

In just six weeks' time, our children will already have started to open the doors on their advent calendars, excited to see what messages, pictures or treats lie behind each one of them. And how much they love the stories where the opening of doors leads to adventure – as it did for the Pevensie children who, passing through the door of the old wardrobe, found their way into the land of Narnia.

We adults are just the same: we love the adventure of opening doors and seeing what lies behind them. Maybe you like the quiz shows where valuable and not-so-valuable prizes are hidden behind doors. Or perhaps you prefer the documentaries that take you behind the normally closed doors of factories, hospitals, hotels, military buildings, palaces or private homes. And, quite likely, we all do the same thing when we reach our hotel room or holiday cottage: we open each cupboard, room and wardrobe door in turn to see what lies behind it!

Conversely, there are times when we are keen to close doors rather than open them. It is a relief to close the door behind us when we leave work, and then when we get home, at the end of a busy day. We close doors to get some peace and quiet, to protect us from the elements, to keep us safe from the unwanted attention of animals, burglars or other visitors. Particularly in relation to transport, we close doors to ensure our safety: our very lives are at risk if the bow doors of a ferry are left open, for example, or the doors of an aircraft, a car or a train.

Then, of course, we use the word 'door' metaphorically as well as literally. The old proverb, "when one door shuts, another opens", was well-known by the sixteenth century. Earlier still, there are many examples of both the metaphorical and literal meaning of the word 'door' in the Bible. Today, we'll look at just two of them...

the crowded door of blessing

Jesus began His public ministry in Galilee (Matthew 4:12–17). For most of that time, He was based in Capernaum, the prosperous fishing village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, a place that Matthew described as Jesus's "own city" (Matthew 9:1; cf Mark 2:1). Actually, Jesus performed more miracles and preached more sermons in and around Capernaum than He did anywhere else. And, from the start, He attracted large crowds. In Capernaum,

they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."²⁸ And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

²⁹ And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰ Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. ³¹ And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³² That evening at sunset they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. ³³ And the whole city was gathered together at the door. ³⁴ And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. **Mark 1:27–34**

In the Jewish world at that time, there were two evenings: the first from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., the second from 6 p.m. onwards. Mark writes carefully, "That evening at sunset", so we know that what took place occurred after 6 p.m., the official end of the Sabbath day, when people were allowed once again to move about freely and carry with them those who were ill. That evening in Capernaum, there was only one place to go and one place to be: the house where Simon lived, the house where Simon's mother-in-law had just been healed, the house where Jesus was staying.

The parallel passages in Matthew's gospel and Luke's gospel (Matthew 8:14–17, Luke 4:38–41) confirm that Jesus healed all those who were sick and cast out many demons. He did so simply "with a word" (Matthew), and He did so individually, as "he laid his hands on every one of them" (Luke). And notice, in passing, that Mark draws a clear distinction between the two groups of people: those who were suffering from ordinary diseases but were *not* demon-possessed; and those who, whether physically ill or not, *were* demon-possessed. It is wholly wrong to suggest that physical or even mental illness is a sure sign of demon possession!

Simon's house in Capernaum was besieged because of who was there: Jesus, who "taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes" (Mark 1:22); Jesus, who "commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mark 1:27); Jesus, who "healed all who were sick." (Matthew 8:16). At Simon's house we see *the crowded door of blessing*. Centuries have come and gone since that wonderful evening in Capernaum. But still

- we should listen to Jesus

In Capernaum at a later date, we read, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him."⁶⁷ So Jesus said to the Twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?"⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,⁶⁹ and we have believed and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:66–69)

That was true then, and it is true now. Jesus's teaching continues to have unique authority because, uniquely, He is the Son of God. Peter and James and John, privileged to go with Jesus up the Mount of Transfiguration, heard the voice of God say, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." (Matthew 17:5) If we would honour God the Father, we must listen to God the Son; if we would know God the Father, we must listen to God the Son; if we would hear God the Father, we must listen to God the Son. And still

- we should go to Jesus

The day after that memorable evening in Capernaum, Jesus took His disciples on a trip "throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons." (Mark 1:35–39) When he returned to Capernaum, there took place the famous incident of the four men who removed part of the roof so that they lower before Jesus a paralysed man (Mark 2:1–12). They had to do this very remarkable thing because, we are told, "Many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door."

This incident is a challenging reminder that we should make absolutely every effort we can to approach Jesus. We may need the help of others; we may attract the attention of others; we may endure the scorn of others. But if we are to be healed, we need to get to Jesus. Interestingly, when Jesus saw the faith of the four men, "he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."" (Mark 2:5) His words may have surprised the watching crowd, and they certainly offended the critical scribes. But Jesus had made no mistake and knew exactly what He was doing. He knew that the critical need of the paralysed man was not the healing of his body, though that was to follow, but the healing of his soul: above all, he needed forgiveness.

