

Prayer: Amazing! Wonderful!

Message for Sunday, February 25, 2018
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 6:5-8

Children's Message: Philippians 4:4-7

Circles sure are funny things. *Show a paper circle.* If you take a paper circle and cut it in half, you'll get two half circles. *Do it.*

Now show a circular ribbon of paper. But what if you cut the circle around the edge: what do you get then? Well, I suppose you will get two circles, half as wide as the original. Let's see what happens.

There you go! What if I cut one of them in half again? *Do it.* I get two more circles—but look, they're linked together!

Let me try that again with this other one. *Do it.* I get two more—no, I get one big circle! Well, you just never know, do you? That was a pretty simple trick. Now watch as I make them disappear. *Put them in a bag.* That's about the extent of my magic tricks.

Have you ever heard of Harry Houdini? Now there was someone who was worth watching! He amazed people by being able to escape. Handcuffs couldn't hold him. He could easily break out of any jail cell. He wasn't a criminal; he did all this for entertainment. In some of his shows, he was tied up with rope, his hands were chained, he was hung upside down in the air — and he got himself free in 30 seconds.

Some magicians might make a rabbit jump out of a hat or a bird disappear into thin air, but that was too easy for Houdini. He used an elephant! He had an elephant named Jennie which did all the usual things that circus elephants do. But when Houdini fired a pistol, Jennie vanished from view.

Yes, Harry Houdini was world famous for his astonishing feats. But I am about to do something which is so amazing, so stupendous, so incredible, so fantastic that none of Houdini's tricks could ever match it.

Let's take a moment for prayer as we begin...

... *pray very simply, nothing fancy or long. E.g.*
"God, as we listen to your word to us in the Bible,

help us to understand it, but even more, to live it. Amen."

(Excitedly) Well, how was it? Amazing or what?!!

Did you miss it? But I did it right in front of you! How could you possibly miss it? Do you want me to repeat it? OK, but pay close attention this time...

Repeat above prayer.

Do you get it now? What's more amazing than any magic trick? Prayer.

Just think about it. When someone does a magic trick, they hide a card up their sleeve, or switch things when you're not looking, or something like that. It's very simple.

When you pray, you are talking with God—the almighty creator of the whole universe. That's amazing! Even more, it's wonderful. God loves us, and wants us to have this connection with him.

The Bible says that when we take time for prayer, God gives us his peace in our lives.

Message: "Prayer: Amazing! Wonderful!"

Last week when I started this series on prayer, we read the passage in Luke's gospel which comes right after Jesus teaching the Lord's prayer. Today we're looking at the passage in Matthew's gospel which comes right before Jesus teaching the Lord's prayer.

1) Prayer is NOT about the words we use

Matthew 6:5, 7-8a, Today's English Version:

[Jesus said,] "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites! They love to stand up and pray in the houses of worship and on the street corners, so that everyone will see them. I assure you, they have already been paid in full. ...

"When you pray, do not use a lot of meaningless words, as the pagans do, who think that their gods will hear them because their prayers are long."

Jesus makes it very clear in this passage: the heart of prayer is most definitely *not* about the words. Our goal is not to impress others with our eloquence in prayer, or the length of our prayers. For one thing, we're not speaking to those others; and for another thing, that doesn't impress God either.

2) Get together with God

Matthew 6:6, Today's English Version:

“But when you pray, go to your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what you do in private, will reward you.”

The heart of prayer is having a relationship with our Father. I think the idea here is to get away from any temptation to impress other people; get away from distractions: just you and God.

That doesn't mean that public prayer is wrong. The Bible has hundreds of examples of people praying with others around. In fact, I love listening to the prayers of other people. I especially love it when I'm with someone who has known the Lord for many years, whose love for God is deep, and whose prayers come from that depth. At the same time, I love to listen to the prayers of a new Christian or a child, with their simple faith.

3) Prayer is having a relationship with our Father

Matthew 6:8, Today's English Version:

“Do not be like them. Your Father already knows what you need before you ask him.”

