

Prayer 1

Richard Dawson

3 May 2009

Why don't we pray?

2 Cor 11³⁰-12¹⁰/ Luke 18⁹⁻¹⁴/

Story of working on the forest –the first 6 months. In the first month we really didn't make much because we were all learning to handle our saws and the rugged nature of the work. We generally didn't get started till about 9am and we finished by 4pm because it was so far to drive back to town. In the second month we tried working later but we still didn't make much money. The people we were contracted to did some time and motion studies on our gang but they never really told us what our problem was so in the third month I decided to do something about it and I told the boys that I would pick them up at 7am from their houses. They groaned about this and several times I had to get them out of bed and we still weren't making much so I began to drive a little faster out to work. We still weren't making any money. And then I decided in an all out push that I was going to pick the boys up at 6am. Boy did they not appreciate that. But the combination of that and driving really fast out to the work site meant that we were generally well at work by 8am. But do you know what. The boys wore out, I got extremely exhausted and... wait for it... we didn't earn much money. Of course by this time I was driving like a lunatic. I had gotten so used to the gravel roads that I would happily slide around every corner like a rally driver. I discovered later to my chagrin that the boys generally arrived feeling really unwell and it would take them at least an hour to recover from the trip out there. Eventually in a combination of sheer exhaustion and disillusionment I did the only thing I had left in my arsenal. I prayed. No, the truth is I got down on my knees and I complained. I said God – I believe you've lead me to this work and this place and yet it's all going pear shaped and it's not my fault!! I said, You promised to look after me and yet we're still not earning any money, I've been through about 10 different workers and the present gang is also not happy. What are You going to do about it!!!? And as I prayed that extremely arrogant prayer a small voice seemed to say to me – 'Slow down.' 'Slow Down!' What do you mean 'slow down?' We're working as fast as we can now and we're still not making any money. If we slow down we won't have enough petrol money next week to do any work! And the voice simply said to me 'Slow down.' As much as I prayed this is all I could hear. I think God had installed a message service and anyone who rang that day, I'm sure, would've got the same answer – 'Slow down.'

Anyway the upshot of this was that I drove miserably within the speed limits from that time on. I went back to picking up the boys around 7.30am and I continued working. And a fascinating thing happened. The next month, we made some money for the first time.

As I look back on my life one question continues to haunt me in regard to my Christian faith and it is simply this... 'Why when I know that prayer is of the essence of the Christian life, do I find it so

hard to do?’ After all, this is certainly the witness of the Bible. If we are meant to be anything as Christians we are meant to be a people of prayer!

God’s house, according to Isaiah is to be a ‘house of prayer’ (Is 56⁷). And God’s people were also to be a people of prayer, a people who could call out to God at any time and He would hear them. (1 Kings 8³⁸⁻⁴⁵) And we know how much this came to mean to the people because when this privilege was removed it became the leading theme of their grief. The great lament in Lamentations reaches arguably it’s zenith with these words which are so full of despair precisely because God seems to have turned His back on prayer...

⁸ though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer; (Lamentations 3)

And Joel the great prophet of the end times calls the people back to their true destiny calling them not just to repentance but to repentance and **prayer**. In other words he calls them back not just with a command to turn away from their sin but to turn back to the main task for which they were originally chosen – to pray.

¹⁴Sanctify a fast, (he says) call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD. (Joel 1)

Jesus, even more so, was a man of prayer, from nights spent in prayer to specific teaching about prayer He made it clear that **to follow Him meant to pray**. And we know that this was the case simply by what the first church in Acts did once He was gone. **Committed to following Him the very first activity they committed themselves to in any systematic way was prayer...**

¹⁴All these (the disciples) were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. (Acts 1)

And this activity also became the special preserve of the whole Church and especially of the leaders.

³Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴while we (the leaders), for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” (Acts 6)

Finally we have the apostle Paul whose attitude to prayer could not be clearer. He was a man of constant prayer for whom prayer was the key ingredient to his life’s work. And he calls us to prayer with that same fervency.

¹⁸Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. (Eph 6)

So why, please tell me why it is, that we don’t pray? Why do we find it so hard to pray? Why do we resist prayer relegating it so often to the very last thing we will do?

