus Prayer: God Centering

Scripture: Matt 6: 5-15 Sunday, September 3, 2017

We are in the midst of a sermon series on prayer. According to a Pew research 55% of Americans claim to pray everyday, and 63% of Christians claim that pray is a very important part of their identity. I am not sure what the other 27% of Christians do. But the point I want to focus on today is about how to pray because if we don’t pray in the right way, our prayers will have no power or meaning. So that is why I want to take my time to focus on all aspects of pray for the next few weeks. In the first sermon in this series, I talked about the mountain top experiences of prayer when you are hyper aware of God’s presence. These are honestly for most people very rare experiences. Then there are the spiritual black out periods or what I called the eclipse periods where you have no awareness of God’s presence and went we have to pray right through even those eclipse periods. And I talked about how prayer in both those contexts have there own unique characteristics and purposes. So when you have such a wide range of spiritual experiences how do we get a grip on how to pray then?

When you look at prayers in the Bible, by one accounting there are 222 prayers in the Bible, 46 of them in the NT. 10 of those 46 are prayers are Jesus’ own prayers including the famous Lord’s prayer which we are going to look at today. The Lord’s prayer was a prayer that Jesus used to teach the principles of prayer and yet ironically most people have turned it into a rote prayer that you have to simply repeat without thinking. In fact the Lord’s prayer is the most important prayer not because it tells us what to pray, it teaches us how to pray. It is this prayer that gives context to the 222 prayers of the Bible. So today, we are going to dig deep into the Lord’s prayer. In fact if you are familiar with this prayer, the one thing you probably have already noticed about it is that it has two distinct parts, the first is the focus on God and the second part of the prayer focuses on our needs. Today, I am going to focus on the first part of the Lord’s prayer. The purpose of this part of the prayer is to God center our minds.

But before we get to the prayer itself, our Lord Jesus makes a couple of preparatory comments that I want to bring to your attention. The first comment He makes is when you pray don’t pray standing on the street corners like the Pharisees who did it to show everybody how pious they were. In stead our Lord Jesus Christ says you should pray in private where no one can see you, because that kind of prayer is rewarded by God. Well, just to clarify, he is not saying we should never pray in public. Public pray is always part of every public worship setting. But the point our Lord Jesus is making is that, you can never forget the fact that pray is a conversation with God. If your prayer is to impress others, God can see right through that kind of prayer and he will hold back our reward for that prayer. That comment is especially for people like me who have to do a lot of public prayers. The point is, he says, when you pray, be aware that you are speaking to God. And you cannot fool God. God is seeing the heart, and if the prayer is just to show off to others then the real spiritual benefit of that prayer is zero. But when you pray in secret, there is no one to hear your prayers, so that conversation you have with God is the purest kind of prayer. And if you are serious about your relationship with God, then you and I need to spend a lot of time in this kind of very private prayer that nobody else knows about.

The second general comment our Lord Jesus makes about prayer is about the words that we use. In many places it is common for people to pray by simply repeating a phrase or sentence over and over again as if those words had some magical power in them. Jesus is very clear, God’s children are not to go on babbling prayers with many repetitions. He says, God is our Father who already knows what we need. So going on and on about our needs to him is not going to help you in any way.

Ok now that we have been reminded that the core of prayer is your private conversations with God and even those conversations cannot be just babbling endless repetitions, we are now set up for a deep dive into the prayer itself. Remember we only have time today for looking at the first three lines of the prayer, the God centering part. The first three lines are three petitions to God. So let’s dive right in.

The first petition is this, “Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be your name”, which is the King James version that the whole world is familiar with. In simple English it means, “our father, who is in heaven, may your name be made holy”. Now there are a lot of things to point out in this first petition. The first two word’s itself are amazing, because the prayer opens with the words, “Our Father”. Jesus is straight away tells his disciples if you want to know how to pray, learn how to address God appropriately. And the only appropriate way to address Him is father. And the original term Jesus uses is “Abba” which is a very intimate term for father used in Jesus’ day. More like daddy or dada that we would use today. And it is “our daddy”. Which means that in just the first two words, Jesus is both expressing the vertical intimacy with God and the horizontal intimacy that is equally important among the disciples.

But remember, the complete phrase is, “our daddy who rules in heaven”. This is not your earthly father who is weak and short tempered and limited in resources and cannot make any promises to you even on his best days because he does not know what tomorrow will bring. No this daddy is the perfect sinless, all powerful and perfectly loving daddy who is the boss of heaven itself. And the amazing this about this phrase, “our daddy who rules in heaven” is that it creates intimacy with God without sacrificing the reference due to God. “our daddy who rules in heaven”.

Now the next part of that phrase is “hallowed be thy name” or in simple English it means, “may your name be made Holy”. What does that mean, you must be wondering? In fact it is kind of confusing, if any human being were coming up with a prayer, can you imagine this writing a phrase like this? I ddon’t think so. Because God’s name holy is not the first thing anybody things they should pray about. Well, you see what the Lord Jesus is referring to here is not anything to do with the being of God at all. In fact what is already holy, cannot be made holy. God cannot be made holy, but Lord Jesus is referring to the associations we have in our minds when we think of God.

