

Matthew 6:5-8 “Learning from Jesus about Prayer”^{**1}

Series: The Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Living 101

Main Idea: In Matthew 6:5-8, Jesus teaches us how to prepare ourselves to pray. He says there are two matters to consider carefully, first *where* we pray, and secondly *how* we pray.

- I. Consider carefully where you pray (5-6).
 - A. Do not pray like the hypocrites (5).
 1. They pray to impress people.
 2. They receive their reward.
 - B. Let your prayer be secret and childlike (6).
 1. Your Father is in secret.
 2. Your Father will reward you.
- II. Consider carefully how you pray (7-8).
 - A. Do not pray like the Gentiles (7).
 1. They pray to impress God.
 2. They have a wrong view of prayer and of God.
 - B. Let your prayer be sincere and meaningful (8).
 1. Your Father knows what you need.
 2. Your Father knows before you ask.

Make It Personal: Three important questions to ask ourselves...

1. What does my praying reveal about me?
2. What does my praying reveal about God?
3. How does my praying need to change this week?

As we turn our attention to Jesus’ sermon on the mount this morning, we’re coming to a familiar passage, the section leading up to the Lord’s prayer. But don’t be fooled by the familiarity. What Jesus has to say to us can truly change our lives this week.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:5-8

It's exciting to be around a new Christian, someone who recently has come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. So full of zeal. So hungry for God's Word. So sincere in his desire to please the Lord in every area of life. So burdened for unsaved family and friends. But do you know what is really exciting about new Christians? To hear them PRAY! No fancy words, no theological jargon, no religious cliches. Just a simple, clear, sincere conversation between a child and his or her Heavenly Father.

But as we grow in Christ, a problem may develop. Last week God's Word identified the problem for us. It has to do with motives. In the first section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Jesus announced the character of righteous living that pleases God. It's not enough to be religious in order to be righteous. Righteousness is a matter of the heart, and it comes by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

But a person can strive to demonstrate the righteous character Jesus described in Matthew 5 and still not please God. Why? It has to do with MOTIVES. Chapter 5 taught us the WHAT of the Christian life, chapter 6 teaches the HOW. The HOW of righteousness is as important to God as the WHAT. In Matthew 6 Jesus moves to the matter of motives behind righteous living.

He says in verse 1 (NIV), “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

^{**} Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see the series preached at WBC in 1988.

There was much abuse of piety in first century Judaism. There were religious people doing the right things for the wrong reasons. That's behind Jesus' warning that begins chapter six. There's no room for spiritual showboating in Jesus' kingdom, specifically when it comes to three 'acts of righteousness' spelled out by the Lord in chapter 6.

Jesus addresses the subjects of almsgiving in verses 2-4, prayer in verses 5-15, and fasting in verses 16-18. What did He say is the solution for abuse in these areas? It's obviously not to stop giving, stop praying, and stop fasting. Rather, according to Jesus, we need to learn to give rightly, pray rightly, and fast rightly if we're to please God.

In Matthew 6:5-15, Jesus teaches us how to pray. He says there are three matters to consider carefully, first *where* we pray (5-6), and secondly *how* we pray (7-8), which we'll focus on today. Then thirdly, in verses 9-13, He will address *what* to pray.

I. Consider carefully where you pray (5-6).

Jesus begins, "And when you [KJV, *thou*] pray." The KJV points out a significant pronoun change missed in the modern translations. In verse one, He uses the plural "ye," but in verse 5 the singular, "thou." Why the shift? Because every individual must come to grips with motive in prayer. I can't do it for you, and you can't do it for me.

Also notice an assumption in Jesus' words. "And *when* you pray." Jesus assumes that if we are His disciples, we will do what? We will pray!

Prayer was a vital part of Jewish life in Jesus' day. Every good Jew scheduled prayer time right into the daily routine, not just once, or even twice, but at least three times a day. No doubt from childhood, Jesus practiced the existing forms of Jewish piety, for all male Jews were taught the following customs.

They were taught to pray the *Shema*, a term which comes from the Hebrew word "to hear." Jews learned to recite verses from Deuteronomy 6 & 11 as soon as they could speak. Morning and evening they vocalized the Shema in Hebrew.

