

Delight #6 – Praying for God’s delight

Based on *Delight! – Discipleship as the adventure of living and being loved* by Justin Rossow

Bible Reading

This, then, is how you should pray:

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.*

Matthew 6:9-13

Introduction

In the previous talk we looked at how God’s will and God’s delight are closely linked.

Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight.

Psalms 119:35

How Jesus promises that if we keep God’s commands, that we will remain in his love.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

John 15:9-11

That when Jesus says, *Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands you will remain in my love...* is not a threat, it is a beautiful promise, Jesus has told us this ***so that his joy may be in us, and that our joy might be complete!***

Today's reading was the Gospel of Matthew's version of what we call the Lord's Prayer. Many of us know it by heart, probably with the old-fashioned words 'art' and 'thy', and finished off with 'for thine be the glory...' etc.

It is the prayer that Jesus gave us as a framework of how to talk with God, so we know that it is very important. And the context is important, in the verses before it, he gave some examples of how not to pray.

'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. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.'

Matthew 6:5-8

The first thing I noticed was that Jesus does not command us to pray. He says, 'and when you pray'... assuming that a follower of Jesus will *want* to talk with him, not to make ourselves look good, but so that we might become more like he wants us to be. And like any good conversation, don't think that the more words you use, the more chance you have of being heard.

God knows everything, prayer is not a means of twisting God's arm, it should be how we share our thoughts, our fears and our wishes with him, and, most importantly, aligning our lives to his will.

The Lord's Prayer is a superb example of how Jesus is able to pack loads of important teaching into a few lines. But our familiarity with it, and the fact that we tend to recite it in a similar way to which we recite the alphabet, or our times tables, means we often don't pay proper attention to what we are praying when we recite it.

Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer, is reported to have bet his horse on his belief that a friend of his wouldn't be able to get through reciting the Lord's Prayer without his thoughts wandering.

His friend accepted the bet, and Luther was so confident that he locked his friend in a closet so that he would not be distracted.

Eventually the friend asked to be let out and revealed to Luther that the prayer had gone really well until he got to 'For thine is the kingdom', when he began to wonder if the horse came with a saddle. If he had recited Matthew's version, he would have won the bet!

I sympathise with Luther's friend, I find proper, focussed prayer really, really difficult. But learning how to pray is essential if we are to live proper Christian lives, and as the Lord's Prayer is one that Jesus gave us as a template for how to talk with God, let's take a brief journey through it.

Our Father in heaven,

Jesus begins the prayer by stating our relationship to God. If you are a Christian, God is not a remote figure, he is your father, and you are his precious child. We don't have to go through elaborate ceremonies to communicate with God, he delights in you and as a result, you can delight in spending time with him.

hallowed be your name.

'Hallow' means 'honour as holy', it is a reinforcement of the first phrase, and reminds us that the original hearers would have heard in the word 'father' a call for deep and profound respect.

They would have been shocked by the casual attitude that many 21st century western children have toward their fathers, where in many families the children seem to be in charge of the parents!

The relationship we have with our heavenly Father is close and loving, we delight in his love, acceptance and protection. He also delights in us, but the God the Father is the one who is in charge.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Praying for God's kingdom to come is praying for God's will to be done... the way it is perfectly done in heaven. And remember, God's will is locked in to God's delight. It could be translated 'Your kingdom come, your joy and *delight* be done'.

Where God's will is, so is joy and delight. We are praying that God's delight will be real in us, and that we will make real his kingdom, his realm of kingship, to others in our day-to-day lives.

Give us today our daily bread.

Everything we have, we receive from God. And God loves to give us good things, delightful things, including food and drink. This prayer is not trying to persuade God to do something he doesn't want to do.

It would have reminded the hearers of God's provision of manna in the wilderness, where he gave the Israelites just enough for each day.

This part of the Lord's Prayer is reminding us of our utter dependence on God. So often we slip into taking the things he gives us for granted, and concentrating on all the things we don't have. We need regular reminders of God's gracious provision, and hearts that are overflowing with thanks for all the good things he does for us. True gratitude is essential if we are to delight in God's goodness for us.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

As a Christian, your sins are forgiven. Jesus' death on the cross means that you are seen by God as spotless and clean. But we are not perfect, we continue to do things that are not pleasing to God.

