

October 15, 2023

## “The Pitfalls of Prayer” Matthew 6:5-8

FCF: Our motivations in prayer

**PROPOSITION:** (anchor) Christ calls His followers to pray.  
(magnet) But we must do so in the right way.

### SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Why do we do what we do – even the good things we do? The spiritual things? Why do we pray? Why would we spend time with God, giving praise and thanks, making confession and requests, taking time to sit in silence? Why pray? Here’s the setting. It’s a group meeting and it’s time for the group to pray together. Why would you join in? Perhaps as a response to God’s work and initiative in your life. Sure. But it could be you’re just parroting the things you’ve heard. Or perhaps you’re just posturing to impress the folks around you. Those are problems.

Have you ever considered the potential pitfalls of prayer? And what they might be?

**SCRIPTURE READING:** [Matthew 6:5-8](#)

### PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

### SERMON INTRODUCTION:

“The Apostle” is a 1997 film about a preacher, Sonny Dewey, played by Robert Duvall. He is anything but perfect. But he is transparent. Listen to this prayer from the film ([READ](#)):

Somebody, I say somebody has taken my wife; they’ve stolen my church! That’s the temple I built for you! I’m gonna yell at you ‘cause I’m mad at you! I can’t take it!  
Give me a sign or somethin’. Blow this pain out of me. Give it to me tonight, Lord God Jehovah. If you won’t give me back my wife, give me peace. Give it to me, give it to me, give it to me, give it to me. Give me peace. Give me peace.  
I don’t know who’s been foolin’ with me – you or the Devil. I don’t know. And I won’t even bring the human into this – he’s just a mutt – so I’m not gonna bring him into it. But I’m confused. I’m mad. I love you, Lord, but I’m mad at you. I am mad at you!  
So deliver me tonight, Lord. What should I do? No tell me. Should I lay hands on myself? What should I do? I know I’m a sinner and once in a while a womanizer, but I’m your servant! Ever since I was a little boy and you brought me back from the dead, I’m your servant! What should I do? Tell me. I’ve always called you Jesus; you’ve always called me Sonny. What should I do, Jesus? This is Sonny talkin’ now.

You might be uncomfortable with this. It seems so raw, so transparent, so vulnerable and honest. Sonny just says what’s on his heart. And I think a case could be made this is the way to pray.

We’re in Matthew’s Gospel, at the start of a short series on prayer. As you move from chapter five to chapter six, you see a shift from moral righteousness to religious righteousness, from acts and attitudes towards others to outward expressions of devotion to God. Jesus speaks to the three pillars of 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism – almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. And He gives us warnings about each of the three. Here’s the over-arching principle ([READ Matthew 6:1](#)).

From there, Jesus speaks of almsgiving, giving to the poor. He then shifts to the subject of prayer. Jesus calls His followers to pray. But we must do so in the right way. What does that mean? To get at that, we’ll look at three things. First, the assumptions behind the instruction. Second, the problem with hypocritical prayer. And then, third, the problem with pagan prayer.

## I. THE ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND THE INSTRUCTION

So, first, the assumptions behind this instruction. What’s the foundation underneath?

### A) *Historical Practice*

We need to understand that prayer is something with deep roots in Judaism.

### 1. Essential

It was one of the three pillars in Jewish piety. In the Old Testament, we see examples of both corporate and private prayer. In Jesus' day, there were calls to prayer from the synagogue and temple – in the morning, afternoon, and evening. And other times as well – public and private.

### 2. Rationale

The rationale being that God is a relational God. We are made in His image for relationship with Him. So, even though the Fall damaged our prayer antennae, we are still hard-wired for this.

#### *B) Continued Practice*

With that as the backdrop, what then will Jesus say on the topic of prayer?

### 1. Essential

Jesus makes clear that prayer is still essential. He not only teaches this but models it as well. Think of that. The eternal Son of God, now in the flesh, the God-man, prays. And continually.

### 2. Rationale

Why? There is no distance between Him and the Father. As the Son, Jesus is gladly submissive to and dependent upon the Father. So He prays. And He presses His followers to do the same.

That then is the assumption behind the instruction. We are called to pray.

#### *Application:*

It really should come as no surprise that strong Christians pray more. What may surprise you is why. The reason strong Christians pray more is that they realize how weak they are. They grasp what Jesus means when He says we're to become as children. The more mature you are in your faith, the more you see your need for God and His grace in every area of your life.

Now there is a sobering flipside to this. And that is that immature Christians pray less. And they pray less because they don't see their need, their spiritual poverty. And that comes out in all sorts of ways. But especially in a lifestyle marked by self-dependent prayerlessness.

Jesus calls us to pray. That's basic and essential. But we must do so in the right way.

## **II. THE PROBLEM WITH HYPOCRITICAL PRAYER**

Which brings us to the problem with hypocritical prayer (**READ Matthew 6:5-6**).

#### *A) The Explanation*

So what's going on here with this hypocritical approach to prayer?

### 1. Reason

Behind it lies who these folks are – hypocrites. Literally, play actors who wear masks and pretend. They do so to be seen and noticed, to be admired and praised for their performance.

### 2. Approach

How does that play out? Jesus gives two examples. First, in the formal setting of the synagogue. The custom was for someone to stand up front. It was seen as an honor. And it was fertile ground for the temptation to sound elegant, to use lofty expressions, to try and impress people.

