

ENCOUNTER.

**A NEW LOOK
AT AN OLD PRAYER**

Introduction

Welcome to the daily bible reading notes that we as a church are using during our “Encounter” series. As we look at the vital subject of prayer during our weekend services, in small groups, and using these notes, we are going to thoroughly investigate Jesus’ teaching on prayer. Encountering God more is one of the “14ers” that we want to “summit” together this year.

The Lord’s Prayer (some call it the disciples prayer) is one of the best known passages of scripture. Some say it should be used as a piece of liturgy, others would say that it contains the essential elements of prayer, surely it is both.

Over the next couple of months, we will not only consider Jesus’ teaching on prayer, but we will also look at the themes that He highlighted in that prayer of all prayers.

As we begin, let’s pray (seems like a sensible idea considering the subject!) that we will all grow, and experience authentic relationship with God in our everyday lives.

Take time to sit down each day (once over the weekends!) to read and reflect upon the notes, and don’t skip the set bible readings, they’re important!

God bless you,

Pastor Jeff

Monday, April 24th: When You Pray

Read: Luke 11:2-4, Matthew 26:36-46

Focus: “When you pray, say...” (Luke 11:2)

Let's establish this truth: God wants us to pray. We'll spend some of our time over the next couple of months examining just how we should pray, and hopefully we'll find some practical hints that will help improve our prayer life, but let's establish that God sees prayer as a priority. So it should be our priority too. Jesus assumed that those who love and follow Him would pray prefacing His teaching about prayer by saying “when you pray”, and not “if you pray.” (He also viewed fasting and giving in the same way). He didn't just teach the importance of prayer: we find Him personally prioritizing it. In a life packed with clamoring crowds and endless demands, He would often rise early, to retreat and spend time in prayer (Mk 1:35). Faced with the greatest challenge of His life (His trial and execution), Jesus chose to spend His final hours in prayer, and desperately wanted His friends to join Him in that vigil. The New Testament is crammed with exhortations and instructions about prayer, including a call from the apostle Paul that encourages us to “pray continually” (1 Thess. 5:17). Speaking of Paul, he repeatedly called the churches that he planted to pray, and to pray for his ministry. And the Bible ends with “the prayers of the saints” (God's people, you and me) rising up to God like incense (Rev. 8:4, KJV), showing that our praying is part of our worship.

As we'll see, prayer is not easy. But it is a significant element of the walk of faith.

Prayer: Lord, I hear you call me to pray. During this next two months, expand my capacity for prayer. Amen.

Tuesday, April 25th: Prayer is Not Easy

Read: Romans 8:26-27, Luke 11:1

Focus: “We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.” (Romans 8:26)

Prayer is one subject that is almost guaranteed to make Christians feel guilty. We know it is vitally important, but we feel how inadequate we are to be called people of prayer. The disciples knew that feeling, and perhaps were intimidated by the “prayer experts” of the day, the Pharisees. And so they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. The great apostle Paul, with all his encouragements and commands to pray, makes an honest declaration, which applies to others apart from him: “We don’t know how to pray.” He speaks his confession of weakness and failure on behalf of us all. Notice that Paul doesn’t suggest that our weakness in prayer is removed, but rather encourages us that God’s Spirit wants to help us in that weakness.

As the one writing these bible notes, let me join in with the confession. I find almost everything about my life, work and faith journey easier than the task of praying. And I find some writing and teaching about prayer unhelpful, because it usually comes from people who are very accomplished at prayer. I don’t find solitude terribly welcoming, prayer is hard. I am an activist: I enjoy the many requirements of a multifaceted ministry where deadlines loom, and meetings must be aligned with the demands of other busy people. I like having a fairly fast paced life, and spending time with other people. So please know that the writer of these notes does not come to the subject as an expert, but as one who feels weak when it comes to prayer.

Prayer: Lord, teach me how to pray, please. Amen.

Wednesday, April 26th: Why is Prayer so Hard?

Read: Mark 14:32-42, Romans 7:21-25

Focus: “Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. ‘Simon,’ he said to Peter, ‘are you asleep? Couldn’t you keep watch for one hour?’” (Mark 14:37)

I am so glad that the gospels tell us the disciples were sleeping when they should have been praying. Despite repeated requests from Jesus that they stay awake and watch and pray with Him, they succumb to slumber. These are the people that He has carefully selected to change the world.

Having said that prayer can be difficult, let’s consider why that is. Prayer involves us talking with someone who we cannot see or touch. We can be quite unaware of their presence, and we can’t hear any response. And it’s usually a one-way transaction. It’s often taught that prayer is like a conversation, we talk to God, He talks back, but while that might occasionally be the case (very occasionally in my experience), it’s usually not that way. Rather we bring our thanks, our hopes, our requests, our concerns to someone who is invisible, and faith says that we are heard. Add to this the busyness of life, where there are so many tangible things that need to be done (many of them with very measurable outcomes), and it’s easy to begin to see why prayer can be difficult. Additionally, nobody is actually checking up on us to see if we are praying. We can fulfill many of the outward practices of being a Christian, attending worship, giving financially, serving in our church, community or both, yet at the same time neglect our relationship with God through prayer.

Prayer, it’s a vital lifeline. Let’s not neglect it, and make disciplined choices to walk with the Lord.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, help me to pray, especially when I least feel like it. Amen.

Thursday, April 27: Some Jewish Perspectives on Prayer

Read: John 4:4-30, Psalm 34:1-22

Focus: “Yet a time is coming...when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.” (John 4:23)

It's a dilemma that we all face at Christmas time, or when birthdays come around - what does the person we are buying for really want? It's painful to give a gift and then realize that disappointment is the result. So here's a vital question: what does God really want from us? One answer is that He seeks worshippers, and that includes prayer. He is never wearied by our praying. Jesus qualifies this call by saying that the Father is not just looking for endless talking from us (babbling is a word used in the Sermon on the Mount) but engagement with Him in spirit and in truth.

No wonder Paul exhorts us to “pray continually” (1 Thess. 5:17). Obviously that doesn't mean that we will always be praying, but it calls for persistence in prayer, together with a prayerful attitude. The Psalmist says, “I will extol the LORD at all times; His praise will always be on my lips.” (Psa. 34:1) It is a call to be people of praise, whatever our circumstances.

Prayer should incorporate gratitude or thanksgiving. I love the ancient rabbinical idea that, with the dawn of Messiah's coming, all prayers will someday be discontinued, except the prayers of thanksgiving. God loves it when we pray. And He is delighted when our prayers are weighted towards gratitude.

Why this yearning in God's heart for His people to pray? Surely it's this simple. He loves to be with us, to experience the sharing of our daily lives with Him. Today, let's respond to what God wants, and not just be preoccupied with our wants.

Prayer: Father, please show me what it means to live prayerfully rather than just have moments or times of prayer. Amen.

Friday, April 28th: Not all Prayer is Good

Read: James 4:3, Matthew 6:5-8

Focus: “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.” (James 4:3)

We might assume that prayer itself is a good thing. But like anything that is worthwhile, prayer can be sullied by our sinfulness. James writes about prayer that is *kakos*, the word means sick or evil. The Pharisees, again, were prime examples of this, using prayer as a way to impress the masses as they parroted their eloquent but hollow “speech prayers” in public. Prayers designed to impress others displease God. Jesus taught us to pray privately, only seen and heard by the Lord. This was not to dismiss the value of shared, public prayer, but was a caution to check our motives when we do engage in prayer with others.

The rabbis had a saying that a person cannot come into the presence of God unless he or she brings their heart in their hands. In other words, sincerity and integrity are more important than the specific mechanics of prayer. And prayer is certainly not just an emergency number to call when we’re in trouble. The Jews have a saying, “Honor the physician before you have need of him.” But the ancient rabbis didn’t always get it right. They believed long prayers were more spiritual. The Pharisees prayed for three hours a day, but in this they missed the point. Jesus, as we have seen, did not advocate lengthy prayers.

Some of us have swallowed this “long prayer” idea, and because we can’t pray for an hour, we don’t pray at all. But isn’t it better to pray for five minutes, than to believe in lengthier prayer, yet not actually pray at all?

Prayer: As I endeavor to go deeper in prayer, help me to avoid the pitfalls that I might encounter on that journey, Lord. Amen.

Saturday, and Sunday April 29th and 30th: What's the Point?

