April 24, 2016

“The Heart 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 the things we do – even the good things we do? We talked about giving to others last week. What about prayer? Why do we pray? Why would we spend time with God, giving praise and thanks, making confession and requests? Here’s the setting. It’s a community 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.

Why do we do the things we do – including prayer? Jesus calls us to examine our hearts.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 6:5-8

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

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

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 a 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. He 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, studying the Sermon on the Mount. As we move from chapter five to chapter six, we 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 1st 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).

Last week, we looked at almsgiving. Today, we’re looking at prayer. And what is the theme? Christ 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.

1. **THE ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND THE INSTRUCTION**

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

1. *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.

1. 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.

1. *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 it but models it as well. Think of that. The eternal Son of God, now in the flesh, the God-man, prays. And continually.

1. 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 prayed. And He pressed 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.

1. **THE PROBLEM WITH HYPOCRITICAL PRAYER**

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

1. *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.

1. 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, He prayed publicly. As did the early church.

1. 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 blind to prayers that are blind to Him.

1. *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, secure already in His love.

1. 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.

1. Result

The result? A completely different kind of reward. As John Stott describes it (READ quote):

…we are granted a strong assurance of his fatherhood and love. He lifts the light of his face upon us and gives us his peace. He refreshes our soul, satisfies our hunger, quenches our thirst. We know we are no longer orphans for the Father has adopted us; no longer prodigals for we have been forgiven; no longer alienated, for we have come home.

This is the sort of reward our heavenly Father will give – not out of our merit but of His mercy.

*Illustration:*

Think of the expression “to put on airs”. To “put on airs” has nothing to do with the stuff we breathe. It’s from the French word “air”, referring to our “look, appearance, or bearing.” It means to act as if you’re better than other people. Acting like you know more than your teacher in the classroom, your doctor, or the policeman who has pulled you over. It’s not recommended.

*Application:*

How do we apply this? For public prayer, this speaks to family worship, community groups, Sunday morning, and events like the National Day of Prayer. 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. 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.

1. **THE PROBLEM WITH PAGAN PRAYER**

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

1. *The Explanation*

So what’s going on here with 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.

1. 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.

1. *The Alternative*

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

1. Reason

Here too, it is begins with 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.

1. Approach

And so Jesus says, “*Do not pray like them*.” But note that Jesus is not saying all repetition or 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.

*Illustration:*

Sarah and I celebrated our wedding anniversary last week. Over the years, I’ve made mistakes but learned a few things. One would be this. Yes, there are times I need to prepare what I’m going to say. But that’s not the norm. What she wants is just to hear me, how I am.

*Application:*

Our prayers must be sincere, not hypocritical. And yet also thoughtful, not mechanical. How do we apply this? There is an appropriate place for meditation in prayer. But it is not to take us into a trance. We are not to just repeat a creed, a liturgy, or a song without reflection. But the same could be said of much freeform prayer and how we can slip 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*.” 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:**

I’ve been rereading Paul Miller’s The Praying Life. Let me read you this (READ quote):

Let’s imagine that you see a prayer therapist to get your prayer life straightened out. The therapist says, “Let’s begin by looking at your relationship with your heavenly Father…What does it mean that you are a son or daughter of God?”

You reply that it means you have complete access to your heavenly Father through Jesus. You have true intimacy, based not on how good you are but on the goodness of Jesus. Not only that, Jesus is your brother. You are a fellow heir with him.

The therapist smiles and says, “That is right. You’ve done a wonderful job of describing the *doctrine* of Sonship. Now tell me what it is like for you to be with your Father? What is it like to talk with him?”

You cautiously tell your therapist how difficult it is to be in your Father’s presence, even for a couple of minutes. Your mind wanders. You aren’t even sure what to say. You wonder, *Does prayer make any difference? Is God even there?* Then you feel guilty for your doubts and just give up.

Your therapist tells you what you already suspect. “Your relationship with your heavenly Father is dysfunctional. You talk as if you have an intimate relationship, but you don’t. Theoretically, it is close. Practically, it is distant. You need help.”

Really, that diagnosis is true for no few of us. And it’s well worth our facing that.

So, what’s the solution to the temptation towards hypocritical or pagan praying? Just like we said last week, the answer is not to just stop praying altogether – privately or publicly. That will do more harm than good. The solution is to learn to pray in the right way – what that looks like and how it comes about. Again, like we said last week, we need to keep our eyes on Jesus.

You see, we can truly rest assured (in the literal meaning of that phrase) that just as surely as Jesus calls us to pray and to do so in the right way, He also promises to help us. Remember that the One speaking these words is fully God and fully man. He knows these temptations well. He knows us well. And He stands ready to help. We simply have to know our need.

We don’t have to be stuck in our hypocritical and pagan tendencies. We can grow in our prayer lives. And He – better than any therapist but as our great and good King – will help us.

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