That's the first example. The second is the street corner. Three times a day, there were calls to prayer. The temptation was to time your walks in public spaces so you could be seen praying.

Now, please note this. Jesus is not saying it's wrong to pray and to be seen. He's saying it's wrong to pray in order to be seen. Clearly, Jesus prayed publicly. As did the early church.

### 3. Result

So that's the reason and the approach of such prayer. The result? You'll get just what you asked for – the praise of other people. And no more. God is deaf to prayers that are blind to Him.

#### *B) The Alternative*

What then is the alternative way of prayer Jesus speaks of? It is the secret way.

### 1. Reason

The reason is tied to who is praying. This would be a disciple of Jesus, walking in His ways. This would be a child wanting to please His heavenly Father, resting secure already in His love.

### 2. Approach

So, with that in mind, go into your room and shut the door. This is a reference to the storage room of a typical home at the time. It was a private place, likely the only room with a door. You seek conversation with God. So then go to a secluded place, away from all the distractions.

### 3. Result

The result? A completely different kind of reward - soul's refreshing, satisfaction, and assurance. This is the sort of reward our heavenly Father will give – not out of our merit but of His mercy.

This is how we need to think about the contrast between true and hypocritical prayer.

#### *Application:*

How do we apply this? For public prayer, this speaks to family worship, community groups, Sunday morning, special events, or times of thanks before a meal. To gather with others to pray is a good thing. But we must guard against twisting such a privilege into a performance.

That's the first thing. But this has application to private prayer as well. We are to come as we are, as children do. With trusting hearts. Without masks or pretense but with snotty noses and dirty fingers and skinned knees. We are to come as we are and to say what's on our hearts.

Again, Christ calls His followers to pray. But we must do so in the right way.

## **III. THE PROBLEM WITH PAGAN PRAYER**

But there is another temptation here. Prayer is a universal impulse – not just for the Jew, for the church person, but for the Gentile. So Jesus speaks to this (**READ Matthew 6:7-8**).

#### *A) The Explanation*

So what's going on here with the Gentile, the pagan approach to prayer?

### 1. Reason

Behind it are certain beliefs about God. That is, that He can be manipulated. Such prayer was driven by the idea that God needs to be awakened, managed, badgered, and pressured into acting.

## 2. Approach

So names and titles were piled up with the hope that the “many words” would get His attention. Great effort was put into reminding Him of past favors and sacrifices. And what was owed.

### B) *The Alternative*

Clearly, Jesus is speaking against this. What then is the alternative way of prayer?

#### 1. Reason

Here too, it begins with our beliefs about God – true ones. He cannot be manipulated. He is not ignorant, needing our instruction. He is not hesitant, needing our persuasion. He is our Father.

#### 2. Approach

And so Jesus says, “*Do not be like them.*” But note that Jesus is not saying all repetition or all perseverance in prayer is wrong. He modeled and called for that Himself. What He is saying is we are not to come with all words and no heart, with little more than a meaningless script.

This is how we need to think about the contrast between true and pagan prayer.

#### *Application:*

Our prayers must be sincere, not hypocritical. Yet also thoughtful, not mechanical. How can we apply this? There is a place for meditation. But it is not to take us into a trance. We are not to just repeat a creed or a liturgy without reflection. But note this. The very same could be said of much extemporaneous freeform prayer and how we can slide off into religious jargon.

But there’s something else. Our view of prayer is tied to our view of God. So let’s think about some of the things we say about prayer. “*Be careful what you pray for. You might get it.*” Friends, what does that say about our view of God? Prayer is not magic. And God is our Father.

Again, Christ calls His followers to pray. But we must do so in the right way.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Wondrous as it sounds, there is a relational aspect to prayer. We are in real communion with God when we pray. True communication is taking place. And that is fundamental to the whole discussion. In our Inklings Beyond group this past week, we discussed C. S. Lewis’ book, *The Magician’s Nephew*. Here’s the scene. Two children, Digory and Polly, have been sent by Aslan on a mission to retrieve an apple from a distant tree. To get there, they ride a winged horse named Fledge. Along the way, they stop for the night. Here is some of the dialogue ([READ](#)):

“I am hungry,” said Digory.

“Well, tuck in,” said Fledge, taking a big mouthful of grass. Then he raised his head, still chewing and with bits of grass sticking out on each side of his mouth like whiskers, and said, “Come on, you two. Don’t be shy. There’s plenty for us all.”

“But we can’t eat grass,” said Digory.

“H’m, h’m,” said Fledge, speaking with his mouth full. “Well — h’m — don’t know quite what you’ll do then. Very good grass too.”

Polly and Digory stared at one another in dismay.

“Well, I do think someone might have arranged about our meals,” said Digory.

“I’m sure Aslan would have, if you’d asked him,” said Fledge.

“Wouldn’t he know without being asked?” said Polly.

“I’ve no doubt he would,” said the Horse (still with his mouth full). “But I’ve a sort of idea he likes to be asked.”

Why does God want us to pray? Why not just skip that and get to the fix? Prayer is relational. Coming to Him with our needs opens a pathway to our greatest need - communion with Him. It reminds us and reawakens in us a sense of dependence, an abiding like a branch to a vine.

Jesus is our need. And He wants us to pray. But we must do so in the right way.

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