

[Title Slide: Power points of Faith – Prayer]

We are continuing the series on power points for faith. The aim of this series is to give us the assurance of what we believe, to help us to live it out and the confidence to be able tell our story and explain our faith to others.

When it comes to having confidence in what we know or believe, I remember something that my former headmaster told our sixth form chemistry class. He said that we should revise “until we know that we know what we should know.” Let me say that again - “until we know that we know what we should know.”

When we are learning something, we want to KNOW that we know it. That is, we want to have the confidence in our knowledge. And we want to know that WHAT we know is what we SHOULD know. It’s important to know that we haven’t been wasting our efforts learning the wrong things.

Just like my chemistry revision, this series is about understanding the fundamentals, and having them deeply rooted in our hearts and our minds. It is about knowing that we know that our faith is rooted in God and his word, and not in our feelings.

We have looked at who Jesus is and that his claim to being Lord is true. We have looked at salvation and how we can know that we are saved. We have looked at how we can be sure of our faith and how we can trust God’s word, like building on rock, not sand. We have looked at how we can know that we are forgiven. Last week we looked at who the Holy Spirit is and how we can know that we are filled with him.

And now we have reached Prayer. So what do we need to know about prayer? Prayer is talking to God, and as we have already seen in this series, we talk to him because we have a relationship with him. In a relationship there are many different things that you will want to say to the other person, in many ways and at many different times. We cannot, in the next few minutes, even scratch the surface of what, when and how we can pray to God. So I’m not going to try.

This series is about the fundamentals and by the end of the service this morning, I want us to have a clearer idea of why we pray. I also want us to know how and where prayer fits into the other things that we have already been looking at.

- What does God’s word say about prayer?
- How can I know God hears my prayer?
- How does prayer help me live the victorious Christian life that we have been learning about?

I want to start with “Why do we pray?” If we know why we pray, if we know that we know, and if we can explain it to someone who asks, then some of the other questions, like “What do we pray about?” “When should we pray?” And “How should we pray?” Will become a bit easier to answer.

I also think that if we get the “Why?” wrong, then it won’t matter what and when and how, it will still be wrong.

There are lots of ways you could answer the question “Why do we pray?”, but I think that essentially they boil down to two options:

- Because I...
- Or because God...

In other words, is it about us, or first and foremost about God? That is not to say we won't include ourselves in our prayers, but it's about who is the focus. To put it another way...

How do we approach prayer?

- On basis of what we have done?
- On basis of what we deserve?
- Or on basis of God's grace?

You see, the Pharisees got this wrong, and Jesus rebuked them for it, as we heard in our reading earlier. Matthew 6:5

“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”

He said they prayed to be seen by people – in other words, I pray because I want people to think I'm holy and super-spiritual, so I use big words and pray in a public place. But Jesus said that's a “Because I...” answer. It leaves God out. And actually, it misses out. Jesus said they had received their reward in full. That is, if you pray to impress people, then people being impressed is all that you are going to receive – and that is not an encouraging thought, because we know how fickle people's admiration is.

He also rebuked any self-righteousness in prayer. In Luke 18 we have a story that he told about a Pharisee and a tax collector, who both went into the temple to pray. The Pharisee thanked God that he wasn't like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers, and even like the tax collector. He said that he fasted and tithed. On the other hand, the tax collector wouldn't even look up to heaven but beat his breast and simply said “God, have mercy on me, a sinner”.

The Pharisee was praying a “Because I...” prayer. Because I've earned it. Because I deserve it. The tax collector was praying a “Because God...” prayer. Because God is merciful. From what we've already heard this series, you can probably work out the punchline to Jesus' story already. Which one went home justified?

You see, what we find with prayer is the same as what we have already found in this series - the only way to approach God is by faith in his love and grace. He invites us to pray and he promises to hear us when we seek him, so when we pray we are trusting him to hear us – in other words, “Because God...”

- Because God in his word tells me to pray – and I know his word is trustworthy
- And because God in his word promises to hear my prayers – in fact, to know them even before I speak them
- And because God in his word promises to answer my prayers

[Slide 2: Fact-Faith-Feelings Train]

This also addresses the question of feelings. Because prayer is not just something that we do when we feel like it. And we don't just pray when we feel like God is hearing us, or when we feel like we have received an answer that we wanted. No, we pray because God tells us, in his word, to pray. He tells us that he knows what we need, even before we've asked. We've seen this picture of the train before. If we put our faith in feelings, we won't go anywhere. No, we must put our faith in the facts that we have in God's word.