Also, three times a day the Jews prayed *Tephilla*. In the morning, at the time of the afternoon sacrifice in the Temple (around 3 P.M.), and in the evening, all good Jews prayed *Tephilla*. During these prayer times, the Jew followed a prayer guideline called "The Grand Benedictions," which, by Jesus' day was a string of eighteen benedictions which needed to be recited. Any personal matters of prayer concern were tacked on at the end. In addition, prayers were offered both before and after meals.

We must realize that when Jesus taught about prayer in Matthew 6, He was talking to people who were saturated with prayer. Therein lies the problem. Prayer had become a burden for the people, a demanding ritual, from which Jesus released them.

How? To start with, He gave them a couple of guidelines in verses 5-6.

A. Do not pray like the hypocrites (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."

What is a hypocrite? It's a term that comes from the theater of the Roman world. It refers to a actor who performs on stage before an audience and wears a mask. In short, a hypocrite is a person who playacts, who puts on a front to hide true motivation.

What does a hypocrite do when he prays? Jesus tells us what some did in that day. "For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be

seen by men." They love to pray--so far, so good. But behind the good act was corrupt motive.

Who did Jesus have in mind with this description? His listeners knew. The "they" were the "men of the cloth," those respected, highly-thought-of religious teachers known as the Pharisees. Such men were models of piety.

The problem was that, known to God alone, behind their piety lurked an ugly pride, and it showed up in two places, according to Jesus. One, at the synagogue, and two, on the street corner.

The synagogue was the place of teaching and worship (think of our church services). Following instruction time from the Torah, a respected synagogue member was called upon to stand up front and lead in corporate prayer (a mark of distinction). Some people "loved to pray" up front.

They also loved to pray on the street corner. Every afternoon at 3:00, a daily sacrifice occurred in the temple in Jerusalem. And throughout the country, all good Jews would pause at 3:00 for afternoon prayer. But guess what some did? They timed it perfectly so that at 3:00 they just "happened" to be, not in the privacy of their home, but on the busy downtown street corner. And there they prayed, for all to see.

Is Jesus saying that all public prayer is bad, that we shouldn't have congregational prayers in church or pray before we eat in a public restaurant? No. The issue isn't location, for we can pray in private or public (Solomon prayed in public, so did David and Daniel). The issue isn't posture either, for in the Bible various postures are used for prayer (kneeling, prostrate, sitting, or standing like the Pharisees). What's the issue then?

Motive. What motive did Jesus confront in verse 5? The hypocrites pray, says Jesus, "*that they may be seen by others.*"

1. *They pray to impress people.* And they did it by choosing the most public, the most visible places to pray. And while we may not pray on street corners, we can do this in other ways.

It starts early, as any children's Sunday School teacher knows. "Who wants to pray this morning?" you ask. And five hands go up, "I do! I want to pray." "No, I want to pray!"

Then we get older, and more sophisticated. In casual conversation we throw in a statement like, "When I was praying in my devotions this morning..." or, "Last night I had a great time in prayer..." And we can use our private devotional life to make a public statement about our spirituality.

It's not always wrong to talk about our prayer lives in public ways. Paul shared freely about how much he prayed for the churches. But it can be.

Do you know what a hypocrite gets when he prays? Exactly what he aims for, a very specific reward. Jesus said, "Verily I say unto you they have their reward."

2. *They receive their reward.* What kind of reward? Admiration. Approval. Applause. Of God? No, of people. And *not* of God.

So I can pray a prayer that impresses you but offends God. And the issue isn't content. I can say true things. No problem there. The problem is motive.

When you pray publicly, do you worry about what people think? By the way, we can *not* pray in public and be guilty of the same sin. If the reason I refuse to pray in church is because I am worried about how my prayer will sound to people, I am thinking just like a Pharisee thinks.

The hypocrite uses prayer to impress people. This could be other people, but it could also be one particular person. *Me*. Yes, I can use prayer to impress myself.

This reveals just how subtle sin is. What is sin? Listen to how Martyn Lloyd-Jones answers that question.

“We tend to think of sin as we see it in its rags and in the gutters of life. We look at a drunkard, poor fellow, and we say, There is sin; that is sin. But that is not the essence of sin. To have a real picture and a true essence of it, you must look at some great saint, some unusually devout and devoted man. Look at him there upon his knees in the very presence of God. Even there self is intruding itself, and the temptation is for him to think about himself, to think pleasantly and pleurably about himself, and really to be worshipping himself rather than God. That, not the other, is the true picture of sin.”²

So Jesus says, “Do not pray like the hypocrites.” Then He gives the solution.

