

The Foundation of Prayer ▪ Matthew 6:5-8

Ryan Perz ▪ February 13, 2022

Intro: We all have moments when we are at our best. If you are a morning person, you may be at your best after at the break of dawn, as the coffee aroma is still fresh. Or if you are a night owl, you are at your best when everyone else is in bed. Maybe you are at your best when the sun is fully shining.

Martyn Lloyd Jones made this comment: “Man is never greater than when he is in communion and contact with God.”

Since prayer is such a vital part of our spiritual lives—it’s worth slowing down and taking two weeks.

This week we are looking at the *Foundation*; next week we will look at the *Framework* that Jesus gives disciples on how to pray.

For Example:

D.A. Carson has pointed out that we primarily learn how to pray in 2 ways. (Taken from the intro of *Spiritual Reformation*).

One is from the teaching of scripture. As we become more familiar with the prayers in the Bible, hopefully we learn how to pray more biblically.

Second, we learn to pray by example. We end up praying like the people we hear pray or pray with. Whether it’s our parents, believing friends or leaders in the church.

- And that was certainly true in Jesus’s day. There were some rotten examples. Let’s recall that this comes as part of the warning Jesus gives. (6:1)

So as we look at the foundation, the first things to beware of is where there are cracks in the foundation.

FRACTURES IN PRAYER

Prayer hypocrisy (v5)

Here, a very similar issue is taken up that we saw with charitable giving and fasting—it can be done merely to show off one’s spirituality.

In Jewish culture, the synagogue was the most public place of prayer. There were also 3 set times a day to pray (morning, mid-day, and evening); so you could catch someone potentially stopping on a street corner to pray

But this is an obvious fracture in the true prayer the Lord wants from us.

The first fracture is this: self-interest. Prayer becomes a means of self-interest, or self-promotion.

Now I don’t think this means we avoid all public praying. But we do need to check our motives for self-interest when we pray publicly.

If we think that our prayers need to sound like they come straight from the *Valley of Vision*.

Or that adding big words which we only find in theology textbooks will make us sound more “Biblical”—that’s a fracture and we’ve received our reward.

Pagan idolatry (v7)

The example Jesus gives here is the Gentiles.

“Heap up empty phrases” and being heard “for many words” can be illustrated well in the prophets of Baal:

1 Kings 18:26 ESV

And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made.

- The cultural practice in the Greco-Roman world was to call out to numerous “gods” hoping to get the attention of one. Sometimes real words were not even used—but nonsense syllables.....which is just plain nonsense really.
- This pagan prayer was also an attempt to manipulate the god to get the answer they wanted.

This fracture of pagan prayer can go by another name: pragmatism. Pagan prayer is pragmatic, programmatic.

And the frightening thing is—we as Americans usually like that. We don’t like things that are slow and seem inefficient.

Last month ATT&T came through our neighborhood laying fiberoptic cable. After hitting the water line in 3 different places, it was an apparent success.

- It’s also a reminder that the world we live in is always moving faster, more efficient, more on demand.
- › If we expect prayer to work like that, it’s nothing more than the same pagan idolatry that people gave into.

I think sometimes why we don’t stick to prayer enough is we just want to see the fruit.

- › Yet how often do we hear in the Psalms— *“wait on the Lord.”*

Now if I said, “you pray like a pagan—you pray like a Wiccan”. Most would be highly offended. But that is exactly what Jesus does here?

Pagan prayer is pragmatic; there is no real dependency, no real trust....and certainly no relationship with God.

So the main fractures of prayer all involve self, and self-interest.

James 4:3 ESV

You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

How dark our hearts can be.....that we can turn something so good and twist it into something of self.

When we ask the Lord for forgiveness, we should also ask him to forgive us for fractures in our praying—when prayer has become more self-interested than actual interest in God.

THE FOUNDATION OF PRAYER

The first thing that may seem obvious is that Jesus assumed that disciples pray.

Matthew Henry: “You may as soon find a living man that does not breathe, as a living Christian who does not pray.”

In other words, prayer is as essential to our life as breathing.

When it comes to the foundation, there are two “walls” to stay with the metaphor. One wall is practical—what we actually do.

Last year I took part in a pastor’s cohort that had an exclusive emphasis on prayer. One pastor who was connected to that ministry shared his own experience about getting really fired up about prayer—and had the godly resolve to devote an entire year of sermons to prayer. He preached to his congregation about the importance of prayer, Sunday after Sunday, for an entire year.

Guess what happened after that year. Revival broke out? Masses came to faith and were sent on mission?

No— this pastor stated he could not discern that the year’s worth of sermons moved the needle much in the church’s culture of prayer.

Why? It became *just* listening, which is never enough

(Jas. 1:22)

So the first foundational wall is practical.

Give priority to private prayer. (v6)

Hypocrites rarely pray in private; that's the point that Jesus is making. So he encourages a prayer life that is *largely unseen*—hidden in the “prayer closet”.

Now we need to keep in mind that the people Jesus was speaking to had homes where their average home did not look like ours.

They were not looking at 2-3 thousand square feet, and trying to pick from a half dozen wardrobe closets. The average home in Galilee at the time of Jesus had one, maybe two rooms.

—The technical term used here is for a storage room that was found in a farmhouse.

- In principle, find a secluded place where your prayer can be hidden.

Another takeaway is that praying happens when we intentionally take time to pray.

Set time, set place, quiet, solitude, no distraction.

If we are not intentional and deliberate, prayer will not happen.

You may say—my closet is not big enough. Too many clothes in it; using it for a baby's pack and play.

I get it—with 6 people, and several furry other creatures in our home...we push our square footage to the max. I have a desk in a room that has the washer and dryer right behind me.

Ok—so maybe no “closest”.

Let's look at the prayer life of Jesus.

First, he found the place.

Matthew 14:23 ESV

And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,

Second, Jesus set the time.

Mark 1:35 ESV

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.

Third, Jesus made it a habit/rhythm.

Luke 5:16 CSB

Yet he often withdrew to deserted places and prayed.

At the risk of it sounding overly simplistic and reductionistic—this is how prayer will practically happen. Find the place, schedule the time, and stick to it.

That is the practical foundation.

The second foundational wall is doctrinal.

As Jesus gets at the heart of laying the true foundation of prayer, he draws our attention to two things that motivate right prayer.

1) Your Father sees (6b)

He is the all-seeing God. In theology, it falls under his omnipresence—His eyes are everywhere!

He sees every time we bow our head, knees, or close our eyes—cry out in Joy or Pain.

2) Your Father knows (v8)

The most amazing, staggering part of this is found in this verse.

He is the all-Knowing God! In theology, this falls under God's omniscience.

A staggering thing is said about God and his responsiveness to his people

Isaiah 65:24 ESV

Before they call I will answer;
while they are yet speaking I will hear.

This can only be true with an all-seeing, All-Knowing God who acts for his people out of his love.

Apply: So maybe the starting question in my prayer life should be: "is my vision of God big enough?"

Do I actually believe (by faith) that the God, who created the billions of galaxies, actually cares, condescends, stoops in divine humility to hear.

Conclusion—

So then, why does God command prayer? If God sees all, and knows all, why spend the energy on prayer?

"Man is at his best when he is in communion and contact with God." (Lloyd-Jones)

- › God wants us to be at our best

Prayer is communion. Prayer is fellowship. That's the heart of true prayer.

So if your prayer life has lost the edge; if your prayer life is not at all where it needs to be, consider what the heart of your Father is: to commune with him.

So God commands us to pray—essentially so we can be at our best.

Do you want to be at your best? Then in sincerity, "draw near to God."