

Prayer: the connection we long for

Just so you know before I start, I have their permission to say this so its ok, but having teenage boys, I am discovering, is a hugely interesting experience. Those of you who have gone before me will relate.

I find myself trying to impart as much love, wisdom and care as I have to them in a way that is just not cringy; I find myself thinking of ways to maybe tell them they need a shower from time to time whilst hoping that I'm not sounding critical! I want them to learn from their own mistakes whilst somehow, at the same time, hoping and longing that they don't mess up and get deeply hurt. And when there are times of of disconnection, I am making sure the fridge is crammed full of food and making sure I'm available late at night - when my eyelids are desperately fighting to close and go to sleep just so that if the boys want to connect, I'm available to listen. I find myself trying to bite my tongue and not react....anyone been there? - it's so hard. But then you get those moments, those delicious moments when it feels like someone has given you the biggest present ever....when connection comes and they sit down and open up their hearts to you, when they listen and when they share their dreams and their failings.

We just love to connect don't we? It's like in the early throws of young love...I bet some of you have said, or are right now just in it....when you've come back home from a date and you say to your housemates, your mum or your best mate, 'we just talked for hours and hours, he just gets me!' We long for that connection and we love it. Or maybe if you've chewed the fat with your mates down at the pub or over a cuppa, we love the connection that that brings. Some of you may have never experienced any of this but you recognise that you long for the connection I'm talking about.

So when it comes to God, you'd think that we'd naturally embrace this thing called prayer- this thing that is going to connect us with God. We love connection, and yet, so often it's a real struggle. Sometimes, for me, I wonder if the connection is even working, is he even listening, sometimes I wonder if I'm hearing him clearly and it can feel like we're not getting through to him and he's not getting through to us. Sometimes it can feel like this thing called prayer (that is designed to be simple and natural) - that maybe we could do it for the rest of our lives and never really feel connected, never really know his presence the way we were designed to. And how do we admit that it's not quite everything that we hoped it would be?

Thankfully there was a man who came to Jesus and admitted that he didn't know what he was doing when it came to prayer. There were lots of people who watched Jesus but one person watched Jesus and thought 'Do you know I want a connection with God like that but I just don't know what to do'. Interestingly Jesus didn't say, 'you know what, it's really easy, it's really simple, just be yourself and it'll all come naturally.' Jesus didn't say, 'What? You don't get prayer? What that's just basic...If you don't get prayer how are you

going to get anything else?' Jesus didn't even say 'you can do it anywhere, on the camel on your way to work.' He didn't do or say any of that.

Let's read what he did say - it's in the book of Matthew 6:6-9

We're only going to look at a tiny bit of the Lord's Prayer today...

1. Find a quiet place

So Jesus said, 'actually the first thing you need to know about this thing called prayer is that it matters where you do it, I want you to go and find this quiet place, I want you to go behind closed doors, I want you to open the chambers of your heart and I want you to get simply and honestly before your Father'. Part of the challenge is that we sometimes see prayer like those relationships where we say, 'hi, we must catch up sometime, there's so much going on, how are you doing?, yeah great, good' and then we move on with our lives and prayer is a little bit like that, we mean to catch up with God but it doesn't quite happen the way we would like it. So Jesus teaches us how to pray and the Message translation says verse 6 beautifully:

"Find a quiet secluded place so that you won't be tempted to role play or perform before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace."

2. 'Our Father in Heaven'- Change the focus

So Jesus is saying that behind closed doors as we open the chambers of our hearts and we get simply and honestly before God our focus changes from us to God. And focus changes prayer, prayer from performance to complete transparency where I can be who I am before Him. Accepted. Loved. I find that when I do that even my posture changes, my shoulders go down and I can just be. Focus changes prayer from religion and duty and obligation to something far more vulnerable, far more profound, a thing called relationship.

Here's a video clip that I saw on Graham Norton, it's all about this guy who is focusing on the wrong thing. He's got this GoPro (which is like a video camera) and he's so excited because he wants to record this trip of a lifetime- he goes to San Fransisco and he goes to all the most amazing places in the States - but he has the camera on selfie mode all the way. ([Video](#))

We laugh and then we think 'oh no, what if that's like prayer? What if I'm thinking I was focusing on the right things, but all along my prayers were all focused on me and my needs, my thoughts. What if I had everything set up but the focus was just in the wrong place? What if we were praying all wrong? Not praying for the wrong things, not using the wrong words because Jesus is saying that our words don't matter, he says 'don't think by babbling on and on for hours and hours that means Gods going to hear you'. But what if the focus of the prayer was wrong? Jesus says in Matthew 6,

'When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your father who you can't see' But then in verse 8, He says, 'Don't be like them, for your father knows what you need before you ask him'

Now I don't know about you but when I read that, I think, 'if God knows what we're going to pray before we ask him, 'what's the point of praying then?' I don't know if Jesus is trying to get us to pray here because I find that statement a little bit demotivating! If my father in heaven already knows what I need before I ask him, then why bother praying at all?

I think it's because Jesus is saying that our starting point is the recognition that prayer at its core is about connecting with God and depending on God. It's saying 'God, this time I'm not going to do this on my own, it's saying, I'm not going to figure out my family on my own, I'm not trying to figure out this relationship or my marriage by myself, or my job, I'm going to depend on you.'

