

The Proper Purpose & Practice of Prayer
Matthew 6:5-8

Introduction

Prayer is a very basic activity of people. Those who are spiritual will purposely seek out God through prayer, but even people who are not religious or may even claim that they do not believe God exists will call out to Him when they are in trouble. Prayer is very elementary in its essence for its most simple definition is “talking to God.” Yet prayer is also one of the most complex subjects that can be discussed. Think about it.

How can a human talk with the creator of the universe?

How does an insignificant human address the creator of the universe?

How can God hear all those prayers at once?

How does prayer work?

God is sovereign and does not change, yet prayer somehow moves Him to do things differently?

How does God know what to do?

One farmer prays for rain because his crops are getting dry, and another farmer prays for a sunny day because he just cut his field of hay and rain would ruin his crop.

How come some prayers are answered quickly, others after a long delay, and some get a “pocket veto.”

Why are some people so good at praying and others not?

What is a good prayer?

What should we pray for?

As children we were taught to repeat simple prayers. Things like: “Now I lay me down to sleep, I Pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. (I have always wondered how interjecting the idea that the child might die that night is supposed to be help them sleep).

We learn other prayer habits as children too. We say a blessing before eating: “*God is great, God is good. Now we thank Him for this food*” Or as reported in a Boy Scout Troop where hunger preceded thought, “*God is good, God is great, We now thank Him for the food we ate*”

What is proper prayer? How should we come to God? What should we pray for? Those are questions that we will be looking into over the next few weeks as we examine Jesus’ teaching on prayer in Matthew 6:5-15. Let’s quickly review the background for this passage so that we make sure we will understand Jesus’ teaching in its proper context.

BACKGROUND:

Religious people, especially those from liturgical backgrounds, are usually much more concerned with action than motivation. It is much more important to them to do what they believe is the right thing to do than the reason is should be done. Their understanding of righteousness is defined by the religious rituals and duties they perform with the actual motivations for those things being irrelevant or secondary at best. We have already seen this in the lives of the scribes and Pharisees as we have been studying Jesus’ correction of their teaching and practices in the Sermon on the Mount.

The scribes thought they were righteous because they kept the Mosaic Law according to their interpretation of it. They were blind to the fact that they often either greatly distorted what God commanded through Moses or missed the meaning and purpose of His commands. For example, they took the command concerning punishment for injuries in Leviticus 24 of “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” as a requirement to seek revenge instead of a restriction on it. They carried this so far that

they taught that you were to hate your enemy even though that was in contradiction to God's command concerning loving your neighbor. Jesus corrected them on both of these issues as well as what they taught about murder, adultery, divorce and vows.

In the section of the Sermon on the Mount we are now examining, Jesus corrects the Pharisees concerning their practice of giving alms, prayer and fasting. The Pharisees thought they were righteous because they did these righteous deeds. Jesus made it clear that in God's eyes, the motivation is more important than the deed. Jesus stated this principle as a warning in Matthew 6:1, *Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.*

We saw the first example of this a couple of weeks ago in our study of Matthew 6:2-4 in which Jesus teaches the proper practice of giving alms. Perhaps the Pharisees may have felt some sorrow for the poor, but the harsh reality is that they did not give out of compassion to help those with real needs. They gave to feed their self righteous pride which is why they called attention to themselves when they gave alms. They wanted to make sure that others took notice of what they were doing for they wanted to be honored by men. Jesus said that because of that they had their reward in full. They would not receive anything from God.

Jesus begins to teach His disciples about proper prayer starting in verse 5. This passage has two distinct sections. In verses 5-8 Jesus addresses the proper purpose and practice of prayer. In verses 9-13, a section often referred to as "The Lord's Prayer," Jesus teaches the proper pattern of prayer. He gave them a model they could follow. We will only be looking at the first section this morning.

The Proper Purpose of Prayer

In verses 5-6, Jesus warns His disciples to not follow the example of the Pharisees. *"And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you."*

The hypocritical Jewish religious leaders pretended to be something they were not. That is what a hypocrite does. They act out a part to give an impression that is not true of them in reality. These religious leaders wanted to give the appearance by their prayers that they were close to God, but the truth was that they did not really care what God thought of them. What was important to them was what the people thought.

