

# Praying

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's pray to God and ask for his help. Heavenly Father, we just pray once again that your word would be proclaimed with clarity and with faithfulness.

We pray that your word would indeed dwell richly in our hearts as we hear it this morning. Please soften our hearts, enable our ears to hear, our minds to concentrate.

As your word is spoken and indeed will you help us to be a church that truly honors you in all that we do as a result of what we hear this morning.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. So far in this series we've been considering what church actually is. We are a people who by the power of the gospel now belong to Jesus and belong to one another.

And so we have obligations and responsibilities towards one another. We are also a people who gather in the name of the Lord Jesus and act as a preview of that final heavenly assembly that will take place at the end of time.

[ 1 : 13 ] And we've considered what church should be like. We've seen that church is to be a fundamentally welcoming place. One that models the welcome of God to the unwelcome.

And last week we began to think about some of the things that the church should do. And because this series only goes six weeks, I had to pick and choose what to highlight.

And since I think we've often emphasised the importance of the word of God, and since I know that we'll be talking about loving and serving one another when we get to the book of 1 Corinthians in the coming months, I've tried to highlight other key things where perhaps we've not heard so much emphasis on.

And so last week we heard about the place of singing in church. We saw it's how we express our gratitude to God and how we help each other let the word of God dwell in us richly.

And today, I want us to focus on praying. What is the place of praying in the life of the church? Well, let's begin by considering the context of the two Bible readings that we've just heard today.

[ 2 : 23 ] Let's start with Acts. What's happening in Acts chapter 3 and 4? Well, a miracle has just taken place as a lame beggar is instantly healed by Peter and John.

The crowds are amazed as they come together. And Peter doesn't want to waste this opportunity. So he stands up and he preaches Jesus, his identity, his death, his resurrection, the need for repentance.

But the priests and Sadducees are disturbed by these. And they seize them, interrogate them, and basically tell them that they cannot ever preach Jesus again.

They want the gospel to be stopped dead in its tracks. So notice what is happening here. The apostles are under pressure not to stick with the gospel.

They're under pressure to hide it, neglect it, disregard it, let it be. And so when they go back and report this to the church, what is the church's first response?

[ 3 : 31 ] Under such pressure, what do they do? Well, verse 23 tells us they raise their voices together in prayer to God. They don't complain, quake in fear, or defiantly take up arms.

They pray. Consider 1 Timothy 2. What is happening there? What's the context? Let's have a quick look.

In 1 Timothy 1 verse 3, we discover that Paul has left his co-worker Timothy back in Ephesus to fight some false teaching that was beginning to take root in the church.

We're not 100% certain what the exact content of this false teaching was. But we know from 1 Timothy 1 that it's about the Old Testament law, and so it sounds biblical.

But the impact of this false teaching on the church was to begin moving them away from love and from advancing God's work to useless speculation that didn't help them trust Jesus.

[ 4 : 42 ] That's all in 1 Timothy 1. And so the church was under pressure. Once again, not to stick with the gospel.

They're under pressure. This time not from people outside persecuting them, but from people inside, who say that they have the truth, but who are teaching a twisted message.

So what should Timothy do first? Of all, what should the Ephesian church do? I think we know what we would want to do. We would want to confront, to teach afresh, to defend.

But look at 1 Timothy 2 verse 1. Paul urges, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for all people.

He urges prayer as the first response. It's saying when you're under pressure due to false teaching, how do you fight it?

[ 5 : 52 ] Yes, eventually you would have to teach, for sure. But first of all, you pray. So notice on both occasions, as the church came under pressure, they prayed.

They prayed together. They cried out to God together. This was their priority. And at this very moment in history, we, the church, are also under pressure.

We've come under great pressure from the pandemic, which has reshaped our lives, our habits, even our church structures in all sorts of unexpected ways.

We're still under pressure from false teaching, which has always existed, but is perhaps more worrisome now because of the amount of time we spend online, where we can hear just about anyone say anything.

And more subtly, perhaps, we've come under pressure just to care a little less about God's glory, just to care a little less about God's people, just to care a little less about God's purposes.

[ 7 : 13 ] What is the antidote to all that God says?

