

"Sincerity and Simplicity in Prayer"

A kindergarten teacher was having the five-year-olds recite the Lord's prayer and one of the little boys, Andrew was doing well till the end when he said, " And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from e-mail." ¹ Well, that's not right but it *is* an understandable mistake. There has never been a time in history when technology has been more advanced than at present and yet it often feels like it is more a part of the problem than it is a part of a solution. I don't think I have to go into any detail on the pandemic or the politics to convince you we are facing problems of great difficulty and technology doesn't offer much hope. So I am thankful that we come this morning to the heart of *The Sermon on the Mount* and one of the most famous of Jesus' teaching, the Lord's Prayer. In a culture immersed in technology but starving for spirituality this prayer has much to teach us.

We will spend three weeks on The Lord's Prayer. We will begin with an introduction to it this morning and then look at each of its two major sections in the following weeks. There is no better place to go to get into the heart of spiritual life and true hope for today's problems.

The Lord's Prayer has an important introduction. In **Matthew 6:5-8**, before Jesus tells us *how* to pray. He uses the introduction to press home the point he has made throughout *the Sermon*; which is that the life that flourishes spiritually has to be about the reality of your heart. This is the theme of the whole sermon in **Matthew 5, 6, and 7**. The Lord's Prayer comes in the *middle* at **chapter 6**. In his book, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, Jonathan Pennington says the careful literary structure of the whole sermon places the Lord's Prayer at the center of the center of the center of *The Sermon on the Mount*.² It is so very important. So what does Jesus teach us in the introduction to it? He teaches something that seems simple but is so crucial. ***He teaches us that God is a good and gracious Father, so when we go to him in prayer, we should pray from the heart with the sincerity and simplicity of a trusting child.***

Three clear truths capture his message. First,

I. WHEN YOU PRAY DON'T GIVE THOUGHT TO WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK: PRAY WITH SINCERITY TO GOD ALONE.

Look at **verse 5**, “*And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. He talks about how they love to stand and pray in prominent places, why? To be seen by others. He says they have received their reward. They want the praise of people – so that what they get but that’s all. Then in **verse 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.**

A. Spiritual sincerity means being focused on the reality of God and your relationship to Him.

At this point in the Sermon we’ve just completed the section in which Jesus gives us six examples of what he calls the righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were religious conservatives but Jesus said they didn’t have the deeper righteousness of the heart. They would comply with what God demanded but they didn’t live in devotion, asking what does God want from me. Jesus made it clear God doesn't just want you to avoid murder. He wants you to deal with your anger. He doesn't just want you to avoid adultery. He wants you to deal with lust. He gave six examples that go right to the state of your heart. That brought **Matthew 5** to a close. What happens in **Matthew 6** is Jesus gives now three examples of how this same issue of the heart affects your religious life. In **Matthew 6**, Jesus talks about three religious acts common to people in his day, giving, praying, and fasting. He says, in each of these, the most important thing is not how much you give, how long you pray, or how dramatically you fast but whether you have a childlike heart of devotion to God.

B. Spiritual sincerity and simplicity is not to be taken for granted.

We can give to look good; in that sense, we can be self-centered in our giving. We can be proud in our prayers! That's hypocrisy. It's subtle.

Illustration: Quite a few years ago, a youth rally attracted 5,000 Baptists youth group members. A preacher brought them what became a fairly famous message called a *Shocking Youth Message*.³ This message was about hypocrisy. The speaker was concerned about teenagers in church youth groups who had, at some point, prayed a prayer to invite Jesus into their hearts, but there was no change in their lives. In that sense, he was addressing an important issue. But there was one thing that always bothered me about that message. He based it on the words of Jesus toward the end of *The Sermon on the Mount*.