In a warning to His disciples about the scribes hypocritical piety, Jesus said this of them in Luke 20:46-47, *"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets, 47 who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation."*

The scribes and Pharisees made it their practice to pray in such a way as to be seen by men because they wanted the people to think they were pious and close to God. They went into the temple and into the synagogues and made a show out of their prayers. They would stand before all the people, lift up their hands and speak very loudly. In the streets they would stop on the corners and do the same thing. They would make a show of their prayers to call attention to themselves with the goal of impressing others about their supposed piety. Jesus states here that their prayers went only as far as the sound of their voice. They did not reach God because they were not meant for God.

An example of this is seen in Luke 18:9-14 where Jesus gives a parable contrasting the prayer of a self righteous Pharisee with that of a penitent sinner. *"And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. 11 "The Pharisee stood and was*

praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. 12 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'"

Take note of what it says in verse 11 that this Pharisee *"prayed thus to himself."* I do not get the sense that this man was praying in silence. He may have mentioned God at the start of the prayer, but everything in it was about himself. His prayer was not directed to God in true thanksgiving, but to himself in pride. *"The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself."* He would have been more honest if he had begun his prayer, "self" instead of "God," and then continued in his boasting.

The tax-gatherer is quite a contrast. 13 *"But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'"* 14 *"I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted."*

This man was truly speaking to God and it is demonstrated in the humility of the prayer. It is a cry of confession and a plea for mercy. God granted this man's request.

There are plenty of people around today that are like the Pharisees. They pray only when someone else can take note of their show of piety. This can be very subtle.

Martin Lloyd-Jones tells about a supposedly very pious man who liked to demonstrate his godliness in that when walking down a hallway he would suddenly drop to his knees and pray. Lloyd-Jones wondered if that was necessarily honoring to God. Could he not have just as well prayed to God in secret while walking rather than calling attention to himself by his physical demonstrations?

I have to be frank, this is one of my concerns about the behavior of some "Christian activists." Yes, public prayer is proper if it is truly directed to God. But I wonder if this is what is happening when people get down on their knees and clap their hands or lift them up and call out a prayer in front of a government building, movie house, pornography store or an abortion clinic. I am not saying that it is wrong to do these things, in fact, it is good to call attention to evil things that need to be corrected. However, great caution needs to be taken regarding the motivations for the practices. That is what Jesus is addressing here. What is the motivation behind the prayer? Is the manner and place of prayer for the purpose of being seen of men, or is it true petitions before God regardless if other people pay attention or not?

Jesus states in Matthew 6:6 *"But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you."* We are to pray to our heavenly Father in secret and let our reward come from Him instead of men.

Does this mean it is improper to pray in public or with other people? Not at all. Jesus prayed in public (John 11:41,42); the apostles prayed in public (Acts 3:1; 21:5); and the early church held prayer meetings (Acts 12:12). But this does mean that you must have the proper purpose in your prayer of talking with God and not a motive of trying to make an impression on the other people present.

Example: Your habit is to give thanks to God before you eat, which is a good practice according to 1 Thessalonians 5:18 and 1 Timothy 4:4-5. You go to a public place to eat such as a restaurant or the company lunch room. Do you pray before you eat or not? If it is your habit to pray when you are alone, then you should pray just as you do when you are alone. Do not call undue attention to yourself, but at the same time do not cease your godly activity for the fear of men. Remember, Daniel ignored the King's decree that prohibited prayer to anyone but the king. He just continued to do what he normally did. Daniel 6:10 states, *"Now when Daniel knew that the document was signed, he entered his house (now in his roof chamber he had windows open toward Jerusalem); and he continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God, as he had been doing previously."* Daniel did not make himself conspicuous, but neither did he hide. He simply continued to do what was his normal practice. We need to do the same including when we are in a public place such as a restaurant. However, if it is not your habit to give thanks for meals when you are alone, then it is hypocritical for you to do so just because you are now in public or with other people.

This same principle applies to church prayer meetings. Praying with other believers is a good and proper thing to do as demonstrated by the early church which Acts 2:42 records as devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Praying together allows others to join in our prayers, and we learn better how to pray by hearing others pray. But public prayer is built off of personal time spent with God. If the only time you pray is when you are praying with other believers in a group, then you are only fooling yourself because you are not fooling God.