Answer? Answer? We need to prioritize prayer. We must pray. But how can we be like the early church that devoted themselves to prayer?

How can we get better at praying? After all, you and I know very well how difficult we find it. And what we need today is not so much condemnation, but encouragement.

And so I hope to encourage us this morning from the same two Bible passages that we just heard read, 1 Timothy 2, 1-8, and Acts 4, 23-31. And this morning, I hope to encourage us by considering the privilege of praying together, the purpose of praying together, and the practice of praying together.

So firstly, the privilege of praying together. What is prayer, actually? We know we need to pray, but what is it?

[ 8 : 35 ] And one simple definition that we often use is that prayer is simply talking to God. That's certainly how I often answer that question. It's what I teach neo-Christians.

And I don't think it's wrong to start there. That definition so helpfully reminds us that prayer is about relationship. It's about relating to God.

But there is a potential danger to the simplicity of that definition. For if we don't say more, there's a danger that prayer is not differentiated enough from the everyday conversations that I might have with a friend.

If I think speaking to God is exactly like how I speak to Bobby, then we would very quickly lose that sense of awe and privilege that ought to accompany the act of prayer.

Because, yes, prayer is an activity of relationship, but it is not a relationship of equals.

[ 9 : 49 ] After all, think about it. 1 Timothy 2 verse 5 tells us that there is only one God who is, Acts 4 24 reminds us, the maker of heavens and the earth.

And that's who stands on one side of this relationship. And on the other side stands us. Mere creatures formed from the dust.

And so how can you compare the two? And even then, this still doesn't quite get at how unequal this relationship is. You see, we could think, oh, you know, what's so special about God making things?

We also make things. We make cakes, we make cars, we make houses. And so God is just someone who makes things on a bigger scale. You know, big deal. But when the Bible calls God the maker, it actually means something even more incredible.

You see, the things we make don't have absolute dependence on us. Let me explain what I mean. You see, true, without us, that cake or that car wouldn't have existed.

[ 11 : 06 ] But now that it is made, it can exist outside of me. If I die, that car or that house can still exist on its own.

But we are made in absolute dependence on God. Only in Him can we live and move and have our being, as Paul will say later on in Acts.

So our entire lives are a gift from and dependent on Him. And so God is not just a bigger version of ourselves.

He is in an entirely different category altogether. And therefore, we can only relate to God on His terms.

There's no way we can ever talk to Him on our own. And wonderfully, we can. From the beginning, God bent down to talk to us, even though He didn't have to.

[ 12 : 11 ] But here's the truly amazing thing. Even after sin has entered our world and corrupted our being, we still can.

That is the privilege of prayer. Why is that so? Well, Paul reminds us in 1 Timothy 2 verses 5 and 6, for there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all people.

So, what is Paul telling us well, here's an analogy. Whenever we want to meet someone important, we often have to go through many hoops, don't we?

If we wanted to meet the Prime Minister, we probably first have to go through some lowly secretary and then on to the head of department and then on to the chief secretary to the government and then he probably has to lie us with the PA in the Prime Minister's office and so on.

You know, there's so many barriers to cross just to get an audience with the Prime Minister. And imagine if we tried to trespass to get close to the Prime Minister or the young Di Petawan Agong.

[ 13 : 35 ] There's a good chance that we might be shot dead. But that's our situation with God. Because of sin, there are countless barriers and to try to cross those barriers ourselves ends in death.

But, the Bible tells us Jesus is like the ultimate middleman. In our sin, we had no right to approach God but on the cross, it's like Jesus gave up his excess card to the Father for our sake.

That's the ransom price. And so, as he died on the cross, he was met with silence from heaven. So much so that he ended up quoting the words of Psalm 22.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And yet, his very ransom, which caused him to hear silence from God, is the same ransom that transports us right into God's throne room.

That's what Jesus did. Or think about it from a slightly different angle. In this fallen world, who might be the only person in this entire universe who can fully expect to have his prayer heard?

[ 15 : 05 ] Answer, God's Son. And if we just pray on our own, in our sin, our prayers will never be heard. But if God always listens to his Son, and we are now united with Christ via the ransom he paid, then it's a different story, isn't it?