Read: Philippians 3:1-11, John 15:1-8

If God knows our needs (because He knows everything that is knowable, including our outward circumstances and the secrets of our hearts) what's the point of telling Him what He already knows? But that approach narrows prayer down to simply sharing information, together with a request for help. However, prayer is about so much more than that. While asking is important, prayer enables us to commune with God by faith, to share our lives in relationship with Him. It provides the opportunity for us to come with our worship and thanksgiving, to bring honor and praise to God. Prayer enables us to spend time in God's presence, allowing His Spirit to search our hearts. It can help to restore emotional balance in our hurried lives, and opens us to God's guidance when we need direction. Jesus spent time in prayer before making major decisions. Prayer gives us the opportunity to cast our care upon the God who cares for us (1 Pet. 5:7). Paul spoke of his great priority of "knowing Christ" (Phil. 3:8) and, without prayer, that relational connection is just not going to happen.

To Ponder: What does it mean to "abide" or "remain" in Christ?

Monday, May 1st: Our Father

Read: Matthew 26:47-56, Matthew 6:9

Focus: “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:53)

In his book, *Stumbling on Happiness*, Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert points out that human beings are the only species that have a defined capacity to strategize about the future. Some animals can instinctively anticipate the future and make preparations for it, but not analyze it. But being able to consider what might be can also be a curse, as we fret about negative possibilities. In his brilliant book, *Broken Escalators*, Peter Haas points out that considering the future without having a keen sense of God’s fatherly care is terrifying. Unlike Hinduism, which teaches that we need to surrender control and just live in the present, followers of Jesus are taught to trust their future into the hands of a loving Father who cares deeply about every detail of their lives. In teaching about prayer, Jesus points us to the Father who is deeply concerned, and ultimately in control. As Christians, we don’t abandon control, we surrender control to Him.

We see this in Jesus’ life, as we return again to Gethsemane. Peter stepped up to intervene and protect his friend Jesus, drawing his sword, a brave act that was clumsy but well-intentioned. But he discovered that Jesus didn’t need a security guard. He had a powerful Father at hand, ready to intervene with twelve legions (roughly 72,000) angels! Bearing in mind that one angel put 185,000 men to death (2 Kings 19:35), Jesus was pointing to tremendous power. We can face the future with confidence, because we have this Father.

Prayer: Father, You are mine, and I am Yours. I am in Your hands. Amen.

Tuesday, May 2nd: A Father like no Other

Read: Luke 11:5-13, John 14:9-10

Focus: “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13)

Tragic though it is, there are some people who not only struggle with the idea of God as their Father, but are deeply hurt by it. Having had unhappy childhoods, with fathers who were abusive, cruel, cold, violent, or who even abandoned the family altogether, the word “father” has no positive sides at all. To them, the idea of God’s fatherhood brings no comfort, only threat. Why would they want another father after fatherhood has been such a wounding experience?

We further compound their pain when we insist that God really is like an earthly father, only better. But using superlative examples of ridiculous behavior (a father serving up a meal with a snake as a starter and a scorpion for main course are both bizarre images), Jesus teaches that our heavenly Father is completely different and like no other father that there has ever been. He is faithful, caring, generous, and always interested in us. This is a picture of perfect fatherhood, unparalleled anywhere else.

To those who have had terrible experiences of fatherhood, I know that a sentence or two from me isn’t going to resolve that. But instead of translating negative images of parenting from your own experience, remember that Jesus revealed His Father, insisting that those who had seen Him had seen the Father. The kindness, humor, winsomeness, and self-sacrifice of Jesus, these are the characteristics of the Ultimate Father God. This is the God to whom we come in prayer. Our Father.

Prayer: Take me into a greater understanding of Your fatherly nature and care, Father God. Amen.

Wednesday, May 3rd: It doesn't Come Naturally

Read: Romans 8:14-17, Galatians 4:1-7

Focus: "... rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'" (Romans 8:15)

Yesterday we acknowledged that there are some who find it especially difficult to conceive of God's fatherhood. But I'd like to suggest that none of us experience God's fatherhood without God's supernatural help. Twice in the New Testament we are told that it is by the Spirit that we are able to cry out "Abba, Father." Once again we see the help of God's Spirit in the place of prayer, because commentators suggest that "crying" to God like this is primarily about the prayers that we offer. All of this points us to the need for us to be filled with the Holy Spirit daily. Christians do not simply try hard to fulfill a series of moral obligations, including the practice of prayer. "It is God who works in you," Paul reminds his friends in the Philippian church (Phil 2:13). Just as a tree needs sap to produce fruit, so we can experience the daily inner empowering of the Holy Spirit to live the Christian life, and walk with God.

The Bible calls us all to carry on "being being filled with the Spirit." That's not a typo, it's the emphasis of Scripture, calling us to be dependent continuously upon God, and to ask Him to renew us daily in the Spirit. Christians have argued endlessly about what being filled with the Spirit means, but perhaps we would do better to focus less on the experience and just ask God to fill us with His fullness each day. Not only will we be empowered to serve God, but we will be emboldened in our relationship with Father God.

Prayer: Spirit of the living God, renew and fill me today, that I might grow in the knowledge of the Father. In Christ's Name I pray. Amen.

Thursday, May 4th: Our Father - The Corporate

Read: Matthew 6:5-15, Acts 4:23-31

Focus: “This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father....’” (Matthew 6:9)

As we consider the entire prayer, let’s notice that the personal pronouns are all plural. We are called to say our Father rather than my father. It’s our daily bread that we ask for; our sins for which we seek forgiveness. Let’s return again to the ancient rabbis - they taught that we should pray, “Hear not, O Lord, the prayer of the traveller”. That seems strange. Don’t many of us pray for so called “traveling mercies”? We do, and we should. But the Jewish perspective is that the person who travels is primarily concerned about what affects their journey, weather, safety, no hold ups. The traveller is preoccupied with what makes their day smoother, and is therefore more likely to become self-focused in their praying. But Jews were taught that we should rather ask for what benefits everybody, rather than what is just best for me.

That challenges the way some teachers present the life of faith, over-individualizing it. Some “health and wealth” preachers don’t just present the false notion that God’s primary concern is that everyone be rich, but make it all very focused on my hopes and dreams rather than what is best for us together as the people of God.

This emphasis on “our” rather than “mine” shows us the value of sharing prayer with others. Despite the wonderful success of movements like 24/7, some churches have little opportunity for prayer gatherings. That means we are missing out on the opportunity to gather to God with our focused prayers.

Prayer: Lord, I know that you want me to bring my needs to you-but save me from becoming unhealthily focused on my own life. Amen.

Friday, May 5th: More on Shared Prayer Together

Read: Matthew 18:18-20, Acts 1:14

Focus: “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 18:19)

Sometimes when we look back on the life of the early church, we view it through rose-tinted glasses, as if they had no problems at all. That is wrong. They argued, struggled to be inclusive, were bewildered when God moved unexpectedly, and battled to stay in unity. But it's clear when we consider the book of Acts that they had the habit of sharing in corporate prayer. The Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost to a prayer gathering (Acts 2:1-4). Before making major decisions, like choosing someone to replace tragic Judas, they prayed (Acts 1:24-25), as they did before choosing people to serve the needs of widows (Acts 6:6). When faced with threats, they gathered to pray for courage (Acts 4:23-31). And it was in the place of prayer that God's missional strategy was revealed, as the Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Saul to embark on their first missionary journey together (Acts 13:1-2). This practice of shared prayer was not just in large gatherings. Paul and Silas were praying when God sent an earthquake that led to their release and the amazing conversion of the jailer (Acts 16:25-26).

There is power in shared agreement in prayer. Prayer is somewhat easier if it is expressed in creative, interesting formats. I confess that I struggled with boredom in some of the first prayer meetings that I attended as a young Christian, mainly because the format was predictable. But vibrant, varied corporate gatherings for prayer are vital for every local church.

Prayer: Lord, help me to include prayer as an ingredient of my friendships. Amen.

Saturday and Sunday, May 6th and 7th: Radical Talk

Read: Matthew 6:9, Hebrews 10:19-22

Jesus gave us a radical example when He prayed. Pagans used to address God as father but Jews were not in that general habit, mainly because the fatherhood of God was not a central theme in Old Testament biblical theology. The Jews preferred using language that exalted God, like King of the Universe or Sovereign Lord, rather than expressing intimacy with Him. But Jesus broke with that pattern, even using the beautiful Aramaic word Abba -the very same word that Jewish children used to address their own earthly fathers, daddy.

