

Third session: Praying with others and for others and

Conclusion: The secret of prayer



We have so far explored Jesus' answer to the request of the disciples, "teach us to pray." We have seen that prayer strengthens our experience of not being left on our own, and we saw how the psalms challenged us to understand prayer as a dialogue with God and to remember God's promises and working in history of the people of God and in our own life.

In the second session we focused on how prayer is nurturing the inner child of God, and thus we were mostly concerned with the individual or personal aspect of prayer. We also touched on how we may pray with others to help them to come into contact with their inner child of God so that God's image may also be restored to them.

This session will focus on communal prayer or the disciple fellowship as a praying community. I will say a bit on praying for others, and we will conclude the exploring the secret of prayer that refers to the working of the Holy Spirit in our prayer life.

But first another remark on individual prayer. The personal prayer life is important for the sake of our relationship with God; without it our life as disciples of Jesus is not authentic. Prayer helps you grow spiritually, because your daily dialogue with God helps you to know God and God's love in Christ better, and you will know yourself as God sees you. Our daily practice helps us to pray anywhere and at all times, so that you in all circumstances of life may experience God's loving presence to you. Our relationship with God is of great importance in our relationship with others, and in how we serve one another in the Christian fellowship, as St. Paul says, "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." (1 Corinthians 12:27)

It may be a good habit to have a fixed time for our personal prayer, may be morning or evening. It is good to include Bible reading in the daily prayer. You may pray one of the psalms. And you may close your prayers with the Lord's prayer and a blessing. But as I will demonstrate The Lord's prayer might help you to structure your prayer as you pray for others.

Prayer is however also a corporate practice. As we gather as Jesus' disciples it is a natural thing to pray together. Jesus adds a promise to our praying unanimously together.

¹⁹ "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. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18)

This is a glorious promise, but it is not something magic. You should pray as one, and you should pray in Jesus' name, i.e. what you pray should be according to who Jesus Christ is. He was serving us in love and giving himself to us even in the death on the cross. He was obedient to God's, his Father's will. Thus, our unanimous prayer should spring from a right relation to God, from a willingness to serve and to follow God's will. We should be like Jesus in Gethsemane, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26/39). As you pray together, remember that Jesus is with you in your midst; if he would say "Amen" to your prayer, it is done in His name.

How to pray coming together? St. Paul gives as an idea of this, as he describes the gatherings of the congregation for prayer:

1 I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— **2**for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. **3**This is good, and pleases God our Savior, **4**who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. **5**For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, **6**who gave himself as a ransom for all people. (1 Timothy 2).

Paul uses four words to describe the prayer service. Prayer consists of petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving.

Petitions, i.e. we call upon God in our need. We need God's attention. It is like calling on his name, calling, "Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!" We are in need of God's grace in Christ. We are like the blind beggar Bartimaeus outside Jericho:

When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47-48)

Prayers, i.e. we are coming to God on our own behalf.

Intercession, i.e. we are coming to God on behalf of others. The image that Paul's readers would have hearing this word is that of the court of the emperor or a king. Those who have access to the emperor's or king's ears come on behalf of those who do not have this privilege. Because Jesus is our heavenly high priest, we may "approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we [and those we pray for] may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Hebrews 4:16).

Thanksgiving like our petitions, prayers and intercessions expresses humans' dependency on God. In our prayers we express our needs, and often our needs originate from our alienation from God due to sin, but in thanksgiving we express the rightful place of creation face to face with God the creator; we thank for the restoration of the order of Creation, because through Christ we have found that which is creation's freedom and peace.

Our prayers and thanksgivings are "for all people" – not only our friends, our church, or ourselves. Paul says we pray for "for kings and all those in authority", i.e. all that all who have a leading, governing or administrative authority in the nation and in the world – whether we like them or not, whether they are friends of Christians or persecute Christians. Paul wrote to Timothy in an age of persecution, and in such a time it is especially important to pray those in power, even if they are evildoers, unjust, oppressive, and are misusing their power. We pray for those in authority, because we long to "live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness", i.e. that we are able to live in a way that conforms to our faith and to being followers of Christ. To long and pray for this is not selfish, but an expression of our will to be a fellowship or community that is an alternative to the ways of a materialistic and self-seeking culture; we long to be a fellowship in which human relations are characterized by charity, reconciliation and by serving one another.

