

What happens when Christians pray?

Luke 11:1-2

We have been preaching through Acts for the last few weeks, but I want to press the “pause” button on that for a while and look for the next few weeks at prayer.

If we are honest, I’d say that it is something we are mainly not very good at – possibly even for some of us, if we hear the subject being mentioned, there is a slight guilty feeling in the back of our minds and we say “I ought to pray more.”

The leader of my previous church – David Stroud, decided that before he ever taught on prayer, he would make sure that he had prayed for at least an hour each and every day for at least a year – which he did.

He is a man who has inspired me lots, but to be honest, if we waited until I could say the same, I don’t know if we’d ever get to this series! I love to pray – and mainly it’s a pleasure, not a chore, but I often find that life is just so busy that prayer can often be squeezed into a corner.

But I believe that at the moment, God is wanting to teach us to pray and to invite us into a fuller life of prayer, where we know praying to be a joy that we look forward to and where we know God to be The One who answers us – without all the guilt!

When Paul in the Bible went to Athens, he saw all the idolatry and false gods in the city and saw how devout the people were. He was shocked by what he saw, but when he addressed them, he very politely said:

"Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. (Acts 17:22)

I think that if he had come to certain parts of Birmingham – this area in particular, he may have said something similar.

We live in a place where lots and lots of people pray. If you drive around this area, there are a huge number of Mosques, Gurudwaras, Temples, Mandirs and Church buildings.

And something that seems to unite all these faiths is that they all pray.

But actually, if you look at the different faiths, their ideas of prayer are all different. And, because many of us were brought up following faiths other than Christianity, I think that at times we can bring different ideas of prayer with us when we come to faith in Jesus.

And I think it is possible that we then bring different expectations and wrong ideas when we come to pray – and I think this can damage our walk with God.

Because of time, I am going to summarise this and hope that in doing it, I don't make any mistakes.

What happens when Sikhs pray?

Sikhs believe in one God (Ik Onkar) who is the creator and is inseparably linked with creation – “The Creation is in the Creator, and the Creator is in the Creation.” Sikhs are free to pray (Ardas – a structured prayer) at any time, presenting requests to the divine.

But in Sikhism there is not the idea of a personal God, and rather than prayer, the highest ideal would be remembering and reciting the name of God – hoping that this would bring peace and harmony with creation and the creator.

What happens when Hindus pray?

Hindus also believe in one supreme being – Brahman, but approach him through many (330 million) deities or smaller gods.

Prayer (Vedas) to different gods is an act of devotion, but whether the God answers or not is up to him. Hindus also believe in Karma – that the God will reward or punish you according to your deeds. And these deeds, including prayer and religious rituals – puja, will determine whether you will be answered – and Karma says you will get what you deserve.

So how you express your devotion and if you are bringing enough sacrifice, and who you pray to will decide whether you are blessed or punished – meaning that there is always a sense of am I doing enough? Am I praying right? Am I doing the rituals right? Am I even praying to the right God?

What happens when Muslims pray?

Muslims are well known for prayer; they are meant to pray 5 times each day – “Salat”. They must pray face after first light; before mid-afternoon; before sunset; after sunset and after dark. Before praying they must wash and they must face Mecca as they pray.

As well as Salat, Muslims can pray to Allah with requests. There are a number of verses from the Qur’an that are referred to about prayer; one of the main ones says:

“And when My servants ask you concerning Me, then surely I am very near; I answer the prayer of the suppliant when he calls on Me, so they should answer My call and believe in Me that they may walk in the right way.” (Q. 2:186 Shakir)

This seems to be a positive verse, saying Allah is close and will answer; but it is a promise with conditions: “I will answer – when you call in this way.”

I’m not an expert on the Qur’an, so rather than making my own comments on this, I want to quote a famous 13th Century Muslim scholar – Al Qurtubi, who listed the conditions that need to apply in order for Allah to answer. He said:

The person who is praying and asking Allah must not be committing any transgressions against Allah, knowingly and unknowingly.

Then he quotes another verse from the Qur’an - Sura 7:55 to support this:

“Call on your Lord humbly and secretly; surely He does not love those who exceed the limits.” (Q.7:55 Shakir)

Then he asks “What does “*exceed the limits*” mean?