If we look at today’s reading from Luke I think one simply reason is suggested here which deserves our attention. Now the parable is one that essentially deals with how prayer works in that Jesus is wanting to draw a comparison between two people who **both** pray but who do not both prayer successfully. Lesson 1. **Not all that passes for prayer is so**. We must remember this because so

often what we assume to be prayer is really just a trumpeting of our ideas and dreams; a demand without any desire for relationship or as Paul put it a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. An unthinking use of prayer will yield nothing. An ill directed prayer will also yield nothing. An unrighteous prayer will also yield nothing. But the prayer of a person who prays out of repentance and faith is quite a different matter. This prayer is powerful indeed.

However for my purposes this morning let's continue to look more closely at the two people praying and work out where truly their faith lay. You see it's my belief that both men prayed out of faith. Both men were inspired by faith as they prayed. The difference was the **object of that faith**. What would you say the object of faith was for the tax collector was? (God) And for the Pharisee – in what was he putting his faith? (Himself!) Yes! Himself. The Pharisee was confident because of what **he had done**.

Now let's pause a moment and consider the whole logic of prayer. Prayer is, at base, communication with God. It is the word we use to cover what we do when we talk with God. And, at the very heart of this activity must be a confidence in God – an assurance that He hears and will answer; that He cares and will be concerned for us; that He will provide. And how is this confidence expressed? It is expressed, according to Paul, most fully in our lack of confidence in ourselves; in our lack of self-sufficiency and our refusal to 'go it alone.'

For Paul this kind of self-confidence was the absolute antithesis of the Christian Gospel. Indeed, if anything it was the essence of sin. **I can do it myself. I can be righteous, I can achieve God's will.** But Paul says...

³⁰If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. (2 Cor 11)

And he then goes on to outline how weak he has been and how ineffectual. And the point is clear. Christian life begins with a focus on God and what God can and will do and not on what we can or have done. We who go to God confident in our own strength have missed the whole point and power of prayer. What is worse, when we go to God in this manner we exhibit something that undermines our prayer straight away and this is simply that **we don't believe in it!**

If the basis for our prayer is our own self-confidence then we clearly don't believe in prayer – the basis of which is confidence in God alone.

This, I believe, is where our problems start. Not so much with a lack of technical knowledge about how to pray and what to pray for but in the very belief in prayer. **We don't pray because we don't believe in it. We think we can basically get the job done ourselves!**

All true prayer begins with the heart of the tax collector – 'God be merciful to me a sinner!' It simply must start there because anything else is likely to be an expression of confidence in the human spirit to achieve God's ends – and we just can't. The question we must begin this series on prayer with is then simply this – in what do I place my confidence –in myself – or in God?

Of course the opposite of this approach is also common in prayer. This is the approach which is perhaps best summed up as taking a potshot in case God is listening. It's our sort of 'if God is out there and listening prayer' most akin I would say to buying a lotto ticket. Out never know. I might

just win if the Big Fellow really likes me or is a good mood today. If anything this kind of prayer characterises our culture even more than the 'faith in myself' prayer and I will say more about this next week. For the moment let me finish with this story.

One man who made his life so that everything depended on God was George Muller the great pioneer of orphanages in England. Muller spent everything on building vast orphanages when his income was only that of a parish minister. IN prayer he sought God for the money to do this and he was given literally 100's of thousands of pounds for the work from donors around the world. This small story is an example of what would happen in his orphanages...

Things looked bleak for the children of George Muller's orphanage at Ashley Downs in England. It was time for breakfast, and there was no food. A small girl whose father was a close friend of Muller was visiting in the home. Muller took her hand and said, "Come and see what our Father will do." In the dining room, long tables were set with empty plates and empty mugs. Not only was there no food in the kitchen, but there was no money in the home's account. Muller prayed, "Dear Father, we thank Thee for what Thou art going to give us to eat." Immediately, they heard a knock at the door. When they opened it, there stood the local baker. "Mr. Muller," he said, "I couldn't sleep last night. Somehow I felt you had no bread for breakfast, so I got up at 2 o'clock and baked fresh bread. Here it is." Muller thanked him and gave praise to God. Soon, a second knock was heard. It was the milkman. His cart had broken down in front of the orphanage. He said he would like to give the children the milk so he could empty the cart and repair it.