As we read Paul's description of the prayer service, we understand that the overall objective is the

salvation of humans. Prayer is part and parcel with the proclamation of the gospel. The prayer service or ministry, Christians' way of life, our witnessing to others of our faith in God in Christ is one coherent ministry, and we understand that we should not beforehand deem anyone outside salvation, because God "wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth". Our prejudice, our likes and dislikes should not rule our prayer.

To sum up Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy:

- Petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving are made for all humans, and all of creation (if we take Romans 8 into account)
- Our prayers include intercession for those in power and those who exercise authority in society
- Our prayer are concerned with the Christian community's ministry, way of life and mission
- Our prayers include personal matters – our own and individuals
- Petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving originates from and serve God's will to save, as we pray that humans may encounter God's love and presence in Jesus Christ

A prayer life following these lines and containing the four elements (petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving) may happen in Church, in cell groups, prayer circles – and even if you are just praying together two or three persons. And also your personal prayer life may be ordered the same way.

The Lord's prayer as intercession

Jesus has taught us to come to God as children that approach their parents in confidence and trust. Jesus gave us The Lord's Prayer to pray, and to use as a model for praying. This means that you also use the Lord's Prayer as the shape of your intercessions. You'll also get a handout with the exercise we will do together now.

When I quote a sentence from the Lord's prayer I ask you to repeat it aloud.

I'll ask you to remind yourself of a person you know who is in need of the presence of God. This may be concerning a person who is ill, or a person who has caused you pain, or your thoughts may reach out to persons in need due to famine, catastrophes, war and civil war, or You know best which person you'll have in mind, needing God's help.

Sit comfortably. Feel your body's contact with the floor and the chair back. Let your feet rest on the floor if possible - imagine they have roots, going deep into the ground. Relax your shoulders - your jaw - let your face relax - you don't need to think about anything right now. Sense your breathing - don't change it - just relax in it - feel Gods' presence. When you breathe out, you release the tension and restlessness.

Come Holy Spirit, and guide us in our prayer:

Our Father in heaven

OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

Ponder on how great God is and know that God is present as a caring mother or father.

May wonder and thankfulness fill you!

Ask God to reveal God's presence for the person or persons for whom you pray.

Hallowed be your name. Your Kingdom come

HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME. YOUR KINGDOM COME

Thank you, Holy Spirit, that you bring the peace and joy of God's Kingdom, and may this peace and joy find its way to the person or persons for whom I pray.

Your will be done, on earth as in heaven

YOUR WILL BE DONE, ON EARTH AS IN HEAVEN

Your Spirit knows us fully and knows what's best for us. Reveal your good will in the life of the person or persons for whom I pray. And leave the assurance that you intend the best for the person or persons for whom I pray.

Give us today our daily bread

GIVE US TODAY OUR DAILY BREAD

You do not give a stone, if we ask for bread, but you give what we need mostly in the circumstances of our present situation. I ask you, Father, may the person or persons for whom I pray, receive your Holy Spirit and what they need the most just now, according to your loving-kindness.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us

FORGIVE US OUR SINS AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO SIN AGAINST US

Help the person or persons for whom I pray, to be able to forgive and to receive forgiveness.

If you yourself need to forgive the person or persons for whom you pray, tell God about it so that God for Christ's sake will make you free in your relationship.

Lead us not into temptation

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION

Let not the problems, life circumstances become insurmountable to the person or persons for whom I pray, so that it ends up in doubt, despair and hopelessness and thus gives room for the devil or temptations.

But deliver us from evil

BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL

Thank you Father, that your Son has overcome Satan's power. May the person or persons for whom I pray, experience Christ's victory over the powers of darkness in the present situation.

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

FOR THE KINGDOM, THE POWER AND THE GLORY ARE YOURS NOW AND FOREVER

Be filled by gratitude and praise of God, and giving thanks and praise include the person or persons for whom you pray.

In praying for others, you are not bound to do it the way we just did it. Most importantly is that you pray from the heart – using the words that are natural for you to use. Do not think it should be in a certain way; do not compare with what others do. No language approaching God is the only right way. It's coming in a trustful and expectant way that matters, and it's your concern for those you pray for that is dear to God.

Sometimes however it is difficult to find the adequate words. If you have the gift of tongues this might help you. You may also find a help in using the pattern from the healing of the heart, or you may use the Jesus-prayer as an intercession. Sometimes you just notice a person in need of help, but there is no way in which you may approach him or her, then you may simply pray, "Jesus Christ, have mercy on me and of this person." You'll get a handout for using the Jesus-prayer this way.