That's our privilege. In Acts 4, verse 30, the early church put forward a prayer request, and that request, notice, is made through the name of your holy servant, Jesus.

Because it is only through Christ alone that we can be heard. But just as encouragingly, it is precisely because we pray in the name of Christ alone, we will be heard.

That's God's lavish grace on us. And remember who it is that we're praying to. It's the maker of heaven and earth. It's not just some random territorial God.

And he's in charge. Now, I'm sure many of us have had the experience of trying to find the guy in charge. Let's just imagine that because of a flooding issue in our church, we had to call the authorities to try to resolve it.

[ 16 : 34 ] So first, we call MBKS. But the officer there tells us that actually it's not his responsibility. And then he tells us to call JKR. So we call the JKR office.

And the JKR person we speak to keeps saying, sorry, sorry, and Jack, I really cannot authorise this action. I cannot authorise the action. Until we get exasperated and we ask, well, can we speak to your boss who actually is in charge here?

And then the boss takes the phone and then tells us to call the subcontractor instead. So we all know that terrible experience of not knowing who to speak to, of not knowing who has the authority to take charge of things.

But here's the privilege of Christian prayer. We know exactly who to speak to. Notice the prayers of the church in Acts 4.

They start off verse 24 by saying, Sovereign Lord. And so they know exactly who to address. And they are confident that he's absolutely the right person to talk to.

[ 17 : 48 ] Why? Because of his track record. In verse 27, they recall all the different parties, Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Jewish leaders and so on, who plotted to kill Jesus.

They recall the fact that Jesus too had been opposed, just like what they were facing now. But why does this not faze them? Because they realized, verse 28, that this is exactly what God had decided beforehand would happen.

This was all part of God's sovereign plan to redeem his people. And so, he's in charge. There is nothing to fear.

After all, as verses 25 to 26 put it, where the church is quoting Psalm 2, yes, the kings and the rulers of the earth might choose to act against the Lord's anointed, that's Jesus himself, but all their efforts are in vain.

It's a waste of time. But praying together will never be a waste of time, because we're addressing the truly sovereign Lord.

[ 19 : 04 ] That's the privilege of prayer. So, what implication does what we have seen so far have for us? How does this affect our praying together?

Well, for one thing, it frees us from trusting in exact formulas for prayers. Sometimes we think that we must get our prayers exactly right, in the sense that we must say certain words, or we must build some sort of special prayer altar, or something like that, or we must make sure that enough of us have fasted just enough, or we've done just enough good deeds, before we can approach God, or before we can attend that special prayer meeting.

But our God is not restricted by magic formulas, as if without the exact ritual, he cannot act. no. Precisely because Jesus is our mediator, we don't have to worry about getting it exactly right, because we know in his name, God still hears us and understands us.

And secondly, it makes us humbly bold. We're humble because this is not a relationship of equals. We cannot speak to God in a chintai manner, or treat him as if he's a genie whom we can simply manipulate, but at the same time, it makes us bold, because we have the ear of the most powerful being in the entire universe.

Nothing can stand in his way. And if he can turn the ultimate act of evil crucifixion of his son into something good, is there anything else that he cannot reverse?

[ 21 : 09 ] So we can be humbly bold. But what exactly should we be praying for? Well, that takes us to our second consideration for today, the purpose of praying together, the purpose of praying together.

When we gather together, we want to pray for what God desires. But what does he want? 1 Timothy 2 verse 3 to 4 gives us the headline.

He wants all people to be safe and to come to a knowledge of the truth. He wants to be known not just as God the maker, but God the saviour.

That's his purpose. Now, this of course does not mean that all people will be safe in the end. Even within 1 Timothy itself, that is clear. Later on in 1 Timothy 5 verse 24, Paul will talk about the place of judgment.

But remember the context of 1 Timothy? There was false teaching going around that was promoting some form of useless speculation. And so the church were getting distracted.

[ 22 : 25 ] And so against that backdrop, Paul wants to call the church back from that distraction from getting off course. And remember that the gospel is what God is all about.

And when the gospel is constantly shaping our prayers, when it's the focus of our agenda, the chances of the church going, wayward, of getting distracted, is reduced.