Religion has tended to shy away from that intimacy. In some Orthodox churches, a preface is used for the Lord's prayer, saying, "Grant that we may dare to call on Thee as Father, and to say 'Our Father...'" Such intimacy seems too bold to them. But this is how God insists that we address Him-and this matters. Without that sense of welcome and intimacy, we will draw back from God, nervous and uncertain. No wonder the writer to the Hebrews beckons us warmly to draw close to the Lord. The alphabet of Christianity starts with "F" for Father.

To ponder: Do you find it easier to conceive of God as Almighty and powerful rather than as a Father?

Monday, May 8th: Our Adoptive Father

Read: Romans 8:14-17, Ephesians 3:1-13

Focus: “The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.” (Romans 8:15)

Before we move on from the truth that God is our Father, let's pause and consider a wonderful truth: He is the Father who has specially chosen to adopt us into His family. Often we look upon God as the appeased judge, which is true, but this is the language of the courtroom. A crime, the sin of humanity, was paid for in full by the shed blood of Christ, but God remains the judge nonetheless. But there is a further lost treasure in the New Testament that leads us from the language of the courtroom to the language of the family home. We who are in Christ have been formally adopted into the family of God. The Trinity is hard (even impossible) to understand, but let's affirm that God only has one natural Son, His name is Jesus. But now our “big brother” Jesus has laid down His life for us, opening the way for us also to find a way into the Father's house, not as cringing servants but as sons and daughters. The good Fatherhood of God, the sufferings of His Son and the message of His grace and adopting love must be at the heart of our churches if we are to live with a sense that we are welcomed into His presence, then we can draw near to God's throne with confidence.

Is it possible that some of us are still subconsciously thinking, “Here comes the judge” when we think of God, but God wants us to view Him as the Father who has intentionally chosen us in Christ to be His? Perhaps it's time to settle down into the family room when we come to prayer.

Prayer: Shape my thinking, to see You as Father, who has always planned for me to be part of Your adopted family. Amen.

Tuesday, May 9: In the Heavens

Read: Matthew 6:9, Acts 17:16-28

**Focus: “This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven....’”
(Matthew 6:9)**

Sometimes prayer seems like a very long distance call. And it's not helped by the fact that the Lord's Prayer apparently describes our Father as being “in heaven.” That seems like a very long way away. If God is up there and we are down here, then prayer can feel like lobbing snowballs at the moon. And the fact that, much of the time, there is no reply back from God makes the sense of distance seem greater. So what on earth does Jesus mean when He teaches us to pray “Our Father in heaven”?

Dallas Willard suggests that our problem, the suggestion of a God who lives above, has been created by a poor translation of the word heaven, which he insists should be the plural, “heavens.” Suddenly, everything changes. Far from suggesting that the Father is distant, Jesus teaches precisely the opposite. The “first” heaven, biblically, is the atmosphere or air that immediately surrounds your body. Jesus is teaching us here that God the Father is both right near us, and right out there. He is introducing us to the infinite, omnipresent Father who also is so very, very close, and in whom we live and move, and have our being. We'll consider this more over the next few days in our journey together. But for now, know this: God is close. And when fear strikes, or sickness stalks, that's very important news that comforts and strengthens us. If we tend to see God as located somewhere else, we need to think again.

Wednesday, May 10th: God with Us

Read: Matthew 28:19-20, John 14:15-21

**Focus: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”
(Matthew 28:20)**

Jesus impressed upon His disciples that even though He was leaving them, navigating the journey to the cross and then to resurrection and ascension, yet they would not be alone. The Holy Spirit would be with them, the paraclete, the helper who comes alongside. In other words, the Son of God was leaving, but in the fullness of the mystery that is the Trinity, God would not be somewhere else, but with them, in them. His parting words affirmed this truth again, promising that He would be with them always, to the very end. Dallas Willard explains why it matters that we see God as being very close:

“Some think that God is a Wizard of Oz type being sitting in a location very remote from us. The universe is then presented to us chiefly as a vast empty space with a humanoid God and a few angels rattling around in it. ...It seems that when many people pray they do have such an image of God in their minds. They therefore find praying psychologically impossible or extremely difficult. No wonder.”

But the idea of God being just “out there” somewhere is difficult to shake. The notion has been popularized by Bette Midler in a lilting song that sadly perpetuates the bad idea that God is just watching us (which implies passivity) from a distance (and He is a long way away). Next time you pray, reflect on the truth that God is right there, in the room, at your side. Talk to Him. It’s a local call. Very local. And that reality makes all the difference.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the promise of Your constant closeness and presence. Whatever today brings, You are with me. Amen.

Thursday, May 11th: Out There and Here Too

Read: 1 Chronicles 29:10-13, Ephesians 3:14-21

Focus: “Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours.” (1 Chronicles 29:11)

It's surely an experience that we've all had: we look up at a night sky, ponder the impossible distances between planets and stars, and it makes us feel very small, incidental specks of sand in a vast desert. Perhaps the Psalmist had been star-gazing when he said, “what is mankind that you are mindful of them?” (Ps. 8:4).

As we hear that God is our Father in the heaven(s), we should not just celebrate the truth that He is close, but also be grateful for the mind-bending truth that He is also the God of the Universe. He is near-and out there too. Scripture captures this truth, declaring that our exalted, transcendent God is holy (an aspect of His character that we shall explore further), but then it goes on to declare that “the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:3). Out there, and fully here, gloriously.

Life has a habit of making our view of God small. The challenges of the world, with so many economic, political and social problems, seem insurmountable. Prayer can at times seem like a wish upon one of those stars, a desperate hope. So when we pray, we must remember who it is that we are talking with. He made the cosmos at a word: light and darkness sprang into being simply because He willed it. And the Creator is also the God of the resurrection, beating even the power of death itself.

Leading a UK conference years ago, I was surprised by a children's worship song that became a firm favorite with the adults: “Our God is a Great Big God.” To Him we come in prayer.

Prayer: Save me from ever limiting your greatness or power, Mighty God. Amen.

Friday, May 12th: With us on Sundays

Read: Matthew 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 14:1-25

**Focus “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”
(Matthew 18:20)**

Living in beautiful Northern Colorado, as we do, there is a comment that I occasionally hear from people who profess to like God and dislike church: “I don’t need to attend a service to worship God. I feel closer to Him in the mountains, just me, Him and creation.” It sounds very appealing, not least because then we don’t have to navigate church-fueled relational tensions, or frustration when things don’t go in the direction we’d like. But it’s a false notion. We’ve already seen that we address the Lord as our Father. Let’s also know that in a way, which perhaps we can’t fully quantify, God is with us dynamically in our gatherings.

God is obviously omnipresent-everywhere, all of the time. But there are times when He makes His presence felt more obviously. Some people talk about these spaces as “thin places,” where we can experience a strong sense of God being there. As the New Testament talks about the gatherings of God’s people, it describes evidence of that presence, the gifts of the Spirit operating, physical healing, and even the place where they met being shaken. God often seems to show Himself as being there when His people gather. That’s not to suggest that every time we meet, we should expect some massive supernatural encounter. Often we’re called to come together, pray our prayers in agreement, open Scripture, share sacraments, give and go home. But the Bible makes it clear that God is with His people as they gather in His Name. So let’s not neglect those gatherings.

Prayer: Lord, I’m grateful to be part of the family of God. Help me to commit to it, especially when fellowship is a challenge. Amen.

Saturday and Sunday, May 13th and 14th: With us on Mondays Too

Read: Matthew 10:29-33, 1 Corinthians 10:31

In a book created for children, it was a well-intended attempt to teach them the importance of the local church. But one of the cartoons gave an entirely wrong impression about the Lord. A mother was pictured walking away from a church building with her daughter. “Wave goodbye to God, darling,” the mother said. The implication was obvious and wrong: God lives in special buildings, and we visit Him there occasionally, maybe weekly on Sundays, and only communicate with Him through special ceremonies. Yesterday we affirmed the vital importance of gathering with God’s people but we must never place God in a watertight, Sunday compartment, occasionally giving Him a prayerful nod. He influences our daily lives and we walk with Him on an ongoing journey of faith.

