

One indispensable ingredient that marks true spiritual awakening is prayer. What happened in New York City in the late 1857 is a vivid case in point.¹ The city, like most of America, had been prospering and felt little need for God. That self-sufficient mentality quickly changed in the late 1850's as a great economic panic swept the American scene. Thousands of merchants faced a jam as banks failed, and railroads went into bankruptcy. Factories shut down and the unemployment lines swelled. New York City alone had 30,000 idle men. In the fall of 1857, hunger and despair stared the people in the face.

In the same year, a businessman by the name of Jeremiah Lanphier took an appointment as a City Missionary in downtown New York. The job of turning the tide of decreasing church attendance fell upon this layman. So burdened was he by the need that Jeremiah Lanphier decided to invite others to join him in a noonday prayer meeting, to be held on Wednesdays once a week.

He distributed a handbill that read in part: "A day Prayer Meeting is held every Wednesday, from 12 to 1 o'clock, in the Consistory building in the rear of the North Dutch Church, corner of Fulton and William Streets. This meeting is intended to give merchants, mechanics, clerks, strangers, and businessmen generally an opportunity to stop and call upon God amid the perplexities incident to their respective avocations. It will continue for one hour; but it is also designed for those who may find it inconvenient to remain more than five or ten minutes, as well as for those who can spare the whole hour."

And so at twelve noon, on September 23, 1857, Lanphier opened the door and waited for response to his invitation. Five minutes went by, no one appeared. Ten minutes elapsed, still no one. Then fifteen minutes, then twenty, then twenty-five, and Lanphier was still alone. Finally, at 12:30 the first person appeared, then another and another until six people were present and the prayer meeting began. The next Wednesday there were 40.

In the first week of October a decision was made to hold the prayer meetings daily instead of weekly. Within six months, ten thousand businessmen were gathering daily for prayer in New York, and within two years, a million converts were added to the American churches. One of the greatest revivals in New York's history swept through the city. "There was no fanaticism, no hysteria, simply an incredible movement of the people to pray (J. Edwin Orr)."

The church today needs prayer. Prayer is a non-negotiable. If you are a Christian, you need prayer, for prayer is one of the basics of the Christian life. As we continue our series on "Back to the Basics," we turn our attention to prayer.

In His Word, God speaks to us, and in prayer, we speak to God. But is that all there is to prayer? What should we say when we pray? How do you talk to Someone you can't see?

***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.

¹account in *Desiring God*, by John Piper, pp. 153ff.

The Bible has so much to say about prayer, and we could turn to many places to learn about this basic. We could turn to the psalms, for the psalms are full of real-life prayers that can serve as guardrails to guide us in our approach to God's throne. Or we could make our way to some of the recorded prayers of the great saints in the Bible, such as Nehemiah's prayer (in Neh 1), Daniel's prayer (Dan 9), Solomon's prayer (2 Chron 6), or one of Paul's prayers (Eph 1; Col 1). Then again, we could turn in the Bible to one of the many instruction sections dealing with the topic of prayer, such as James 5, Ephesians 6, or Hebrews 4.

Certainly, any of the above would help us greatly, but in order to go back to the basics on prayer, I can think of no better place to turn than to the words of the Master! In Matthew 6, Jesus Himself addressed the subject of prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, with teaching so essential for us that we will devote the next two weeks to its study.

Proposition: What do we learn about prayer from Jesus? In Matthew 6:5-15, the Lord teaches us about two aspects of prayer.

I. We learn *how* to pray (5-8).

A. Beware of your motive in prayer (5-6).

1. Don't try to impress people (5).
2. Do view prayer as a family matter (6).
 - God is our Father.
 - God is unseen.
 - God rewards.

B. Beware of your mentality in prayer (7-8).

1. Don't babble (7).
 - Error #1: More is better.
 - Error #2: The right words produce the right outcome.
2. Do pray biblically (8).
 - Prayer involves thinking.
 - Prayer involves trusting.

II. We learn *what* to pray (9-15). [next week]

Implications: We must make two choices...

1. We must choose to *pray*.
2. We must choose to pray *biblically*.

I. We learn *how* to pray (5-8).

The setting begins in verse 1, "Take heed that you do not do your acts of righteousness before men to be seen by them; otherwise you have no reward of your Father who is in heaven." What is true spirituality? 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 showboats in Jesus' kingdom, specifically when it comes to three 'acts of righteousness' spelled out by the Lord in the first half of 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? Is it to stop giving, stop praying, and stop fasting? No! According to Jesus, the solution is that we need to learn to give rightly, pray rightly, and fast rightly as disciples if we're to please God. Since our immediate concern is prayer, we want to examine verses 5-8 where Jesus teaches us how to pray, and offers two warnings.

