

Listening

Prayer: How to do it

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John 10:1-16

Well, a couple of months ago I was looking into the history of Weston Village, and I came across a fascinating article that stated that in times past, the church bells here at All Saints were rung at particular times in the week to signal when the communal Western Village bakery ovens were ready for people to come and bring their bread for baking. And I love that idea of people getting together and bringing their loaves and doing some communal baking. It was kind of like a bake-off in olden times. I guess it might have been a bit embarrassing if you'd forgotten to put your yeast in and yours came out a bit flat and everybody else's was all beautiful. But still, I love that idea of the church calling people to come and bake bread together. I think it's brilliant, because throughout history bread symbolises the basic nourishment that humanity needs. And in the Bible, bread symbolises provision not just for our physical needs, but our spiritual needs and our emotional needs as well.

1 Thessalonians 5:16

¹⁶ "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

And so in many ways it makes total sense that Jesus deliberately chose this phrase that we're looking at today: "Give us today our daily bread." It's the next stage of the prayer template that we've been studying over these past weeks in the Lord's Prayer. But as with many of the famous words in the Bible, there's more to this phrase, I think, than meets the eye.

So far in our sermon series, "Prayer - How to Do It," all the phrases of the Lord's Prayer we've been looking at have focused so far on God himself. If you think about it, we've looked at "Our Father in heaven," "Hallowed be your name," "Your kingdom come," "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." But now Jesus switches it up, and the focus shifts to asking for our own needs: "Give us today our daily bread."

Now, Jesus would have most likely spoken in Aramaic, but Matthew and Luke record this teaching of Jesus in Greek. And I looked at the original order of words, and it is a little bit different, so the phrase is literally: "Bread our daily, give us this day." But it's still clear and unambiguous, isn't it? Jesus did teach that we should not only pray to God every day (I think "this day" shows us that), but that we should bring our daily needs before the Lord. God is interested in the stuff of our everyday lives. When we sometimes think of the world and its needs and all that is going on around us, all these enormous issues that are happening, stuff happening in Iran and shootings happening in the United States and things like this even today, you think, well, my little prayer and my daily needs don't count for much. But actually, **Jesus taught us to pray for our daily bread, so he is interested in the smaller things of our lives.**

The first mention of bread in the Bible is in Genesis 3:19:

Genesis 3:19

¹⁹ "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your bread."

God is explaining to Adam the tragic consequences of the fall, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit and started hiding from God in their shame. And God told Adam that one of the effects of mankind's rejection of God would be that work becomes thorny toil. Do you ever feel like your work is thorny toil? Sometimes it is. Obviously not for a vicar of this wonderful church. But the Lord said, "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your bread." And in our broken world, even the basics of life are sometimes a struggle. It feels like an uphill battle.

But in contrast, Jesus said that we should pray to our Father: "Give us this day our daily bread." Not simply "help us with our work," not "help our crops to grow," but instead, interestingly, "give us today what we need." Give it to us. It's totally different from that mistaken idea that God helps those who help themselves. People think that's in Scripture. It's not. It's not. And that is the point. Jesus suggests that **we should admit our dependence on the Lord, even for our daily basic provisions.** Instead of us being in control of our productivity and success, we're actually humbly asking God to provide for us. And this is the yielding portion of this prayer that we're moving into, as we yield ourselves to the Lord.

This phrase also echoes back to another occurrence of bread in the Old Testament, a little bit more famous perhaps, when the Israelites were wandering in the desert and crying out to God for their lack of food. And so he gave them manna to eat, manna, bread from heaven, miraculous daily flakes of waxy bread-like stuff that sustained them. But of course it was only good for one day, except on the Sabbath. Collect any more and it would go mouldy and maggoty. Daily bread was enough. No more. God was teaching them to rely on the Lord for their daily needs. Enough is enough. There is always enough.

And so, God is teaching us that godly living is a matter of daily trust. Don't sweat for the big picture, except for what God provides for us. And "Give us today our daily bread" is about yielding to the Lord, trusting him to provide for our needs and not just our wants. Although there is a place for that sometimes, we need to be careful. I did once have somebody ask me for prayer about whether they should buy a Jaguar or a BMW. I have to say I didn't feel particularly embraced to pray deeply with him about it.

But of course, our daily bread is not just about our physical needs. In Matthew 4:4, when the devil tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread when he was hungry in the wilderness, Jesus replied:

Matthew 4:4

4 “Man doesn’t live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the Father.”

And this is how the prayer course that we've been following as our structure unpacks this phrase of the Lord's Prayer: the daily bread we need is God's word to us. And we need to take the time to listen out for God's voice. We need to take the time to receive our daily bread.

And in the reading we just had, in John 10:27, Jesus says:

John 10:27

27 “My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me.”

But he concludes that passage with that promise of abundant life for those that are following him, those that are listening out for his voice. Abundant life is in hearing God's voice.

And we've talked about different ways of praying over these last six weeks: adoration, petition, intercession, contemplation. But listening for the nourishing words of God needs a different emphasis from us. It's about being open and receptive. Hearing God's voice, I don't think it's like a DAB radio, whether it's on or off, where either you have signal or you don't. I think it's more like an analogue signal, old style, requiring more delicate tuning, filtering out the noise of everyday life.