As we see Jesus quietly joining the exhausted pair on the Emmaus Road, (Lk 24:13-27) listening to their concerns and disappointments, and sharing words of encouragement and even rebuke, we see a portrait of the normal Christian life. Obviously we don’t experience Him in the same way, visibly, sharing supper! Our walk is one taken by faith, which obviously has its challenges. But as we hear Jesus affirm that our heavenly Father cares for every detail of our lives, (and is not just concerned with the matters of a distant heaven) so we are prompted to whisper our prayers in our everyday experiences, in everything we do.

To Ponder: What happens to our lives when we start to think of God as someone for the weekend services, but not for Monday morning?

Monday, May 15th: A Prayer

Read: Isaiah 43:1-13, Deuteronomy 31:6

Focus: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.” (Isaiah 43:2)

Before we move on, I'd like to share a prayer that beautifully expresses the truth that God is always with us, in all things, all the time. “The Breastplate Prayer of St. Patrick” was probably written in the 5th century. St Patrick was born in Roman Britain, and captured by Irish pirates at the age of sixteen. He is now famous for his missional work in Ireland. Patrick developed a prayer, and we can use this modern adaption of it.

Christ to protect me today
against poison, against burning,
against drowning, against wounding,
So that there may come abundance of reward.

Christ with me, Christ before me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ where I lie, Christ where I sit, Christ where I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.

By the grace of God, let's live with a greater dependency and consciousness of the presence of Jesus today. Prayer will help us in that aspiration.

Prayer: Surround me with Your grace and protection today, living, risen, present Christ. Amen.

Tuesday, May 16th: Hallowed be your Name

Read: Matthew 6:9, John 14:5-7

Focus: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” (Matthew 6:9)

Spirituality is fashionable these days, at least in some circles. Generally, those who choose to be spiritual are no longer treated as strange. That’s good, for the most part. When people are open to spiritual matters, that means that they are searching, and they might find Christ. It also makes conversation about spiritual matters easier. But there’s a danger in this: that non-specific, vague spiritual exploration becomes a substitute for a genuine encounter with the living God. As we pray, “hallowed be your Name,” and request that God’s name will be seen as holy, it reminds us that any spirituality not specifically directed towards the one and only true God is hollow. Before I became a Christian, I occasionally prayed upward, “to whom it may concern.” But a name uniquely identifies a person. We are affirming there is only one way to God-through Jesus. In a culture where many names are considered holy, the Christian affirms that there is but one Name that is to be exalted.

Perhaps this will be an area where Christians will be most criticized in the coming days. People won’t mind if we worship something, generally. But when we affirm that we worship Someone, specifically, by name, then the pressure may come. If so, may we be found faithful, like many other believers around the world who pay a high price for following Christ. May God give us grace, as followers of Jesus, as we insist that there is only one way to God, without becoming narrow, ranting, or unkind.

Prayer: Strengthen me today, to live boldly, and kindly for you, Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Wednesday, May 17th: God as ‘Middle C’

Read: Isaiah 40:1-31, Psalm 18:1-6

Focus: “To whom will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One.” (Isaiah 40:25)

Lloyd C. Douglas, who wrote the novels, *The Robe* and *The Big Fisherman*, tells of a retired music teacher that he met while in university. They lived in the same lodgings, and the older man was disabled and unable to leave his apartment. A daily ritual of sorts developed between them; every morning Douglas would open the old man’s door and ask the same question, “What’s the good news?” The older gentleman would pick up his tuning fork, tap it on the metal arm of his wheelchair, and say the following:

“That’s middle C! It was middle C yesterday, it will be middle C tomorrow; it will be middle C a thousand years from now. The tenor upstairs sings flat, the piano across the hall is out of tune, but that, my friend, is middle C!”

In our confused world, God stands above the post modern clamor as the one who is the “middle C,” the constant reality upon whom we can depend.

In prayer, we come to the Holy One who will never respond with indifference. His ways are established; His plans for the planet, and for us, are firm. As we’ll see tomorrow, as humans we can be tempted to try to make Him into being what we would prefer Him to be. But in a rapidly changing and uncertain world, God is our “rock” to whom we can turn. As Isaiah was called to comfort the people of God with this revelation, so let’s allow our own hearts to be stilled by the peace that comes from knowing that the unchanging God has ultimate control of this wayward, bewildering planet.

Prayer: I love you, Lord, my rock, my strength. Amen.

Thursday, May 18th: Unchanging, Holy God

Read: Exodus 32:1-35, Exodus 3:1-14

**Focus: “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt”.
(Exodus 32:4)**

Throughout her history, Israel was tempted to create their own version of God, to try to make Him into what she wanted Him to be. The rot set in quickly; even while Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the law, the Hebrews made an “alternative” god. Aaron shaped a golden calf, and then a remarkable statement was made about his handiwork: “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt” (Exodus 32:4b)

“Aaron went on to call ‘a festival to the Lord’ the following day. In his thinking, God had truly been honored. But whenever humanity tries to revise God, not only is doctrinal truth a casualty, but human behavior degenerates too: the next day, the people ‘engaged in revelry’ (Ex 32:6) - which, in this context, likely included a sexual orgy.

Instead of responding to the absolute self-revelation of God, “the great ‘I am’” (Ex 20), the Hebrews reversed this and began to create God according to their own subjective and immediate wish list. Impatient with God’s mountain top conference with Moses, they sought to revise their God, and unwittingly devised a god.

Sometimes I wish that God had not said certain things in His word. Life would easier if I could just ‘revise’ Him to what I’d like Him to be. Some of his commands are difficult to follow. But we all need to take to heart the warnings about making our own “golden calf-gods,” in the formation we can cope with, or even manage or fully understand. We are to pray to the unchanging God.

Prayer: You are who You are, Lord. Help me to never think of You as I’d like You to be, rather than who You really are. Amen.

Friday, May 19th: Awesome God

Read: Psalm 8:109, 1 Samuel 2:1-2

Focus: “Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens.” (Psalm 8:1)

The word “holy” also means “to be marked off from the ordinary.” Some writers have said God’s quality of holiness makes Him “the great stranger,” so utterly unique is He. His purity is perfect, His power beyond understanding, He is “the beautiful One” (Ps 27:4). The holiness of God means that in no sense is God “one of us.” That means that we shouldn’t confuse intimacy with flippancy when it comes to approaching Him. The Bible calls us all to “come near to the throne of God with confidence” (Heb 10:22). But perhaps we should remind ourselves of how remarkable that invitation is. Under the old covenant, even Isaiah could only cower until his lips had been cleansed with a burning coal (Isa 6:6). In Isaiah that awe is expressed most strongly in this refrain: “Go into the rock, hide in the dust in terror of Yahweh, at the brilliance of his majesty when he arises to make the earth quake” (Isa 2.10).

A reminder of the awesomeness of God is timely, lest we replace confidence with a casual “God is my mate” approach: a God who deserves no reverence surely has no relevance. Donald McCullough, one of my favorite authors, warns us against careless flippancy: “Reverence and awe have often been replaced by a yawn of familiarity. The consuming fire has been domesticated into a candle flame, adding a bit of religious atmosphere, perhaps, but no heat, no blinding light, no power for purification.” Let’s draw near, but remember *Who* it is we draw near to.

Prayer: Lord, You are truly awesome. I’m thankful for grace that allows me to approach You and know Your awesome love. Amen.

Saturday and Sunday, May 20th and 21st: Holy Other yet Wholly yet Near

Read: Genesis 3:1-9, Isaiah 7:14

I know. I'm back talking about the closeness of God. But we need to affirm again that God's holy, hallowed nature never means distance from us. The story of God does not stop with the revelation of His holy transcendence. Israel's story is that the "out there, totally different from us" God connected with them, dynamically leading His people, delighting in their faithfulness, weeping over their sin. Then, as Jesus comes, the "wholly other" God becomes the God wholly with us and for us-Emmanuel.

God, with His people, strolling around a garden, is the portrait that emerges from the opening chapters of Genesis. Again, we can learn from a rabbi, this time Abraham Heschel: "The God of the prophets is not the wholly other, a strange, weird, uncanny Being, shrouded in unfathomable darkness, but the God of the covenant, whose will they know and are called upon to convey. The God they proclaim is not the Remote One, but the One who is invoked, near, and concerned."

Far from being unapproachable in His holiness, He comes looking for us, and comes to save. The story of the prodigal son shows us a father figure who comes sprinting out to meet his wayward boy. Why? Because the holy God always wanted to walk with His creation, the human race, just as it was back in Eden's bright day, before sin brought separation. He went looking for wayward Adam and Eve; in Christ, He came looking for us. As we turn in prayer to His holy presence, He comes close still.

