

When You Pray

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Prayer / Matthew 6:5–8

Introduction:

- Today we're starting a new series that will take us through the rest of the summer, and we're going to be focusing on prayer. Prayer really is an interesting part of the Christian life, it's so commonly talked about, and so important to what it means to be a Christian, I remember growing up in Sunday school hearing the song "read your Bible, pray every day".
- For anyone who becomes a follower of Christ, one of the first things that we're taught is the importance of prayer as a way of growing in our relationship with God.
- Yet prayer can also be an area of the Christian life that we tend to have a lot of questions about. How many of us have ever thought, "How do you pray?", "What do you pray for?", "Am I praying in the right way, or for the right things? Or using the right words?"
- We know, and we're taught that prayer is important, yet we tend to have a lot of questions about what it really means to pray. "How do you pray?"
- And our goal for this series is to help answer some of those questions, and to do that, there's so many different places in Scripture we could go, but we're going to be looking at what is probably the most famous biblical

template for prayer, the Lord's Prayer, which was read for us just a moment ago.

- This is an incredibly famous prayer that Jesus taught to his disciples, and is often one of the first things that comes to mind when you think of “prayer”.
- Part of the daily routine when I was in school, and I think is still a thing, was singing the national anthem every morning before the day got going. When I was young, I attended a Christian school for a few years, and part of our daily routine along with singing the national anthem, was reciting the Lord's Prayer. We all knew it by heart, because we said it every day.
- The Lord's Prayer is considered to be *the* model for what prayer should look like.
- And as we get into this series, I just want to help give you a bit of context, to understand what's happening as we come to this passage.
- Jesus teaches his disciples this prayer during what is called “the sermon on the mount”.
- After an intense period of ministering to large crowds, Matthew Ch. 5 begins with these words:

English Standard Version Chapter 5

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

The Beatitudes

2 And he opened his mouth and taught them

- What follows in Matthew 5-7 are some of the most famous words of Jesus as he spends some time on this mountain specifically teaching his closest disciples about things like loving their enemies, laying up treasures in heaven, being salt and light in the world, etc.

- Again, some of the most famous, and most often quoted words of Jesus are included in these three chapters.

- V. 9 then begins with these words as Jesus introduces the Lord's prayer to his disciples during this time of teaching:

English Standard Version Chapter 6

9 Pray then like this:

- The purpose of the Lord's Prayer was for Jesus to teach his disciples *how* to pray. That's what it was intended to do.

- So the goal of this series is to take the next number of weeks to look at each element and phrase of the Lord's prayer, in order to understand why it's so important, and why Jesus taught his disciples to pray this way.

- But as we start out today, we're not actually looking at the Lord's prayer itself, we're actually going to spend some time looking at Jesus' words immediately before this prayer, in V. 5-8 of Matthew 6.

- The point of these verses, before Jesus teaches his disciples about how they should pray, is to warn them about two potential pitfalls that exist in prayer, and how to avoid them.

- And as we look at these pitfalls, we'll see that they're both issues that most of us struggle with in one way or the other

when it comes to prayer, whether we realize it or not.

- William Barclay refers to these pitfalls as “faults of misguided devotion”, which can creep into our prayer lives, and twist the intentions and purpose of our prayer.

When you pray, don't try to impress others

- The first of these two warnings that Jesus gives is found in V. 5.

English Standard Version Chapter 6

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.

- And right off the bat, it's significant to notice that Jesus doesn't say, “if you're praying. He begins here with saying “when you pray”, and even those words on their own show us something about the importance that Jesus puts on prayer, and the importance that it should have in our own lives.
- As Jesus is talking to his disciples, he's teaching them something here about how to pray, but behind that teaching is the assumption that they *are* praying.
- For a Christian, prayer is not optional. To be a follower of Christ, is to be a person who prays. Prayer is an essential part of our identity in Christ, and a key way that we grow in our relationship with him, and Jesus makes that incredibly

clear time and time again as he teaches his disciples, both in the words that he says, and in the way he models the importance of prayer through his actions.

- So having established the importance of prayer, Jesus gives his disciples these two warnings regarding *how* they pray, which are also warnings for us about how we pray today.

- And this first warning is that when we pray, we must not be like the hypocrites. In his warnings, Jesus instructs his disciples to avoid the pitfalls of two different groups of people. This is the first. The hypocrites.

- Leon Morris defines what is meant by this word “hypocrites”. This is what he says:

The Gospel according to Matthew b. Prayer, 6:5–15

the word signifies those who profess to do a pious action, but do so with their eye on people when they should be concerned with God only

- For the Jews, prayer was an essential part of everyday life, but evidently there was this group of people who, when they prayed, would make sure that they were in a public space, and make sure that they were as visible as possible so that others could see them praying, and see how spiritual they were.

- Jesus says that they loved to stand in the synagogues, and at the street corners *so that* they may be seen when they pray.