Like 'give us today our daily bread', this is a reminder to us that God loves to forgive us, that it is in his nature to forgive. He doesn't take delight in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). He throws a huge party when the rebellious son comes home (Luke 15:11-32).

This section of the prayer reminds us of this, and also insists that we are to imitate God's undeserved forgiveness of our sins in the way we behave towards other people. As we appreciate God's forgiveness and put it into practice in our own lives, we are helping to extend God's kingdom into this world.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

Once again, this is not a prayer that is asking God to do something he doesn't want to do. Although in the last session, we saw how God the Holy Spirit did take Jesus to a place where he was tempted, this was a special case.

For the majority of cases our experience is as explained in the Book of James:

When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.

James 1:13-14

These verses could have been written especially for me. There have been so many times in my life when my prayer might as well have been, 'Lord, allow me to walk just far enough into this particular temptation that I can't get out of it'.

The Lord's Prayer is giving God permission to step in and help us, to block us from doing stupid things that will drag us away from his will, his good and perfect plan for how things should be in our lives. Away from his place of delight for us. God loves answering prayers like this, and the answer is often very simple to understand and very difficult to do... '**Run away!**'. (Genesis 39:12, 2 Timothy 2:22)

Being a Christian means being continually shaped by God. God is a relational and creative God. Just as he delighted in creating the universe out of nothing, not because he had to, but because he wanted to, and made human beings to live in relationship with him, so he delights in working with you and me, helping us to become more like the people we were created to be.

One of the most familiar analogies of how God works in our lives comes from the book of Jeremiah 18, where God tells him to go to a potter's house and watch him at work. Jeremiah notices how the potter took a partly formed pot that was misshapen and useless, and turned it into one that was correctly proportioned and useful.

God tells Jeremiah that Israel should be like the lump of clay, with God as the potter, shaping it as he pleases. Sadly, God goes on to say that Israel has refused to be shaped by God. It has become rigid and unchangeable.

In Jeremiah 19, God tells Jeremiah to go before the Jewish leaders holding a clay pot, and to smash it to pieces in front of them while explaining that this is what God will do to Israel if they refuse to be shaped by him.

God loves creating things. But he doesn't just create things and then let them go. God delights in being involved with his creation. The problem is that fallen humans often prefer to leave God out of things, to do things their own way.

Christians talk about the day they ‘gave their lives to Jesus’. And that is exactly what they did. What we did. What I did. But you don’t just give it to him on the day you become a Christian. You give it to him second by second, minute by minute, day by day...

Jesus spoke about being a follower of him as ‘losing your life’.

In Luke 9:20, answering Jesus’ question as to who he thinks Jesus is, Peter says that he believes that Jesus is God’s promised Messiah. Jesus does not deny this, but he immediately makes it clear that he is not the warrior messiah that many are expecting, rather that he was going to suffer many things, be rejected by the authorities and then killed. Oh, and on the third day be raised to life.

Then he said to them all: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?’

Luke 9:23:25

Being a follower of Jesus, being a Christian, means relinquishing control over your life, giving your life to Jesus. Like a lump of clay in the hands of the divine potter, we give him permission to do with us what he pleases, believing that he knows what is best for us, believing that there is more delight to be had in our relationship with him than there would be in possessing the whole world.

And this is both the entry ticket, and lifetime season ticket, for being a disciple of Jesus. And there are many times when I don’t like that at all. One of the idols of our age is the independent individual – the self-made woman or man. It is so much a part of our culture that we don’t even notice it until it is challenged.

And Jesus challenges it head-on. If I want to save my life, I've got to lose it to Jesus. I have to learn to delight in him and his ways, not in me and mine.

And this is the Good News of Jesus. He promises that if you give your life to him, he will redeem it, transform it, make it better than it had any chance of being without him. Make it a thing of delight, both to him, and to you.

The much harder thing is that you have to acknowledge that you are not ultimately in charge of the way your life goes. Jesus is. Jesus becomes the potter. You become the clay.

So, is that it? When we become Christians, do we pray the Lord's Prayer, and then sit back and wait for God to do something?

