

20260712 “HOW AND FOR WHOM TO PRAY” - PS PETER ANDERSON

Matthew 6:5-8 and 1 Timothy 2:1-8

I was told by Ps Bijoy that you are planning a week of prayer and fasting as a church. This is fantastic. Truly, prayer is the engine room, the powerhouse of the church. Prayer is vital for a church to be spiritually healthy and for a church to be empowered to shine for Jesus in our dark world. When we pray and when the church prays as a body, we are admitting our desperate need for God. We are admitting the fact we can do nothing without Him.

Many of you will have heard about missionary to China, Hudson Taylor. He first went to China in 1854. It was in 1865 that he founded the China Inland Mission (now OMF International). When Hudson Taylor died on 3 June 1905, the number of CIM missionaries had increased from the initial 24 to 828. The CIM had 1,152 Chinese church workers, 18,625 baptised Chinese Christians, 418 churches, and 150 schools. In 1902, some of Hudson Taylor's very last written words while he was still the General Director of the CIM, were these: *“I trust that in all the days to come, as in the past, we shall recognize our entire dependence upon God and the absolute importance of private and united prayer.”*

What Hudson Taylor said about the CIM, is also true about any church or Christian ministry today. We all need to be reminded about the vital importance of prayer—both private prayer and united prayer, praying with others. It is important for married couples to pray together, and if they have children to pray with their children, and as a family. It is important for believers to pray with other believers, and for us to pray as a church.

Let us look then at what Jesus taught His disciples about the right attitudes needed for effective prayer and then we will look at some of Paul's teaching on prayer.

1. HOW TO PRAY (Matthew 6:5-8)

In His famous Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew chapters 5-7, Jesus tells His disciples *how* to pray. First of all, however, He tells them how they should *not* pray! He says in 6:5, ^{“5} **And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the**

synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full."

It may seem strange to us today that people would do such things as those described here. However, in Jesus' day although the Romans were occupying the Jewish homeland (including Galilee, Samaria and Judea), the Jewish ruling class, in particular people like the Pharisees, were very religious. However, their religion was often little more than a show. They loved to look good. They tried to impress people with how devout and strict they were.

Devout Jews prayed three times a day—at 9 in the morning, at noon and at 3 in the afternoon. There was nothing wrong with this of course. People like Daniel kept these set times of prayer but unlike Daniel, the religious leaders in Jesus' day used to make sure they were in a place where ordinary people would see them praying. They would bow their heads and lift their hands, which was the typical Jewish way of praying. Ordinary people on the street or in the Temple or wherever it was would see them and no doubt think, *"Wow, look how holy and devout they are!"* These religious leaders loved the praise of men. They were praying to impress other people. They were praying to men not to God!

Yes, we must remember that prayer is praying to God. Prayer must come from our hearts. We may use the words of Scripture; indeed, the words of Scripture can really help us express praise and adoration to God. It is great using Scripture in our prayers. There is power in God's Word and when we base our prayers on what God has said or promised, we can often pray with far more confidence and faith. We can of course use our own words when praying—simple everyday words. We do not need a special vocabulary to pray. Prayer is simply telling God what is on our hearts. We can speak to Him with the same openness, directness and simplicity with which a child speaks to his or her parents. We can pray in any language of course for God understands every language and He sees every heart.

So then how does Jesus say we should pray? Let us read verse 6. **"⁶But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."**

Jesus told His disciples to pray in the secret place. Obviously, there is a time and place for public prayer—for praying in church, in a small group, in a prayer meeting. However, the most basic

and important of all is our private prayer life. Surely, if we don't pray in private, we might need to question our motives for praying in public.

Thinking about praying in private, it obviously is important to find a place where we can concentrate and be undisturbed. It is not always easy finding such a place, especially if you live in a big family. It may be necessary to get up a little early before the busyness of the day catches up with you and the prayer time gets squeezed out by breakfast or the need to rush off to school or work.

Now, what about praying with others? This is also very important. When we pray with others in unity and agreement we have the wonderful promise from Jesus, **"I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my Name, there I am with them."** (Matthew 18:19, 20) Nothing is too small and nothing is too big to bring to God in prayer.

Let us treasure the opportunity to pray with others—to pray in pairs (with a prayer partner), as couples and families, in our Home Groups, and all together at the church prayer meeting. Whether we pray in private or with others, we should pray sincerely and from the heart.

