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Growing In The Prayer Life - Part 1

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The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier

John Stott explains how praying is the Christian's greatest privilege. He warns us from Scripture how not to pray and encourages us as to how we should pray.

Transcript

[Music] Pray is beyond any question the highest activity of the human soul. Human beings are at their greatest and highest when upon their knees they come face to face with God. When a human being is speaking to God, he or she is at their very acme.

It's not only the highest activity of the soul, it is the ultimate test of our true spiritual condition. Welcome to The Bible for Today with John Stott. Perhaps no one raised the standard of biblical teaching as did Stott.

It was Jesus Christ that he made preeminent in all his teaching. Whenever he preached at his home church of all souls, Langham Place, it was packed. During John Stott's centenary we are bringing you some of his finest Bible teaching from almost 60 years of ministry.

Prayer is the soul since their desire uttered or unexpressed, well according to the old hymn, but as Christians we don't always find prayer easy. It's often the first thing we neglect when days get busy. Today John Stott shows us why prayer is our highest goal and explains how we should pray.

We come to the subject of prayer. Prayer is an indispensable part of Christian discipleship. I'm certain we're all agreed about that.

God's people in the Old Testament were people of prayer. Jesus, our Lord, kept withdrawing from the milling crowds in order to be alone with his father in prayer. The first evidence we're given that Saul of Tarsus was truly converted is in the words behold he is praying.

And frequent in the New Testament are the exhortations to all of us to pray constantly,

to pray without ceasing. Indeed the main assurance we have that we're children of God is that whenever we say, "Abba Father," it is the Holy Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God. So wherever you open the Bible in the Old Testament or the New or in the life of Christ, prayer is perceived as indispensable to the Christian life.

Let me come on to our end. I wonder if you come across this quotation. Prayer is beyond any question the highest activity of the human soul.

Human beings are at their greatest and highest when upon their knees they come face to face with God. When a human being is speaking to God, he or she is at their very acme. It's not only the highest activity of the soul, it is the ultimate test of our true spiritual condition.

Can you identify the author? That's Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones. I suppose the greatest preacher of this generation there he died some ten years ago. So prayer is indispensable.

It's the greatest activity in which any of us ever engage. But it's after we've said that, that the difficulties begin. "I'm so busy, you know, with other things.

I can't help it that I resemble Martha much more than Mary. I get tired and preoccupied and distracted and very often if I'm frank I don't feel like praying when I do my thoughts wander in courageably." Here is another quotation. "I throw myself down in my chamber and I call in and invite God and his angels thither and when they are there I neglect God and his angels for the noise of a fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the whining of a door.

I talk on in the same posture of praying, eyes lifted up, knees bowed down as though I prayed to God. And if God or his angel should ask me when I thought lost of God in that prayer, I cannot tell. Sometimes I find that I had forgot what I was about but when I began to forget it I cannot tell.

A memory of yesterday's pleasures, a fear of today's dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in my ear, a light in my eye and anything, a nothing, a fancy, a chimera in my brain troubles me in my prayer. So certainly is there nothing, nothing in spiritual things perfect in this world. Can you identify that author? Well, let's John Dunne, the 17th century dean of St Paul's Cathedral.

So if a dean of a cathedral has difficulty with wandering thoughts there may be some hope for us. So what help does Jesus offer us in this matter of prayer? Especially in the text that we have been set tonight by the rector, which is that passage in the Sermon on the Mount, a part of it that Nick Page read to us just now. And as we turn to it in just a moment that before you do, let me say this, I want you to notice as I read you some verses that Jesus was negative before he was positive.

He told us how not to pray before he told us how we are to pray. He explained what we are to avoid in prayer before he went on to what we ought to do in prayer. And I think you'll notice that as we read it.

So would you like to turn again to the Bible? Matthew's Gospel, chapter 6, an important part of the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 6, 5. When you pray, we notice Jesus didn't say if you pray, it wasn't a hypothetical possibility that if we're followers of Jesus we might conceivably pray from time to time. He took it for granted that his followers would pray.

So he said, "When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites." Here's the first negative. "They love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have or they have received their reward.

But positive, when you pray, go into your room, shut the door, pray to your Father, who is in the secret place, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." Now another negative. "When you pray, don't heap up empty phrases like the pagans, the Gentile nations. They think they'll be heard for their many words.

Don't be like them." Because your Father knows what you need. "Before you ask him so when you pray, here is how you should pray." Positive. Father, heavenly Father, may your name be honored, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Give us our daily bread, forgive us our sins, deliver us from evil, and so on. We're very familiar with the so-called Lord's Prayer. Well, as we meditate on this, we find that there are two negatives and one positive.

