

Who do we pray to?

July 7, 2019 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Once again, summer is here, and that means that it's time for another round of Q's from the pews – questions that you have asked that will help us to grow as believers and followers of Jesus.

There's still time to get questions in – I have a bunch already and I hope to get an overview to you in the next couple of weeks – but by all means, get questions in to me because I'd like to answer as many as possible. I really value this time as a way to specifically address the things that you are thinking about.

So far, you've given me some really great questions, and a real variety of questions – some that will help us to understand our faith, some to help us defend our faith and some to help us practice our faith – and our question today falls in that last category – something to help as we live out our faith. So here's the question –

Who should I pray to? God the Father or Jesus the Son?

That's a good question. And an important one too. Time and again, the Bible tells us that we should pray. We should pray for our needs, our concerns, our experience of God's will, our place in God's kingdom; in short we pray for everything.

And we pray all the time too – to borrow a phrase from Satchel Paige, we pray not just when it rains, but when the sun shines too. As one of the shortest verses in the Bible puts it - 1 Thessalonians 5:17 – [we] Pray continually.

But here's the question – to whom do we pray? To God? To the Father? To the Son? To the Holy Spirit? I know a lot of people start their prayers with 'Father' - is it appropriate to pray to Jesus or the Holy Spirit too? And is praying 'Father' the same as praying to 'God THE Father?' Those are good questions. And whoever has asked this question is clearly thinking carefully about who God is and how to approach Him in prayer.

And as you can see, this is not just a question about prayer, but a question about the Trinity too, so we're going to have to explore both of those ideas in our time together today.

But here's the thing – I don't want this to be simply a theoretical theological exercise – sure you can do it like that and certainly I read some erudite theology getting this together – but when you boil it right down, this is not just about prayer, but the relationship that you have with the God that you are praying to. You could have the most eloquent, theologically accurate prayer of all time, but unless you have a relationship with the God you're praying to, then it's not worth much – so let me unpack this through the lens of my own experience – because I think that you'll probably identify with the journey that I've been on.

So let's get into it – to whom should I pray?

Growing up in the United Church, I suspect that the majority of prayers that I heard were addressed to 'God' or the 'Heavenly Father' or some other TRUE but broad theological abstraction like 'Giver of all good things' or 'God of great wonders.'

Those are very appropriate prayers – of course you pray to ‘God.’ He is our sovereign and He is our God. So of course we pray to Him. That’s the basic, fundamental dynamic of our relationship with Him. He is God, we pray to Him. And the lion’s share of NT prayer agrees - I went through and looked up all the places in the NT where prayer was specifically addressed to a particular person and by and large, the majority of NT prayers are addressed to ‘God’ specifically.

Luke 6:12 - 12 One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. (Luk 6:12 NIV).

Acts 12:5 - 5 So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. (Act 12:5 NIV).

Acts 16:25 - 25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. (Act 16:25 NIV).

Romans 15:30 - 30 I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. (Rom 15:30 NIV).

Colossians 1:9 - 9 For this reason, ~~since the day we heard about you~~, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. (Col 1:9 NIV).

Time and again, people in the NT address their prayers specifically to ‘God’ specifically and so we are absolutely right to pray to Him.

But here’s the thing – growing up, it never really registered to me that when we were praying to ‘God,’ we were praying to a person. God seemed more like an idea – albeit a personified idea – but an idea that was just ‘there.’ It never really struck me that we were praying to someone who was listening. Now that’s partly my own ignorance and partly on the ministers that we had and to be honest, for my part I think that those theological abstractions were partly to blame too.

They would pray - “God of amazement and wonders” and “Giver of all good things” – they may be technically true but those titles always struck me as poetic abstractions that actually distanced me from God.

When I got to university though, I heard people praying as though someone was actually listening. They were not just praying to ‘God’ but to ‘their God.’ Not just ‘God generally’ but ‘God, whom they knew and God who knew them.’

(And just an aside – my intention here is not to throw shade on my childhood experience – and my intention here is NOT to say that if you pray to ‘God’, you don’t have relationship with Him’ – not that AT all – if you listen closely to my prayers, you’ll hear me pray to ‘God’ a lot, Paul prayed to God, Jesus prayed to God.’ I just want to point out that it’s possible to pray to God as an abstraction or as an idea without actually having a relationship with Him and I want to highlight how important it is to pray to God as the person that He is).

And something that really helped me with that was the fact that people around me prayed to God as ‘Father.’ They were praying not just to a deity but to a parent who loved and valued them. They

thought of themselves not just church goers but as children of God who could pray to God as Abba Father, just as Galatians 4:6 says.

~~6 Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." (Gal 4:6 NIV).~~

And so I started to address a lot of my prayer to my 'Father.' And it changed something in me, because I was not addressing a distant, disinterested deity, but a father who really cared for me and that habit of praying to God as Father has stuck with me for a long time.

But now here's a question – is praying to God relationally to MY Father the same as praying to God theologically as THE Father, ie., the first person of the Trinity? See because I think that when I pray 'Father,' I'm praying to God as a unity, rather than as a specific person of the Trinity. It's appropriate to pray to the Triune God; is it also appropriate to pray to one or more persons of the Trinity?

