

Prayer 2

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Joshua 3⁷⁻¹⁷ / John 5³⁰⁻⁴⁰ /

At the front end of His ministry Jesus begins with this call... ²⁸**“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. (Matt 11)** But how do we do this? How do we come to Jesus? At base prayer is the act of **coming to Jesus**. This is perhaps the most fundamental act of confession – to come to Jesus. Jesus calls a variety of people to come to Him twice in the synoptic Gospels and 5 times in John’s Gospel. At whatever stage we are at in the faith journey our most basic movement must be this one – **to come to Jesus**. Prayer is how we do this.

I begin this morning with a story I wanted to finish with last week. It is an incident, a typical incident in the life of a man who knew what prayer was and how to do it; of a man who lived, as it were, by prayer. His name was George Müller and he was a Christian minister who lived throughout the 1800’s. During his life apart from caring for a congregation of over 1000 he also created orphanages which cared for over 10,000 orphans. His method of supporting this work was to trust God to provide and to pray for all his needs. He neither drew a salary nor accepted any regular payments of that sort for this work. And this is the sort of thing that happened to him.

Things looked bleak one morning for the children of George Müller'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 Müller was visiting in the home. Müller 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.

What you notice about Muller in regard to prayer is two things. One he believed in it. And two he believed in it to the point of trusting in it, in other words, of being faithful in prayer. To put it bluntly, he risked his life to prayer. This is different from two things which masquerade as prayer and are therefore counterfeits. It is different from simply **approving** of prayer **intellectually**. I think that this is often where we can often end up, **approving** of things which we seldom enter in to. What this exposes is quite simply a **lack of belief**. The other main mistake in prayer is to believe in it for the wrong reasons. If we make of prayer simply a method of getting what we think we need then it is no longer

prayer but another expression of the human ego. Prayer is not a magic way of getting things. It is a relationship first and foremost and in any relationship there must be as much give and there is take – perhaps even more!

What this exposes is a lack of faith because faith, unlike belief, requires action – indeed, **it is an action** in that it is the work of **acting on one's beliefs**. When you tell me that the wire on the fence is not electric and I am safe to touch it I may well believe you but you will never know I believe you and that belief will never be tested **until I am willing to put my faith in you and touch it!** Faith is the **act** of reaching out and touching the wire, of acting on my belief.

Prayer is hard because we struggle to believe in it and it is made harder still if we come at it without the commitment of faith. You only have to look at the way a person lives to discover what they believe in. Belief leads to action. That is why the Bible even in the NT remains so convinced that God will use our actions to judge us. They betray our true beliefs. If we live as though there was no tomorrow, as if our actions don't really matter to God, this betrays something about the nature of our beliefs and in particular our belief about God.

Again this is why hypocrisy is such an enigma for Jesus. You can't preach one thing and live another and expect to end up pleasing God. As Jesus said to the people, the religious authorities have been charged by God to teach you the law so listen to their preaching... and then He went on to say... 'but for goodness sake, **don't live as they are living!!**'

How we live places our beliefs on show every time. What we do is a conscious or unconscious expression of what we really believe much of the time. And this is why humans find it so hard to change. You see we were made to follow our beliefs. If you like we are the '**believing creature**.' We act not just as instinctual beings but as beings who are moulded and shaped by something far more powerful than instinct – our beliefs. And this is something which is an image of the Creator. That we can believe and act in accordance with what we believe confers upon us some amazing advantages. It enables us to resist our base urges and our instinctual drives in order to fulfil something far higher and some thing far more creative – namely, **faithful existence**; existence that is defined by our faith in something we cannot see. Remember the basic definition of faith in Hebrews 11

¹Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebs 11)

We are made to live like this – to live by what we cannot see, to have faith in something that **is not merely material in essence**. And there are many expressions of this. Every time we act according to a moral or an ethic imperative we are living by something we cannot see – we are acting **faithfully**. Every time we obey a law, whether it be good or bad, we are living, to a certain extent, **faithfully** – that is living by something we cannot see even if it be a bad law!

More basic again... whenever we plan something in the future, even something as simple as planting a crop or writing down a phone number so that we can remember it we are acting in a 'faithful' manner because we are preparing for a future we cannot yet see. We are putting our trust in something which, for all intents and purposes, **is not there!** And it is our great privilege and gift to be able to do this.

But the height and heart of this possibility is faith in God - **acting upon our belief in God**. This was always the basic lesson God was trying to teach Israel. Trust in me. Trust in something you cannot see. Act as you were made to act and don't rely on what you can see. We see this in the great act of crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land. They had to put their feet in the water, they had to begin crossing in order to complete the crossing on dry land – they had to obey the unseen God, they had to act **faithfully**.

Paul gives blunt expression to this in 2 Corinthians when he says quite plainly...

⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight. (2 Cor 5)

And what lies at the heart of our ability to walk in this fashion? How can we 'walk by faith?' **Prayer does! You see God is not commanding us at this point to walk blindly.** Jesus is clear, the blind leading the blind is a bad thing. Rather God is wanting us to walk **after Him** – in a relationship of following where our eyes are focused on what God calls us to and where God leads us. The problem is we find it terribly hard to trust God at this point and, what's more, we usually have more than a few agendas of our own. Notice that in our reading today Jesus repudiates that word 'own.' He deliberately denies any suggestion that who He is and what He has been able to do are a function simply of Himself. Rather He says, "I can do nothing on my own." He **does not work alone. He works out of 'the will of the One who sent Him.'** It is this which prayer opens up for each of us – the will of God. And prayer works both at the level of knowledge **and** at the level of motivation. Most of us realise that it is one thing to know what God wants and quite another to do it.

Sometimes we recognise in our life that we simply don't want what God has for us. What's more we don't even want to know what that is. We'd rather continue with our agenda and have God leave us alone. I have times like this and I'm sure that most of you do too. This is where prayer comes in because prayer is not simply a transfer of information but it is a transfer of personality. As I pray God transforms me and makes me again, in His image. And only in His image may I both know God's will **and be willing to do it!**

What I find is that a season of prayer will melt my stubborn heart and get me focusing back on God and His will. That is why I like to start the day with a season of prayer – because it effects my motivation, my willingness to listen for the rest of the day. We are Christian as we '**come to Jesus.**' All else, even our very best acts and action, is secondary to this fundamental movement. In prayer we begin where we must begin – with Jesus.

Prayer is the act of coming to Jesus. I want to invite you again this morning to '**come to Jesus.**' Whether this be your first time or, indeed, the first time for many days or perhaps your first time today – God's invitation remains open. ²⁸**"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.** We come to Jesus to find the rest our souls require – to enter the rest we need to do the work God has for us – to be able to believe again the Word of God. In prayer we may come. Let us pray...