Let me explain. You see hear a name of a person in your mind, your brain has many memory associations with that name. Some may be good and some may be bad. Human beings tend to use God’s name in all kinds of situations. When something is messed up, what is the phrase that comes to mind for most people, “Oh God or oh my god”. Over time, in our minds, because we have not had the right thoughts associated with God and have heard God being profaned even, the associations in our mind when we think of God are not what they should be.

There should be this incredible reverence and awesomeness and holiness, that should come to our minds every time we even think about God and definitely when we begin to speak to Him. That is why, right in the beginning, in the 10 commandments itself, the first three commandants are, “thou shall have no other gods before me, though shall have no graven images an thou shall not take the Lord’s name in vain. These commandments are there so that the holiness of God or the set-apartness of God from every negative thing in the universe is the very first thing that comes to our mind when we think of God. That is what the meaning of the first petition is, “make your name holy”. It means “make your name holy in my mind” dear daddy who rules in heaven.

The second petition is, “may your kingdom come”. This phrase which is the center of the three petitions and the defining theme of the whole prayer. This petition reflects the yearning of the one who is praying that the kingdom of God be established here on earth. Let me unpack this phrase a little. Again if a human were thinking of their own life, they would pray for not the kingdom of God but “paradise on earth”. I remember when I was a young child about Andrew’s age I had travelled with my family on a vacation to Kashmir in the north of Indian. This region is connected to the tallest mountain range in the world. The air is incredibly pure and you have a very beautiful lake there surrounded by snow capped mountains. It is stunningly beautiful. And there is a garden there, which has an inscription on it that I remember to this day. It said something like this, “*if there can be paradise on earth, then this is it*”. Now paradise is a place where all human wants are taken care of and there is no pain and suffering in any form. The human tendency is to yearn for paradise. There are some people who are even willing to create hell on earth by becoming human bombs, so that they can get paradise. Really ironical isin’t? Now the Bible never asks us to pray for paradise. Our Lord Jesus is asking us to pray that the kingdom of God comes to earth. What is the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God, is the place where God’s authority is unopposed and where God rules. This pray is an acknowledgment that right now, this world is under the rule of Satan and he will try to oppose God in every way. You see by the end of Jesus time on earth he dies on the cross and rises up from the grave and in that process he defeats Satan. So we now live in a world where the world is actually ruled by a king who has been defeated. But the rule of Satan has not ended because it is like the people who live in the land don’t know that the rulers has been defeated. In World War II we had this exact scenario playing out. You see Japan had concurred different parts of the world in 1945 and their soldiers where in charge. But after the bombs where dropped the Emperor of Japan surrendered in a public speech. But in 1945 the communication technology was very primitive by todays standards so in many remote parts of the world the Japanese soldiers did not know that the war was over and they were still fighting fiercely. And the people who were living in the Japanese occupied islands were still thinking that they were occupied by the Japanese because they did not know that the Japanese were defeated. This is kind of like the time we are living in. Now the way it works with God is that Jesus defeated Satan but it is the responsibility of the individual people to shift their allegiance from the old ruler to the new ruler. God does not automatically come in and take over the land. When people give their allegiance to God what does it look like? Their hearts will reflect something like King David when in Ps Psalm 19 he says this about God’s word and laws, *The fear of the Lord is clean and enduring for ever. The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes much more than fine gold. Sweeter also than honey, the drippings of the honey comb*.

Basically the idea is this. God has made his laws clear to the world. But because Satan rules the world, all people rebel and go in the opposite direction to God’s law. But what if the human heart would consider God’s law sweet and attractive and desirable. What would demonstrate true love for God and God would be able to reign on earth without force or coercion. That is what happens when the kingdom of God comes and that is what the second petition is talking about. Our daddy who rules in heaven, let your rule extend here on earth as well. Let your kingdom come.

That brings us to the third petition. “***Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven***”. Well, if you notice there has been a progression here. First, was the plea to cleanse the name associations of God in our minds. The second was to bring the kingdom of God to earth. The third petition is an extension of the second which is to extend the will of God itself to earth. Now, what does it mean when you talk of will of God? In one sense there is nothing that happens that is not against the will of God. Even when a bad think happens, within the framework and boundaries that God sets. But that does not mean God is pleased with everything that happens. So let me illustrate this. When someone receives Christ into their life and overcomes there addictions and turns there life around, is this God’s will for them of course. This is God’s will and this is pleasing to God. On the other hand when someone rejects God and goes down a wrong path, would they be able to do it against God’s will? No, they are able to reject God, and it is God’s will to give people the freedom to reject God. But that deeply pains God. But he permits us to pain him. On the other hand when we do things that are what God wants us to do, that is called God’s express will. So when the third petition says, “let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” it means let all the actions that are happening on earth be pleasing to God like it is in heaven.

The fascinating thing about these three petitions is that, each of these petitions are referring to a specific person of the Trinity. So the first petition is addressing the father, right, “our daddy who rules in heaven, let your name be made holy in my mind”, Let your kingdom come, is referring to the work of the Son of God who defeats Satan and announces that God’s kingdom has come to the earth and finally, let your will be done refers to individual people walking not according to their flesh but according to the express will of God. And how does that happen? That is the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is when we have centered our minds on the amazing and awesome work of our heavenly father, his Son and our Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit that we are aligned in will of God enough to bring our needs before God. So let us enrich our prayer live with God centered prayers and see how God starts moving in our midst. Let us pray.