

## WAYS OF PRAYING - 3

### THE WRONG PRAYER FOR THE RIGHT REASON

#### Misguided Response

One of the most tragic stories in the Old Testament is that of Jephthah. In *Judges 11* (read it all - it's gripping stuff!) we read of this mighty warrior who had a pretty rough start in life, but eventually became a respected leader. Using his diplomatic skills he tries to reason with the Ammonites who were threatening to invade; to no effect. Even as the Spirit of the Lord comes on him to strengthen him for the battle ahead, he makes his reckless promise to God: "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return... I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering." The last thing he expects to see on his victorious return is his beloved and only child, his daughter, dancing out of the house to greet him! Devastated, Jephthah and his daughter feel he cannot break his vow and, after a time of mourning with her girlfriends, the dreadful sacrifice is made.

What went wrong? Firstly, look at Jephthah's relationship with God; he seems to be using him as a convenient backstop (*v.11*). Secondly, he has not understood the nature of God; that he can't be bribed (*I Sam.15 v.29*), that he abhors human sacrifice (*Lev.18 v.21*), and that He is a God of mercy preferring a godly heart to sacrifice of any kind (*Hos.6 v.6*). Thirdly, Jephthah is arrogant and disobedient in thinking he can offer any old sacrifice - it might have been the family dog, or a chicken, or something "unclean" - instead of taking a prescribed, acceptable offering to the priest. ***Whatever our background, there seems to be no excuse for getting our relationship with God this wrong!***

#### Misplaced Zeal

The disciples were indignant for Jesus. That's all right. Their Master was being insulted and rejected in Samaria and they weren't going to stand for it. Read *Luke 9 v.51-56*. Generations of racial and religious prejudice still had the Jews and Samaritans arguing over where the site of God's Temple should be, and Jesus had set his face to go to Jerusalem. This was more of a political confrontation, and James and John wanted fire from heaven to consume the opposition. That was not all right, and Jesus rebukes their misplaced zeal. (A footnote to the text has him reminding them that they forget what power He, and therefore they, have at their disposal.) We too can become jealous for our God, incensed when His name is vilified, saddened when Christ's sacrifice is belittled, and hurt when His mercies are trampled, but there are three points here. ***Firstly, we need to remember God can look after Himself (Mat.26 v.52,53). Secondly it is for God to avenge, not us, (Rom.12 v.19) and thirdly, we need to be careful of our reactions, lining them up with his will (Rom.12 v.17-21 & Matt.5 v.43-48).***

#### Me First

We all like to be recognised, don't we, to have our achievements acknowledged? Well, a lot of us do! James and John fell into this trap, and the accounts in *Mark 10 v.35-45* and *Matt.20 v.20-28* differ only in that Matthew has their mum asking for the places of honour in Jesus' kingdom. It is disappointing that these two men, part of Jesus' inner circle and often at private revelations, had allowed this to go to their heads. Their mother was naturally proud of them and was ambitious for them, but she and her boys clearly still had a lot to learn. So have we. ***Jesus calls us to be servants, not show-offs, and washed his disciples' feet to give the supreme example (John 13). Even in roles of leadership, especially then, we need to do the same. Of course we all want to be close to the Lord, but we shouldn't be asking for preference or status.***

The above examples are a challenge to us.

Are we sure of what is an appropriately targeted prayer?

Have we understood properly the nature of God and his Kingdom?

