

## Chapter 1 Why Do I Need to Learn to Pray?

I realised that I needed to learn to pray when I ran out of spiritual steam after working in full time church ministry for a couple of years. I had used up all the resources I had gathered from a lifetime of praying in Sunday Worship, and from the liturgies that had been fed to me at ministerial training college. I had, for support, a lovely prayer-meeting on a Tuesday evening in my church vestry where half a dozen of us would gather around God's Word, seeking insight in preparation for Sunday's sermon (on my part) and upholding the life of the church in prayer. So, it wasn't as though I couldn't pray any more, it was just that this wasn't sufficient to grow a church and sustain me as God's minister. I was crying out, in desperation, for a closer and deeper relationship with God.

I was beginning to realise that if I were to feed others in the faith, then I needed extra in order to have plenty to give away! Currently, I was running on empty and my health was suffering as much as my spirit. From my perspective, the world looked bleak. Help was at hand as I was eventually directed by one of my Church Elders to the Maranatha Community which was based close to home. Their patient guidance in prayer and through copying their practices of seeking after God began a recovery process which led to a new understanding of who I am in Christ.

As I became part of this group and began to lose myself in the times of prayer, I learned to properly listen to God, to discern his voice and to hear his promptings ever more clearly. I found that other people who were praying with me were often able to hear specifically from God about me and my needs, and I theirs. In this environment of worship, prayer and the presence of God, I absorbed the prayers of these holy people, watching and praying alongside them as I recovered sufficiently to take what I now knew and to use it, stretch it, test and teach it as part of my ministry.

I soon realised that a lifetime of learning will never be enough to fully satisfy the heart that continually cries out to God to show us more of him. I know that I still need to learn to pray because I need to love him better - having fully accepted that he alone satisfies my heart and soul. Above all, I discovered that every Christian needs to be taught to pray in order to be effective in whatever God has called us to do.

Asking for help in learning to pray should not embarrass anyone, there is credible precedence. One of the first questions of spiritual merit that his disciples asked Jesus, was for him to teach them to pray. It is a request that every believer should be making of their teachers. *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."* (Luke 11:1-13 NIV)

Learning to pray can mean laying your whole life at God's feet and simply asking, 'your will be done' whilst listening intently for his response. We may have the words of many beautiful and ancient prayers at our disposal for use without hesitation, but to learn to pray takes us further, beyond the words, the form and even the disciplines which we have learnt and to quest for proper relationship with God the Father. Look at how Nicola describes her need to learn;

*I got a spiritual director and I remember sitting down with him, in the summer, on a beautiful sunny day, on a picnic bench and saying to him; 'I don't know how to pray! You know, other than the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the usual prayers that you learn, I don't know how to pray! I want to relate to God, but I don't know how.'*

*And he said; 'Well it's the same as if you wanted to get to know any human being,*

*what would you do? It's the same thing with God: it's a relationship.'*  
*So that was how I began to pray; 'Oh! That's how it is'. Having a conversation with God and listening for what he might want to say as well.*  
*I also learnt about communal prayer, which we hadn't done in my family, even praying before and after meals, so I just saw that God could impregnate everything you did.<sup>2</sup>*

Nicola is from a loving prayerful family and had been deeply touched by her own parents' reverent prayers and devotion to God. Indeed, it is probably their example which kept her interested in Christianity and in knowing Jesus. The one drawback with the formed prayers that we use, often to great effect, from our historical and liturgical resources, (prayers from books) is that they have a set, formalised beginning and an end. Nicola's revelation here is that God 'impregnates everything'. So too our relationship with God should have an effect on the entirety of our life. There is no place in our lives where God cannot reach. He cares about our darkest, dullest most trivial concerns as well as the huge matters of importance that govern our future and well-being. He fills our imagination with his presence as well as guiding our decision making through the direction and wisdom of those around us who care for us.

Prayer is to spend time in God's presence, taking note of his responses, his behaviour, his reaching out to other people through other Christians or through a seemingly random series of events. Getting to know God more fully demands our time and energy. Through learning to pray, we learn to honour God. We learn to devote more than the offering of our 'words' to him.

Perhaps many of us have had something like Nicola's experience. We have known prayers and examples of prayer which have been with us throughout our lives, but it has taken a moment of personal epiphany or revelation to realise, in our spirit, that we too need to be taught to pray, just as Nicola was taught, just as John's disciples were taught, just as Jesus taught his own disciples.