B. Let your prayer be secret and childlike (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.”

So as opposed to the street corner, let your prayer be secret (“go into your room and shut the door”). And rather than ostentatious, be childlike (“pray to your Father...and your Father will reward you”).

Prayer is a family matter. You must be a child of God in order to pray.

You say, “Aren’t we all God’s children?”

No, in fact, when we enter this world, none of us are. From the day Adam and Eve sinned, all of their descendants enter the world cut off from God, held captive by our sins, under the control of the prince of this world. But God sent His own Son into this world to rescue hell-bound citizens of the kingdom of darkness. That’s why He died on the cross, to pay sin’s penalty in full, and then conquered the grave, to break the power of sin and death.

“How then do we become God’s children?” you ask.

Jesus answers that question in John 3:7 when He said, “You must be born again. You were born the first time by the will of an earthly father. Now you must be born from above, by the will of the Heavenly Father.”

How does that happen? It’s nothing we do. It’s trusting in what He alone can do. This new birth is a miraculous work, planned by the Father, that the Spirit of God accomplishes by divine grace. He causes a second birth to occur, a spiritual re-birth. And when He does, the sinner cries out, “God, be merciful to me a sinner! Thank you for sending Your Son to save me. I receive Him, Jesus the Christ, as my Savior and Lord.”

Have you experienced this miraculous second birth? If not, why not ask God to save you now? If so, then God is your Father, and you can talk to Him anytime and anyplace. That’s right. Prayer is a family matter, and when we pray, we’re not talking to men, but to a *Father*.

When I going to seminary, I met a young man named Dale at the church we attended. In that particular church there were more than a dozen professors with Master of Divinity degrees who were much older than Dale. But that didn't seem to intimidate Dale. When he prayed aloud in prayer meetings, he prayed with simplicity and authority.

² Lloyd-Jones, p. 22.

Do you why? Because he wasn't talking to those men with M.Div. degrees. He was talking to his Father!

What's true of our Father? Jesus tells us two things about Him right here.

1. *Your Father is in secret.* He's "unseen," says the NIV. In verse 6, the KJV uses the term "closet" which used to confuse me. When I read that Jesus wanted me to pray in my *closet* I wondered why, since if I got in my closet I'd be sitting on a stack of shoes with my head sandwiched in between a stack of shirts, trousers, and suitcoats! That doesn't sound like a conducive place to pray to me.

That's not what Jesus had in mind. He used a word which probably refers to the supply-room in a typical Jewish home. It was the only room in a poor Jewish house that could be locked. In one sense, it was the least "spiritual" place in the house, for it was used to store feed, small animals, tools, and other supplies.³ But what made it ideal for prayer was that it offered privacy. It had a lockable door on it, and was a windowless room in the middle of a Jewish home.

"Go to your storage room and pray," says the Master. It's no longer the Holy of Holies that's the special meeting place for the believer and God. It's a room with a lock.

Do you have a private place where you get alone with God and pray? You say, "But it's hard. I mean, with small kids, my house is like a zoo!" Granted, but that's why this is so encouraging. I doubt what we have is any more cramped than a typical first century Jewish home. It doesn't have to be fancy. We just need to designate a place and time to be alone with God regularly. Away from the TV, the phone, the computer, the "to do" list. Maybe we need to get up before the kids do, or stay up later. I once heard of a person who went to a cemetery to be alone with God.

The point is, your Father is in secret. So meet with Him in secret.

2. *Your Father will reward you.* Jesus says when you pray to your Father without trying to impress people, here's what the Father will do. He shall "see" you in secret (not "hear"), and "shall reward you openly."

Let that sink in. God does not owe us a thing. Yet He loves to give good gifts to His children. And He invites us to ask.

John Piper has written, "A prayerless Christian is like a bus driver trying alone to push his bus out of a rut because he doesn't know Clark Kent is aboard."⁴

Sometimes we develop the strange notion that the God who sacrificed His own Son for us is stingy, or that He's sort of a barrier we must get through to get what will bring us most joy. Nothing could be further from the truth! He is *for us*, says Romans 8:32.

"I must get rid of this thought that God is standing between me and my desires and that which is best for me," explains Lloyd-Jones. "I must see God as my Father who has purchased my ultimate good in Christ, and is waiting to bless me with His own fullness in Christ Jesus."⁵

Jesus is so practical here. He says that when we pray, we are to do three things regarding the *where* of prayer. Look again at verse 6. One, enter into our private place, two, shut the door, and three, pray to our Heavenly Father.

