

PRIVATE PRAYER – WHERE?

Matthew 6v6

Three weeks ago I launched a teaching series on 'Your Inner World'. We began with Matthew 26v41: "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." Then we examined Matthew 6v1-21; developing a secret life for God's eyes only. Last week we began to look at verse 6 about private prayer. **But when you pray, go into your room, close the door.** There will be times when we *will* pray with others. But here Jesus is talking about private prayer: time alone with God and undisturbed. It is not necessarily secret but it is for God's eyes and ears.

First we looked at what Jesus had to say about "When to Pray" i.e. we *do* need time for private prayer (as Jesus Himself did), and also to think about a specific time. But we focussed more on principles than rules:

- Accept that we are all different and you are therefore unique.
- Devote some of your best time to prayer rather than your left-overs.
- Make a plan.
- Don't clock-watch!
- Be aware of the presence of God throughout the whole day.

This week the Portsmouth footballer Linvoy Primus was interviewed in 'The Times'. The questions soon turned to his Christian faith and his story which he has written up in a book called 'Transformed'. At one point talks about prayer. *"I pray all the time but my religion doesn't tell me to pray X amount of times a day. I can pray as much or as little as I want. I do it when I want, it's a constant process. I do it in the dressing room, I do it on the pitch, I do it at home, I do it wherever I want."*

He knew he could pray at any time and all the time. But he also had something to say about *where* he prayed. This is our focus as we look again at Jesus' words in Matthew 6v6. **But when you pray go into your room.**

2. Where you pray:

2.1. You may have a room of your own where you can pray.

You may have somewhere you can go and be undisturbed. It might be your bedroom or a conservatory or a shed. It might be the main room in the house at a time when everyone else is in bed or out and about. It might even be your office at work at during lunchtime. You may have a nook in a room at home. In the winter it is likely to be a seat near a radiator! Some even create a special space in a room for prayer.

John Piper, a pastor, writes: *"In 1975 when we bought our first home, I built a prayer bench with a place for my elbows in a kneeling posture, and a place for my Bible to lie, and a shelf underneath for the Bible or other books and a notepad. It has been with me ever since in three different houses. For the last twenty-one years we have lived in the same house, and there has been a*

nook in my study, created by positioning filing cabinets to block it off from the rest of the space. There the prayer bench welcomes me every morning and several times during the day. God alone knows the tears and songs that have mingled there. I urge you to think creatively. Seriously consider building a place of prayer, even if it is just the re-arrangement of furniture or the cleaning out of an unused storage space.”

Do you have a place where you will not be disturbed? If not, don't worry.

2.2. You can pray anywhere.

Who among Jesus' hearers had a room of their own? How often did Jesus have a room of His own, or the disciples? "Room" here must mean a private place where you can be undisturbed. Jesus sometimes headed for the hills, a garden or even the lake. On one occasion he spent forty days in a desert. Your "room" could be anywhere.

I have a room in which I can pray, but best of all for me is walking and praying out of doors. Just once in my life I spent a whole day alone walking the hills of Galilee overlooking the lake. It was Yom Kippur 1983. I spent that day walking with my God. On a more regular basis I have Druridge Bay just four miles from our home.

George Muller, famous for his exploits of faith, felt the same about walking and praying: *"I find it very beneficial to my health to walk thus for meditation before breakfast, and am now so in the habit of using the time for that purpose, that when I get into the open air, I generally take out a New Testament of good sized type, which I carry with me for that purpose ... I find it very profitable, not only to my body, but also to my soul."*

You can pray anywhere. That is what Premiership footballer Linvoy Primus has learned. *"I (pray) in the dressing room, I do it on the pitch, I do it at home, I do it wherever I want."*

There are believers who have even found a place for prayer in the most unpromising locations! Some of the stories coming out of China illustrate this. 'The Heavenly Man' (Paul Hatthaway. Monarch 2002) is the story of Brother Yun. He tells of a time when he was so busy serving Christ that his own relationship the Lord suffered. *"Working for God had taken the place of loving God"*, he says. This resulted in a serious error of judgment. He writes: *"Because of my disobedience and disrespect for the Lord, my wife, and my co-workers, I was sent to prison for a second time. The Lord saw I was exhausted in the ministry, so he graciously allowed me to rest in him behind bars for a while and learn about inner spiritual life."*

2.3. You can create an inner room for private prayer.

While some places are more conducive to prayer the real issue is an inward one. If we struggle to pray our problem is not usually the lack of a place, a Bible, devotional books or worship CD's – it is within us. Our need is to

develop a “room” in our inner world. Two of the great devotional classics have this emphasis.