So that's exactly what Paul recommends. Notice in verse 1 that he calls the church to pray for all people. I think whenever we look at these verses, our focus immediately jumps to verse 2, where there is a more particular call to pray for our national and for our civic leaders.

prayer is for all, the rich and the poor, the well-off and the marginalized, the Jew and the Gentile. And our concern is that all these people we pray for will know Jesus and know the truth more and more.

[ 23 : 44 ] we want all people to know that there is a mediator and that they too can enjoy the privilege of prayer. And therefore, therefore, that's why verse 2, we pray for kings and all those in authority.

not because they are somehow more important and more deserving of prayers than others. Rather, it's because we are praying for all people and those in authority are more likely to make an impact on the lives of many people through their decisions.

sins. So, that's also why we are to pray, end of verse 2, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

So, we are to pray that those in authority will govern in such a way that Christians can have freedom to openly live out lives that point to Jesus.

Now, that's not the same, of course, as expecting trouble-free lives. Paul himself would say in 2 Timothy 3 verse 12 later on that all who wish to live godly lives can expect trouble.

[ 25 : 09 ] He's simply echoing Jesus at that point. But, we know very well that when social conditions are stable, it is better for the gospel, isn't it?

When we look at places in the world today like Syria or Haiti, where there is basically a failed state and anarchy has taken over, it's difficult for the gospel to get a hearing simply because things are so chaotic and people are just trying to survive.

So, we pray for conditions that maximize the ability for the gospel to be heard and for Christians to live out godly lives that promote the gospel.

That's the prayer that is good. that's the prayer that pleases God. That's his purpose. Notice how the early church prayed in Acts 4 verse 29.

Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. And so, notice their priority was not just their safety.

[ 26 : 24 ] Their priority was that the gospel would not be silenced. And that's why the Lord Jesus, when he taught us to pray, asked us to say, your kingdom come, your will be done.

That's a request that the world will know more and more that there truly is only one God, that he alone is the king who has no rival and no equal, and that his kingdom is to displace all other kingdoms.

And that's why the early church in Acts 4 verse 30 were not afraid to ask for healing and signs and wonders, for those miracles point beyond themselves towards the new world, the new kingdom that Jesus will one day bring, and authenticated their status as God's messengers.

purpose. And so when we come together to pray, our purpose should not be to pray for our own agendas. Our purpose, first and foremost, is to call on God to fulfill his gospel promises, that he will one day indeed reign over all, that every knee shall bow and say that Jesus is Lord.

That's what God calls for. God. The great theologian John Calvin used to call prayer the chief exercise of faith. In other words, he says, how do you best show your faith?

[ 28 : 01 ] By getting on your knees. It requires faith, doesn't it, to keep calling on God to come true on his promise when all we see are wars and rumors and rumors of wars, when disease and pestilence continue to ravage the globe, and Christians continue to be persecuted.

But that's what we are to do together. We exercise our faith as we pray. and that's why praying together can be so beneficial.

When we pray on our own, it's easy to get caught up with what I want. It's easy for our prayers to default to become prayers only for my success, my comfort, my well-being.

But when we pray together in the company of other Christians, and we pray in one accord for the gospel to go out, for God's name to be glorified, for people to know Jesus more and more, and we say Amen to all of that, what it actually does is to train and disciple us.

We are learning to pray in line with what God desires by watching other mature Christians pray like that. And that brings us to our final consideration for today.

[ 29 : 37 ] Thirdly, the practice of praying together, the practice of praying together. In 1 Timothy 2 verse 1, Paul says we can petition, pray, intercede, and give thanks.

In other words, we can make requests to God, that's petition. We are to pray on behalf of others, that's what intercession means. We can express our gratitude, that's thanksgiving.

And I hope that if you've been attending our Sunday services, even for just any amount of time, you can see that's what we try to do in our public prayers. We petition intercede because we know that's how much we need his help.

And because we know how big God is, we intercede not just for ourselves, but for our country and even our world. The late pastor John Stott once tells a story of a prayer service that he once attended.