One of our greatest frailties can be that we judge a situation from an earthly perspective. To an untrained eye, it may seem that God's blessing or lack thereof is evident in a place or situation. Taking time to pray and listen properly to God can shed a whole new perspective on the same thing. Learning to pray is critical to discovering God's will for our lives and our calling. The following Bible passage is from the beginning of Jesus' ministry and gives us an idea of some of the potential pitfalls that were awaiting Jesus as he began to minister more fully in the power of the Spirit:

*<sup>32</sup>That evening after sunset, all who were sick or had demons in them were brought to Jesus. <sup>33</sup>In fact, the whole town gathered around the door of the house. <sup>34</sup>Jesus healed all kinds of terrible diseases and forced out a lot of demons. But the demons knew who he was, and he did not let them speak. <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." <sup>39</sup>So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. Mark 1 (NIV)*

The disciples had witnessed Jesus' constant use of prayer in informing the relationship he had with the Father and how this prayer fuelled his everyday approach to situations. (Mark

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<sup>2</sup> Madonna House: Nicola, Discovering Relational Prayer

1:35-2:11) Jesus firstly brought himself to God and from that point, he brought others. Prayer was Jesus' fuel for all his activity and decision-making.

In the passage from Mark's Gospel, we read about a successful evening of preaching, deliverance ministry and healing. The very next morning, just a few hours later, we see Jesus seeking the mind and will of Father God through prayer. In prayer, Jesus was reminded that earthly approval was not on the agenda and so, he was not so concerned about the 'numbers who were gathering' as he was concerned for the others who needed to hear the gospel of Good News. He responds to his eager disciples: *Let us go somewhere else - to the nearby villages - so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come.* Mark 1:38 (NIV)

How many times do we take running or experiencing a 'successful' event as having been given absolute approval that a thing should continue? By this, it is in no way to suggest that good things and successful things should discontinue. The evidence of its worth is discovered through prayer that surrounds the idea, the hope, our grand plan. We take ourselves to God in worship and prayer, surrendering ourselves fully to his Lordship. We allow him to give direction to our day and focus to the plans within it.

We need to learn to pray because it teaches us about God's perspective on a situation, on our life or for an issue. Through prayer, we learn to take a back seat to the will and purpose of God, and through doing this, we discover that God's immediate involvement in our life was the best plan all along.

We need to learn to pray because we need to be clear about what God's character and his will look like. The better we get to know God, the more easily we adapt to putting his plan in place as we jettison our own 'great idea'. I tried explaining this in a sermon for a church which had been heavily involved in bringing its premises into reasonable order:

*"If Jesus came to this church and was preaching and teaching and crowds were coming from miles around to be part of it, you have got out all the spare chairs and people are being healed, how would you feel?"*

*"Excited!"*

*"Great ... and what would you want to do with Jesus after this successful event?"*

*"Give him a paintbrush!"<sup>3</sup>*

The Lord of heaven and earth being given a paintbrush and told to help paint the kitchen? This was not the mission focus I'd imagined! It was a clear sign of Jesus' acceptance as one of the lads in that church community but it also shows how we can become so wrapped up in our routine and the priorities that are at the top of our minds that we often forget to seek God first and ask the question; "What do you want me to do today: how best can I serve you?" For some people, God's response may well be that they should pick up a paintbrush, a vacuum cleaner or shopping list. For others it may be to study, go to work or care for children. Others may be called to pray, be missionaries at home or overseas. Each activity that we do, in order for it to fit right, must be the one that God has designed for us, and discovering God's design for our day begins in prayer.

My lovely church member, David, was enthusiastic and spontaneous in his response, wanting to keep Jesus with the lads, working together on making the church beautiful. We may well take up a paintbrush and do a job because it needs doing and God is with us in that. However, it can be that we often hide behind the jobs that we believe need to be done in order to avoid the more pressing tasks that are assigned by God. It is through

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<sup>3</sup> In Loving Memory of David Bradbury

learning to pray that we become ever more in tune with what God wants. When we are close to God, he is more easily able to bring us back to work and live within his plan. David would have been as disappointed to have Jesus refuse to ‘muck in and help with the painting’ as the disciples who were still buzzing from the previous night’s event were when they approached Jesus with their own ‘paintbrush’ situation.