Group prayer meetings are wonderful and important. We seek to have prayer as an important part of our worship services and include group prayer in our Bible studies. We gather monthly to specifically pray together for our missionaries on the second Sunday evening of each month. There is interest in starting a weekly meeting on Thursday evening specifically focused on praying. It would be great if everyone came out to these times of prayer, but in truth, the only people that should come are those who are serious about prayer. That does not mean you should not come unless you have your prayer life all together, but it does mean that it is your desire to have a good prayer life and to pray properly. We are all better off if those who just want to be heard by other people would stay home.

There is an emotional component to prayer that at times can be lacking or even contrary to the desire of the mind and will. Perhaps you may be experiencing what David Brainerd, that great missionary of the 1700's, called his "Dark Night of Soul." I have been there. Here was a man sold out to God. He was a "fool for Christ" in the modern vernacular. Yet, he felt that God was distant and his prayers were not getting past the ceiling of his room, but that did not stop him from continuing to pray!

Spend some time alone with God this afternoon. Start pouring over your schedule to see what has usurped the priority of prayer in your life and then do something to change it. Regain the proper purpose in praying which is simply to talk to God. We need not be nor should we be concerned what other people think of us one way or the other. Our concern is to be talking with God and what He thinks of us. Jesus advocates praying in secret in verse 6 so that there would be no temptation to impress other people and you can receive the Father's full reward. What a blessing to set aside a time of prayer in a secluded place. A place where you can pray without being interrupted. A place where you can pour out even the secret things of your heart.

Jesus' concern over prayer was not just the proper purpose. He was also concerned about the proper practice. If the motivation is wrong, then it is easy to fall into an incorrect practice of prayer. But even if our purpose in prayer is correct, we can still fall into the wrong practices of prayer.

The Proper Practice of Prayer

In verses 7-8, Jesus warns the people against an improper practice of prayer, "*And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him.*"

Because most of us learn our practice of prayer from others, it is not unusual to find very godly people that pray with sincerity and with proper motives that fall into this trap of an improper practice of prayer. There are two improper practices Jesus corrects here.

Many of you grew up in a Roman Catholic church or other church in which you were taught formal prayers of some type to say on particular occasions. Some of those formal prayers such as the "Hail, Mary" or "The Rosary" were worthless from the start since they are not directed to God to begin with. Others are actually very beautiful prayers composed with great thought that can be very helpful in bringing the things on your heart before God. But any prayer, regardless of how carefully it was composed, that is repeated so often that the mind is no longer engaged in what is being said, is worthless. People even do that with "the Lord's prayer" resulting in it becoming rote repetition rather than a pattern upon which they build their prayer. One ex-catholic fellow I knew in Seminary explained how Catholic confession worked. Since he had been a very active sinner in a strongly Catholic

family, he was well acquainted with the process. He would go into the booth, tell the priest what he had done, and the priest would tell him the particular things he would have to do in order to gain forgiveness for his sins. It was usually to say certain formal prayers so many times. He said that for his friends and him, the goal was to see how fast they could say all the words of the prayers. The prayers themselves became the meaningless repetition of words to satisfy the requirements of the priest. Perhaps some of you have done that yourself.

Least I be accused of picking on Catholics only, I will broaden this to everyone. How many of you repeat the same prayer before you eat a meal and you have done so for so long that you no longer have to think about what you are saying. I have been to many peoples homes were it was pretty obvious that "saying grace" before eating had degenerated into a formality rather than truly thanking God for what He had provided. Jesus warns us here against the practice of repeating prayers meaninglessly.

Jesus is also speaking against praying the same thing over and over and over again like God cannot hear you. Yes, we are to continue to persevere in prayer and may pray for the same request many times over a period of time, even years, such as in praying for the salvation of a loved one. However, we are not to spend hours at a time making the same request as if that will somehow get God's attention and wear Him down so that we will gain our request. Kids might get something from their parents that way, but that is the wrong way to treat God. That is the pagan idea of God. In 1 Kings 18 Elijah mocked the 450 priests of Baal and 400 priests of Asherah for this for they had done all sorts of things for hours trying to get the attention of their gods, but there was no answer. They became even more intense in trying to get the attention of their gods, but all to no avail. The true God hears before we even ask and will answer in His timing in His manner.