I think that that's what this question is really asking - should we pray to God the Father or Jesus the Son? Or to the Holy Spirit for that matter? How does the 'threeness' of God impact the way that we pray? Well, I'd like to suggest that we pray both to the Triune God and to the individual persons of the Trinity.

God exists in three persons. God, as the Bible teaches, is the Father; God is the Son; and God is the Holy Spirit. The Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God. Each is fully God and they are God together. One God in three persons.

Now I think it's obvious that we pray to the One God; is it appropriate to pray to the Father or Son or Spirit too?

Well, let's start with the first one. Do we pray to God the Father? And the answer is yes.

When Jesus taught us to prayer, who did He teach us to pray to? "Our Father, who art in Heaven." And given that this is Jesus the Son saying this, we know that it is God the Father that Jesus is teaching us to pray to; Jesus is teaching us to pray to the first person of the Trinity.

Similarly, Paul says in Ephesians 1:17 - I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

He's specifically praying that the Father of the Son would give the church the Spirit so they would know Him better; clearly it's appropriate to pray to God the Father, first person of the Trinity.

What about the second person, the Son?

Well, in Acts 9, when Saul comes to faith and becomes Paul, both he and Ananias spend time in prayer, and both of them are specifically talking to Jesus (Acts 9:4-6, 10-14, 17).

The whole of the Bible actually draws to a close with a prayer to Jesus – Revelation 22:20 – 'Come Lord Jesus, come.'

So clearly it's appropriate to pray to Jesus the Son.

What about the third person of the Trinity? The Holy Spirit? To be honest, I can't find anywhere in the Bible where a person prays to the Holy Spirit, but it's clear from passages like Romans 8 and John 14 that the Holy Spirit is integral to our prayer lives. And given the nature of the Trinity, I think it's totally appropriate to pray to the Spirit. Is it appropriate to pray to God? Yes. Is the Spirit God? Yes. Then it's appropriate to pray to God the Holy Spirit.

And to be honest, this became more natural to me as my understanding of the Trinity grew. At first, all I could do was pray to God generally, or the Father, because that's what Jesus taught. But when I began to realize that each person of the Trinity accomplished different things, it just became natural for me to pray to them each individually.

When I need peace or patience or self-control, it just makes sense that I would ask the Spirit, because He bears those things as fruit in our lives.

When I need forgiveness and grace, it makes sense that we would go to Jesus in prayer, because He is the one who died as atonement for sin. He is our high priest who intercedes for us.

When I need wisdom and insight into the things of God, then it just makes sense that I would pray to God the Father for He is the Sovereign overseer of all things.

It is appropriate for us to pray to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, because each of them work in our lives in different ways – in harmony, but in different ways.

So to answer our question straight on – who should I pray to? God the Father or Jesus the Son – I would say that it is right and good to pray to God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. And I would also say that it is good to pray to the Triune God as a whole.

And that's why – I think – we see so many prayers in the NT addressed to 'God' as a whole. I suspect that the NT writers are using the word God as a shorthand to say 'God, who is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.' It's just a mouthful to say every time you pray – 'dear God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit' – and so we pray 'Dear God' knowing that we are addressing all three person with one word. Sometimes it makes sense to pray to a specific person of the Trinity; other times it just makes sense to pray to the Trinity as a whole.

Here's an example - when Paul writes in Philippians 4:6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God (Phi 4:6 NIV), he is saying – don't worry about anything, but instead, take your requests to God. I.e., go to the God who knows all things, who redeem all things and who works for good in all things – Go to the Father, Son and Spirit in prayer.

And similarly, when I pray 'Father,' I think I'm doing the same thing, but relationally. I am praying to 'God,' to all three persons of the Trinity, but not from a distance – I am praying to God as His beloved child, knowing that He is the most powerful, wise and compassionate Father that I could ever have. You don't HAVE to pray to God as Father but it is a privilege that we have as children of God to be that close to Him as to call Him Father.

Now, just a quick note – what about praying to people – like, praying to saints, or to angels for that matter? There's nowhere in the Bible where we are told to pray to anyone but God. In fact, in

Revelation 22, John starts to worship an angel and the angel's like 'no – no – I'm just a servant of God like you; I'm just a created being – God alone gets our prayers.' He is FAR more capable of responding than saints would ever be, so let's focus our attention on Him.

And with that in mind, let me close with this. Who is God to you? An abstraction? An idea? A god who is far removed from everyday life? Or is He your Father who loves you beyond your wildest dreams?

The Bible tells us that God showed His love for us like this – He sent His Son Jesus to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins, to bring us back to God, to bring us back into relationship with Him and to give us real life. He is there, with outstretched arms saying 'Come home. Trust in me.'

And when we do, He invites us to cast all our cares on Him because He is careful with us. He doesn't begrudge our prayers, but instead delights to hear His children come to Him, to pour out their hearts to Him. And you know what? The simplest prayer – God, help! – is just as effective as the most theologically astute, Trinitarianly accurate prayer of all time. God just wants His children to come to Him, to be with Him, to ask things of Him, to give thanks for what they have received, because He delights to give us what we need.

Whether you are praying to God, Father, Spirit, Son – God of wonders and amazement for that matter – if you are in relationship with God and speaking honestly from your heart – He hears your prayer and delights to provide what we need.

BENEDICTION

7. 2 Cor. 13:14 - The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.