So the first point is, don't be like the hypocrites. And Jesus without doubt is referring to the Pharisees. Now many Pharisees were good men.

They were religious. They were upright. They were moral.

They were sincere. Many of them. But they had a fatal tendency, a tendency to which all religious people are exposed, not excluding ourselves.

They had a fatal tendency to hypocrisy. The outward show of prayer meant rather more to them than its inward reality. So the negative in verse 5 is quite clear.

When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites. They love to stand and pray in the synagogues in the street corners that they may be seen by men. The Pharisees love to strike a pose, as we would say very self-consciously and ostentatiously when they prayed.

They stood in a prominent place in order to be conspicuous in their praying, whether in church or the synagogue, which is the equivalent or even on the street corner in a public

place. Now they were determined above all else that if they engaged in prayer, somebody should see what they were doing. They weren't prepared to do it in private, that nobody might ever hear about.

They were determined to be seen by men. I expect you know that the Greek word who pocketes, the hypocrite, is literally the actor, the one who plays a part on the stage, the one who is pretending to be somebody other than he really is. The actor is impersonating somebody else.

And hypocrisy is the game of religious let's pretend. The hypocrite turns prayer into a charade, what the Americans call a charade. I've no wish to argue with them about it.

Whether you call it Paris or Paris, it doesn't seem to me to matter. So it's a charade or charade. Anyway, it's a stage performance.

And that's the essence of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is turning religion or religious practice into a stage performance. And Jesus says of them, it's a very solemn thing.

He says, "They have their reward." They receive the reward they want. The reward they want because they're praying in order to be seen by men is a little applause. Look, he's praying, she's praying.

And what they want is a little bit of admiration or approbation for applause. But when the clapping dies down, there is nothing more to come. They have had their reward.

And they can wait for nothing but the judgment of God. So don't be like the hypocrites. See, the great tragedy of this is the prayer is or is intended to be a real activity coming to God, coming into the presence of God.

And to turn it into a performance is to destroy it. If you turn coming to God into a performance to be seen by men, it is such a complete perversion of the purpose of prayer that it destroys it altogether. Where we're all very well aware of this danger, don't be like the hypocrites.

In contrast to them, Jesus comes to the positive in verse 6. But when you pray, go into your room, not you see into a public place where you can be seen, but into your room where you can't be seen. Shut the door, draw the curtains if you like, and pray to your Father who is in the secret place. And your Father who sees in secret what you're doing, then nobody else may see it, will reward you.

Not will reward you openly. As the King James Version mistakenly puts it, the contrast here is not between a secret activity and an open reward. It's simply that your Father will reward you, but the reward that the Father gives to his children who pray to him is an appropriate reward.

It's not applause, it's not clapping, it's not a prize or a certificate for excellence in prayer, it's not a silver trophy that you can put on your mantelpiece, it's not that kind of reward at all, it's an appropriate reward. You know what our Father does when we come to him in secret? He rewards us by coming to meet us in the secret place in which we have come to meet him. He rewards us by granting us a personal audience with him.

He rewards us by refreshing us with his presence, assuring us of his love, lifting up the light of his face upon us and giving us peace. Those are the kind of rewards that he gives to those who come to him in the secrecy and the reality of their own private room. So that's the first thing Jesus says, don't be like the hypocrites, prayer is real, it's a real activity, it's not a hypocritical one.

Now the second thing, if we're not to be like the hypocrites, we're not to be like the pagans. Pagans also pray and are often sincere in their prayers, the trouble with their prayers is not that they have a critical so much as that they are mechanical. Verse 7, you're following chapter 6 of Matthew, verse 7, in praying, don't heap up empty phrases as the pagans do, they think they will be heard for their many words.

Don't heap up empty phrases. The King James version is don't use vain repetitions. The new English Bible is better still, don't keep babbling on.

Because the Greek word "batilogia" is an onomatopoeic word, that is to say a word with sounds like what it means, babbling. Don't keep babbling on. Batilogia is a babble or if you like a gabble, which is noise without meaning.

So what was Jesus getting at? He was certainly not forbidding repetition. In the King James version it's don't use vain repetitions, but he's not against repetition. After all, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane used repetition, he said the same prayer were till three times.

He went away, found the disciple sleeping, went back and said the same words. There's nothing wrong with repetition in prayer, so long as your mind is in it. It's vain empty repetitions that he is forbidding.