Through prayer, Jesus knew he had a clear mission imperative, given by God:

*After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”* Mark 1:14-15 (NIV)

As a result of people receiving that message, and even as a means of delivering the message, Jesus brought the reality of the coming Kingdom to bear on people’s lives. He healed the sick, he dispatched demons, he challenged the untruths and partial truths that were prevalent among the religious leaders and people of influence in the places where he went; but foremostly, Jesus’ mission task was to preach the good news of God’s imminent Kingdom to those who were in need of hearing and receiving it.

For Jesus to get hung up on a successful looking by-product of that message is to deprive the gospel of the influence it could have and to be disobedient to the first calling of God on his life. The only way to be resolute and remain focussed about the task was for him to remain close to God. To seek God’s blessing, his rebuke or correction and to move in the direction in which he points us. Jesus knew this and sought God’s purpose through prayer and time alone with his heavenly Father and so should we.

Learning to pray can mean the shaking off of our preconceived ideas about God and his intentions for the world. Look again at the passage from Mark: Jesus is more concerned about doing God’s will than in crowd-pleasing theatrics. Throughout Mark’s Gospel, we see how Jesus is more bothered about doing his Father’s will than in his own good reputation or in his personal safety. Jesus knows who he is because he has learnt to pray and his prayers continue to propel him along the road that God has planned for him, all the time checked and challenged by his own intellect and will. Jesus follows God’s plan, choosing the cross. We may have to choose job, spouse, home, church, what to do with our money in a similar way. Learning to pray equips us to be more effective witnesses of God’s love and power in the world. Through being competent in prayer, we are more able to be active in service also.

Prayer also motivates the disciple to activity. It is not a mere passive occupation which engages your head. The purpose of our praying is to move in the ways God wants. I asked James, a first year mathematics undergraduate, what God talks to him about in his times of prayer:

*Sometimes he tells me things I need to know. Sometimes, I get reminded of things that have not necessarily slipped my mind, but I’ve almost thought that they’re not important and actually, they are. Sometimes, he’ll tell me about what I then need to get on and do about a situation.<sup>4</sup>*

James’ prayer ought to be fairly typical for many of us. He experiences further revelation from God: about who He is or even about who James is. In this way, God is able to occupy more of the space in our head and heart ... The space that is often assigned to working out the possible twists and turns of soap operas or daydreaming about being a celebrity or how to advance in the Xbox game that has been defeating you...

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<sup>4</sup> James Hollins: Connecting with God

Then there is the reminder of things that we already know but have not responded properly to or have let slip in the busyness of life. This can be necessary as the Word of Truth in us may take a while in establishing itself. It can be as if God says, 'remember when I promised I would never let go of you? This is me, taking hold of your life'.

The third part is the motivation to action: what then should I do? This can apply to any situation in which we find ourselves and is the call of God on our lives. Similarly, Jesus prays and then he acts with bold commitment to his decision. In Mark 1, it is to move on to the next village.

As you look again at this passage in Mark's gospel, you will see that Jesus gives no justification for his decision. He engages no argument. He responds with conviction and fervour for the task God has set for him and his disciples. Note the plural 'Let us go ...' Jesus has received God's direction.

As Rabbi, he leads his disciples in God's direction with confidence and conviction. There is given greater weight to the decisions of the person who is able to pray, they carry the authority that comes from choosing God's right way. Having learnt to pray, we too can decide confidently to follow God's voice when other people speak their version of wisdom to persuade us to an alternative course.

It is a wonderful thing to see anyone follow God's directions for their lives with utter faithfulness. These people exude prayerful peace and holiness. They are attractive to be around as they move and live in faith in Jesus' love and plan for them. This confidence comes from the prayer which is the conscious relationship of the believer with God. As Christians, prayer is critical to our development as effective believers and followers of Christ. When I found myself ill and anxious, without the spiritual resources to function effectively as a Church minister, I learnt the hard way that properly knowing how to pray is vitally important to spiritual and general well-being.

Jesus had learned to pray for all eventualities; when he was tired, under attack, potentially fearful and running to a full schedule. We would do well to follow his example. In order to be fully human, fully alive, we need to learn to pray. In more cynical moments, when we declare that prayer is too hard and that God is not listening, it is all too easy to conclude, from our sophisticated twenty-first century point of logic that, '*Of course Jesus knew what God wanted of him - he was God*'. In the First Century, the disciples were as yet unaware of this minor detail. Simply, they saw their Rabbi pray to God and saw that it worked. They wanted to learn from him.