The secret of prayer

Prayer stems from the disciples' unique relation to God: We are God's children. The power of prayer is God's Spirit since it is exactly the Holy Spirit who creates this assurance in our hearts that we are God's children and that we may call upon and approach God confidently. St. Paul expresses it this way: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children", and that we for that reason are adopted to the status of God's children. "And by him we cry, *Abba, Father*". (Romans 8:15-16). The Holy Spirit is the power in our prayers, and the least as we pray for other people and for all of creation.

This is further explained by St. Paul in Romans 8, and this is the secret of prayer, We read an excerpt from this chapter.

14For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. **15**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. And by him we cry, "*Abba, Father*."

18I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. **19**For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. **20**For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope **21**that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

22We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. **23**Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit,

groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

26In 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. **27**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.

28And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Paul points out the suffering that is a basic circumstance for the created world. He does not attempt to explain away suffering, and he even states that the believers are sharing this suffering. At the same time we know that we are God's children and that the Holy Spirit lives in us. The suffering is expressed in our lives as we groan with the suffering creation, but this groaning is the voice of the indwelling Spirit.

What is this suffering of the created world, nature and humans? Paul describes it as frustration and decay or corruption. It's important to notice that creation is not only humans, but nature alike. Creation is suffering because of the sin of humankind. Sin is the separation and estrangement that was the result of humans locking themselves in themselves and thus shutting God out of their lives. We put the needs and desires of our ego above God's will and above serving love. This meant that the relationship between humans and other created beings suffered, We were not any longer good stewards of creation, but consumers and exploiters. But it had been God's intention that creation's relationship with the Creator should have been mediated by humans.

All of creation are thus experiencing frustration as a condition of life, by this is meant a loss of purpose due to physical world's unstableness and death and due to humankind's unethical exploitation of creation. Frustration is an emptiness, a void without harmony and order. It's nothingness and chaos in stead of creation and cosmos. Suffering is the fruit of creation not being in a right relations with God; and it's impossible for creation to enter right relation with God without humans who do God's will. Creation is not living according to it's purpose. Thus creation is in bondage to decay and corruption; this expression points to the state of frustration, the state of nothingness: destruction. Creation is inextricably bound to decay and corruption, because it cannot free itself. Only a human can make creation free and reestablish right relations with God. For this reason creation groans.

But this groaning is not in vain; it's not without hope; it's a groaning as in the pains of childbirth. Delivery and redemption are at hand. The hope of freedom is linked to the revelation of God's children. Creation hopes to share the freedom of humans as God's plan for salvation has come to an end. The groaning of creation is the beginning of redemption. As humans enter into right relations with God, this will influence the other creation. The redeemed humankind will help creation into its right order and once more name nature and all earthly creatures to God.

And here we find the secret of prayer and its motivation. The Holy Spirit lives in the believer and groans in him or her. It's a longing for the redemption of our bodies and for fully living in the freedom of child of God in an intimate relationship with him. At the same time the Spirit makes us

sharing in creation's suffering. We groan with creation. Its groaning finds its tongue in us. Thus the Spirit reveals us to be those God's children for whom creation longs. With our shared groaning with creation we lend our voice to creation's longing for deliverance and freedom; we name creation to God, we intercede for creation. But it is God's Spirit who creates this groaning, and it is experienced as the Spirit helping us and creation in our weakness, when we do not know what we ought to pray for. The Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

This is a mystery. We are where our cognition stops, but we grasp in hope the reality that creation's longing for deliverance through the Spirit's groaning with us and in us on behalf of creation is of utter importance to the Triune God. Our prayerful groaning is brought in to the center of the Trinity's inner life, and there it meets God's ever attentive awareness and love.

Paul is here pointing to the deepest secrets of our prayer life, individually, in our groups and in church. We cannot manage prayer in our own power, but God's Spirit guides us and leads us in prayer – even when prayer goes beyond our words and become a wordless sigh or a groaning, or we are using the gift of tongues, the language of the Spirit. May God's Spirit assist you in your prayer life to “utter mysteries by the Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 14:2), communicate with God in your heart and in your spirit; may the Spirit help you to pray a matter through to the end as you expose yourself to God or pray for another person in utter distress and in need of God's presence.