³ Bruner, 234

⁴ Desiring God, p. 139

⁵ Lloyd-Jones, p. 31.

Again, this is so encouraging. Our wonderful Savior revitalized prayer, and put meaning back into it. How? There were three things which were very different about prayer for Jesus as compared with the accepted teaching in His day.

One, He broke with the customs of His day. He did not limit Himself to praying at three specific times a day. He prayed early in the morning at times. He prayed late at night at times. And there were times when Jesus prayed all night.

Two, Jesus also broke with the traditional language of prayer. The Shema and the Tephilla were both recited in Hebrew, the professional language of the day (like Latin for us). Jesus prayed in Aramaic, the language of everyday life. And He taught His disciples to pray that way.

Three, Jesus also changed the very content of prayer. Jesus prayed to His Father with the intimate security a child has in talking with his beloved father. And He gives us that privilege too. He put intimacy and meaning back into prayer.

So here's the first consideration as you prepare to pray. Jesus says to consider carefully *where* you pray.

II. Consider carefully how you pray (7-8).

As in the *where*, so in the *how*, Jesus will give a negative, and a positive. This is the second misconception common in prayer. The first, in verses 5-6, was the misconception of the Pharisee, that if what I pray sounds good to people, it'll sound good to God. The second, in verses 7-8, was the misconception of the pagan, or Gentile.

A. Do not pray like the Gentiles (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."⁶ We just saw that hypocrites use prayer to impress people. Now Jesus tells us what the Gentiles do.

1. *They pray to impress God.* How so? Listen to how the KJV renders verse 7, "But when you pray, use not vain repetitions as the pagans do; for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking."

Jesus is not condemning all long prayers. Nor is He condemning all repetition in prayers. He Himself prayed, sometimes at length, sometimes with repetition. What then does it mean to pray with "vain repetitions"? The emphasis of thought is not on "vain", but on "repetitions". The Greek word for vain repetitions sounds like our English word "babble". Dietrich Bonhoeffer translated the word, "empty noise". Praying with vain repetitions means praying with empty phrases. Jesus' followers are to avoid prayer which is all words and no meaning, all lips and no mind.

Jesus is exposing two common errors in praying.

•Error #1: More is better. "They think they will be heard because of their many words." Are they right? For pagan Romans, prayer was characterized by magical incantations, chants, and formal invocations. To get the gods to help, you had to badger them, to annoy them, to wear them out until they could do nothing else but give in!

Even amongst the Jews, there was this tendency towards long prayers. Rabi Levi said, "Whoever is long in prayer is heard!" Another saying goes, "Whenever the righteous make their prayer long, their prayer is heard."

We sometimes buy into the notion that more is better when we think that long

⁶ In the NIV, "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words."

prayers are more pleasing to God. In 18th century worship in Scotland, length meant devotion. In a typical Scottish service, there was a verse by verse lecture which lasted for an hour. Then there was a sermon which lasted for another hour. And then there were prayers--lengthy prayers, fluent prayers, magnificent prayers.

The NEB puts verse 7 this way, "They imagine that the more they say, the more likely they are to be heard!" But people who do that indicate they have a faulty view of God. Jesus says, "Don't be like them. We don't believe in that kind of God."⁷

•Error #2: The right words produce the right outcome. The pagans viewed prayer as a mindless activity, "If I say the right things, God will give me the desired results."

Do we ever think that way when we pray? Some people seem to view the phrase "in Jesus' name, amen" as sort of a good luck charm that has to be tucked on at the end of a prayer. I knew a lady who criticized a pastor once because he didn't always end his prayers, "In Jesus' name, Amen." Be careful.

I had a Coach in school who used the Lord's prayer as a sort of rabbit's foot to get God on our side. Don't do that, says Jesus. That's what pagan Gentiles do. And why?

2. *They have a wrong view of prayer and of God.* They see prayer as an activity of presenting words and phrases, and they see God as One who rewards based on the nature of those words and phrases.

But that's not God. And that's not true prayer. And that must not be us, says Jesus. We mustn't view prayer as reciting magical, meaningless words. What then?

B. Let your prayer be sincere and meaningful (8). "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

Listen to Jesus. *Do not be like them.* Why not? Because we don't believe in that kind of God. We know better, by God's grace. We know that we have a Father of whom two things are true, according to Jesus.