Jesus says, *a good tree bears good fruit, and by their fruits, you will know them* and, in the end, tells many who claim to know him, “*depart from me, I never knew you.*” I thought it was good that he called out hypocrisy but what struck me was that the kind of hypocrisy *he* condemned in the teenagers was so different than what Jesus stressed in *The Sermon on the Mount*. The preacher talked about what he watched on television, or dressed immodestly or, as he put it, loved the things the world loved. He talked about teenagers hanging out at park at 1:00 in the morning doing something they shouldn't, wanting to be like Brittany Spears. Those are valid issues but he based it on the Sermon on the Mount and in Jesus sermon the hypocrisy Jesus' called out was very different. In Jesus' examples, the hypocrites are not doing worldly things; they are doing religious things! They are giving to the poor, praying, and fasting. They are doing things that look good, but there is a worm in the apple! Their motives are messed up. The idea that other people might see them and think well of them means more than the idea that God will see what they do in secret and reward them when no one else does. They do good things, but they don't love God himself or believe he matters most. There is a profoundly deep view of the soul-sickness of sin here. It goes deep. Sin is not just an outward thing. It is, first and foremost, a disposition of the heart. It is a life that is lived for self and about self and not God. It is so stubborn and sneaky it follows us right into our spiritual activities and corrupts them with false motives. We need a Savior. We need wisdom.

C. Sincerity and simplicity in prayer is an issue of the heart.

Verse 6 speaks about *going into your room, shutting the door, and praying to your father in secret*. In *The Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus uses strong pictures to make his points. Does the part about going into your room mean you should never pray in public? No! Jesus repeatedly prayed publicly. In the book of **Acts** alone, there are multiple references to Christians praying together, praying in public, and it is a good thing. There is a place for public prayer.

The idea, the principle Jesus is getting at in “shutting the door and praying in secret” is something you can do even in public. You shut out and forget other people! You shut out and renounce the distraction of or concern about what people think of you or see you doing. There is a way when you pray to shut out every other focus or concern except the reality that you are a child of God in his presence, praying to him alone.

That's the first thing: I. WHEN YOU PRAY DON'T GIVE THOUGHT TO WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK: PRAY WITH SINCERITY TO GOD ALONE. Here's the second:

II. WHEN YOU PRAY DON'T THINK YOU WILL BE HEARD BECAUSE OF YOUR MANY WORDS: PRAY WITH SIMPLICITY.

Verse 7-8 *"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. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

A. Jesus doesn't say, "Don't ever repeat yourself in prayer." He says, "Don't heap up empty phrases."

Now, you are not heaping up empty phrases if in pouring out your heart, you find yourself saying some of the same things over again. That's human. In **Psalm 119**, King David prays at least seven times, *"Lord, teach me your statutes."* Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane, repeatedly prayed with great emotion for the cup to pass from him.

B. The words are empty when they lose heartfelt sincerity or become an attempt to pressure God to comply with our wishes.

The word "gentiles" just refers to non-Jewish people. The ancient Greeks and Romans believed intense and repetitious invocations would move the gods and goddesses to respond to your requests. It's not that different today when people have a prayer; they just repeat over and over and over as if to impress God with how desperate they are and coerce him into compliance with their will. If you aren't engaging in heart-deep relationship with God you are in danger of just heaping up empty phrases.

Illustration: I heard a quote once that prayer is like a boat hook. You know a pole with a hook. Someone on a boat uses it to connect to the shore and pull the boat to shore. He said you don't try to pull the shore to the boat. You grab hold of the shore and pull the boat to it. When you come to God in prayer, you aren't pulling him to you and your will. You are pulling yourself to him and his will. That's what is crucial, and it doesn't take a lot of words. It doesn't take beautiful phrases that flow seamlessly or stay on course. It doesn't take long hours spent in prayer. Short prayers are plenty long enough when they sincerely draw you to God and express your dependence on him. Prayer is not about

you in the sense that it is not about whether people are impressed by your devotion or whether God is impressed with your many words.

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II. WHEN YOU PRAY DON'T THINK YOU WILL BE HEARD BECAUSE OF YOUR MANY WORDS: PRAY WITH SIMPLICITY.