A. Beware of your motive in prayer (5-6). "And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and at the

corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward."

Jesus begins, "And when *thou* prayest." 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, in verses 5-8, He gave them two guidelines relating to motive in prayer.

1. *Don't try to impress people (5)*. "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites." 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 were the "they" that Jesus had in mind? 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 their pride. The Pharisees' pride showed up in two places, according to Jesus, at the synagogue and on the street corner, two places where they loved to pray in public.

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. Guess what some Pharisees did? They timed it

perfectly so that at 3:00 they just "happened" to be, not in the seclusion of their home, but on the downtown street corner! And there they prayed, for all to see.

Is Jesus saying that 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--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 was the problem then?

Motive. What motive did Jesus confront in verse 5? The motive of those who prayed "*that they may be seen by men.*" We can be guilty in other subtle ways. For example in conversation we can casually say, "When I was praying in my devotions this morning..." or, "Last night I had a great time in prayer..." We can use our private devotional life to make us sound "spiritual" in public. "I haven't missed my quiet time in 6 months!"

Beware of trying to impress people when you pray. Is it possible to dazzle people with public prayer? It sure is. "My, what a beautiful prayer! He sure is spiritual." Do you know what a hypocrite gets when he prays? Exactly what he aims for, the applause of people, but no more. Jesus said, "Verily I say unto you they have their reward."

I can pray a prayer that connects with you but short-circuits with God. The issue isn't content, but motive. The Pharisees had truth, and even prayed true prayers. When you pray publicly, do you worry about what people think? By the way, you can *not* pray in public and be guilty of the same sin. If the reason you refuse to pray in church is because you are worried about how your prayer will sound to people, are you any different than the Pharisees? Jesus tells us don't use prayer as a way to impress people. Conversely...

2. *Do view prayer as a family matter (6).* "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

We need to view prayer as a family matter. What does that mean? It has to do with our concept of God when we pray. We need three perspectives.

- God is our Father. Jesus said (6), "Pray to your *Father.*" Jesus revitalized prayer in Matthew 6. He didn't limit prayer to specific times as did the Jews. And He didn't tell His disciples to use conventional prayer terms. He taught us to view prayer as a conversation between children and a Father.

In his excellent book, *Desiring God*, John Piper offers an excellent chapter on prayer in which he poses the following (pp. 146-7), "The difference between Uncle Sam and Jesus Christ is that Uncle Sam won't enlist you in his service unless you are healthy, and Jesus Christ won't enlist you unless you are sick. 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners' (Mark 2:17). Christianity is fundamentally convalescence ('Pray without ceasing' = Keep buzzing the nurse)."

When we pray, we're not talking to men, but to a *Father*. We'll learn more about what that means next week, but allow me to say this now. When I was in seminary, I remember listening to the prayers of a young man named Dale. We were in a church that had more than a dozen professors with Master of Divinity degrees who were much older than Dale. That didn't seem to intimidate Dale. When he prayed aloud in prayer, he prayed with simplicity and authority. Do you why? Because he wasn't talking to those men with M.Div. degrees. He was talking to his Father!

•God is unseen. Jesus instructed, "Pray to your Father who is in *secret*." 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 anyway. Jesus used a word which probably refers to the supply-room in a typical Jewish home. "Go to your storage room and pray." The supply room 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 (Bruner, 234). 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.

Jesus instituted a radical change for God's people. It's no longer the Holy of Holies that's the special meeting place between the believer and God. It's the room with a lock.

Do you have a private place where you get alone with God and pray? You may object, "But with small kids, my house is like a zoo!" I doubt if it's any more cramped than a typical first century Jewish home. We need to designate a place and time to be alone with God on a regular basis. Away from the TV, the radio, the newspaper, the "to do" list. Maybe we need to get up before the kids do, or stay up later. I know one person who goes to a cemetery to be alone with God! The point is, God is unseen.

•God rewards. 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."

Again, John Piper has written (p. 139), "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... A prayerless Christian is like having your room wallpapered with Sak's Fifth Avenue gift certificates but always shopping at Ragstock because you can't read."

My friend, we have an unseen Father who delights in rewarding His children! But when we pray to Him we must guard our motive. Jesus gives us a second warning.