Jesus says when you pray, don't start with you. Don't build your relationship with God around you, build it around Him. He said before you get to the stuff about all the things you need - I want you to pause, I want you to pause and drink in the presence of the one you are coming before. Our father in heaven. And he says as you begin to do that, **who He is will begin to change who you are.** Jesus knows that when we spend less time on our words in prayer and on our wants in prayer we can spend more time with the one we are praying to. Isn't that hard to hear? Because most of our life we've been taught that our words really matter. Have you ever been in a prayer gathering where you've admired somebody who used better words? Deeper words, greater words, theological words, even the Greek words? Have you ever been in that kind of gathering? And Jesus says those words don't actually matter- it's the focus, the One who we are coming before who really matters. **He says focus on connecting with God rather than getting from God- let that be where your focus goes.** It begins with a recognition of who he is. Jesus would say don't start with your weakness, start with who he is, don't start with your failures, start with his greatness, don't start with your hurts, start with his strength. Don't start with your past, start with his presence. Recognise that prayer is not all about telling God all the things that are wrong with you, turn the go pro round and start by telling him all the things that are right with Him.

3. 'Hallowed be your name' - declare God's name.

Jesus says in verse 9 - 'Our father in Heaven, hallowed be your name.' It's a weird word isn't it, 'hallowed'what does that mean? Who uses that? Well it simply means God, your name is first, your name is holy, your name is to be honoured, your name is above all other names, your ways are first.

Why does Jesus tell us to do this? What's so special about God's name? Well names in Jesus' time carried far more significance than they do today. What you were called revealed what your character was like. To know God's name is to enjoy a kind of

privileged access to him, he's letting us know what he's like. As we pray and declare his name, we begin to understand and get to know his character. So how do we actually do what Jesus says and hallow or declare God's name when we pray?

Well we can do it in all sorts of ways. We can look in the bible and discover all the different names for God and then you can pray using them. You can look at the 'I am's'. The first 'I am' statement in the bible is in Genesis 15 where God appears to Abraham and says '*Do not be afraid Abram. I am your shield and I am your very great reward*'. So you could find a space at home, or somewhere where you can connect to God and say 'God, you are a shield, you protect me when it feels like there are arrows being thrown my way, you're a shield when all I see around me is chaos, you're a shield for those harsh words. You might pick up the second part of the verse- God you are the great reward, you are the prize. Where I see people trying to dominate one another and get ahead, you are the one who is worth living for, you are the goal, you are the great pursuit, you are the journey.'

Or the name that I find myself using at the moment is Jehovah Jirah, one of the Hebrew names for God. Again in the book of Genesis, chapter 22, God provided a ram for Abraham to kill instead of his son Isaac so Abraham called the place where that happened, 'The Lord will provide'. God provides and is called Jehovah Jirah. So you can pray, 'You are the Lord who provides, thank you for all your blessings, for forgiveness, for purpose, for hope, for food, for a home, for strength when I'm feeling weak, for laughter. Thank you that you know what I need before I even ask, I trust you to provide at the right time, in the right way.'

It doesn't surprise me that Jesus teaches us to pray in this way because he wants us to get to know the character of God through the names because prayer is a two way thing, we get to know about the one we are praying to how God is our shield, our reward, our great provider. He wants us to know that whatever our circumstances, God's character does not change. I went for a job last week which I didn't get...does that change the truth of who he is? Does he suddenly stop being Jehovah Jirah, the provider because things don't go the way I want them to? No, Jesus wants us to declare God's name because his name and his character are constant. It cements truth into our hearts.

But when things are going right, when we want to sing from the rooftops that something is going well, I am learning that He loves to hear what makes us happy too. How many of us just forget to pray when things are going well? Something wonderful happened to me the other day and I knew that God had instigated it, he had set it up and I was so thankful. The funniest thing though was that I couldn't wait to tell him about it, I pulled into a car park overlooking some trees and told him how what he had done had made my heart sing....I didn't need to tell him, He knew already because he had made it happen but I couldn't wait to tell my dad, my Heavenly Father. I sensed that he loved me doing that, for sharing joy with him.

So to conclude.

1. Let's find a quiet place where we can meet with God and open up the chambers of our hearts. We think the place where we pray doesn't matter, Jesus says it does. Jesus says where we pray is a signal of our intention of creating space.
2. Let's turn the GoPro round and focus on Him. Jesus says in verse 9, 'This then is how you should pray: Our Father in Heaven'

When we focus on God, acceptance comes and we can be who we are before God. Loved. Wanted. Focus changes prayer from religion and duty and obligation to something far more vulnerable, far more profound, to connection and relationship.

3. Hallowed be your name- Let's declare His name as great. In the coming weeks, maybe look at some of the names of God in the bible and see what that reveals about his character. Jesus says declare them as you pray, usher in the truth of who he is into your life.

My hope for you as you leave today and go about your week is that you begin to think about prayer as connection with your father who loves you. That it wouldn't be "I got this from God, I prayed this and I got this, prayer works". I want it to include that but it has to also be **I went there, he met with me, he's alive**. I went there, He met with me, he's alive, not I prayed and I got this, it works. I went there, he met with me and he's alive. Just as a parent pursues connection with their children, God is calling us into connection with him, let's abandon performance and embrace reality, honesty, joy, vulnerability and deepen the connection that Jesus wants for us with our Heavenly Father.

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