

## When You Pray

Sermon on the Mount, Vol. 20

HBC 12/13/20

Matthew 6:5-8

Many people are convinced that prayer is a wonderful gift from God, but they just can't figure out what He wants them to do with it. They try to use it, but it frustrates them. Sometimes it seems to be wonderful, but sometimes it seems to be more of an irritation or a burden than a blessing. They can't get rid of it. But, try as they might, they also can't seem to be blessed by this gift, and the more testimonies they hear about how wonderful it is, the more frustrated and disillusioned they become.

As we look at prayer in this passage and then again in the model prayer Jesus gave to His disciples, there is a possibility that you will discover that some of your own long-held beliefs about prayer are flawed. Don't be frightened, though, because I believe that you will find that what Jesus actually teaches about prayer is both *simple and liberating*. Most things man comes up with on a subject so close to the heart of God as prayer are just the opposite: *complicated and burdensome*.

### I. How And Where Not To Pray (5)

Matthew 6:5: *When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.*

As with all the other examples of the problems Jesus has used, prayer in the system of the Pharisees and Scribes was corrupted and twisted by the traditions of the rabbis. In Jesus' day, most Jews were thoroughly confused about how to pray as God wanted. Many Christians likewise are unsure what to do with prayer. The reference here is to **all kinds of prayer**. Among the Jews, though prayers were always appropriate, there were set times for prayer.

In the Old Testament faithful people prayed while standing, kneeling, lying prostrate, or in no particular posture. Standing was the most normal position, so the part in this verse about **stand and pray** is not the issue. The problem was with praying in such a way and in such a place as to **maximize the possibility of being seen** by other people.

Scripture does not condemn public prayer, nor does it condemn private prayer in a public place. What the Lord condemns is **ostentatious** praying. To do your praying so as **to be seen** by other people is **sin**. Jesus' message here regarding prayer is that it is the **inner attitude is most important**. God blesses the heart that is truly and humbly devoted to Him.

Historians have helped us see the background for this passage by summarizing some errors that had crept into Jewish prayer practices at that time.

1. Prayer had become **ritualized**.

2. They had developed **prescribed prayers** for every occasion.
3. They limited prayer to **specific times** and occasions.
4. They put high esteem on **long prayers**.
5. They frequently used **meaningless repetitions**.
6. The worst fault and the over-arching flaw was their **desire to be seen and heard** by other people.

Praying **in order to be seen and heard** by other people is **intrinsically evil**. The motive is not the glory of God; the motive is sinful self-glory. It's acting. It's hypocrisy. If you want people to notice you praying or know that you pray a lot, your greatest reward will be if they indeed notice.

## II. How And Where To Pray (6-7)

Matthew 6:6: *But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.*

**Inner room** is any place of privacy. The point is to do the opposite of making yourself conspicuous. Prayer, according to Jesus, is to be a time when you **shut out the world** and get alone with God. **Shut your door** describes emphasis on secluding yourself from distraction. Most of your prayer is meant to be a private thing between you and God.

**Father who is in secret** means God meets you in that secret place. Notice the wording **who is in secret**. God doesn't just see what goes on there; He **IS** there. **Father who sees in secret** means He isn't impressed at all by what you display for other people to see. He responds to you on the basis of what's in your heart, regardless of any facade you put up.

Matthew 6:7: *And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.*

This is a condemnation of certain kinds of prayers as pagan in nature. It is pagan thinking that says that the longer and the louder one prays, the greater the chance of getting the desired result. In 1 Kings 18, the priests of Baal cried out in prayer "from morning until noon." Tibetan Buddhists have a prayer wheel inscribed with written prayers they recite. The Rosary is another example of a violation of this principle. The flaw behind

all such things is the notion that the acceptability of our prayers depends, at least in part, upon the *number of words* we use or the *number of prayers* we rattle off.

### III. **Why You Can Pray Sincerely** (8)

Matthew 6:8: *So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.*

Jesus was not condemning pouring out your heart to God. Nor was He commenting on telling God things He already knows. It is because an earthly father or mother understands a child so thoroughly and knows his or her needs better than any stranger does, that the child will go with his needs to his father or mother, which is exactly what loving parents want their child to do. God delights in hearing the cries of your heart, both your joys and your sorrows. He's in this relationship for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sorrow and in joy, and in sickness and in health.

What Jesus condemned is the spirit of fear and distrust which causes a person to approach God babbling on and on in an effort to placate Him and get Him to respond favorably.

Speaking with God is the one and only time that you can say "***You know what I mean,***" and know for sure that the One to whom you are speaking truly knows what you mean. More good news is that He not only ***knows*** what you mean, He ***understands*** and He ***cares*** more than anyone, and He ***can do something*** to help. As the sovereign, all-knowing, almighty God of heaven and earth, God knows what you need before you ask Him. That's the Person I want to respond to the cry of my heart!

---

During WWII an army chaplain wrote the following piece in *His* magazine, titled "Some Pray and Die." It deals directly with the question I didn't get to today, but it overlaps with the issue of us accepting the leading of God. See if your faith lines up with his observations:

Is there such a thing as getting the "breaks" in prayer? What about the fellows who pray regularly, but get killed regularly? . . . I wish people would stop writing about the soldiers who pray and have their prayers answered by not getting killed. Why do all the other soldiers seem to get the wrong answer?

What I want to know is this: what sort of an extra-special, super-powered prayer is needed to make everything turn out the way you want? That sounds facetious, almost irreverent, but I'm serious. I really want to know. I'm an army chaplain, and I could use some special prayers with my men—and heaven knows, we need them badly at times. Because the fact is there are always more men who pray to come back than there are men who get back. Quite a lot more. What is the deciding factor?

The thing for all of us to remember is this: someone else does the answering. . . . What you have in mind may not be what God has in mind. If you ask him something, you must be willing to take what he gives. . . . That is why I am a bit depressed by the writings of those who try to get other people to pray by telling them that you get what you want. People must learn to want what they get. . . . When I talk to soldiers about prayer I try to tell them that they must be adults. God expects us to be men. Only children demand a happy ending to every story. How old must we be before we begin to realize that even prayer can't get us everything we want, unless the thing we want is right for us to have?

Who gets the breaks in prayer? Nobody. There is no such thing. We get what God in his infinite love and foreknowledge, sees fit to give. That's not always the same as getting what we want. But it ought to be.

*But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you . . . for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.*