B. Beware of your mentality in prayer (7-8). In teaching us how to pray, Jesus corrects two misconceptions 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. In His teaching, Jesus tells us both what *not* to do, followed by the positive.

1. *Don't babble (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." We're not to use vain repetition when we pray. Deiterick Bonhoeffer calls that "empty noise."

Jesus isn't condemning length and repetition in prayer, for sometimes He Himself prayed long prayers and used repetition. What's He attacking then? Two common errors.

•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!

We sometimes buy into the notion that more is better when we think that long prayers are better. The NEB puts verse 7 this way, "They imagine that the more they say, the

more likely they are to be heard!" What an incredible notion! What kind of a God is that? Jesus says, "Don't be like them. We don't believe in that kind of God."

•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 view the phrase "in Jesus' name, amen" as a good luck charm that has to be tacked 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. Frankly, Jesus never gave us the Lord's prayer so we could *recite* it, but so we could *pray* it. We mustn't view prayer as reciting magical, meaningless words.

2. *Do pray biblically (8)*. How do we do that? Realize prayer involves 2 things.

•Prayer involves thinking. Have you ever switched from driving a car with a standard transmission to one that has automatic transmission? Did you discover you had a tendency to hit the floorboard with your right foot in search of a clutch that wasn't there? Why did that happen? Driving had become a mindless routine, a routine which was interrupted now that the clutch was gone.

God is not pleased when we approach prayer as a mindless routine. You may be able to drive blindfolded (I wouldn't recommend it!), but you're in serious trouble if you engage in mindless prayer. Prayer involves thinking. In fact, Jesus forbids any kind of prayer with the mouth when the mind is not engaged (Stott). That applies to the use of the rosary, the practice of transcendental meditation, and the reciting of meaningless liturgy.

I knew a pastor who began a board meeting once by asking the men to take turns praying around the table, and when everyone had prayed he said to them, "Okay, let's go around the table and have everyone pray a second time." The pastor said it's interesting to listen to someone pray after they've used up their "pet" prayer.

•Prayer involves trusting. Listen to Jesus' words in verse 8, "Be not ye, therefore, like unto them; for your Father knows what things you have need of, before you ask Him." What a loaded sentence! 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."

When someone prays in church, "Dear Lord, please help Sam. He's at Scioto Memorial Hospital, 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.

My friends, God knows! Do we pray like we believe He knows?! We need to take prayer seriously. We have an audience with the One Who knows our needs! Since that's true, I wonder if it's honoring to God to use public prayer in a worship service as a time to move people around since people's eyes are closed. Prayer involves thinking and trusting. Jesus says our Father is concerned about *how* we pray. Next week, we'll explore Jesus' teaching concerning a second matter, addressed in verses 9-15, and learn *what* to pray.

Implications: We must make two choices...

1. *We must choose to pray*. Do you pray? Is prayer a vital part of your daily routine? Do you pray alone? Do you pray with your spouse and children? Pray is a non-negotiable basic, isn't it? Choose today to pray. If you don't pray, perhaps it's because

you don't know God in a personal sense. He's not your Father because He's not your Savior.

2. *We must choose to pray biblically.* We cannot come to God on our terms, but His. Have you been praying biblical prayers? Have you been praying with biblical motives?

New York City became a different place when Jeremiah Lanphier called on people to pray, and pray they did. Will you commit yourself to being a person of prayer?

Response:

If we are to experience the power of God in prayer, God must be real in our lives. Beloved, is the Lord real in your life? When you pray, do you know that He is listening? Do you desire for God's presence to be more real in your life? Do you want to see the presence of God manifest in this church? Then let's sing the following prayer and ask Him to open our eyes to His presence.

Hymn of Response: #383 "Open Our Eyes, Lord"

Let's bow our heads and hearts before the Living God, and spend time in prayer.

Time for Response in Prayer

Would you think about some things in light of what we've heard this morning from God's Word? Have you been trying to impress people with your spirituality recently? Confess that to the Lord. Choose today

Have you been abusing prayer in your life? Perhaps you've viewed it as a good luck charm, or just haven't prayed much at all. Confess that to our Heavenly Father.

Perhaps you would like to know how to have God as your Father. If you will repent of your sin today, and trust in His Son, Jesus Christ, you can become a member in God's family today!

The truth is, we not only need God this morning, but we need Him every moment, don't we? That's the truth the hymnwriter put into words for us so we could sing it as a prayer to God. Let's sing to the Lord this prayer of dependence.

Song of Commitment: #428 "I Need Thee Every Hour"