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Matt 6⁷⁻¹⁴ / Phil 4⁴⁻⁷ / Eph 6¹⁸⁻²⁰

Let me set the scene. Dr Ryan Stone, a specialist on her first mission into space has been involved in a terrible accident where all those she was with have been killed. She is now alone in a crippled space station with very few choices available and in that place she begins to speak out her distress and anxiety. Please listen closely to what she says...(video clip from movie "Gravity")

"I'm gonna die, aren't I God? I know we're all gonna die...we're all gonna die. But I'm gonna die today! Funny that you ought to know. But the thing is I'm still scared ... I'm really scared. Nobody will late? I mean, I'd pray for myself but I've never prayed in my life. Nobody ever taught me how. Nobody ever taught me how."

Nobody ever taught me how to pray. It so interesting that, in a secular film largely about humans at the edge their ability to survive and facing death for a prolonged period, both God and prayer come to the fore. When faced with her own immanent death Dr Ryan Stone seeks God; cries out to God; wants God! This is perhaps her last and only solace and yet... no one has taught her how to pray. She is unsure if she's praying right. She wonders if God really cares. Would you pray like that? How would you pray in this situation? How do you pray?

We begin this year at Leith with a month of prayer – a month of special opportunities to pray and to grow in prayer. And we do so quite simply because our mission as a Church begins with prayer. Prayer is that

thing which brings us close to God, which opens us up to the heart to the work of God and which directs us in service to God. We pray quite simply because unlike an army we do not make progress on our stomachs but on our knees. Prayer is the Church's true mode of progress, its greatest defence and its living connection with the Lord of the Church, Jesus.

A J Gordon the famed Baptist preacher once said this of prayer...

“You can do more than pray after you have prayed; but you can never do more than pray until you have prayed.”

And John Wesley said, **“Prayer is where the action is!”**

E M Bounds the influential Methodist preacher who wrote 11 books on prayer puts it this way...

“No learning can make up for the failure to pray. No earnestness, no diligence, no study, no gifts will supply its lack.”

There is no such thing as a prayerless faith; there is faith in prayer or no faith at all. So let me ask you, has someone taught you how to pray? Are you confident that you can pray; that God hears your prayers; that you are praying right? Dr Stone, confronted by her immanent death turns to prayer and wonders if God will hear – wonders if she is praying right because no one has ever taught her to pray. It is tempting to think that she's got it all wrong that of course God will hear her cry for help as He hear all such cries. And in this we might be right. But she is also right about prayer having to be learned. We pray naturally when we're in trouble, as Dr Ryan did, but this prayer is not much more than the anguished cry of a baby when it is has no other language to express itself. Yes the parents hear it and will do what they can to pacify the

child but they have little real idea why the child is crying except perhaps that it is hungry, tired or uncomfortable. Imagine if a person never got beyond that way of expressing themselves. Imagine what they could not do. They could not express their feelings in a way that helped others to understand; they could not say what they wanted to say with any accuracy; they could not engage in mature relationships; they could not express their love to a lover or their frustration or their understanding. In short if we leave prayer to the desperate cry of a desperate person we leave it stuck in an immaturity which is tragic. Yes this prayer is instinctive and not ineffective. I have heard many testimonies of God answering such prayer. But to leave prayer there, to imagine that we can call on God 'when we really need God' is to dismiss the joys of growing past the age of about 9 months in human terms and who here would ever want a baby to stop maturing at 9 months?

It is one of the most central tasks of the Christian to learn to pray and so we see Jesus teaching the disciples to do so. It is important to begin to learn about prayer and, like learning the piano, the most important thing in this education is... **practice!**

Why is prayer so important? It is so because prayer is the language of our relationship with God. In and through prayer we speak to and hear God. But it is also important because it is through prayer that we make progress in the Kingdom of God - we 'get things done.'

Andrew Murray once said that **"The [person] who mobilizes the Christian church to pray will make the greatest contribution to world evangelization in history."**

And Charles Spurgeon also said **“Prayer is the real work, Evangelism is just the mopping up.”**

SO in prayer we relate to God and we join ourselves to the mission of God and we also achieve a third very important facet of Christian life and that is to contend with evil both in ourselves and in the world.

In the garden one of Jesus’ last pieces of advice to Peter and the disciples was this...

⁴¹Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Matt 26)

And Paul, after teaching about evil principalities and powers and how to combat them finishes with this...

¹⁸Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. (Eph 6)

Prayer then isn’t just something associated with the Christian life – it is the Christian life and it is so because through prayer we come into contact with God who is our life-giver. An hour a day in prayer would transform our lives and our Church. It would change and change our community here at Leith. Even a commitment to pray regularly with a prayer partner or to pray regularly for our work place and work colleagues would change our world because prayer is our ‘spiritual capital’ – it’s the currency of the kingdom’s economy.

Prayer is our way up, our way forward, our way through and our way in. So why don’t we pray?