He tells us to pray, and the reason he does is because He loves us. He loves us and made us to communicate with him – to experience his love through a relationship with him. Now we spoiled and continue to spoil that relationship through our sin. Sin is turning away from God, putting ourselves on the throne of our lives and shutting God out. It is closing ourselves to communicating with him.

But we have already looked at the fact that he loves us so much that Jesus died for us. He loves us so much that he is seeking us, even when we are running away from him. And he loves us so much that he promises to forgive us, he promises to save us. He loves us so much that he is already offering us forgiveness before we even ask, so all we need to say is “Thank you”

So the foundation of prayer, of communicating with God, is rooted in him and the fact that he wants to communicate with us, not the other way round. To understand prayer more, we need to look at why God wants to communicate with us and have us communicate with him.

We need to look at what our relationship with him was meant to be, and what he is working towards making it again. You see, he loves us so much that he has plans and purposes for us. That is why I chose our call to worship at the start of the service – the psalmist marvels at how much God has placed in our hands!

There are four purposes that I want to look at this morning, and we can see these purposes being worked out in prayer through the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, which we had in our reading earlier.

Our father in heaven – **relationship** with God

Hallowed by your name – **worship** of God

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven – **rule** (of God and our role in it)

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins as we give those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil – **priestly intercession** (physical needs, forgiveness and guidance)

[Slide 3: Father & Son]

**The first purpose**, as I have already mentioned, is to have **relationship** with God. Right back at the beginning, God walked with Adam and Eve. Ian said a couple of weeks ago that you can't walk someone unless both parties agree. So we see in the Garden of Eden this remarkable image of God, the creator, choosing to walk with, to have a close relationship with, his created beings – those that bear his image. We also see it mentioned that Enoch walked with God and Abraham was a friend of God.

Moving on a bit, we come to the Exodus. This is such an important part of the Bible because it is here that God gives his people the guidance and instruction as to who he is and what his purposes for his people are. So we will come back to the Exodus again as we look at the other purposes.

But as we look at the purpose of relationship, we have a fascinating story in Exodus 33. Because of the Israelites' stubbornness, God originally said to Moses that they were to move up to the Promised Land but that God's presence wouldn't go with them. Moses prayed to God, pleading with him to

teach him, so that he could lead the people, and God relented, saying that his presence would go with them. And Moses said “If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.” In other words, the presence of God with them was more important than the Promised Land in front of them. It was more important to have God with them and to know him, than anything else.

Someone else who knew about the importance of God’s presence was David. He was “a man after God’s own heart”. And many of the psalms pick up this theme of longing to be with God, to be in his presence. Psalm 16 and Psalm 21 both speak of the joy of the presence of God. Psalm 51 pleads with God not to be cast from his presence.

In the New Testament, this relationship is explained even more fully. The Sermon on the Mount, from which our reading was taken, contains several references to “Your Heavenly Father”. Paul, writing in Romans, says that because God is our father, we are his heirs. We are not illegitimate children, we are heirs. And this relationship will culminate at the end of time, when God once again dwells with his people. In Revelation 21, God says that he will be our God and we will be his children. So **relationship** is the first purpose.

[Slide 4: Worship]

**The second purpose** is to **worship** and glorify God. Again we can start at the beginning and see how the thread of worship runs right through the bible. Cain and Abel both brought sacrifices to God as an act of worship, although only Abel’s was accepted, because he brought his best. When Noah and his family came out of the ark, the first thing they did was offer a sacrifice of one of the animals they had had with them on the ark to worship God. This was part of their livelihood, there wasn’t anything else. But they offered it to God.

Going back to the Exodus again, when God rescued the Israelites through the Red Sea, the first thing they did was stop and praise him. Exodus 15: 1 “I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. Both the horse and the rider he has hurled into the sea.”

The Ten Commandments, and other passages in Exodus and Leviticus describe what God wants from us in worship. When we worship God he wants our best. This is summed up in Deuteronomy chapter 6 as: “**Love the Lord your God** with all **your** heart and with all **your** soul and with all **your** strength”. Jesus quoted this when asked which commandment was the greatest.

Many of the psalms were written as acts of corporate worship, which Jesus and his disciples would have known and sung. It says that before going out to the garden of gethsemane they sang a hymn.

Paul, writing to the church in Rome, encouraged them with these well-known words. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”

I could go on, but I’m sure you get the gist. We are made to **worship** God.

