

## Teach Us To Pray

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Matthew 6:9-13

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I want to share some of the things I said on Saturday, because there's an Ignatian discipline called 'repetition', which is supposed to be good for us. But yesterday I was saying how much I have great respect for Tom and his leadership, and for this amazing work that's been going on here in this incredibly beautiful place, Weston, in Bath. I drove up here and thought, 'wow!' And of course it's a city set on a hill, really, isn't it? A light for this area. And the church building been reordered and made beautiful.

**Mark 11:17 | <sup>17</sup> And as he taught them, he said, 'Is it not written: "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations"? But you have made it "a den of robbers".'**

**Isaiah 56:7 | <sup>7</sup> "these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.'**

And this morning we're looking at this reordering of the people in the beautiful temple in Jerusalem by Jesus. And he's clearing out stuff and calling the people to the heart of the matter, which is that "my house shall be called a house of prayer." In the Mark version we read, "shall be called a house of prayer for all nations,'" echoing Isaiah 56. This is the heart of the matter.

And it's been our privilege to strive under God to build houses of prayer. When we were in Paris, in a French-speaking church for 10 years, it was nicknamed *Une maison de prière pour toutes les nations*. When we were in Oxford, we engraved on the glass doors of a new reordered building, *my house shall be called the House of Prayer for All Nations*. And now we have the privilege of working with a thing called *Europe Collaboration*, which is planting new churches, indigenous churches, in Europe's troubled continent. And we often visit those places. Next month we're going to Vienna. For example, last month we gathered some of them from all over, to think about this thing.

And, in a way, the name of the church is 'a house of prayer.' And today, of all days, we so need to recover that, I believe, because I don't know if you remember the day when the war against Ukraine was declared four years ago? I remember that day well and saying, 'this will change the whole of Europe and the world.' And today, we're living in the aftermath of an attack against Iran, followed by retaliations, the death of the Ayatollah. And the front page of the BBC today, from Lyse Doucet: *Iran's supreme leader killed in U.S.-Israel attack: Trump's bet on Iranian regime change could be his biggest gamble yet*.

We don't want to alarm ourselves or become anxious, but when Jesus walked into the temple, he walked into a place that was occupied by Romans. And his solution, his recipe, his call was to be a house of prayer for all nations. And I want to say it's the same call to us today. But will we respond to it? Is my house a house of prayer? Are we a house of prayer? I was reading a chap called Malcolm MacDonald, a friend of mine's new book, which talks about the pandemic when it came. And he said he was on *Zoom* calls with pastors, and they were discussing basically how to respond. And the debate was about how to organise *YouTube* or *Zoom* online meetings for everybody, and how to really preserve business as usual for the church. Whereas, perhaps, he would have rather been in *Zoom* calls discussing desperate prayer, and how to remake the church a house of prayer for all nations.

So, I just want to say this is a time for your series that is very 'kairotic', to use the Greek word *kairos*<sup>1</sup> - a *time* to notice and to wake up. The trouble is when we say 'teach me to pray', Jesus gave this brilliant *paternoster*, all-consuming prayer. But many of us feel, 'oh, how do I do this? Is it not going to be very hard work?' We want how to's and so on. And we need that. I remember hearing the story of a couple who had, a family, who had some friends, some new friends to lunch on Sunday. And it was after church. And as they sat down for the meal, the mum said to their little daughter, Katie, 'and Katie's going to pray, aren't you, Katie?' And so Katie said, 'I don't know what to say.' And she said, 'well, just say what Daddy said this morning.' So she closed her eyes and put her hands together and said, 'oh God, we've got those awful people coming to lunch today.'

Very often, our prayer life at home is as bankrupt even as that. And yet, I believe there is something in the Bible called 'the spirit of prayer.' In the book of Zechariah, we read:

**Zec 21:10 | <sup>10</sup> "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son."**

**Mark 11:17 | <sup>1</sup> "On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity."**

A spirit of grace, i.e. enabling-energy from God, God's riches, and supplication prayer intercession. So, this is what we're longing for in this series. It's not only how-to's, but also a 'spirit of prayer.' We don't know how to pray, but the spirit helps us.

**Romans 8:26 | <sup>26</sup> "In 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."**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2540/niv/tr/0-1/>

And this for me is a life passage where Jesus disrupts things, and calls for prayer. I remember in *St. Aldate's* in Oxford, which we had the privilege of leading for 20 years. It's a big church, and the sort of thing they used to do there was have a live donkey on Palm Sunday, walking around the church for children to pet and all that. And that was all very interesting and beautiful until the donkey in front of the stage decided to dump on the carpet. The verger had to run for a shovel. And this was disruption that I'm not asking for, but a kind of holy disruption. So, I want to say three things briefly this morning from this passage.

**1. Let us contemplate the beauty of Jesus.**

**2. Let's contemplate in this passage the beauty of his church at prayer.**

**3. Let's think about the potential for our own temple, our own house.**

**1) Let us contemplate the beauty of Jesus.**

So just first, the beauty of Jesus walking into the temple there. He's come on a donkey. He's humble. And I remember years ago not knowing Jesus at all. I'd been at Oxford Uni. I'd been there for four years. I'd never been to church or chapel in all that time that I was there. Why should I? I was a long-haired hippie, smoking cigarettes and so on. And my girlfriend, who I'd had a split up with, went to Cambridge to train for teaching and became a Christian, and rang me up to say 'I've become a Christian.' And I said, 'I'm very pleased for you.' I was pleased because I thought she would be nicer to me. I thought it would be good for me. But she said, 'no, no, no, you don't understand. I *want* you to, it could happen to you too.' I said, 'well, how would that happen?' She said, 'well, go to Blackwell's bookshop, buy a Bible and read the New Testament.'