Again, it isn't a ban on the Anglican liturgy. That is not what is meant. Liturgy is fine.

A prayer book service is fine, so long as your mind is in it. Of course, if you're gabbling prayers from the prayer book without thinking what you're saying, that is babbling on. But it isn't a liturgy in itself, so Batilogia is speaking without thinking.

It's any speech in which we'd prattle on without thinking what we're talking about. In such people, Jesus says, "It's stupid enough to imagine that they will be heard for their many words." They imagine that prayer is evaluated by quantity rather than by quality. And they think that the more you tell the razory when your mind is elsewhere, or the more you turn the prayer wheel, or the more you recite incantations and petitions when

your mind is elsewhere, the more you are likely to be heard.

"Do not be like them," Jesus said. The purpose of prayer is not to inform God as if he were ignorant, so that the more we say, the more likely he is to understand what our needs are. The purpose of prayer is not to give God an earful of our vain repetitions.

He already knows what we need before we begin to pray. So our praying is neither to be hypocritical like the Pharisees nor mechanical like the pagans. But thirdly, do be like children coming to their heavenly Father.

Verse 9, when you pray, pray like this, heavenly Father. Dear friends, absolutely foundational to Christian praying is the relationship to God as I have in lefathah. True prayer is impossible.

I do not exaggerate one moment or one little bit. True prayer is impossible unless and until God has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and God has adopted us into His family and made us His children. And then when He's our Father and we're His children, then and only then can we begin to pray.

He gives us the great privilege of calling Him what Jesus called Him. Father, He gives us the great privilege of taking upon our lips the very pet name that Jesus continually gave to God. In fact, Jesus addressed God as Father on every occasion that He prayed except one, which is my God, my God, why have you forsaken me.

Otherwise it was Father, Abba, Father, always. And Jesus allows us to use ourselves, His own pet name for God. Now you know, don't you, that Muslims have 99 different names for God.

They have a resurrection to some of them, some sects in Islam. And in their resurrection they have resurrection containing 33, 66 or 99 beads, which they use for reciting the 99 titles of God. Creator, provider, protector, sustainer, and so 99 of them, but not one of the 99 is Father.

Some Arabs, Muslim Arabs, whether they're like for witticism, say that God actually has 100 names, but we only know 99 of them, and the only creature who knows the 100 is the camel, which is why the camel's expression is always one of ineffable superiority. But actually it isn't the camel who knows the 100th name of God, it's the Christian. The Jesus told us to call God Father, and that is the very essence of prayer.

Now having spoken of Muslims, let me speak of Jews. It's very interesting again that the Jews would never have dreamed and never dreamed today of using this affectionate, intimate, and pet name of God. Some of you will know, I think this quotation from the late Professor Joachim Yermias, a well-known German theologian who died a few years ago, and he spoke the central message of the New Testament.

He says, "To date, nobody has produced one single instance in Palestinian Judaism where God is addressed as my Father by an individual person, but Jesus did just this." More remarkable, as on Professor Joachim Yermias, is the fact that he used the diminutive Abba, which almost is equivalent to daddy. "Nowhere in the literature of the press of ancient Judaism," says Professor Yermias, "an immense treasure all too little explored. Nowhere is this invocation of God as Abba to be found." Jesus, on the other hand, always used it when he prayed.

Once more, Professor Yermias, to a Jewish mind, it would have been irreverent and therefore unthinkable to call God by this familiar word. It was something new, something unique, unheard of, that Jesus dared to take this step and to speak with God as a child speaks with his Father simply, intimately, securely. When we hear this word, Abba, Father, says Yermias, we are hearing the ipsism of Vox, the very voice of Jesus.

And even while I'm giving you quotations, I spoken to Muslims and Jews. Let me give you a quotation about Christians. What is a Christian asks Dr. J.I. Packer in his great book called "Knowing God?" And he goes on, "The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer to the question, 'What is a Christian that I know?' is that a Christian is one who has God for his or her Father.

John Stott has been showing us the relationship we have with God that enables us to call him Father. This is the first part of a message on prayer that John will conclude at the same time next week. You'll know by now that John Stott wrote many books during his lifetime and each week we recommend one that might help you with our subject.

Today's is entitled "The Disciple" and you'll find details on the homepage of our website, premierchristianradio.com/JohnStott. The legacy of John Stott lives on and is growing touching every level of society across the world. Today, Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries thanks to the vision of John Stott, who donated all his book royalties to support this ministry through Langham Partnership. To find out about this and other ministries, John Stott founded, go to premier.org.uk/JohnStott. Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stott.

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