We too can follow the disciples' example and learn from Jesus how to communicate with God the Father. Looking again at the Mark 1-2 passage, we see how Jesus' closeness to God affects his response to people. The purity of Jesus' heart allows him to be super-sensitive to the brokenness in the people he meets. He is complete in his surrender and commitment to God the Father. Fully human, he approaches prayer and the worship of God as the fuel for his life. Fuelled by the Holy Spirit and fully aware of God's saving love for the world, as God's minister, Jesus meets the broken, the mistake-makers and the social rejects. We need to learn to pray in order to minister God's love as Jesus did. It is not so much the person of Jesus whom the Leper asks for healing in Mark 1:40, (see below) it is the power of God residing within Him. By the Holy Spirit, through prayer, this power resides in us.

We need to learn to pray in order to minister God's love to people as well as to deal with that which has been broken within us. Jesus teaches those whom he chooses, but then

others seek him out, eager to catch the blessing that is evidently available from this man of God.

It is part of our life of faith that we should be ready to respond should that same question be asked of us:

*Are you willing?* (Mark 1:40)

Are you willing to reach out with a hand of blessing and display the Gospel of saving love to the one who stands in front of you with questions oozing from every part of their life? The Leper offers Jesus a challenge, based on his knowledge of Jesus; *'If you are willing, you can make me clean.'* (Mark 1:40) In that challenge for Jesus to bring God's blessing on his behalf are a number of unspoken further challenges, ones for which an answer will be required of us as we learn to fully minister God's love through our prayers on behalf of others;

"Are you willing to acknowledge me, to touch me, to speak to me, to create me once again in the image of God so that I too may rejoin the human race and be whole as a person?"

We need to learn to pray in order that we may bless the world with God's touch and God's love which He has placed within his church. Where we have a good relationship with God, he will enable us to see that person through God's eyes: *'fearfully and wonderfully made'* Psalm 139:14 (NIV) We don't even need to be in the same place, country or even continent to bring them to God. Again, learning from Jesus and the faith of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28, or the Centurion with the sick servant in Matthew 8:5-13, Jesus brings God's blessing to bear through prayer at some distance from the objects of healing and need. This is not an easy method of prayer, but it is a valid one. Jesus, in close relationship with God was able to discern his Heavenly Father's will for wholeness and to bring healing even where he had no physical contact with that person. God requires our willingness to faithfully follow in his ways. For this, we need to learn to pray. As we learn to pray, we too develop that level of unity with God whereby we are able to respond with Godly compassion to the person in need (Mark 1:40-42) or to *'discern in our spirit what is in a person's heart.'* (Mark 2:8) As we grow more confident in prayer, we grow closer to God and our responses to people in need become increasingly Godly as he builds himself inside us. Jesus' example shows how prayer can change, challenge and transform lives.

Jesus was able to respond with God's authority because he had developed a fully human understanding of the thoroughly holy and divine God and Heavenly Father.

In our weakness and humanity, the power of prayer is the power of a person fully alive in Christ who seeks God's will and God's love for a situation and then, with God's authority, acts upon it. The same words and phrases such as Mark employs to describe Jesus' approach to ministering God's blessing over a person or to speak his hope and promise into a situation are the tools of all praying believers. Not to use because they are a code by which we can get God to work, but rather as valid and personal descriptions of God's Holy Spirit stirring our spirit to respond as Jesus responded. This can be scary, and should be treated with all due reverence as we, through prayer, then become ministers of God's grace and blessing.