At first glance, the message here could be taken this way: Your Father already knows all about you, what problems trouble your mind, what joys thrill your heart, and the needs you have. Since I'm not telling God anything he doesn't already know, why even bother to pray? Maybe you've asked yourself that question; I wonder about it myself sometimes.

I don't claim to know the mysteries of God. So what I'm about to say, if it's any help to you, then take it and use it. If you think it's a bunch of rubbish, then leave it aside and go on to something more fruitful.

I'd like to use an analogy. When Jane and I moved here five years ago, we were strangers to you, and you were strangers to us. It takes time to get to know someone: where they were born, what their childhood was like, their favourite foods, what books they read or movies they watch, and so on. And that's just the surface layer. After you get to know someone, and you trust someone, you can go

deeper: how do you feel about politics, about sex, about money, about morality. A few people develop such close friendships that they talk freely with each other about the things many of us never speak out loud: what is life about, what am I afraid of, what do I hope to accomplish with my life, and how does my faith in God affect all this?

That's the kind of relationship God desires with us. That we would be completely open to God, and invite him in to the deepest parts of our lives. And amazingly, God *yearns* to have a relationship with the creatures made in his image. When we pray, that brings delight to the heart of God. Listen to what God says through the prophet Hosea.

Hosea 6:6, New Century Version:

“I want faithful love more than I want animal sacrifices.

I want people to know me more than I want burnt offerings.”

I'm going to read this verse again. This time, put your name at the front: God is speaking to you, personally. God is inviting you into this relationship with him.

Hosea 6:6, Bruce Version:

“*Bruce*, I want your faithful love more than I want animal sacrifices.

I want people to know me more than I want burnt offerings.”

Will you accept that invitation? There's a cost involved, though, and I have to be honest and tell you about that. Being in a relationship with God — as you might expect — is not your ordinary relationship. It takes time: God enjoys spending time with you. As you grow in your prayer life, may you also find that joy.

Being with God also means following God's commandments. If there is any area of your life where you are knowingly sinning, then you must stop. God loves you, forgives you, and will help you through that change.

As our children were growing up, each of them could have a pet of their own choice. Cheryl and Christine each chose a kitten from the local kitten factory—known locally as “Roy and Isabel's barn.” They were four and five years old at the time.

After the kittens had been with us for a few weeks, the girls were playing with the kittens outdoors in the back yard. I forget exactly what happened—maybe Jane or I were talking with them. Anyway, for a couple of minutes they were not watching the kittens, and during that time the kittens disappeared.

We looked all around our yard, looking for them. Not a trace. We got down on our hands and knees and looked between the boards around the crawl space under the porch — maybe they crawled in there. No luck.

We went through the neighbour's yards across the street and beside us. They weren't there either.

There are several trees in our yard, so we carefully looked up in the trees. Not there.

Finally, with fear and trembling, we walked along the side of the road, looking for their broken bodies, where a car may have hit them. Thankfully, the road was empty.

So I suggested we sit down on the front steps and pray that God would bring their kittens back home safely. They were used to praying, and asking God for help. So they eagerly said yes. Our prayer was one of simple, childlike faith: “Dear God. Our kittens are gone and we want to help them. Please bring them back. Amen.”

Within a minute we heard meowing from the hay field next to our driveway, and out they bounced through the fence! The children were delighted, of course, but not particularly surprised. After all, isn't this what we had asked for? It was a wonderful way for them to grow in faith, and they still remember that prayer. But the truth is, I think I grew more that day than they did! I could sense God saying to me, “Bruce, why don't you just trust me like they do?”

Will you trust God, too? Wouldn't you love to know your heavenly Father, and grow closer to him? That's what prayer is all about.

Next Steps:

-) Put your name in the Bible reading above, and read it aloud. God wants you!
-) You'll never *find* time for prayer. You need to *take* time for prayer. Make it a priority.