Third,

**III. WHEN YOU PRAY DON'T FORGET THE REALITY OF GOD.
COME INTO HIS PRESENCE AS ONE OF HIS CHILDREN.**

Matthew 6:8 Jesus says, *Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.* The Fatherhood of God is mentioned 17 times in *The Sermon on the Mount*. When speaking about prayer, Jesus brings the fatherhood of God into concentrated focus at the center of everything.⁴

The heart of prayer is not what others think, or the words you heap up

**A. The heart of prayer is the reality of God
and your relationship to him.**

On Christmas of 1978, Connie gave me one of my all-time favorite books. *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. In his words on this passage, he says when we go to pray, before we begin, we should say to ourselves: *"I am now entering into the audience chamber of that God, the almighty, the absolute, the eternal and great God... who is light and in whom there is no darkness at all."*

But then he adds this:

If only we realized this almighty God is our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. If only we realized that we are indeed his children and that whenever we pray, it is like a child going to its father! He knows all about us; he knows our every need before we tell him. As the father cares for the child and look at the child and is concerned about the child and anticipates the needs of the child, so is God with respect to all those who are in Christ Jesus. He desires to bless us very much more than we desire to be blessed.... He has an ambition for us, I say it with reverence, which transcends our highest thought and imagination. We must remember that he is our father. The great, the holy, the almighty God is our Father. He cares for us. He has counted the very hairs of our head. He has said that nothing can happen to us apart from him.⁵

To know you are in the presence of God the father is so much better than the praise of people. To come to him with childlike faith and simple sincerity is so much better than heaping up empty phrases.

B. Jesus, the one who teaches us to pray as children, is the one who gives us this gift of grace.

In another book in the Bible, **Galatians, Galatians 4:4-6** says, *But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"*

If we have a God who is unconcerned, then we shouldn't waste our time in prayer. We should just face whatever comes the best we can. If, however, behind the fact that we have been given this prayer, there stands the simple truth that God became a man out of love for you and me, and in becoming a man endured all the suffering that led to and culminated on the cross, if in a hell of God-forsakenness, he gave himself to suffer like he did in order to save our souls, then we have to realize that the door to God is open from His side and the love of God is real. We should be a praying people because the God who gives this prayer *to us* gave himself *for us*.

The only thing you have to do to or can do to become a child of God is to receive Christ as your Savior. **John 1:12** says of Jesus, *But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.* Have faith in Christ and pray with the sincerity and simplicity of a trusting child of God.

CONCLUSION

That's what we need right now, in our nation and in our lives. Take this prayer that follows, The Lord's Prayer, pray through it often, not as a mindless repetition of empty phrases, but as a childlike expression of heartfelt communion with God. You will find immediate, undeniable, beneficial results, not only in your personal spiritual life but also in the advancement of God's cause and kingdom! God's supernatural help is available for his children when they pray.

Amen!

¹ *Gusty Chartrand, "Kids of the Kingdom," Today's Christian (July/August 2003), p. 15.*

² Pennington, Jonathon T, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2017, p 210.

³ The message referred to was Paul Washer's "*Shocking Youth Message.*" There is much to commend in this message. I have heard many people say that it was used to awaken them to their need for authentic faith and a new birth. I do not intend to attack it in any way but simply to point out something we might miss with regard to the focus of Sermon on the Mount. At the time this sermon was prepared this message can be easily found by means of an online search. Here is one site: <https://adidab.wordpress.com/2009/05/05/paul-washer-transcript-02-shocking-youth-message/>

⁴ Pennington points out that of the seventeen references to God as father in the Sermon ten occur in 6:1-21. He observes, this super concentration of "Father" references in the center of the central section of the Sermon (6:1-21) accentuates the vital role this understanding of God plays in earliest Christianity. Pennington, pp. 211-112.

⁵ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1977, Volume Two, p. 30.