We begin by praying for people who are around us, for small things of personal significance. It was whilst at university that I was eating lunch with Clare, a member of our fellowship group, whose arm was persistently causing her pain. She had been to see the doctor and was worrying about writing her essays for the semester. I asked if I could pray for her arm, and with her agreement, I did. I don't remember much except for a tingling sensation and heat where my hand touched her arm. She said her arm felt better

after I'd prayed. This was the beginning of praying for others in a way that mattered. It has grown over the years and developed as I have felt drawn to pray for God's healing for many people. It always begins by remembering that I must trust him for my directions and be confident that I know and can recognise his voice of direction, rebuke or blessing. This gets easier the more I do it, but when a person is very broken, there can be confusion brought about in order to stop God's voice from being clearly heard. This was the case when I was leading prayers to bless a friend of mine:

Some while ago, I was praying with a group of people for a young man who was finding life tough and who was dogged by depression and low self-esteem. We gave thanks to God and asked for his blessing upon his life and to remove the pain and anger from his heart and mind. After some while, the prayers became ones of confession, which included harbouring vengeful thoughts against people who had wronged him. We were all praying for him as he surrendered his damaged and damaging emotions to his Father in Heaven. As he did so, I felt a stirring in my spirit that he needed to proclaim his own forgiveness of these people in the Name of Jesus.

"All you have to do is say "Terry", I forgive you in Jesus' Name" ...

I looked up and the young man was looking intently at me ...

"How did you know I needed to forgive Terry?" ... I shrugged,

"I didn't - it must have been God."

And with that, and beginning with Terry, he began a long prayer of forgiveness for those whom he'd held in judgement, releasing them from his wrath and setting his heart free as he saw them afresh through the eyes of Jesus.

It was at this point that I stopped worrying that I wasn't hearing God properly and the prayer ministry was a powerful blessing to all who were involved. I allowed God's authority to guide us all in bringing His love to alter a long-held mindset of hurt and brokenness.

The stirring in our spirit reveals God's intention to bring his love and transforming power directly into a person's life or for a situation. Understanding that we need to minister that transformation is often lost on people: we forget that we are part of a body of believers and somehow have fostered a belief that God will simply 'zap' a person wherever they are.

Most of my experiences of God at work in people's lives involve being with more than one person. My growth of spirit and understanding of prayer came from being within a group of faithful God-seeking Christians. Amazing times of experiencing God's presence in worship have come when I have been among a group of friends. Some blessed times of prophecy and wisdom have been spoken over me and through me in the context of a gathered body of believers. I believe that we learn best through trying things out and seeing things happen.

God views us as being his family as well as being his holy Church which is constantly and faithfully seeking his presence among us. A family gathering is often the time when our guard is down and uncomfortable truths are spoken. When we are in close fellowship with each other- I would call this community- the guard which we put up against the world, to protect our wounds or the shameful and broken places in our lives, is often at its weakest. In community, we are able to experience ministering God's grace into other people's lives through our own prayers and are best placed to learn how to receive prayer that heals our own brokenness.

We need to learn to pray in order to pass on the tradition of teaching and showing God's love in the same way that Jesus demonstrated God's love to his disciples.

This knowledge of God's love and the power of prayer is passed on in the early church, seen in Acts 3, where Jesus' disciples, Peter and John are showing how God loves us to the man at the Beautiful Gate. They offer God's wholeness, through miraculous healing, to the broken man who was begging for coins to sustain his existence.

At the Maranatha prayer meeting, the extent of God's love and care over me began to be revealed through the love and prayers of fellow Christians and through our commitment to learn from God and each other in prayer. I pass that on to Chance, Shelley, Phil, James, Mark, Matt and Claire whose thoughts on prayer form part of this book and help to clarify my thinking.

Through prayer, God reveals what is in our heart and enables us to deal with it. Through this increasingly close relationship with him, he is able to re-create us in his image. It was always worked like this, even in Jesus, the Son of God, who came to earth as a tiny human baby boy. He learnt the way of truth and love and chose to honour God with the whole of his life. This is why he is referred to as a 'second Adam'; the one man who brings reconciliation with God in all things through choosing a life of intimacy with and obedience to God, whereas the first Adam chose rebellion and separation from God. (1 Corinthians 15:20-49) We, like the disciples, should choose to learn from him.

We need to learn to pray because we are following Jesus. We are learning from him. We are building his church. We are workers in his vineyard. We need to learn to pray because closeness with God, of knowing his heart and will is our birth-right. We are *born again of water and the Spirit* John 3:5 (NIV). Being born of the Spirit gives us access to God in a beautifully personal way. As brothers and sisters of Jesus, we inherit an ability to truly pray and this new birth into Jesus can be an exciting journey full of God's power and challenge. When we, like Jesus, let our lives be properly guided by prayer, we also may live in close union with the Father, building his kingdom and revealing his glory. For this, we need to learn to pray.