

Isaiah 60:1-6 | Psalm 72:1-7,10-14 | Ephesians 3:1-12 | Matthew 2:1-12

Main Point:

There is a danger when religious knowledge takes the place of a genuine relationship with God. Prayer is the only way to develop a deep, intimate relationship with our heavenly Father.

Intro | Do you get annoyed at know-alls?

There truly is nothing more annoying than a person who always seems to know the answer to everything.

Today's passage reminds me of those kinds of people – people who think they know everything there is to know.

Talking about know-alls reminds me of a profound conversation which occurred between two characters from the movie, "Good Will Hunting".

Will is a mathematical genius. But he has also had an extremely troubled life. Even though he is brilliant at maths, no one can get through his cocky, rude, know-all exterior – he uses his intelligence to cover up his inner fears. So, he is referred to a counsellor named Sean, played by Robin Williams. In the scene prior to the one we'll watch, Will and Sean had had their first counselling session, during which Will had commented on a painting done by Sean in remembrance of his wife. But Will's comment had been highly offensive, and the session had not ended well. For their next session, Sean meets Will by the lake. Let's listen as the conversation unfolds,

Watch video

No matter how clever, or how many books he had read, Will still needed to learn an important lesson.

It is the same lesson that the religious leaders and pharisees needed to learn.

The lesson: You don't get to know a person by reading books about them, or by collecting facts about them.

The only way to really know a person is to genuinely desire to form an intimate relationship with them – and, intimate relationships are formed through sharing many conversations, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable with the other, and living life together over the long-haul.

Epiphany Sunday recalls the arrival of the Magi, probably a number of months after Jesus birth. Mary and Joseph were now living in a house in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:10), just a few kilometres from Jerusalem.

But, suddenly, Jerusalem was a buzz with the arrival of the Magi.

The Magi were from Persia, and represented a special class of priest. They had existed for hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. They had their own religion and their own writings. Do you remember Daniel? Daniel was appointed head over the cast of Magi, during the reign of Darius (Daniel 2:48).

The Magi were the professors and philosophers of their day. Brilliant, highly educated scholars who were trained in medicine, history, religion, prophecy and astronomy. They were also trained in astrology – the study of the stars in order to find answers to the great questions in life. What's important for us to know is that they had an elite status – they were political advisors to the Persian rulers – hence why they got the name 'wise men'.

No wonder Jerusalem would have been buzzing with the arrival of this elite party, and their entourage.

The Magi had, of course, gone straight to the palace, because that is the obvious place to find a newborn king.

The suggestion that a king had been born, thrust King Herod into deep distress - fearing his throne could be severely under threat.

And so, Herod calls the leading priests and teachers of the religious law – for their expert knowledge of the Messiah.

So now we have these two parties of elite educated people in the same scene: pagan philosophers and the Israelite chief priests and the teachers of the law.

That makes for a really interesting comparison.

The chief priests were the know-alls of all religious concepts and prophecies – they're entire lives were devoted to studying – and memorizing – large slabs of the Hebrew Scriptures.

And so Herod asked them, "Where is the Messiah to be born?"

It was a piece-of-cake answer for these guys: Bethlehem. Check Micah.

"But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past." (Micah 5:2)

They knew exactly where to look.

It is like they held the treasure map in their hands, and their map had a clearly marked 'X', showing the very town where the Messiah was going to be born.

Knowing their in-depth knowledge makes their reaction to Herod's question so startling tragic.

Why? Well ... they knew the place, they knew a child had been born, yet none of them acted on it.

None of these trained theologians, so far as we know, went to Bethlehem.

Pagan astrologers traverse for months over hundreds of kilometres in search of their king.

Dirty shepherds left their fields and flocks to seek out a baby in a manger.

But, the religious leaders, full of insider knowledge and Scriptural jargon and pat answers, don't bother to make the relatively short seven kilometre journey to Bethlehem to actually see this child for which all their theological study should have prepared them.

Why? Why didn't they?

One commentator, David Turner, calls it "the strange indifference". These heady theologically qualified guys, who have loads of Scriptural knowledge ... don't act on the knowledge they've spent years searching.

Their heads were filled with verses, doctrines, and religious facts, but their hearts refuse to seek the very Messiah to which all their study should have led them.

Point 1 | There is a danger of gaining more and more religious knowledge: it can lead to a failure to see the very Saviour the Scriptures reveal

There is such a clear warning here. It is obvious for all of us who have listened Sunday after Sunday to sermon after sermon or read Christian book after Christian book. We are all too familiar with religious jargon.

We know the words of the liturgy, even before they tumble out of our mouths.

We know how to say all the right things to appear pious and knowledgeable.