Al Qurtubi says it means:

- Not asking Allah for any forbidden things
- Not asking Allah for things while committing sin(s) in your life, such as earning interest on your money, stealing from others, not being honest in your monetary transactions
- Asking Allah constantly for the same thing yet not having faith that Allah is going to answer the call in the first place.

- Not having a clear heart and a clear conscience.
- Not being distracted mentally while praying.

Then he quotes another famous Sufi Muslim scholar - Ibn Atta, who adds that asking Allah has conditions that must be followed by the one who asks.

These conditions include:

- Humbleness & humility, fear, hope, continuity in asking, and only eating non-forbidden(*halal*) food
- The act of asking must be done in truth.
- The act of asking must be done at the right time(s) which can include:
 - At the times of breaking the fast or at dawn before starting a fast, the time between the prayer calling and the start of prayer, the time between the second prayer and third prayer during the day, and on Wednesdays. Other times may include urgent or emergency times and out of necessity.
- The main purpose of the calling must be to glorify the prophet Muhammad.
- The calling must be done in a manner that is audibly clear and contains no chanting.

(Source = http://www.answering-islam.org/authors/alfadi/allah_prayers.html)

I read a quotation from a Muslim from Saudi Arabia who had moved to the UK

We never were taught that Allah loves to answer our prayers, or that we can come to him as we are and bring our requests. Yet, living now in a western country, I see that Muslims seek to “adapt” the image of Allah to what is taught in the Bible and try to make Allah look similar to the biblical God. In other word, they try to Christianize Allah’s image.

When I typed the question “What happens when Muslims pray?” into Google, I found pages and pages of websites which answered the question “What happens when Muslims don’t pray 5 times a day?” And the main conclusion to this was that if you don’t do your Salat duties, then you will end up in Hell.

What happens when Christians pray?

The question “How should we pray?” came up with Jesus too. The Jews prayed in a certain way, at certain times, facing the temple; religious Jews would pray for really long times in places where everyone would see them.

Different sects would pray in different ways; John the Baptist taught his followers to pray.

And, as the Romans invaded, they had brought all their pagan gods and prayers to Palestine too.

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

He said to them, "When you pray, say:

" `Father..."

(Luke 11:1-2 NIV)

- Sikhs pray to an **impersonal god** and believe that **if** they pray enough and live good enough, then **maybe** things will go well with them.
- Hindus pray to **many gods** and, **hopefully, if** they have prayed to the right one, and have made the right **puja** and **pleased the god** enough, then **possibly the god will answer** and if they have been good enough, then karma will reward them.
- Muslims believe that they **must** do Salat every day, and if they ever fall short in this **duty** then they risk Hell, and if they want to pray to Allah, he **may listen if, if, if, if, if...**

And then Christians pray.

And in all of the Bible it never, never used the word “duty” or the idea of duty when talking about prayer.

The idea of feeling guilty if we haven’t prayed enough is foreign to the Bible. We are not pushed out of duty and guilt; we are welcomed out of relationship!

The Bible assumes we will pray – “**When** you pray...” but never because we will be punished if we don’t

The only Christian basis for prayer – and the only way we can build a life of prayer which isn’t going to be dead ritual or religion – us trying to please God, is if we know that the One we are praying to loves us and is our Father

The only way I know to build and sustain a life of prayer is out of relationship.

And that is exactly how Jesus says we should approach God.

Normally my sons run to the door and welcome me when I come in which is lovely!

Very occasionally they are busy on the Wii and Louise tells them to come and say hello and they grudgingly come and hug and greet me – because they have been told to.

A grudging, forced welcome never feels the same.

If you don’t feel like your prayer life is very strong, then trying harder because you ought to; out of duty; because you feel guilty, is not the way to go.

The only thing I believe that is going to change us is when we fix our eyes on God – our Father, and realise that, like a good Father, He always has time for us; always welcomes us; always listens to us.

And as we see Him, we are filled with love for Him, and we treasure every minute with Him.

Over the next few weeks I am going to preach about persevering in prayer and having self-discipline; but if you don’t feel that you have a good prayer life, then this is where you need to start.

If there’s anything of Sikh impersonality, or Hindu bargaining or Muslim duty that has crept into your view of your Father in Heaven (and these things creep around people with Christian backgrounds too!) then we need to root them out and kill them off as lies that can only lead to dead religion and will choke the life of intimate, relational, hope-filled, effective, powerful, transforming prayer Jesus invites us to. **Let’s pray!** **(Brent Rue story)**