To ponder: God came looking for you. Could that truth change the way that you think about yourself?

Monday, May 22nd: Becoming Holy like Him

Read: 1 Peter 1:13-16, Matthew 5:13-16

Focus: “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” (1 Peter 1:15–16)

When we pray, “May your Name be hallowed,” we must consider the primary way that the holy God is revealed as being holy, through the lives of His people, who are called to be like Him, and so reflect His character. In praying that way, we must embrace the call to authentic holiness. God is clear. In His holiness, He calls us to be holy too.

God’s people are called to be like Him, to walk in His ways: “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy’” (Lev 19:2). This “call to imitation” is extended into New Testament thinking: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:42). “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:1).

We’re called to march to a different drumbeat, to be distinguishable from others by an entirely new way of living rooted in holiness. We follow a “stranger” God, and are called to be “strangers” as a result. We’re called salt and light, and that calls for distinctive, holy living with the help of our Holy God.

So we show God as loving as we love, God as generous as we give, God’s kindness as we are kind to that person who nudges us to irritation. Some people have rejected God, but they’ve never had the chance to see His true character. The plan is that He is represented in and by us, however feebly.

Prayer: Lord, may I reflect just a little of You today, as the moon reflects the sun.
Amen.

Tuesday, May 23rd: The Main Message of Jesus: The Kingdom and God's Will

Read: Matthew 4:23-25, Matthew 6:9-10

Focus: “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.” (Matthew 4:23)

Having thought about the God to whom we pray, He is the Only wise God, the only Holy One, we now turn to think about the priority of our prayers. What, above all, should we pray for? The answer is found in a short sentence. Let your kingdom come.

If we could interview some of the crowds who heard Jesus preach, and ask them what His main theme was, the answer would be, “the kingdom of God.” The Sermon on the Mount is about what happens when the kingdom-the rule-of God comes. Jesus’ ministry had the kingdom as its core theme. He went about “preaching the good news of the kingdom” (Matt 4:23). The parables of Jesus shed light on what the kingdom is like.

The biblical words for kingdom are *malkuth* (Hebrew) and *basileia* (Greek). The meaning of these words is primarily that of “rule” rather than “realm”. In other words, when we speak of God’s kingdom, we are thinking about what He wants happening, rather than an area with land borders that can be found on a map.

In the Old Testament, God was seen as king over Israel and over the whole earth, but the Old Testament also speaks of a day when He shall become king. That’s a helpful illustration of the, “it’s here, but there’s more” truth of the kingdom. God is already King, but He will yet be King in greater fullness, in the fullness of time. Over the next few days, we’ll consider more what it means to pray for the kingdom to come. However, as we do, let’s ask the Lord to rule and reign over us.

Prayer: Reign in me, Lord. Show me where there are areas in my life where Your kingdom has yet to come. Amen.

Wednesday, May 24th: The Kingdom is a Revolution

Read: Matthew 6:9-10, Zechariah 9:9-13

Focus: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10)

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, just as Zechariah had prophesied that Israel’s king would ride into the city on a colt (Zech 9:9). The symbolism was obvious: He is Israel’s King. Graham Tomlin says, “No one in their right mind would enter the city this way. It would be like hiring a presidential limousine to enter Washington, which is pretty crazy, unless, of course, you are the President.” But still Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was both a fulfillment and a surprise. Other Messianic figures offered aggressive and militaristic solutions to Israel’s immense problems, but Jesus comes riding on a colt, a symbol of a time of peace, where “chariots and war horses would be banished” (Zech 9:10), announcing peace to the Gentiles. He is the King of the Jews, but is crowned on a cross, not a throne. Here is the kingdom where a radical set of values reign, and to be a citizen of that kingdom means learning that new, radical way of life. When we pray, “your Kingdom come,” we are praying first of all that this revolution will be experienced in our own lives.

Jesus did not just come to forgive us for our past, or guarantee our eternal future. He is not just an advisor, a helper, a comforter, or a coach. He rides into our lives as King, and as King to be obeyed. He came to turn our lives upside down, or more accurately, turn them the right way up, His way. Are we still experiencing that revolution, or have we settled down to something that is less than radical?

Prayer: Let me experience your revolutionary rule today, King Jesus. Amen.

Thursday, May 25th: Passionate but Wrong

Read: Luke 17:20-3, John 18:36

Focus: “Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied ...” (Luke 17:20)

At the time of Jesus, the Jews were looking for “the kingdom of God”—a political state of affairs where Israel, a nation then occupied by Rome, would be free to enjoy their own land, with God as King. The plan had always been that God alone would be King over His people, but once they started to have kings, they were mainly a disappointment, and many turned their backs on God.

Even the brilliance of David’s reign was seen as a foretaste of something even far better to come. From David’s family line would come a great King who would build a kingdom that would last forever. In Jesus’ time, there was disagreement about how this new kingdom would come. The Sadducees, the ruling group of priests, taught that maintaining the status quo, with continued sacrificial worship in the temple, would usher in the time of God’s reign. The Essenes, another sect, hated the temple, because it had been built by King Herod the Great. They set up a separated community a few miles from Jerusalem, on the shore of the Dead Sea. The Pharisees insisted that withdrawal from everyday life was not necessary, but that a revival of renewed ceremonial and everyday holiness would prompt God to intervene on Israel’s behalf. Then there were the Zealots, the terrorist force of their day, who took matters into their own hands, and instigated popular uprisings to try to overthrow the hated occupiers. Just about everybody had the wrong idea about the kingdom. Sincerity is not enough.

Prayer: Lord, in my enthusiasm and passion, keep me in Your truth, and help me to maintain a teachable heart. Amen.

Friday, May 26th: The Kingdom Calls for Surrender

Read: Luke 6:46-49, John 13:1-17

**Focus: “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”
(Luke 6:46)**

It happened again last night. I was just about to go to the platform to preach, when I sensed God challenging me about putting something right in my own life. I wanted to put it off, but there was a sense of urgency: God wanted immediate obedience. A little reluctantly, I submitted.

To step into the kingdom is to surrender every right to Christ, rather than “getting a little religion,” like an added extension to an existing house. This is how life is supposed to be for every human being on earth, to live under the reign and order of the King and his Kingdom. Roy McCloughry points out that often people don’t fully grasp that conversion means total surrender to Christ. All too often in Western society, people respond to the message of the evangelist by adding a new compartment to their life.

For the earliest Christians, this call to total allegiance meant acknowledging that Herod the Great was not “King of the Jews” as he prided himself, and that Caesar was not “Lord”. Suffering must be expected for those who profess loyalty to Christ, including ridicule, outright hostility and persecution.

Around the world today persecution still rages. Christians are marginalized, threatened and murdered because of their refusal to deny Christ. Not only should we pray for them, and raise our voices in their defense wherever possible, but we must be humbled by their example. For them, the Kingdom has meant total, costly surrender. Maybe it will one day for us as well.

Prayer: Your kingdom is more than a theory, but calls for my surrender, mighty Lord. Help me to live for Your glory. Amen.

Saturday and Sunday, May 27th and 28th: The Kingdom and the Church are Not the Same

Read: Matthew 6:25-34, 1 Peter 2:9-10

It's something we do weekly here at Timberline Church. We talk about how there are many great churches in the city, and we are just part of the picture here, not the picture. It's right to pray that God will bless "our" local church. But a greater priority should surely be to pray for the "kingdom to come" in our locality. And our prayers are not just for the blessing of one or indeed all of the churches in the area, but rather that the kingdom might come. The kingdom, the reign of God, obviously existed before the church, and will continue throughout eternity when the entity of the church will have discontinued its earthly existence.

The distinction between church and kingdom is vital. When we see that the church, and the structures and programs that the church creates, are servants of the kingdom and not the kingdom itself, then we are able to remain both humble and be open to change.

This truth also prompts us to realize that God's activity and beauty are not limited to the church. God is the Creator. That means we can admire and give thanks for wonderful art and musical genius, whether it comes from "the church," Christian artists or composers, or not, because the influence and beauty of God are found in the most unexpected places.

I love the church, and I believe totally in its priority in our lives. But it exists to serve the King. So next time change comes, let's be willing to go with it, if that change will serve the purposes of the kingdom.