No, of course not. As with all metaphors, the clay analogy is not a complete one. Unlike an inanimate lump of clay, humans are living, breathing, thinking creatures. Remember the virtuous circle.

God works in us, and we respond to that by working for him, continually looking to him to be shaped and strengthened by him, delighting in him and asking him to work in us.

And this will not be easy. Jesus is the perfect example of someone who submits themselves to God's will, and he was regularly exhausted. And it was the same for his early followers. Just reading the adventures of the apostle Paul spreading the Gospel across the known world wears you out!

So when we ask God to be the potter and us the clay, we are asking to become useful vessels of his love and power. Asking him to show us what he wants us to do. As Paul wrote to Timothy...

In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for special purposes and some for common use. Those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be instruments

for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.

2 Timothy 2:20-21

Each one of us has different gifts, different abilities and personalities. Like different sized pots, or pans, or kitchen utensils. All different, but all of us created by God to be instruments of his love, goodness and delight in this world.

As Philippians 2:13 says:

*It is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his **good purpose**.*

For those who have been paying attention, *good purpose* is the NIV's way of translating the Greek word for thoughtful delight. God delights in working for us, and we experience delight when we work, in his strength, doing the things he wants us to do.

It's that virtuous circle... God works for us to turn us from being the selfish and inward-looking people we tend to be, into people who are useful and delightful, to God, to other people, and to ourselves. God delights in saving you, giving you new life, his life, as a free and wonderful gift. And he continues to save us, minute-by-minute, as we grow in our knowledge of and relationship with him.

And we must continually remember that it is all grace, it is all gift.

As the apostle Paul, writing to believers in Ephesus says...

*For it is **by grace** you have been saved, **through faith** – and this is **not from yourselves**, it is the **gift** of God – **not by works**, so that **no one can boast**.*

Ephesians 2:8-9

Salvation is a gift, even the faith that receives the gift is a gift! We are utterly dependent on God for our salvation, past, present and future.

God is the potter, and we are the clay. So once again, the question is raised, do we just ‘let go and let God’?

The following sentence answers...

*For we are **God’s handiwork**, created in Christ Jesus **to do good works**, which **God prepared in advance** for us to do.*

Ephesians 2:10

God wants our full *dependence*, and he also wants our full *engagement*. It’s the wisdom stuff all over again, its not one or the other, it’s both. Like the potter with the misshapen piece of clay, God takes us and re-shapes us so that we are able to good things for the right reasons, not to earn God’s salvation, but because we are so grateful, so delighted that he has saved us.

Remember earlier, we looked at Philippians 2:13:

It is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.

Well, the verse before it reinforces how important it is that we are both fully dependent on God, and fully engaged in doing the things he has prepared and enabled us to do.

*Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always **obeyed** – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to **work out** your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who **works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.***

Philippians 2:12-13

There is so much packed into these verses, but what I want us to take from them is that we need to take God’s work seriously. He has saved us to be his representatives on earth. This is important work. It requires obedience.

And we are dealing with a holy God. Through Jesus' work on the cross, we can call him father, but he is not the kind of father we can twist around our little finger.

Submitting ourselves to God's will, getting engaged in what he wants us to do, will regularly result in times of fear and trembling. Being a Christian is not a hobby, it is having **God work in you** to **will** and **act** in order to fulfil his **good purpose**, God's *thoughtful delight*.

Once again we see the virtuous circle in play. When we are most actively engaged in God's work, God will be there working with us. He delights in seeing us getting involved in his work, even when we stumble and falter. He delights in working with us, especially when the going gets tough.

You are never too old or too young to get involved. I'm closing this message with a prayer, and I encourage you to join me in it.

Father God, thank you that you take delight in us, even though we fall so short of your perfection.

Lord Jesus, thank you that you love us more than we will ever understand, and that you opened the way for us to be adopted into God's family through your death and resurrection.

Lord Spirit, enable me to truly delight in God, to experience what it is to love God with fear and trembling, but also with joy and gratitude.

Help me to work with you in this world, actively seeking out ways of being your ambassador in my day-to-day life, using the gifts you've given me to let others know about your goodness and love.

Amen