[Slide 5: Sovereignty of God]

**The third purpose** is that God has put us on earth to **rule** over it as His representatives. In the Creation account, we see God’s command to mankind to rule over the birds, beasts, fish etc – delegated rule in God’s Kingdom. And again we see the thread of God’s kingdom – being under the rule of God – repeated throughout the Bible. First in Eden, then with Abraham called to be the father of a nation under God’s rule.

This nation was established through the Exodus and coming to the Promised Land. It was meant to show the world what God's kingdom and his reign was like. In Deuteronomy 17 we find these instructions that God gave for future kings:

<sup>18</sup> When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. <sup>19</sup> It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees <sup>20</sup> and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.

Coming into the New Testament, we see the Kingdom of God as a major theme in Jesus' teaching as well – There are over 50 references to The Kingdom of God in the gospels, and over 30 to The Kingdom of Heaven. I won't test you on all of them!

We are called heirs of the Kingdom of God, and as such we have a role to play in God's kingdom. As we have just seen, the way to do that is to follow God's word, keeping it close to us at all times. We should remember, when we pray "your kingdom come and your will be done" that the third part of our purpose is to be his representatives in his **rule**.

[Slide 6: Intercessor]

**The fourth purpose** is to **intercede**. It means to stand in the gap, between Heaven and Earth, between God and what he has made.

Again, this is a thread that runs through the bible. Job interceded for his children by offering sacrifices for them, just in case they had sinned. Abraham pleaded with God for Sodom and Gomorrah. In Isaiah 59 it says that God was appalled when, because of his people's sin and wickedness no-one could be found who would intercede. It is clearly part of our purpose.

In Exodus 19, at Mount Sinai, God said to the Israelites that even though the whole earth was his, they would be a kingdom of priests for him. Again, the teaching we have in the Torah, the first five books, gives us a really clear idea of the role of priests when God appointed Aaron and his sons to that position.

This is not simply historical curiosity. In the New Testament, notably in 1 Peter and in Revelation, we see that we have assumed this mantle of being a royal priesthood that God chose in Exodus 19.

Priests had a number of roles.

- To bless the people, and remind them of God's goodness to them
- To offer sacrifices for the people – thank offerings, fellowship offerings and sin/guilt offerings
- To provide spiritual guidance, speaking God's word to the people
- To make judgements on behalf of God, for example of what was clean or unclean, what was acceptable or not.

These are all things that we find outlined in the final part of the Lord's Prayer.

So there you have four purposes:

**Relationship; Worship; Rule; Intercession**

[Slide 7: Jesus]

Now there is one more point that you may have noticed as I have been describing these purposes. Jesus completely fulfils them:

- He has the perfect **relationship** with the Father – He said “I and the Father are one.” And “I only do what I see my Father doing.” And God said of him, at his baptism and at his transfiguration, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased”
- He perfectly **glorifies** God – At the triumphal entry, knowing what was to come, Jesus said: <sup>27</sup> “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. <sup>28</sup> Father, glorify your name!” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.” [John 12: 27-28]. And in John 17:1 Jesus prayed: “Father, the hour has come. **Glorify your Son**, that **your Son** may **glorify** you.”
- He is the perfect **ruler** – He said to his disciples just before the ascension: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. “ He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, described at the end of Revelation.
- He is the perfect **High Priest**, having offered once for all time the perfect sacrifice and now ever living to intercede for us before God – [Hebrews 7: 26-27]

Jesus didn’t just come to die for us, although clearly he did do that. His life showed us what it means to be fully human, fully living out the purpose that God intends for us. We are mostly fully human when we also live out that purpose, which also means when we are most Christ-like.

When we pray, we are bringing these things back to God. We are reconnecting with our purpose. We are inviting God into the centre of our lives, honouring and glorifying him. Through prayer, God works in us and through us to expand his kingdom.

Do you see how this view of prayer helps us if we find that Jesus is not at the centre of our lives? Praying “because God...” prayers will help us to focus on him, and not ourselves or anyone else. And it will help us to surrender ourselves and invite him to take the throne, where he rightly belongs.

And when we don’t know what to pray, we have the promise that the Holy Spirit will intercede for us. Romans 8: 26-27

<sup>26</sup> In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. <sup>27</sup> And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.

So, do we pray because we feel like it? Or do we pray because God, in his word, invites us to pray and promises to hear us, even when we don’t know what to say?

Do we pray because we deserve it, because we’ve earned it? Or because God in his grace has opened the way for us to draw near to him? This is his desire for us, his purpose for us, and one day, we will see him face to face and fulfil our purpose for evermore, to glorify our Heavenly Father as his royal priesthood.

Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!