And *it is just the same for us*. However acute they may be, any physical or other needs we have pale into insignificance by comparison with our great spiritual need for forgiveness. And forgiveness is precisely one of the blessings we can obtain from Christ – indeed, it is a blessing that we can obtain only from Him. That was the great message of hope that Peter proclaimed on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38) and that later he declared before Cornelius and others – that Jesus "is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." (Acts 10:42b,43) The apostle Paul reminded the Ephesians that God "has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing... In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace" (Ephesians 1:3–10); and Paul told the Colossians that Jesus is God's "beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Colossians 1:13,14)

The apostle John made it clear that "If we confess our sins, he is faithful to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) But notice here the condition: "If we confess..." Certainly we may know the forgiveness of our sins, but certainly not unless we confess them at the crowded door of blessing. To do that today, we do not have to make a long journey, we do not have to stand in a long queue, we do not have to wait for a long time. We can approach Jesus very simply by faith. And to do that, we need to know about ...

the secret door of prayer

Most Christians know the words of the Lord's prayer by heart – not least because, in one version or another, they are recited routinely by congregations in many church services. As well as knowing the words, you may know also that the prayer appears in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount recorded in chapters 5–7 of Matthew's gospel. But do you recall the important teaching that comes before it? Listen to what Jesus said to His disciples:

"Beware of practising your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

²"Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

⁶But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷"And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, / hallowed be your name..."

Matthew 6:1–9

Before saying anything else, let us be absolutely clear that Jesus does not here condemn public prayer or corporate prayer. He is not forbidding us to pray aloud in our public services; He is not forbidding us to arrange prayer meetings; He is not forbidding us to pray with one another. In the Biblical record, there are too many examples of public and corporate prayer, and too many encouragements to pray in that way, for us to have any doubt on this matter.

So what is Jesus saying? We could, perhaps, sum it up like this:

- it is not true prayer if we are trying to impress people
Jesus is condemning not public prayer but posing prayer. He means the kind of praying that has more concern for what people will hear than what God will hear, for what people will see than what God will see, for what people will think than what God will think. This is the kind of praying that is intended to impress man rather than implore God, that is ostentatious and wants to draw attention to itself, that is focussed on itself.
Now I can imagine someone saying, “Well, at least I’m not guilty of that! I’m not like the hypocrites who “love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others.”” Maybe not. But there are so many other ways in which we can seek to impress people with regard to our prayer life. We may speak of the amount of time we spend in prayer, the complexity and length of our prayer lists, the many blessings we have received whilst we are on our knees. In our times of prayer together, even if we are meeting with only one or two others, we can try so hard to come up with a memorable phrase, a lengthy quote from the Bible, a catalogue of facts and figures. But hinting at how much we know is not true prayer, for it has more to do with impressing people than it does with approaching God.
- it is not true prayer if we are trying to impress God
Jesus condemns here the “empty phrases” and “many words” of the Gentiles. The issue here is not the length of our prayers, but the form of them. If you are a true Christian, you are a child of God by faith in Jesus and God is your Heavenly Father. So, with due reverence, you can approach God just as a child would approach his or her earthly father: enthusiastically, joyfully, lovingly and – most significant of all – spontaneously. There may be times when we have to approach our earthly fathers with carefully-chosen words, but routinely we make no attempt to try and impress them with the words we use, the phrases we concoct, the sentences we construct; we simply talk to them. And that is how we are to approach God in prayer: we are simply to talk to Him, not worrying if we stumble over our words, can’t remember a name or fail to come up with a coherent argument. The aim of prayer is not to impress God but to be impressed by God, not to magnify ourselves but to magnify Him, not to revel in our words but to rejoice in His words.

Very well then: in our prayers we must not seek to impress people (ourselves included!) or to impress God. But how are we to do that? Jesus tells us to “go into your room” – we could translate this “your inner room” (NASB) or “your most private room” (Hendriksen) – “and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Matthew 6:6). Here, then, is *the secret door of prayer*, the place to which we go to avoid at least some of the temptation of trying to impress people and impress God when we pray. We do not pray to be seen by men but to be heard by God, so we pray in private, beyond the public eye. As one commentator says, “The reason for mentioning the secret place is that the sincere and humble worshipper, one who is not interested in making a public display for the sake of enhancing his prestige, will find the secluded nook or den to be most appropriate for his devotions. It is there that he can shut out the world and be alone with his God.” (Hendriksen) That is surely the key to prayer: *to be alone with God*.

Now the best place to be alone with Him may be your closet, as the AV puts it, but the principle is more important than the place. Listen to what Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones had to say on this point:

The principle is that there are certain things which we have to shut out whether we are praying in public or whether we are praying in secret. Here are some of them. You shut out and forget other people. Then you shut out and forget yourself. That is what is meant by entering into thy closet. You can enter into that closet when you are walking alone in a busy street, or going from one room to another in a house. You enter into that closet when you are in communion with God and nobody knows what you are doing... There is no value in my entering into the secret chamber and locking the door if the whole time I am full of self and thinking about myself, and am priding myself on my prayer. I might as well be standing at the street corner... When we pray we must deliberately remind ourselves that we are going to talk to God. Therefore other people, and self also, must be excluded and locked out.”

Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn (1960); *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount, Volume Two*; London, IVF; p.29

So how is it with you? Have you the desire to be at that *crowded door of blessing*, keen to catch every word that Jesus says, to watch everything that Jesus does, to receive every blessing that Jesus offers? If so, have you yet opened that *secret door of prayer* by which you can enter into the presence of Almighty God and – forgetting other people and laying aside your pride – you can plead for His forgiveness, His grace and His mercy?

*At even, ere the sun was set, / The sick, O Lord, around Thee lay;
O in what divers pains they met! / O with what joy they went away!*

Lord, thank you for all that you did in Capernaum. Thank you for the encouragement it gives us to approach you in faith to ask that you would forgive us our sins, that you would create new life within us, that you would fit us for your service, that you would teach us how to pray.