We've all memorized some important Scriptures. We know how to sound Christian in our repeated use of precious theological terms and concepts.

But today's passage exposes how dangerous religious knowledge can be.

Scriptural knowledge can easily become a cloak, or a mask, which hides a fear of really allowing ourselves of becoming vulnerable before God.

Even our beloved prayer book, can become a crutch which makes us believe that our prayers will only be answered if we use eloquent words or repeat certain words again and again. But Jesus warned against this thinking (Matthew 6:7).

No! We need to ensure our hearts match up with what our mouths are saying.

That is why I have intentionally changed the liturgy as we move into this new year. Yes, it will disturb us. Yes, it will make us look at the screen (or the page) with more attentive eyes!

But this disturbance will help us to guard against falling into the same trap the religious establishment of Jesus day fell into.

Because, it is a dangerous trap – religious arrogance and indifference can quickly progress into a pattern that would, for the religious establishment of Jesus day, years later culminate in partnering with Roman rulership in their effort to kill the newborn king.

Do you recall that Jesus warned the religious establishment of this trap? He told them,

“You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life.” (John 5:39-40)

But, in this tragic disinterest and rejection of their own Messiah, we find a warning to the modern-day Pharisee in all of us: Bible knowledge, acquired from all our study and gleaned from all our books, can be powerful fuel for creating an intellectual arrogance which keeps knowing Jesus intimately foreign to us.

May we never equate religious knowledge with spiritual maturity.

Application | Your Heavenly Father desires to cultivate an intimate relationship with you, which can only be developed through prayer.

So, how do we prevent ourselves from falling into the same trap the religious leaders of Jesus day fell into?

How do we stop ourselves from becoming modern-day pharisees – whose diligent searching of the Scriptures failed to open their eyes to the presence of the Saviour in front of them?

The only way to guard against religious shallowness, or allowing worship from becoming ‘just a going through the motions practice’, is by having the courage to become vulnerable with God. To allow him to see the real us.

In our clip we watched earlier, Will was so frightened he could not be honest about his struggles and fears ... he was afraid of saying the wrong thing. We can be like that in prayer. That is why it is very easy for us to hide behind carefully scripted prayers which use words that sound oh so eloquent, but don't give voice to the real cries of our heart.

Remember, what I said at the beginning, “The only way to really know a person is to genuinely desire to form an intimate relationship with them - and intimate relationships are formed through sharing many conversations, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable with the other, and sharing life together over the long-haul.”

That's what prayer is all about.

Prayer is the pathway we walk to deepen our relationship with our heavenly Father.

So, during January, we are going to be focussing on cultivating our prayer life.

Last week, I asked you to consider what our spiritual goals were for 2021. Could I ask you to add to your list, the following prayer,

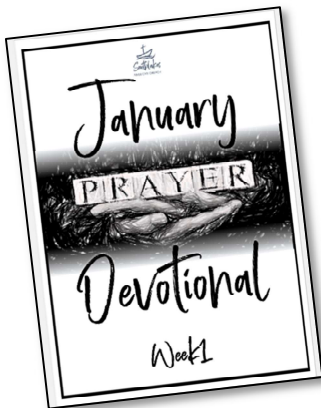
'My loving Father, I want to know you intimately, deeply and securely. Reveal yourself to my heart. May I know and recognise your voice. May I have courage to try new things in my prayer

life, so that I can experience you in new and different ways. Help me to be real with you. I ask this because your Son Jesus died so that I may have a living relationship with you. Amen.

Some reflection and discussion questions

1. Consider your prayer life. Has prayer become stale, dry or just a duty that needs to be checked off your to-do list?
2. Jesus' personal prayer book was the book of Psalms. How often have you used the book of Psalms in your praying?
3. When was the last time you did something completely different in your prayer time? Like listening prayer, or imaginative prayer, or meditative prayer? Do you have the courage to try new and different styles of prayer?
4. Do you use the Bible as you pray? That is, reminding God of the promises he has already made. Look up Isaiah 62:6. What does it say about using God's Word in our prayer life?
5. Do you regularly take time to listen for God's voice as you read the Bible and pray? Intimate relationships are developed through two-way conversations. Always include the prayer "Lord, what would you say to me?" and then wait, quietly with ears that patiently expect to hear an answer.

(We'll learn more about how to hear God's voice in coming weeks).



Look out for the January devotional

The January devotional has been developed using a number of prayer resources including:

1. Andrew Murray's 'Teach Me to Pray'
2. Rosalind Rinker's Prayer: 'Conversing with God'
3. Richard Foster's 'Celebration of Discipline'
4. Darren Cronshaw 'Dangerous Prayer'