1. *Your Father knows what you need.*
2. *Your Father knows before you ask.*

The pagan gods were glorified men. They had weaknesses and deficiencies. Not so the true God to whom we pray. Our Father doesn't need information about our need. He already knows the need. He is omniscient. Our God does not need to be coerced into caring about our requests. He already cares because He is our Father. Why, He's already given to meet our greatest need. And He knows the rest of our needs too.

So what does He want from us? He wants us, His children, to trust Him and to ask Him for help. He wants us to approach Him with confidence, knowing that what concerns us, concerns Him. It's a family affair!

A good father delights in having his children come to him for help. He gladly uses his resources to meet the needs of his children. How much more so our Heavenly Father!

Look again at Jesus' words in verse 8, "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." What a powerful statement! Our Father knows. He's omniscient. We don't pray to inform Him. As Frederick Bruner has written (237), "Prayer is not an intelligence briefing for God; it is intelligent conversation with him."

⁷ I don't know who first said it, but it is a challenge to me, "One mark of a godly man is that his public prayers are short, and his private prayers are long."

When someone prays in church, "Dear Lord, please help Sam. He's at S.O.M.C, third floor, room 321. He's having kidney trouble and is feeling kind of lonely. It'd be nice if he'd get a few cards this week..." I wonder if it's a prayer to God or an announcement to the congregation.

Dear friends, let's always remember that our Father knows. We have an audience with the One who is aware of what we're facing before we even say a word. When we pray, He wants us to engage our mind and hearts, for prayer involves thinking and trusting. He's concerned about *where* we pray, but also *how* we pray.

The third issue that Jesus addresses is *what* we pray. What should we say to God when we talk with Him? "Pray like this," says Jesus in verse 9, in the passage we'll consider next time, the Lord willing.

Make It Personal: Three important questions to ask ourselves...

1. *What does my praying reveal about me?* Most people I talk to, when asked, say they pray. So do this. If you took the content of the prayers you offered to God in a month's time, and wrote them on paper, and just looked at them, what would those words reveal about you? What kinds of things do you say to God? What kinds of things do you *not* say to God?

Our prayers are revealers. They reveal, first of all, what we think about ourselves. So as we look at the record we see that we talked a lot about our food and our kids and our job. "Lord, I'm not feeling too well today." "Lord, help me with this test." And so forth.

That's fine. Those words reveal that I know I'm needy, that I'd like His help.

But am I praying about the needs of my soul? If not, what does that say about how I view myself and my life?

God's Word makes it clear that we are needy. In *many* ways. Do my prayers reveal that? Do I see myself as one who is totally dependent on God? Does my praying reveal my dependency? Does it reveal my devotion to Him? Do I tell Him I love Him, that I'm thankful, not just for what He does for me, but for who He is?

Again, it's fine to pray for the things we need, like our daily bread, but does my praying reveal the fact that God has saved me? Do I thank Him regularly for His Son, and for what He accomplished on the cross? If not, why not? Have I lost focus?

2. *What does my praying reveal about God?* Is it apparent that God is my Father by the way I pray? Does it sound like I know Him very well by the way I pray?

God is not pleased when our prayer becomes a mindless routine. Prayer that pleases God involves thinking. As John Stott reminds us that Jesus forbids any kind of prayer with the mouth when the mind is not engaged.

That applies to the use of the rosary, the practice of transcendental meditation, the reciting of meaningless liturgy, and more.

What does God think of prayer chains? Some people have the notion that if you can get enough people saying the same thing to God, they'll have a greater chance of getting what they want from God—healing, a new job, etc. Beloved, if we think that we can use volume in prayer to manipulate God into granting prayer requests, we're just like the pagans who think they will be heard for their many words.

So look at your prayer journal again. What does it reveal about the way you view God? Is He a Genie in a bottle? Is He a harsh ogre? Is He a mystical force? Or is there evidence that He truly is your loving heavenly Father?

3. *How does my praying need to change this week?* Do I need to find a storage room somewhere and start going there as I begin my day?

Specifically, Jesus has been warning us today about our motives in prayer, that we are not to pray so as to impress men, nor God. Is that what I've been doing? If it is, He already knows, so confess it to Him. Look again at the cross, where Jesus died to pay the penalty for every sin you've committed, including those offensive prayers.

*What a Friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!*

Closing Hymn: *"What a Friend We Have in Jesus"* #435 (all three verses)