- The issue with the prayers of these “hypocrites” is that they were meant to be showy. They were empty words,

meant only to impress those who were around to watch them pray.

- So when Jesus gives this warning not be like they hypocrites, he's talking about people who are more concerned with what those around them are thinking of their prayers, rather than what they're actually doing as they pray.
- Prayer is not a performance. It's not something for us to do so that everyone will look at us and think "wow, that person is so spiritual". It's so much greater than that, and its meant for so much more.
- Jesus says that the hypocrites who pray this way "have received their reward" in the praise that they get from being admired for their prayers. But really, that is such a sad statement.
- Through prayer there is something so much greater available.
- Mark Dever describes so beautifully what is going on when we pray, he writes that when we pray,
 - "We engage with [God] in a relationship. He speaks by his Spirit in his Word. We listen and talk back to him in our prayers ... Our relationship with our creator is the truest, deepest relationship to which all of our other relationships are meant to point and lead. And prayer is a vital part of that relationship." (Pg. 231)
 - That was the issue for the hypocrites, they lost sight of the amazing relationship that God makes possible through prayer, and instead, focused only on gaining the praise of

those who heard their prayers. They received the reward they were after, yet missed something so much greater.

- And this kind of attitude is something that we can all struggle with, even unintentionally.
- How many of us find ourselves getting anxious at the thought of praying in front of people? We worry what people will think of the way that we pray, whether they think we've done a good job, or if people are quietly judging us for the way that we pray.
- Or on the other hand, we can tend towards pride if we think we've prayed especially well, thinking "I hope people were paying attention", and almost expecting that we'll be congratulated for the quality of our prayer.
- But both of these attitudes are concerned more with what other people think of our prayers than they are about the actual purpose of our prayers, which is to talk with God.
- That's not to say that praying in public is a bad thing. We have public prayers even during our services. Each month we have our "potluck and prayer" nights where we come together to pray as a church.
- So how do we look at Jesus' words in these verses, and think about the times of public prayer that we have as a church.
- Again, Leon Morris writes,

The Gospel according to Matthew b. Prayer, 6:5-15

In all this Jesus is not condemning public prayer or praying in a public place; it is praying in such a way as to maximize its effect on other people that he condemns.

- To pray in public is actually a beautiful thing, and it's actually something that is healthy for the church. It is a way that we can encourage one another, and build up the church.
- I quoted Mark Dever a moment ago, he wrote a book called "Nine Marks of a Healthy Church" about nine key pillars that make the church what it is, and prayer is one of the core elements that he includes, which makes us who we are as a church.
- But we have to be careful. When our prayers become more about impressing the people who hear us, making sure that we look as spiritual as possible, and less about the relationship that we are engaging in with our creator, then we've begun to drift into this area of praying like the hypocrites, which Jesus warns us against.
- What Jesus does here is address the heart that lies behind our prayers, as much as our actions themselves. He gives us an important question to wrestle through, which is "why do we pray?" Do we do it so that we'll be seen, congratulated and well thought of, or do we do it for the sake of investing in and strengthening our relationship with God?
- When you pray, don't try to impress people. Prayer was never meant to be about what they think of you. Prayer is meant to be about him.
- And as much as public prayer is an important thing in the life of the church, private prayer is an equally important thing in the life of the Christian, and should be a part of the

everyday life of everyone who follows Christ.

- And it is this type of private prayer that Jesus talks about in V. 6, when he says,

English Standard Version Chapter 6

6 But 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.

- There is a time for praying in public, in order to build up and encourage the church, but there is also a time when each of us needs to spend time personally, and privately in prayer.

- There is a certain beauty about what happens when we pray in secret, as Jesus says in this verse.

- Leon Morris writes,

The Gospel according to Matthew b. Prayer, 6:5–15

The secret place will exclude other people but not God; he is there, in the secret place.

- Prayer is about engaging in a deep and intimate relationship with God. Even when no one else is around to hear what we say, God is still there, and he hears our prayers, even those that are said in secret.

- Not that this always has to be done by shutting ourselves away in a dark room where there's no possibility of anyone ever seeing us, but prayer should never be motivated by a desire to be seen and praised by others for what we're doing. Whether it's public or private, it should be done out of a heart that deeply desires to know God, and grow closer to him.

- Prayer, thought of and practiced in this way, results in a far greater reward than we could ever get from the praise of the people around us.

When you pray, don't try to impress God

- The second warning that Jesus gives is then found in V. 7-8, where we're introduced to the second group of people whose prayer pitfalls we're warned to avoid.
- That second group is the gentiles, and this is what Jesus has to say about them in V. 7:

English Standard Version Chapter 6

“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.