Jesus taught His disciples *not* to pray like the hypocrites and now He mentions another way *not* to pray. In Matthew 6:7-8, Jesus says, **"...when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."**

The disciples of Jesus were all Jewish and Jews worshipped Yahweh, the One true and living God, the God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob. Of course, Jesus was teaching them that the true and living God was His Father—and what was even more amazing, Jesus told them, **"I and the Father are one."** Jesus' disciples prayed to the Father, not some far away unknown deity such as the Greeks and Romans might have worshipped. Pagan religion, such as the religion of the Greeks and Romans, had many gods and goddesses. Jesus described their praying as **babbling**. The prayers of the pagans were not much more than endlessly repeating phrases or even single words.

Pagan religion today is not much different. I have seen Buddhist monks chanting their prayers. They repeat the same words and phrases over and over again. The air is full of the pungent smell of incense and the monotony of chanting voices. I have also watched as Muslim men gather after

hearing the call to prayer. One can admire their devotion as they kneel in long rows with heads bowed to the ground but again the words they chant are very different to what Christian prayer is all about. And totally unlike our Heavenly Father, their god Allah is far, far away.

Of course, sometimes people who call themselves Christians pray without really understanding what they are praying. Even the wonderful prayers in the Anglican Prayer Book, for example, can be read mechanically and not coming from the heart. On Sunday people may come to church, and they may pray but then during the rest of the week they live their lives as if God didn't exist.

One of the reasons the pagans pray such long prayers, says Jesus, is the fact they think that **“they will be heard because of their many words”**. Of course, as Christians, it is not wrong for us to come to God many times with the same request. Jesus Himself teaches us to pray with perseverance, to go on asking, to go on seeking, to go on knocking. Sometimes however, God shows us we do not need to continue to pray about something. He wants us simply to say thank you. Certainly, when we see His answers to our prayers let us not forget to give Him thanks.

Jesus says **“...your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.”** He knows what we need and He loves to answer our prayers. Let us trust Him and keep praying, for prayer opens the door for God to answer—but He does so in His time and in His way.

There was a famous violinist who had a daughter who went to learn music from a stranger. Someone asked the girl's father if he did not want to teach his daughter himself. *“There is nothing I would like more,”* he said, *“but I must wait till she asks me.”*

There are things God wants to give us, but He waits till we are ready to ask. He is longing to bless us but waits for us to desire that blessing. He longs to lead us in the right path but waits for us to look up and reach out for His hand. He waits with all the resources of His love and provision.

In the passage in Matthew 6, Jesus then goes on to tell His disciples how they should pray. It is a kind of model prayer, a guideline about how and what to pray. We call it the Lord's Prayer.

The Lord's Prayer gives an outline of the sorts of things we can and should pray about. These include worship and adoration. They include prayer for God's will to be done and for His kingdom to be extended. There is prayer for our personal needs. There is prayer for forgiveness and for help in overcoming temptation and in resisting the evil one.

We have been thinking about some of Jesus' teaching on prayer in Matthew 6. Now let us look at a passage where the Apostle Paul writes about prayer.

2. FOR WHOM AND WHY TO PRAY (1 Timothy 2:1-8)

In 1 Timothy Paul is writing to his son in the faith, Timothy who was by then the pastor of the church in Ephesus. He writes to encourage Timothy in his ministry and give him helpful advice. In chapter 2 of the letter, Paul gives instructions concerning worship in the church, and first up is what he says about prayer.

Paul says to Timothy, **"I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people."** Clearly, for Paul, in the life of the church prayer was a priority. He uses 4 different words which are quite close in meaning. He mentions **"petitions"** or **"requests"**—these come out of our sense of need. As we become aware of our need of God, of our need of His provision or guidance, we simply bring those requests to Him. Next, Paul writes of **"prayers"**—a general term where the focus is on humbly coming to God, rather than to anyone else. He alone is our source of strength or forgiveness or wisdom or help. The third word Paul uses for prayer is **"intercession"**. The focus here is on praying or interceding for the needs of others.

As we come to God with petitions, prayers or intercession regarding our own needs or the needs of others, we should remember we come to a King, we come into the royal presence of God. As John Newton puts it:

"You are coming to a King;

Large petitions with you bring;

For His grace and power are such,

None can ever ask too much."

Last week, a reading in the Our Daily Bread devotional mentioned a Singaporean pastor in Japan. Before becoming a pastor, Lam Wai Chan had worked as a news correspondent for a Japanese media company. Brother Chan was helping in his home church in Singapore when God called him and his wife to move to Japan. Even though Brother Chan spoke very good Japanese, when he was asked to help in a church in Tokyo, he felt overwhelmed. The church had only about twenty members.