Monday, May 29th: The Kingdom is a Party

Read: Matthew 22:1-14, Revelation 19:1-9

Focus: “Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.’” (Matthew 22:1-2)

It still happens occasionally. I love to use humor to communicate, but sometimes find myself in churches where people have been taught to be nervous of laughter. The atmosphere is more like a funeral than a party. But Jesus loved parties, and spent a lot of time at them. The living, active church is called to be the primary sign of the kingdom, a working model of life lived under the love and lordship of Jesus, a party with an open door policy, where all are invited to come in from the cold and join in the fun. Graham Tomlin uses the analogy of the church being like the legend of Robin Hood. In that story, the honorable and good King Richard is absent from the country, and so the land is ruled by his despicable brother, John. Harsh taxation and national oppression force Robin, Maid Marian and a band of “merry men” to go underground, or specifically, into the undergrowth, of Sherwood Forest. Their acts of defiance and charity (robbing the rich to give to the poor) keep the knowledge of the “good-King-to-come” alive. They are a mischievous, subversive lot, characterized by their playful ability to laugh in the face of suffering, because they know that the reign of evil is but temporary. As we delight in story, laughter, and outrageous celebration and kindness, we become living signs of a reign that is here, and, again, is but yet to come in its fullness. Tomlin is refreshingly blunt, “Miserable, gloomy and dull churches have simply missed the point.”

Prayer: Enable Your church to authentically reflect the Kingdom that is a party, Father God. Amen.

Tuesday, May 30th: The Kingdom is yet to Come

Read: Hebrews 2:5-9, Philippians 2:1-11

Focus: “...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth...” (Philippians 2:10)

It's a truth that I wish I had learned decades ago, and I've written about it elsewhere, but it's worth mentioning again, everything is broken. That's not a statement of negativity or pessimism, but one that reflects the theological reality that the kingdom of God is here, but it is also yet to fully come, a truth that I've alluded to over the last few days. In the meantime, we live “in the gap” between the resurrection and second coming of Christ. One day, He will reign and rule over everything, and everything will bow before Him, but in the interim, nothing is totally perfect, even though the slow work of easy transformation is happening if we walk with Christ and cooperate with the Holy Spirit. Every church, organization, marriage and person is still fractured. As Hebrews says, “Everything is not yet under subjection to Him” (Heb 2:9). If we don't grasp that truth, we will live in continuous disappointment. Those who are passionate visionaries are especially vulnerable. They hope for great things, and are therefore easily disappointed when reality rears its ugly head. We are still in the phase of Jesus “building His church”, and where there's building, there's dust, disarray, and the noise and disruption of construction everywhere. So let's not be surprised at brokenness, but also live in the certain hope of the future.

Prayer: Help me to be both hopeful and realistic, Lord. Amen.

Wednesday, May 31st: Everything is not Inevitable: Your Will be Done

Read: Exodus 32:1-14, Genesis 18:16-33

Focus: “Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.” (Exodus 32:14)

As we pray, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done”, we must see this truth. We pray like that because God doesn’t always get His way. His kingdom rule is not always accepted, and His will is not always done. Some seem to take the view that everything that happens is inevitable anyway, if it happened, it was God’s will, a fatalistic approach to life. Whatever will be will be. But it is not God’s will that evil dictators triumph, that terrorists encourage little children to become suicide bombers, or that human trafficking is still a worldwide outrage. God has called us into partnership with Himself. He is obviously the senior partner, but He invites us to participate in the shaping of history through our kingdom-centered praying.

Moses discovered that truth as he interceded on behalf of wayward Israel. God was determined to bring judgment upon them as they had so quickly abandoned their faith in Him and turned instead to idolatry. But as Moses stepped into the gap, we see nothing short of a negotiation taking place, amazingly, with God determining to hear Moses’ request and take a different direction. An even more startling example of someone bargaining with God occurs in the story of Abraham, as he pleads with God to spare the population of the evil city of Sodom.

If everything is already settled, then wrestling and requesting in prayer is futile. But that’s not the case, so let’s embrace the dignity of our prayerful partnership and calling today.

Prayer: Lord, senior partner, help me to see and embrace the amazing privilege that prayer brings. Amen.

Thursday, June 1st: Kingdom Optimism

Read: Luke 2:8-14, Isaiah 9:6-7

Focus: “The angel said, ‘Don’t be afraid. I’m here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide.’” (Luke 2:10, The Message)

As people of the kingdom, we should be full of hope. Optimism burned in the hearts of the early pioneers of the modern missionary movement, like William Carey, founder of the Baptist Missionary Society:(BMS). Carey was convinced that the world could be transformed by the gospel, that God had “repeatedly made known his intention to prevail finally over all the power of the devil ... and to so set up his kingdom among men.” Dr. David Smith describes the optimism of eighteenth century evangelicals: “They possessed an inexhaustible confidence in the power and grace of God and believed that they stood on the brink of a time when the Gospel of Christ was destined to renew and transform the whole of the earth.”

Carey and his colleagues worked hard to present the gospel in a culturally relevant way. In the face of great difficulty, missionaries stuck to their task with amazing faithfulness, some signing covenants annually which contained these words, “Let us give ourselves up unreservedly to this glorious cause. Let us never think that our time, our gifts, our strength, our families, or even the clothes we wear, are our own.”

That hopefulness survived into the nineteenth century. The renowned Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon told the annual meeting of the BMS in 1858 that the Gospel would one day so transform society that war would be a memory: “When the Gospel has its day, wars must cease to the ends of the earth.” Christ truly is the hope of the entire world.

Prayer: Today, Lord, I affirm the greatness of Your universal invitation. Your Kingdom is the answer the world is looking for. Amen.

Friday, June 2nd: Our Daily Bread

Read: Colossians 3:23-24, Matthew 6:9-11

Focus: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord ... since you ... will receive an inheritance from the Lord ... It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” (Colossians 3:23-24)

Some early commentators on the Lord’s Prayer just couldn’t bring themselves to believe that Jesus would “sink” to discussing something as mundane as food. Surely, they reasoned, Jesus was speaking about something more “spiritual” than bread for each day? Early church fathers like Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine taught that Jesus was referring not to a hearty loaf, but “the invisible bread of the word of God.” Why? Well, surely Jesus is more interested in Bible reading than toast, or so they reasoned. Jerome thought that daily bread was a reference to the sacrament of Holy Communion. Thankfully, the Reformers were more down to earth. Calvin argued that spiritualizing of “daily bread” was “exceedingly absurd.”

We too can be guilty of a subtle heresy; that God is only interested in our “spiritual” lives. Many of us persist in the dualistic idea that God is interested in our Bible reading, prayer and endless hymn singing but reading of a novel, playing a round of golf or anything else “unchurchy” all register far less on the spiritual scale.

A similar error kicks in when we start talking about secular work, as if those who work full time for the church are doing something very useful, but those who work in the broader market place are doing something less valuable. The result of this is that we chop our lives up into sacred and secular boxes. But earlier we saw that God is interested in our Mondays as well as our Sundays. All of our lives matter to Him.

Prayer: Thank you, Father, that You care for all of my life, 24/7. Amen.

Saturday and Sunday, June 3rd and 4th: Give Us ... Asking for Ourselves

Read: Luke 11:9-10, Mark 10:13-16

The man looked surprised. He'd been telling me about some problems he'd been having in his business life. I asked him if he'd been able to pray about the various possibilities. He looked staggered. "Pray for myself? Absolutely, not, Jeff. Isn't that rather selfish?" Reacting against some of the foolishness of health and wealth prosperity teaching, I've noticed a reluctance in my own life when it comes to asking for me.

What a contrast that is with that of children. I try not to mention my two grandchildren too often in my writing but I've noticed that they are rather good at asking, and receiving. They have no hesitation about putting in their requests. Little wonder that Jesus taught His followers, not to be childish, but to be childlike, and that was not primarily about simplicity of faith, but about an ability to receive the kingdom. God likes it when we ask. The church is a community with request at its heart; we are people who have been appointed by God to petition Him together.

John Newton, the slave-trader-turned-pastor and hymn writer, would receive almost unbelievable answers to his prayers because he believed in what he called "large asking." I'd like to take a leaf out of his book.

To ponder: Do you ask the Lord for your own needs? Or do you tend to only focus on your own needs?