- So while the pitfall of the hypocrites was trying to impress people with their prayers, the pitfall of the Gentiles seems to be more focused on trying to impress God himself with their prayers.
- What they would do was pride themselves on praying these big, long, fancy sounding prayers, essentially believing that the longer their prayer was, or the more big words they used, the more likely it was that their gods would hear them and answer their prayers.
- But what Jesus says they're actually doing is just heaping up empty phrases, thinking they will be heard for their many words.

- And again, this is a mindset that we can easily slip into.
- We think that we need a certain number of “thee”s or “thou”s in our prayers in order for them to be taken seriously, or that we need to have a five minute minimum to have actually prayed.
- We worry about whether we’ve said the right thing, or prayed the right way, and we get concerned that maybe God won’t hear us, or listen if we’ve gotten it wrong.
- Or we just fall into a mindlessly repetitive pattern, of praying a certain way because it seems right, without giving any thought to what we’re saying.
- When I was younger, almost every prayer I prayed was the exact same, or at least ended in the same way “Thank you for our family and our friends and all you have done for us and given us, Amen.”
- There’s nothing wrong with those words, and there’s certainly nothing wrong with expressing thanks, but it became almost an unconscious type of thing. I didn’t think at all about what I was saying, I just said the words because, “that’s what I did”. I felt like that was just the way to pray because it’s what I had always said.
- But prayer is not about making sure we have all the right words, and the right length for our prayers so that God will pay attention to us.
- Even the Lord’s Prayer itself, Jesus is not giving his disciples some list of magic words, that if you just recite this prayer word for word then you’re praying correctly.
- I told you that growing up at a Christian school I would

recite the Lord's Prayer every morning, and it was really easy to slip into a pattern of almost unconscious repetition, giving no thought to what I was actually saying, or what any of it meant. I may have been saying the "right words", but there was still something missing.

- Again we can see that Jesus is speaking more to the heart behind our prayers, rather than the words and actions themselves.

- He says in V. 8,

English Standard Version Chapter 6

8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

- When you pray, don't try to impress God.

- God already knows what we need. He knows us more intimately than we even know ourselves, yet he wants to hear from us and wants what's best for us.

- He has already provided for our deepest need when he sent his Son to die on the cross in our place. God knows our needs, and loves us enough to provide for those needs. When we pray, it's not to let God know about some kind of need or situation he wasn't already aware of.

- Prayer is not about making sure that we've told God about every little need that we have so that he can provide, and making sure our prayer is long and fancy enough for him to listen. Prayer is again about engaging in a relationship with our creator, sharing our heart with him, and trusting in his love and ability to provide for all of our needs.

- A prayer that is simply “God I need you”, is no less significant than a prayer that lasts for ten minutes.
- And as we read these verses, again, Jesus’ words prompt a question for us. “Why do we pray the way that we pray?”
- Do we pray a certain way because we feel like it’s “right”, and it will impress God, or cause him to listen to us? Or do we pray the way that we do out of a desire to worship and share our hearts with God, trusting in his love for us?
- Prayer that is done, not to impress God, but to share ourselves with our loving and all knowing Father in Heaven is one of the greatest gifts that we have.

Conclusion - Pray then like this:

- So these verses leave us with two important questions, “Why do we pray?” and “Why do we pray the way that we pray?”.
- These are significant questions that each of us should ask about our own prayer lives. Are you praying to impress people? Are you praying to impress God?
- Jesus warns us against both of these things, encouraging us instead to focus our hearts on the relationship with God that prayer is intended for.
- If you’re struggling with what people think of your prayers, do exactly what Jesus says, get alone with God. Pray in a place that no one can see, or hear you, and the temptation to worry more about what they’re thinking is removed.
- If you’re struggling with feeling like your prayers have to

be long or fancy to be heard, or falling into a pattern on unconscious repetition, make an effort to change things up a bit, force yourself to think about the words that you're saying, and even take some time to pray that the Holy Spirit would teach you to pray differently.

- And the good news is that if you're struggling with this, after the brief introduction to prayer, and some challenges to avoid, Jesus continues teaching his disciples a better way for prayer, giving us the beautiful prayer that is so well known, which we will be studying together for the next few weeks.

- Starting in V. 9, he says:

English Standard Version Chapter 6

9 Pray then like this:

- Don't pray like the hypocrites, don't pray like the Gentiles, but pray like this:

English Standard Version Chapter 6

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

10 Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

11 Give us this day our daily bread,

12 and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13 And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

- And over the remainder of the summer we're going to be looking deeper at this prayer, verse by verse, to see the heart behind these words that Jesus teaches to his disciples, and what they mean for our own prayer lives.
- But it's important to begin with this foundation of understanding what prayer really is, and the heart that should lie behind it.
- Don't pray with the intention of impressing those who listen to you. Don't even pray with the intention of impressing God with fancy, yet empty words.
- When you pray, pray with a heart that is focused on God, and your relationship with him, trusting that he knows you, and loves you enough to answer.