So I did. I read the New Testament. I loved buying books. And there, as I read the New Testament, I found a person - a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief who had an answer to the deepest longings of our hearts. I saw the beauty of his character, the beauty of his courage, especially in incidents like this. His wisdom in responding to questions and his ultimate love and *agape* love, his love for individuals who are broken, his love on the cross, and then discovered the miracle, the true miracle, the fact of history, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. And I thought, 'wow, I must follow him.' I discovered, I contemplated the beauty of Jesus.

Dostoevsky said, beauty will change the world. And this morning let's just remember the beauty of the Lord Jesus and fall in love with him again and be a lover of Christ. And if you're not quite sure about whether that's true, then press in and seek him in whatever context you can. With friends, read the amazing Bible, and find him and fall in love with him. And then learn to contemplate him daily, and be still. And that is the beginning of prayer. The contemplation of Christ, 'sitting on a winter's day in front of a warm open fire' is how Desmond Tutu described contemplation. On a cold winter's day sitting in front of a warm open fire - sit in front of the fire that is burning, the burning love of Jesus. Do you do that? Can you be still and know that he's God? Because out of that stillness comes the changing of the world.

But the other beauty about Christ in this passage is his prayerfulness, really. His seeking of solitude and silence had often been seen. It was seen at the beginning of Mark's Gospel when early in the morning, after extraordinary things were happening, he went out to pray on a mountain. They came to find him and said, everyone's looking for you. And he said, well, let's go somewhere else.

**Mark 1:35-38 | <sup>35</sup> "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. <sup>36</sup> Simon and his companions went to look for him, <sup>37</sup> and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" <sup>38</sup> Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else - to the nearby villages - so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."**

Jesus was always seeking solitude and silence. So that's where this begins. It begins in the contemplation of Christ, the falling in love with Christ, and then the imitation of Christ.

## 2) Let's fall in love with the beauty of his church.

So, in this extraordinary passage, we read that he throws over distractions and there's lots of criticism and so on. But then the blind and the lame come to him in the temple and he heals them all. So, a house of prayer is not a place of sort of works and, 'oh God, we've got these awful people coming to lunch experience.' It's a place of an open heaven. That is the destiny of this place, that it would be a thin place. It would be an open heaven where healing comes, where you walk into an atmosphere that is thick with God's glory and the poor and the lame come. The poor in spirit, the people who are limping, who Christ loves from this area, from your friendship groups, from your family. From goodness knows where.

I remember a girl coming in who was a student at Oxford Brookes University to our church in Oxford one day. She was living with a man in an abusive relationship. It was something that had been a kind of choice that she'd made, and a friend at her course knew her and invited her to church again and again, and she came, and the whole of the first time she came in, she cried and cried. And that was our frequent experience in that place of presence. She cried. Some months later, she managed to get out of that relationship. She committed herself to Jesus. She became an intern in our church. To cut a long story short, she then became a very fruitful worship leader across the world, really. The blind and the lame come and Jesus heals them.

These stories make me cry. And so, let's contemplate the beauty of Jesus' church. That is what we see in this passage. I've fallen in love three times in my life. The first time was with Jesus. The second time was with a girl who put her arm through mine in Oxford while we were walking there, who later became my wife. But the third time was with a more classic woman in the city of York who had this perfume about her and was a brilliant dancer and beautiful music was upon her. And she lived in community and went to visit the prisoners. **I'm talking about the church, the bride of Christ.** So let us strive at the start of this series on prayer to build the church and know its beauty, her beauty.

### 3) Let's think about the potential for our own temple, our own house.

And then lastly, of course, in this passage, Jesus stands at the door of our lives and he knocks. And he says elsewhere, the Holy Spirit says, your body is a temple for the Holy Spirit.

**1 Corinthians 6:19 | <sup>19</sup> "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;"**

So the question is: is my house a house of prayer? Am I a person of contemplative prayer and intercessory prayer? Have I caught hold of the spirit of prayer? I believe that prayer is something to be caught, not just taught. It's like getting a virus, if you like. I caught it in Africa, in Uganda, in a prayer movement, where I discovered tearful prayer. I caught it again. I got a second dose in China where at five o'clock in the morning you hear this hubbub if you're lucky and you think 'what's this?' And actually, it is the voice of people praying with tears in their eyes. Oh, that the UK would rediscover that! Rediscover what I would call 'revival prayer,' that precedes revival itself. I know that this church would catch that. And you might be afraid of catching a virus. You know, it's a bit scary.

I'll finish with this. Yesterday I was using this illustration about the longing to get drenched, as it were, drenched by God. And I often talk about that and receiving God. And I'm repeating this for your edification if you were there, but I say I'm sometimes saying, 'are you willing to be drenched by God's Spirit?' And people say, oh yeah, yeah, yeah. But then you see, we put up our umbrellas. You know, actually there's lots of protection. My umbrella is from *Ecclesiastical Insurance Company*, (which protects people against acts of God, haha). And at the start of my House Will Be a House of Prayer series, I just encourage you to lay that down. You're not being called to be a crazy prayer (although we do need those). You're being called to imitate Jesus. Nothing to fear in that except depth and transformation. So that's on offer, I believe.



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