And he described what the public prayer was like. He said because the pastor was on holiday, so the prayer leader prayed that the pastor might have a good holiday.

[ 30 : 56 ] Well, that's fine, pastors should have good holidays. Second, he prayed for a lady member of the church who was about to give birth to a child, that she might have a safe delivery, which is fine.

Third, he prayed for another lady who was sick, and then it was over. That's all there was. It took 20 seconds. I said to myself, it's a village church with a village god.

They have no interest in the world outside. There was no thinking about the poor, the oppressed, the refugees, the places of violence, and world evangelization.

Well, that's certainly not what we want to communicate. We don't just worship a village god. We pray to the maker of the heavens and the earth. So we pray for all peoples.

We pray for Ukraine and Tonga and Myanmar. We say thank you constantly because we know without Jesus, our mediator, we have no hope before him.

[ 31 : 59 ] And we pray prayers of confession as well. That isn't mentioned in this particular list in 1 Timothy 2, but it's something that Jesus and the apostle John encourages us to.

And one of the benefits of saying the prayer of confession together, as we do whenever we have communion Sunday, we'll do so next week, is that it reminds us that all of us are on the same level ground before God.

No matter who we are in the world, we are all equally sinners before God, equally in need of his forgiveness. And that helps us to be able to better learn humility and to better extend grace towards others as well.

So let's pray together. Let's petition, intercede, confess, and give thanks together. Let's not just pray for one another, but with one another.

Just read through the book of Acts and you would realise that's what they did all throughout. I put a list of references on your handout. They prayed when there was internal conflict. They prayed when one of their own was in prison.

[ 33 : 24 ] They prayed when they went on mission trips. They prayed even in the ordinary routines. And 1 Timothy 2 verse 8 encourages the man in particular to take the lead.

Therefore, I want the man everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing. Man can sometimes be more comfortable debating, but God says, why not use some of that energy instead to plead with God?

God. And as we do so, let's come full circle and remember again the privilege of prayer.

And one of the privileges is not simply that we get to ask the sovereign Lord, but that he is a God who does answer. Look at Acts 4 verse 31.

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

[ 34 : 34 ] That's exactly what they asked for. And God answered. So let's pray with expectancy. Let's pray with anticipation, even while we acknowledge that it is God who has the final say.

let's pray together. When Jesus taught us the Lord's Prayer, he began not with my father, but our father.

And that reminds us that we're not just God's children, but spiritual siblings. We're family. And so we pray with one another.

every week we have a Wednesday prayer meeting. And I fully understand that many of us can't be there every week. We have other responsibilities as well.

But could it be that we need to make it more of a priority than we do at the moment? Ironically, this Wednesday our prayer meeting is actually on break due to Chinese New Year.

[ 35 : 45 ] But maybe that's a good thing because that means you are less inclined to go to the next prayer meeting simply out of a guilt reflex, which is not what we want.

Hey, pastors, go us already, so we better go. No, that's not what we want. But wouldn't it be great if the Holy Spirit was really stirring your heart today to cry out to him afresh with your brothers and sisters in Christ, such that you would put some Wednesday prayer meetings in your diary.

So church, let's ask for a fresh resolve to pray. Let's exercise our privilege for the sake of the world and for the sake of his name.

And so what we'll do now is I will lead us in a short prayer, prayer, and then I will lead us in saying the Lord's prayer together. It's right there on your order of service.

We'll say it aloud together. And then Elder Bobby will come up and he will lead us in prayers of intercession and then Joshua will lead us in song. Let's pray.

[ 36 : 59 ] Father, thank you that in the name of Christ right now we can already be speaking to you.

Help us not to take this privilege for granted that we can have this direct access to your throne room. And indeed, will you help us now to exercise our privilege as family that together we can come and petition you and come to intercede for others.

So Lord, please help us to continue to exercise our privilege, not just individually, but especially as a church and to pray for your gospel to go out so that more and more people will know Jesus, know the truth, so that your glory can be extended to all the earth.

please Lord, convict us and encourage us as we pray. Please stand with me and let's say the Lord's prayer together.

So Father, we just want to pray the prayer that you have taught us. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.

[ 38 : 34 ] Give us today our daily bread, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.