And Pete Greig suggests very helpfully that there are two key practices when it comes to hearing God's voice and receiving this daily bread. These are, firstly, to slow down and, secondly, soften up. Slow down and soften up. Slowing down means creating that space, that space for quiet, for silence, for hearing with our mind's eye, with our internal ears. Reducing distraction, which is a real problem for all of us. And making that time to listen, not just to speak, not just to download our needs and our wants, although that's important, but taking time to listen to what God wants for us. Distraction, I think, is perhaps the primary enemy of prayer in our day. Our lives are completely distracted. I am the worst distracted person in the world.

Actually, even as I was sitting in silence writing this talk, a huge meat fly just came in and started buzzing around my head and buzzing itself against the window. I just found it really distracting. And I just thought, goodness me. So I had to stop. It took me several minutes to coax it out of the window. I didn't just swat it. But before I could return to silence and let my thoughts flow to the Lord. Distractions come in many forms. Lord, deliver us from the flies that circle our minds. Sometimes this can be little anxieties or things you've forgotten to do. Sometimes we have to get those things written out and put down on a piece of paper before we can really fully concentrate, to still that nagging.

And then, soften up. What does this mean? This is about our heart posture, our heart attitude to what we're hearing. And that means dealing with hardness or cynicism or hurry. Hurry is another enemy. But also that hardness: do we expect to hear from the Lord? Are we looking for the Lord to speak to us? Do we think it's possible for the Lord to speak to us? And do we think that actually the Lord's much more interested in talking to other, much more holy people than us?

But I think this is also intrinsically linked to asking for and receiving forgiveness, because that's how we get level with God again. I think Jesus knew this, because the next line of the Lord's Prayer says this: "And forgive us our sins." Have you ever noticed that? It's very linked. "Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our sins." They go together. They go together because to hear God's voice is to have our hearts and minds softened by God's forgiveness. Knowing that we are weak people, we're very bad at tuning in. But forgiveness means, Lord, you know what I'm like. Would you help me hear your words to me?

So, just to remind you, as soon as you become a Christian, in other words, the time you acknowledge your need of God and you ask him to be Lord of your life, you receive that fundamental internal forgiveness. You are given a new heart. You're a new creation. You are made new and righteous in God's sight. And you receive that amazing, whole forgiveness and shalom that Jesus paid for on the cross, and also that hope of new life that was proven at the resurrection.

But we still need to pray for daily forgiveness. Not because we need spiritual revitalisation and regeneration, that's happened. But because actually we need cleansing from the daily tangle of life, the daily detritus that keeps us from being effective in our daily Christian walk. And I think also it's the stuff that stops us from hearing God's voice clearly. You could think of it as earwax. Just as clear hearing can be affected if your ears get blocked up, I think unconfessed sin and things that play on our minds in that sense can block our spiritual senses from hearing God's voice. So I think Jesus deliberately put those two sentences together: "Give us our daily bread, and forgive us our sins." Forgiveness softens us up and opens our ears to all that Jesus has for us. Sometimes I think we need forgiveness for trying to do things in our own strength rather than handing things over to God. Because sometimes I think we do keep trying to make our own bread rather than asking God for it - Give us today our daily bread.

When it comes to hearing God's voice, the good news is we can all do it. You can all hear God's voice. And we need to battle those lies of the enemy that say you can't hear God's voice. Say no, **he's actually made us to be able to hear him.**

Firstly, Paul tells us:

Romans 1:20

²⁰ “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen...”

Creation itself speaks of God's eternal power and divine nature. And on a beautiful day like this, let's enjoy God's creation. It's easy to marvel at God's handiwork. And then, as well as “the book of nature”, as Saint Augustine put it, God also speaks to us through the book of Scripture. And digesting this book of the Bible allows God's word to be integrated into our hearts and our lives and our minds and our thinking and our behaviours. But we have to digest it in order for it to get into us and start taking effect.

And as well as God's direct words to us, he also does speak to us through other people. Hopefully something you hear this morning might trigger a thought or a prompt. It might be the Holy Spirit prompting you today through words that are spoken in different ways, or conversations you have after this service. Sometimes a friend might drop a verse of Scripture for you, or a word of encouragement, a prophecy. And I always think of these things like threads coming together. You're given a thread. On its own, each one may not bear much weight. But then sometimes the Lord speaks in these multiple little ways, such that the threads we perceive gradually build into a rope that's worth hanging on to.

God does also speak to us through our intuition, our conscious and our unconscious thoughts and processes. And as we yield ourselves to God, our gut feel and our consciences act as God-given guidance devices, and in the hands of the Lord they can be trustworthy. We need to discern what we're thinking for and whether we're actually just seeking our own heart's desires. But as we submit ourselves to the Lord, our conscience and our intuition can be sanctified.

Sometimes God speaks through dreams, and sometimes dreams have been really helpful for me during my Christian walk. I've ended up here as an Anglican vicar partly because of a dream that made a profound difference to my decision-making process when I was younger.

And in John 6:35, Jesus said:

John 6:35

³⁵ "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger. He who believes in me shall never thirst."

And so Jesus offers us the essentials of human existence: food and forgiveness. Those are the essentials that we need for our everyday lives, each and every day. We need to eat that each and every day. And it's our privilege to be able to share that bread together.

So as we take communion later on, let's remember that it's not only about forgiveness, it's also about our daily needs, our daily provision, and that his word comes to us through this. I found this lovely quote from D.T. Niles, and I'll finish with this. He was challenged to summarise faith in ten words, and he said this: "Christianity is one beggar telling another where to find bread." And that's what we are together. We're begging the Lord and asking him to give us our daily bread.



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