

WARRIORS IN PRAYER

Vision: Our Father

Today we begin a new series titled – Warriors in Prayer! That’s a challenge right there, isn’t it? How many of us, I wonder, would describe ourselves as warriors in prayer? More likely we’re already feeling guilty that we are anything but warriors in prayer! We would like to be able to say – we are warriors in prayer – but we never seem to get there! We carry the belief that prayer is important, we’d like to pray more.... but somehow...

The truth is, prayer is important, and, mostly we do want to be able to say we are warriors in prayer. This is not, I hope, a series that is in any way here to make us feel guilty about our prayer life. This is not, I hope, a series that will make us feel disappointed in ourselves, or that we are simply a failure in this.

This is, I hope, a series that recognises a deep and profound truth: we have been invited to pray. The deep, profound and simple truth that we have been invited by God himself to pray! Prayer is our response to the invitation from God.

In the Garden of Eden it seems that God walked with Adam and Eve daily in the cool of the day. It is a deeply relational thing for God to do; to walk and talk and enjoy the company of his creation. And for a while it was great, absolutely great. Sin destroyed that relationship; and sin still does. That’s why we struggle so much with prayer, but the invitation to walk with God in the cool of the day, still stands.

Jesus extends the invitation and we call it: The Lord’s Prayer. In this series we are going to explore this invitation together. Here’s a thought: what might happen if we take up the invitation to walk with God? Here’s another thought: Phillip Yancey, in his book about prayer comes to the conclusion that far from prayer being about what we are asking God to do, it is about the change that happens in us as we meet with God!

So, I am wondering, how much are you ready and willing to take up the invitation to pray – to walk with God and see what he can do?

This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,

¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one. (Mathew 6 v 9-13)

The first two words of Jesus invitation to prayer are both startling and powerful!

Our Father! Our Father!

These words give us the context for this invitation. It presents a significant challenge to the way (it seems to me) we are increasingly encouraged to think. In many ways we are encouraged to think about the individual: my rights, my career, my health, what is best for me, pursue what's good for me. Now there are many things that are good and helpful and healthy about that. But it also presents a challenge to something deep and profound and essential to us as created human beings. It is simply this: God is relational.

He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit – we are created in His image. We are deeply and profoundly relational.

Why did God create anything at all? Because God is love, and love always gives – it is in its very nature. God is love and God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit want to give and share that love. We are created to share God's love with him... and with one another.

We are, at our very core, relational beings. That's another way of saying: it's not, never has been and never will be, just about me! If I am really honest, I struggle with that, because, mostly, I want it to be all about me! But, deep in my heart, I know I'm made for more, far more than just me!

One of the saddest facts about modern society is the apparently increasing problem of loneliness. One of the most effective ways to torture someone is

to put them in solitary confinement. We are created as relational beings – it's not just about me; never has been, never will be.

When Jesus summed up the law, here's what he said: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself.' It is, He said, primarily about relationship.

These opening words challenge something else we might struggle with. Right at the beginning of the invitation – this invitation to pray extended by Jesus – is a direct challenge to those who thought they were the most important people in God's economy. The Pharisees made a very public display of praying – part of which was about telling everyone that God was far more interested in their prayers than anyone else's.

Jesus says: 'Don't be like them! They are deeply and profoundly wrong!'

By beginning His invitation with 'Our Father' He is making a very important point. We are all, yes, we are all made in the image of God. There is no difference in how God sees one of the people he created to the way he sees another. God loves all his creations equally. I, as the minister of a Baptist Church have absolutely no more status in God's eyes than any one of you. I can choose to believe I am more important than you, and you can choose to believe that I am more important than you, but it is simply not true!

God loves me because he loves me because he loves me because he loves me, a truth of which I am eternally grateful. And he loves you because he loves you because he loves you!

We have created a myriad of ways of determining that some people are more important than others, and we have become very good at it. But it is simply not true in the kingdom of the heavens! So, Jesus invitation is given equally to everyone.

My best guess is that some of us think we are not good enough to pray – certainly not in a group or out loud - and we have found all sorts of ways to measure the words we say: the confidence with which we say them; how spiritual they sound; whether we can include complicated theology...

But God sees and knows our heart, however we express it!

How's your heart?

The invitation is simply to bring your heart!

'Our Father' is also a challenge in another way. This is an invitation to remember God loves all people. In my worst moments, I am capable of thinking there are some people God can't possibly love. In truth, they are usually people I don't like. But 'Our Father' sets me straight.

Paul writes that we are all, in truth, by nature, objects of wrath saved by the unlimited grace of God. In truth, I am no different from those I choose to dislike. What I can say is that I am a sinner saved by grace and that is by far the bigger and the better story – and God and only God knows the whole story of Ian Phillips. He extends that grace to anyone and everyone.

‘Our Father’ is a challenge to me because it powerfully reminds me of God’s greatest dream, that all would come to him – no-one excluded! ‘Our’ turns out to be an extraordinarily powerful word.

Father – Our Father reminds us who this invitation is from. It is wonderfully true that God is the Father of all – he is the creator and he desires that none should perish. It is also wonderfully true that when our hearts turn towards him, he becomes our Father in a new and different way.

In James 1 v 5 you may remember that James told us something very important about God. ‘If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.’ Here James is telling us something of what God, as Father, is really like. He is the Father who simply loves to give. It is, remember, the nature of love to give, and God is love. God is the Father who wants to give, the God who wants to give to you, and he is the God who wants to give to you always and in every way. In fact, it means that God never stops giving!

Here is a wonderful and beautiful truth: if you take up the invitation to come to God, he will never ask you to come back tomorrow, because he is too busy today. God is always ready and always wanting and waiting to give...to you!

James also reminds us that the truth about ‘Our Father’ is that he is a generous giver. It means, I think, therefore, that God wants to give generously to you. I love this thought, that God is a generous giver who loves to give to all, meaning that his giving has no heavenly limitation. It’s as if God gives to you and me, his children, as if he has nothing else to do! Can you even begin to imagine what that actually means?

When the younger son returns from his selfish and indulgent journey, in the story Jesus tells, the Father throws a generous and lavish party. The older son is out in the field and expresses a long complaint to his father, arguing he was never given anything even though he was a good son. The father’s response is stunning; ‘Everything I have is yours and it’s been here all the time.’

We are left wondering, but the implication is, that the older son never quite grasped, understood or lived in the deep and profound truth of his father’s generosity.

How about you? How much about you is reflected in the older son?

Jesus left that story hanging: the older son was invited in, but we don't know what he did. I'm wondering what you will do... and so, maybe is your heavenly Father.

'Our Father' – you are always welcome – always! He longs for you to come in and walk with him.

So, as we begin this series, this journey, we come to Our Father! Perhaps, and I hope it will, this journey through this invitation to be warriors in prayer will change us and that may turn out to be the most important thing that happens here.

But this too is Our Father - we have a Vision Statement that helps us to look forward. It says we will be bursting with life. Here's a thought: I'm wondering what might happen if we took 'Our Father' seriously. If we committed to coming together, in all the ways we can, to pray together through this series.

At least for me, it begs the question: what could God do that he can't do when we don't gather together as community?

So, Sunday evening prayers; Wednesday morning prayers; life groups; men's prayer breakfast; Alpha.....

Ultimately this is about the kingdom of the heavens where God has invited us to walk with him – because the kingdom of the heavens is real and near. So maybe the question becomes: How about you? Will you take up his invitation and walk with him?

Preached in Crawley Baptist church on Sunday 5th May 2019, by Rev. Ian Phillips.