If you're anything like me prayer is a struggle. It is a strange thing to pray. Unless we're in a real fix, prayer is not instinctive. When we're doing OK – prayer is often a battle and yet, as Christians, we know that it's right to pray. Quite why this is is often not so clear. However, get us into trouble and it's amazing how often the first thing we reach for is a desperate prayer. Its' a bit like a story I once heard about a prisoner facing the judge in the Dunedin courts. [Story told by Fran's brother of prisoner standing in the dock in Dunedin who had his charge sheet read out detailing a veritable mountain of charges against him. When finally finished the Judge looked down at him and very pointedly asked him what he had to say for himself to which he looked to heavens and said in a loud voice "Beam me up Scotty, I'm in a heap of trouble down here!" Needless to say the judge was not amused.

We pray when we're desperate. We don't pray because most of the time we think we can run our lives pretty well without God and it's only when things get out of control that we resort to prayer. The truth, however, is very much the other way. Our lives without God, no matter how ordered, are in fact 'out of control. We need God every day and every hour and when we come to that realisation prayer begins to take its true place.

Why is this? Let me give you two basic reasons that flow from the Lord's prayer.

⁹“Pray then in this way:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.**

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

**Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

The first half of the prayer aims at one thing and one thing only – to set the scene of our current reality – to remind us of the big picture of our life from a Kingdom perspective. Perspective is so important in life and especially in the spiritual life because if we don't have it we act in ways which are inappropriate.

When Pierre-Paul Thomas was growing up in Montreal, Canada in the 1940s he couldn't play hockey with his brothers and it broke his heart. Thomas was born blind—long before a cure was available. So for most of his life he could only imagine the world that people often described to him. For years he walked with a white cane to avoid obstacles in front of him. But at the age of sixty-six, Thomas fell down the stairs in an apartment building and fractured the bones of his face. He was rushed to the hospital with severe swelling around his eyes. A team of doctors went to work to repair the bones. Months later he went to be examined by a plastic surgeon for a consultation about repairing his scalp. The surgeon casually asked Thomas, "Oh, while we're at it, do you want us to fix your eyes too?" Thomas did not understand. Nor did he know how to respond. Not long after that, Thomas had surgery and could truly see for the first time. Suddenly his world consisted of bright colours he had never fathomed before. He spoke of being awestruck by flowers blossoming and trees blooming. As beautiful as this story of a sixty-year-old man who was able to see for the first time is, there is a sad reality. He could have had the same surgery at a younger age and been able to see earlier. Thomas had assumed such a possibility was impossible and had resigned himself to a life of blindness when, in reality, he could have experienced the gift of sight decades earlier.

God is wanting to open our eyes, to change our perspective and in prayer He can do this. In the Lord's prayer God does first this by setting the scene. What is the scene of our life? What is the context of our life? It is this. We have a heavenly Father, One who is both our Creator and our life-giver and our sustainer. This One lives in Heaven – a place which is ruled according to His good, benevolent and fair will. This 'Father' loves us as a Father loves his children, as a Mother loves her children. This heaven is where we are destined for if we will accept it. It is not here yet, but it is coming.

This is the truth of our life – the big truth. This is the context of our life. This is what should lie behind all our decision making and thinking. This is what should help set the priorities of our life.

Now when we pray, this very broad brush picture starts to get filled out. God is able to bring nuance and detail into that picture and we begin to understand what we should do this, year, this month, this day, this hour – but only as we pray.

The second half of the prayer also serves to 'set the scene' but from the point of view of what sort of things we should pray about...

- ¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.**
- ¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.**
- ¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.**

Let us understand that this is not an exhaustive list either in theme or in content. Most commentators are agreed that this prayer of Jesus' is a model for prayer and not an archetype. It is meant to provide a lead rather than the content of all prayer.

So Jesus moves from context to content, from big picture to detail and in doing so He encourages us to bring to him our needs. And what are our needs? Firstly they are our material and worldly needs. These are vital and God understands they are vital. God made us fleshly beings and understands the needs of the flesh. Our daily bread is indicative of all those needs from food, to finance to a life partner. Nothing is exempt from prayer.

Secondly we have need of forgiveness, of peace with God and with ourselves. Again this covers an enormous range of topics from anger to addiction; from anxiety to abuse. Nothing, again, is exempt. They are all to be prayed about.

Finally Jesus calls us to pray for our battle against evil – a battle we've lost time and time again and which rages all around us and in us. The best defence against evil is to avoid it as far as possible. We see Jesus doing this time and again – retreating from outright conflict; living away from where the political machinations against Him are the least; fleeing the crowds when He can; turning away from Jerusalem at every opportunity until, the time is right. We should do the same. We should never assume we are stronger than the evil age we live in. We all have cracks in our defences and we all need to take the greatest care against evil.

Prayer leads us into the life God has for us, the mission God shares with us. This is how we live the Christian life – in touch with God through prayer and as we learn to pray we will also change the world around us for it is a changed life that truly brings glory to God. AMEN.