When asked to preach and to lead the church as pastor, Lam Wai Chan felt as if he “was taking over a sinking ship.” Crying out to God, he sensed the Lord replying: “Offer the church back to Me.” Rather than trying to make the church more appealing or to modernize the music, Pastor Chan asked the church members to pray—for their needs, their family members, and their friends who didn’t know Jesus. It wasn’t long before the church doubled in size. The faithful praying of the members was one important key to building a growing, biblically grounded community of believers.

The fourth word Paul mentions in 1 Timothy 2:1 is “**thanksgiving**”. This is an aspect of prayer we easily neglect. We forget to say thank you. We forget to count our many blessings.

Notice what Paul says next. He tells Timothy we are to pray **for all people**. We should not just pray for ourselves or for those in our circle of friends. We are to pray for all people—all kinds of people. We must not just pray for those we like or those we agree with, or those who do things our way. No, we are to pray for everyone—even those who give us a hard time or those with whom we normally would not choose to associate.

And Paul goes on to give an example of those for whom we should pray. In v.2 he writes we are to pray: “...**for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.**” We find it easy to criticise political leaders, or anyone in authority, especially those we disagree with or dislike in some way. It is easy to criticise leaders, even church leaders, but God wants us to pray for them. Notice the purpose of our praying for these leaders. It is that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. When we pray for leaders in the community and in the nation, it is incredible what God does.

I once attended a seminar about reaching cities for Christ and was thrilled by testimonies I heard of what happens when Christians start praying for their cities, for their mayor and for the local authorities. In one city rather than criticise and complain about the policies of the local government, Christian leaders met to pray. They then approached the city officials and asked them to come and share with them some of their hopes and dreams for the city. They then offered to pray for them and to help in any way possible. Some incredible things happened. The city officials began to trust the Christian leaders, and the churches and the churches themselves began to find more and more open doors to serve their community. Yes, we are to pray for kings and all those in authority for this leads

to peace. Godliness and holiness will flourish. The world has yet to see what can be accomplished when God's people really start to pray and when those prayers lead them to get involved in service!

What Paul says about praying for kings and those in authority is all the more amazing when we realise that he was not living in a democracy that upholds the rule of law. No, Paul was living at a time when Rome was ruled by emperors with absolute power. Nero, a notoriously cruel ruler, was emperor of Rome at the time (AD 54-68) and not long after Paul wrote to Timothy a terrible persecution broke out against Christians. It is thought Paul himself was martyred during one of these persecutions. Christians were burnt alive or thrown to wild animals in the arena to entertain the citizens of Rome. But despite this Paul urged Christians to pray for the emperor and for those in authority.

Paul continues in v 3 and 4: **“³This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, ⁴who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”** God wants all people to be saved. He wants all to come to know God's truth.

The next two verses are truly powerful. Paul says, **“⁵For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶who gave Himself as a ransom for all people.”** Yes, Jesus is the only mediator, the only Saviour. The One who gave Himself as the ransom, the payment, for our sins.

And He loves all people. There is no one, however ignorant or however bad, who is outside the love of God. The gospel message is for all men and women, boys and girls, everywhere. God desires that all be saved. Clearly not everyone is saved. Some who have heard the gospel still reject it. We do not know why this happens, why only some respond. Nor do we understand why God has chosen us. We do not know how His mercy and grace touched us. We certainly didn't deserve it. What Jesus did on the Cross was sufficient for all people everywhere. Our job is to tell them.

That is what Paul was called to do. In v. 7 he says, **“for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a true and faithful teacher of the Gentiles.”** We too are called to be heralds, to announce good news, to witness for Jesus and tell others about His love. We are called to be true and faithful.

Paul was urging Timothy to call the church to prayer. Without prayer we will not be able to impact society around. Paul says in v.8, **“I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing.”** Interestingly, Jesus said that the hypocrites lifted up their hands on the street corners for others to see them praying. They were praying to impress men, not God. Their hands were not “holy hands” for their hearts were full of religious pride. God, however, wants His people to “lift up holy hands” in prayer. He wants us to be free of things like anger or quarrelling and to live pure and holy lives. Then our prayers will be effective in changing the world. Praying for others is prayer that impacts individuals, society and the world for God.

Where can we start? How about praying for your family and close friends? How about praying for a colleague at work or for a neighbour? And let us pray for the church and for the leaders and members of MBCC. Let us pray for our local MPs, the mayor and for the government and the prime minister. Let us pray for the upcoming election—so critical for the future of NZ. And let us pray for other countries and for their leaders. How about praying for unreached people groups—even just one such group that God puts on your heart? Our prayers can begin to change the world.