Monday, June 5th: Asking Daily - Dependency

Read: John 15:1-5, Matthew 18:19-20

**Focus: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”
(John 15:5)**

It was certainly a strange phase in my life, and probably caused some to wonder if my faith had led me into becoming unbalanced. At the conference for leaders, the main leader of the network that I was part of called me to the stage, and presented me with a bishop’s staff. It had previously belonged to Bishop Trevor Huddleston, who campaigned fearlessly against apartheid in South Africa. In front of a thousand other leaders, I was told that I should carry the staff with me when on ministry travel, as a sign of my dependency upon God. And so I did, for a few years. Carting a staff around a conference campus at their huge UK Spring Harvest event certainly brought a few bewildered stares! Walking into an Anglican church (one led by a vicar who was somewhat disillusioned with the Anglican ecclesiastical hierarchy) I was greeted with a delighted laugh, and the comment, “At last! A real bishop!”

While I admit that carrying the staff was odd, I do believe that it was truly what God was asking me to do. Daily dependency upon the Lord, recognizing that He is our source, our wisdom, our King, is an important lesson to learn. I’ve made a few decisions without seriously consulting Him or depending on His direction, and they have been disastrous. I don’t carry the staff any more. It was lost during a transatlantic air flight. But I’ve not forgotten the lesson, that dependency upon God, daily, is an attitude that I never should lose, and as we ask for bread, daily, we express our need for Him.

Prayer: I wander, Lord. Save me from good ideas that aren’t Your ideas. Help me to keep You as my source, my guide, my Lord. Amen.

Tuesday, June 6th: Forgive Us our Sins

Read: Matthew 6:9-12, Matthew 4:12-17

**Focus: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”.
(Matthew 6:12)**

It happened during a gathering of Christian leaders. Joel Edwards, former head of the UK's Evangelical Alliance, spoke of his conversion experience, when he had a great awareness and conviction of sin. Joel challenged the gathering with the question, whatever has happened to sin these days? Some say it was not even in the dictionary prior to 1975. Now, the word is very much in common usage, in a culture where, as one journalist says, “Judging evil is widely considered worse than doing evil.” Utter tolerance is the new mantra.

Encouraging a woman to embark on a disastrous adulterous affair, a character in a Hollywood movie declares, “There's no such thing as good or bad. Just choices.”

The very word, sin, seems to have an antiquated feel about it. But the model prayer that Jesus taught calls us to repentance, and that does not just mean turning from sin, but embracing an entirely new worldview, a different outlook on life. Whatever our culture says, we humans still desperately need forgiveness, and denying the sinfulness of sin is no substitute for it. A call to repent is a core part of the gospel, and we neglect it at our peril. In a culture where tolerance is seen as the only way (and the only thing that some won't tolerate is intolerance!), let's always remember that, and be willing to not just be sorry, but turn from sin when we fail.

Prayer: Keep my heart tender to you, Lord, that I might quickly turn from that which displeases You. Amen.

Wednesday, June 7th: Not Arrived, but Journeying in Grace

Read: 1 John 1:5-10, Romans 6:1-4

Focus: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

Yesterday we talked about the challenge of losing repentance as an attitude, and sin as an absolute reality, in a world where absolutes are viewed with suspicion. But as we're told to ask for forgiveness, there's a further truth that we should notice. Forgiveness is available on an ongoing, daily basis. We've been taught to pray for daily bread, and so Jesus was teaching elements of prayer that He assumed His disciples would use regularly, and that includes asking for forgiveness. We often want something to happen once for all time, but we live day by day, and God provides day by day.

Sometimes I feel exhausted as a Christian, as though I can never arrive, I am ever on a journey of aspiration. I can never pray enough, give enough, serve enough. Perhaps you know the feeling too. But the offer of daily forgiveness is comforting. That doesn't print us a license to sin deliberately. Scripture is clear that “to sin that grace may abound” is foolishness. But it does mean that, in our frailty and weakness, God recognizes our need for ongoing forgiveness, has made provision for it, and anticipates that we will ask for it.

That also means that we should gladly receive the forgiveness we ask for. In prayer, all requests are made in faith, and we have to have faith that God forgives us. As we'll see, too many of us live like shame addicts. But every day, forgiveness is available. Accept it, and in doing so, live as God intended you to live.

Prayer: Thank you for the Cross, Lord, the place that assures ongoing grace and forgiveness. Amen.

Thursday, June 8th: Not Free at Last

Read: Galatians 5:1-6, Romans 8:1-2

**Focus: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”
(Galatians 5:1)**

Years after Abraham Lincoln had outlawed slavery in America, large members of the black population continued to live in slavery, either because they hadn't heard about the legal freedom that was theirs, or because they chose slavery or felt unable to break free from it. Even after the great emancipation act of the Cross, an area of continued slavery for many Christians is in the area of false guilt. Condemnation and shame all too often blight our lives and eclipse the light of grace. For those who struggle in this area, they are caught with the tragic irony that, the good news has not been that good. Typically, shame overshadows us when we have been raised on a constant emotional diet of being told that we are no good, or we are part of a local church that is more of a well oiled “guilt machine” than a community of grace.

As Jesus teaches us to pray, “forgive us our sins”; we see that asking for and therefore accepting God's grace for our failures is an act of obedience. It is not a self-indulgent luxury that “lets us off the hook” but is normative Christian living. To accept forgiveness is to honor the finished work of Christ at the cross. We gladly receive, aware that we cannot pay our way with God, and thankfully accept that the price has been paid through the sufferings of the Christ. Jesus gave everything to enable us to experience the peace that comes when our guilt is dealt with. Let's not live as if He had never made that sacrifice.

Prayer: Lord, as an act of obedience, I gladly accept Your grace and forgiveness for the episodes that shame me. Thank you for paying the price for my freedom. Amen.

Friday, June 9th: The Accuser

Read: 1 Peter 5:8-1, Ephesians 6:10-20

Focus: “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8)

The Bible affirms that spiritual warfare is real. We are called to be aware of “Satan’s schemes,” to be conscious that the devil “prowls around.” I don’t understand the mechanics of how it all works, but the New Testament affirms that dark forces exist. That means that accepting God’s forgiveness is an act of warfare, because shaming us is one of Satan’s major tactics.

From the beginning, Satan has been whispering insidious indictments about the good character of our good God, casting aspirations even back in Eden, undermining Eve’s confidence in God’s intentions and motives. And he seeks to erode our confidence in the promises of God too, with the question, “Has God said?” In our lives, he seeks to do the same thing, as the “accuser of the brothers and sisters” (Rev 12:10). Satan uses accusation so much, he is even named in honor of the tactic. The word Satan means “accuser;” so Old Testament writers occasionally refer to their human enemies and accusers as “satans.” The Psalmist refers five times to the human “satans” that oppose him.

Satan is history’s most prolific and gifted prosecutor. He has handled cases against Job, Joshua, and David. In the wilderness he came against the Lord Jesus. Through the wagging tongues of the Pharisees, he accused and blasphemed the Holy Spirit. If the Satanic attorney will point the finger at everyone, even the great Judge Himself, don’t you think that he’ll try to pull the same stunt on us? You are not alone.

Prayer: Father, I stand firm in You today, trusting Your word is true. As I have asked for forgiveness, You have graciously granted it. Amen.

Saturday and Sunday, June 10th and 11th: As We Forgive

Read: Matthew 6:9-12, 1 John 2:3-11

**Focus: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”
(Matthew 6:12)**

As we celebrate God the forgiver, we quickly see that we are called to be like Him, forgiving others, passing the grace around. But it’s hard. Social media is alive with angry exchanges between family members and friends, as simmering feuds that have spanned decades smolder on. Many churches, homes, workplaces, and marriages are systematically destroyed every day because of a refusal to forgive. A cycle of “ungrace” results.

The Bible is clear. Scripture teaches us that relational harmony is more important than material gain (Prov. 17:1), and that the commitment to quarreling is the preoccupation of fools (Prov. 20:3). Showing grace is not a sign of weakness, but of dignity and glory (Prov. 19:11) as we refuse the stubbornness that often fuels bitterness (Prov. 18:19).

Calling the followers of Christ to sow love rather than hate, John redefines enlightenment as concerning relationships rather than just information gathering or even profound spirituality. “But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him” (1 Jn 2:11). The enlightened person loves—and the one who does not love is in darkness, whatever else they know. Enlightenment concerns character. John’s portrait of the darkness experienced by the loveless is profound. The picture is of a helpless, blinded person, stumbling around with no awareness of where he is or where he is going.

To ponder: Is there hatred in my life? What steps might I take?