Brother Lawrence’s “The Practise of the Presence of God”: *“It is not needful always to be in church to be with God. We make a chapel of our hearts, to which we can fro time to time withdraw to have gentle, humble, loving communion with Him.”*

Thomas A Kempis in ‘The Imitation of Christ’: *“Christ will come to you and show you his comfort if you will prepare for him a worthy house in your heart. All his loveliness and his glory he keeps for the house of the soul, and there it is that he takes his pleasure. Many are the times he comes to the man who lives the inward life, and to him he grants sweet conversation, glad comfort, great peace and amazing friendship.”* (‘The Imitation of Christ’ Book 2. ‘Some advice on the inner life’ 1)

In more modern times the Methodist Leslie D. Weatherhead developed this thought even further in his book ‘A Private House of Prayer’. In it he invites readers to use their imagination and create seven inner “rooms” where they can engage with God. In Room 1 you affirm the presence of God; in room 2 you give Him praise, and thanks and adoration; in room 3 you offer confession and seek forgiveness; in room 4 you get ready to receive by quietly resting in His presence; in room 5 you bring him your needs and desires; in room 6 you intercede for others; finally in room 7 (at the top of the house) you set aside time for mediation on some portion of Scripture.

2.4. Wherever you pray, close the door!

But when you pray go into your room and close the door. In his book ‘Ordering Your Private World’ Gordon MacDonald suggests that we must learn to *“soundproof the heart”*, just as you might soundproof a recording studio or a place where you practice your drums.

For some this means the need for silence in a noisy world. The so-called desert fathers sought out barren wastelands for prayer. You may simply want space and time away from the telephone, e mails, radio and TV and music. So closing the door means switching the PC and mobile off, unplugging the landline or getting away from computer games.

For others silence and blank walls are *not* an aid to prayer. Yes, you need to get away from all the bustle and demands of the day. But you need sensory stimulation. Francis of Assisi was not a desert father. For him “closing the door” involved retreating into the beauty of the countryside.

In the home one of the best places for me to pray and “close the door” is when I’m in the bath! For me the shower is for washing and the bath is for praying. I have, what I call, “prayer baths”. Closing the door is a necessity when I’m in the bath! I can’t take my books, papers and phone into the bath. I can’t take the TV or laptop. And anyone calling must wait till I’m finished.

You may have come up with some personal way of closing the door. Susanna Wesley, John & Charles Wesley's mother rarely had a room where she could be alone because she had so many children. So she would pull her apron over her head and pray. The children soon learned not to bother her when they saw her do this. She was closing the door.

Another remarkable example of this from China is of the imprisoned believer who volunteered to work in (literally) the camp cesspit because he knew that this was the one place where he could be alone with God and "close the door". No one else would come near him! In this stinking pit he sang "*I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses*", with the chorus:

*"And He walks with me and he talks with me,
And he tells me I am his own;
And the joy we share, as we tarry there,
None other has ever known."*

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Private prayer! When to pray, and where to pray. Both are very practical issues. So, how is it with you? Are you a pupil "With Christ in the school of prayer"? Are you growing closer to God through private prayer?

Biblical theologian J.I. Packer believes that it is not your intellect, your qualifications, your reputation, your achievements or your powers of speech that are the measure of you. He writes "*I believe that prayer is the measure of the man, (or woman) spiritually, in a way that nothing else is, so that how we pray is as important a question as we can ever face.*"

John Wilthew. February 2008.