Monday, June 12th: Bitterness

Read: Hebrews 12:14-15, Ephesians 4:31-32

Focus: “See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” (Hebrews 12:15).

As we’re told that we’re forgiven, as we forgive, I don’t think this means that God will not forgive us if we don’t forgive others. None of us can perfectly forgive as God does, there may still be traces of bitterness that remain. I think these are words of encouragement about the normal Christian life, we’re forgiven, we forgive, rather than a conditional contract. That said, the decision to forgive someone who has hurt us is not just for their benefit. There is a sense of self-preservation about forgiveness, as failure to forgive will produce toxic and damaging effects in our own lives. To nurse bitterness is to place ourselves on a pathway of never-ending frustration, because, generally, whatever retribution is actualized, it never satisfies our thirst for vengeance. Relatives of murdered love ones, witnessing the execution of the killer, often express a sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction when the ultimate act of retribution is done. It is not enough.

In her care for fellow holocaust survivors, Corrie Ten Boom saw the power of ongoing bitterness tragically demonstrated. She learned that forgiveness was a daily act, and that those who had found grace to forgive their former enemies were able to return to a sense of normality again and rebuild their lives, even when their physical scars were extreme. But those who, to use her phrase, “nursed their bitterness” remained dysfunctional. Corrie affirmed, “It was as simple and as horrible as that.”

Prayer: When I am tempted to allow bitterness to take root in my life, grant me grace to choose to forgive.

Tuesday, June 13th: Forgiving as a Journey

Read: Colossians 3:13-17, Matthew 18:21-22

**Focus: “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you”
(Colossians 3:13)**

Forgiveness cannot be reduced to an emotion, in a sense it is a cold choice. Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, was reminded by a friend of something especially cruel done to her many years earlier. “Don’t you remember it?” her friend asked. “No”, Clara replied, “I distinctly remember forgetting it.” Paul Tillich says that forgiveness is “remembering the past so that it might be forgotten.” This does not mean the act will be erased from memory, but that we will not focus on it. But forgiveness is also a process and an ongoing decision, a journey of gradually rebuilding our lives, involving our words, actions and emotions.

I’ve cringed during some Christian meetings when the preacher insists that people come forward to instantly forgive those who have hurt them. The preacher, usually male, can unwittingly replicate what has happened to some women, another man demanding immediate submission. A Timberline friend who is also a therapist talks about the danger of “premature forgiveness,” where people are rushed into what looks like forgiving when they are not really prepared for it. “Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude,” said Martin Luther King Jr., and that may involve a lengthy journey. Have you ever “journeyed” towards forgiveness? Were there any attitudes that slowed that journey down, or made you reluctant to begin it?

What matters most is that we are heading the right direction when it comes to forgiving.

Prayer: Help me, Lord, when I have been hurt, to move in a redemptive, forgiving direction. Amen.

Wednesday, June 14th: What Forgiveness is Not

Read: Romans 12:17-21, Proverbs 24:29

Focus: “Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.” (Romans 12:19)

I admit it, there have been times when I’ve really not wanted to forgive, and the journey I mentioned yesterday has been lengthy. Some of us are reluctant to forgive, because it doesn’t seem fair to let somebody who has done wrong “off the hook.” But perhaps we misunderstand what forgiveness actually involves. Forgiving is not about pardoning, or allowing someone to escape from the consequences of a crime. Wrongdoing should still be reported and the person who has done wrong be brought to justice.

In forgiving, we don’t pretend that we have not been hurt. Forgiving doesn’t mean that we approve of or justify what was done to us. God hates sin and calls us away from it. Forgiveness does not seek to pretend that something that was bad was really good, or to excuse or diminish what was done to us. Forgiveness does not try to justify itself by looking for mitigating circumstances for someone’s behavior.

And, perhaps surprisingly, it doesn’t always involve reconciliation! This takes two people, and may not always be possible, or safe.

Forgiveness does not mean that the natural consequences of the sin are averted, in that sense it is not the same as pardon. It just means that we give up our rights to be the controller or avenger in the situation. Forgiveness enables us to allow God to be God in our pain, which may involve Him bringing punishment to the wrongdoer. We just surrender our need to be the judge, and we make room for the Lord.

Prayer: Lord, forgiving is Your way. Help me to make it my way, as I understand it more fully. Amen.

Thursday, June 15th: Unforgettable

Read: Luke 23:26-34, Luke 17:1-4

Focus: “Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’” (Luke 23:34)

In 1987 an IRA bomb went off in a small town west of Belfast, Ireland, amid a group of Protestants who had gathered to honor the war dead on Veterans Day. Eleven people died and sixty-three others were wounded. Gordon Wilson, a devout Methodist who had emigrated north from the Irish Republic and his daughter Marie were caught in the blast. “Daddy, I love you very much,” were the last words Marie spoke. She died a few hours later. Speaking from his hospital bed, Wilson said, “I have lost my daughter, but I bear no grudge. Bitter talk is not going to bring Marie Wilson back to life. I shall pray, tonight and every night, that God will forgive them.” After his release from the hospital, Gordon Wilson led a campaign for Protestant-Catholic reconciliation. Protestant extremists who had planned to avenge the bombing decided, because of the publicity surrounding Wilson, that such behavior would be politically foolish. Wilson wrote a book about his daughter, spoke out against violence, and constantly repeated the refrain, “Love is the bottom line.” He met with the IRA, personally forgave them for what they had done, and asked them to lay down their arms. When he died in 1995, the Irish Republic, Northern Ireland, and Great Britain honored this ordinary Christian citizen who had gained fame for his uncommon spirit of grace and forgiveness.

Jesus prayed for forgiveness for those who tormented and killed Him. When we follow His example, the world sits up and takes notice.

Prayer: As I follow You, may I become increasingly like You, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Friday, June 16th : Don't Lead Us into Temptation

Read: Matthew 6:9-13, James 1:13-18

**Focus “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”
(Matthew 6:13)**

It seems a strange prayer to pray, that God would not “lead us into temptation.” The fact is, He never would. James makes it clear that God cannot tempt us with evil so there is no need for us to ask Him not to! So what does this mean? John Stott believes the best translation of this phrase is “deliver us from the evil one,” who of course is the tempter. Before Jesus embarked on His epic ministry, He faced down the devil in the wilderness of temptation (Lk 4:1-13). But He overcame the threefold strategy of Satan as one “filled with the Spirit.” And we are called to overcome temptation in the same way, not just gritting our teeth and struggling through, but calling upon God’s Spirit to equip and help us.

One of the many reasons for prayer is that we find ourselves living our faith on a spiritual battlefield, which we have touched on before. Some Christians overstate the truth about spiritual warfare, blaming every calamity of life on the devil. But a reaction to that, where we ignore the truth that we are at war, is equally unhelpful. Ignoring the sobering truth won’t exclude us from the conflict.

Perhaps you find yourself in the place of severe temptation today. A poor decision could create devastation for you and those you love for years to come. You may have already decided that you are powerless before the pressure you feel. But that’s not true. God is at hand, and is willing to empower you within (Phil 2:13) by His Spirit, choose well.

Prayer: Lord, when I am tempted, work Your powerful work in me, that I might stand firm in Christ. Amen.

Saturday and Sunday, June 17th and 18th: For Yours is the Kingdom

Read: 1 Chronicles 29:10-13, Luke 1:33

Usually reciting the Lord's Prayer ends with the words, "For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever, Amen." Actually, the words don't appear in the New Testament, (except in the New King James Version) and there is a debate over why that need not detain us. We don't need to argue about the weight of the words, because they are essentially found elsewhere, as in David's prayer, and in the announcement of the everlasting kingdom. As we end our journey through this most beautiful prayer, let's affirm that our relationship with God is not just for the here and now, but for always, for ever. Sometimes that's difficult to believe. Heaven seems like a wish upon star, an almost ridiculous hope.

Allow me to be very personal, for a moment. Some while ago, I took a box of ash and scattered it. It is all that remains of my mother who passed away last year. Ash is very final. Death rolls its eyes and sneers at our claims of resurrection, because beating death is quite impossible. But that's the realm that our God operates in, and so faith nods in agreement. Some things really are impossible, but with God, all things are possible. The kingdom is His, and always will be. The ultimate power is His, and always will be. He has the title deeds of heaven and earth. That's why we trust. And that's why we pray.

To ponder: Is there a key lesson that you have learned about prayer over the last couple of months?