It is said of George Mueller of England that he began to pray for the salvation of 5 personal friends and that after 5 years, one of them came to Christ. After 10 years, two more came to Christ. After 25 years the 4th man came to Christ. George Mueller prayed for the salvation of the 5th man for rest of his life, a total of 52 years. The man came to Christ a few months after George Mueller's death. That is perseverance in prayer and it is an example for us to follow, but spending hours praying for the same things over and over again trying to get God to listen is not. We do not move God by producing an excessive amount of verbiage.

Years ago, when I was in California working in a singles ministry, I met a young lady that ended up having some confusion over this principle. Of course I think most of you would understand that within singles groups one of the major decisions of life is taking place - Who am I going to marry? That question can take on added emotion and urgency with some of the ladies as they approach 30 years old. There was one lady in the Bible study I was teaching that was in that situation in regards to a particular young man (now that I am 56, anyone in their 20's is young!). This woman was recognized by all for her godliness and was already a deaconess in the church. She was faithful in her devotional life. She took advantage of opportunities to witness to others about Christ. She was actively discipling other women and involved in church ministries.

She took the question of who she would marry very seriously and she set aside a day to take the matter before the Lord in prayer. This was all very commendable, yet she ended up with a problem. By the time she had prayed almost the whole day she was both exhausted and more confused than when she began. Why? She had not repeated some prayer formula all day. She had honestly bared her heart before God for many hours on end, but she had missed one important aspect of prayer which left her in confusion and anxiety rather than in the peace prayer should bring. She thought that she had to bring the matter to the Lord over and over and over and over again. The real problem was a lack of understanding of God's love for her and trusting him to take care of the matter she was praying about.

Our text says that the Gentiles used a lot of meaningless repetition supposing that in doing so God would hear them for their many words. But look at verse 8, "*Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him.*" Do you understand the personal interest that God has

in you? You do not need to keep going over and over something in order for God to pay attention to you. He knew your need before you even began to ask Him about it. The proper practice of prayer is to bring the matter before the Lord and leave the matter with Him. That is why prayer can bring us peace.

Paul said of prayer in Phil. 4:6-7, *“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* Peace comes because we can trust God for the matter. Isaiah 26:3-4 states, *“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee. 4 “Trust in the Lord forever, For in God the Lord, [we have] an everlasting Rock.*

We can trust God to hear our prayers and do what is best for us because He loves us. When His answer is a “no” or “wait,” then it is because He knows better than we do what would be good for us and His glory. We can trust Him. We can rest in His care.

Our confidence in God should be like that demonstrated by a little English boy that was watching over his family’s flock of sheep one Sunday morning. The bells were ringing for church and the people were going past the field where he was when the boy began to think that he too would like to pray to God. But what could he say? He had never been taught any prayers, so he knelt down and started to recite the alphabet. A man walking by on the other side of the hedge heard the lad's voice and peering through the bushes saw the little fellow kneeling with folded hands and closed eyes saying, “A, B, C. . .”. What are you doing there, my little man,” the gentleman said. “Please, sir, I was praying,” said the boy. “But what are you saying your letters for?” replied the man. “Why, I didn't know any prayer, only I felt that I wanted God to take care of me and help me to care for the sheep; so I thought if I said all I knew, he would put it together and spell all I want.”

We do not have to be long winded or eloquent to gain God's attention. As with this little boy, we do not even have to know how to pray other than coming to God with humble hearts seeking His will for our lives. God is so attentive to us that, as Jesus says here, He even knows our needs before we ask.

The proper purpose in prayer is communication with God and seeking Him. It is not about gaining recognition of men. The proper practice of prayer is bringing our needs to Him with simple faith that He knows our needs, hears our prayers and will provide for us. Neither eloquent speech nor being long winded will impress God in any way. God longs to hear the prayers of those who long to be righteous from the heart. Next week we will begin our examination of the Proper Pattern of Prayer.

Sermon Notes: The Proper Purpose & Practice of Prayer
July 20, 2014 - Matthew 6:5-8

Introduction

Prayer is simple since it is _____ with God, yet it is complex because it is talking with God

Background

Religious people are usually more concerned about _____ is done than why it is done

The Scribes thought they were righteous because they kept the Law according to _____ interpretation

The Pharisees thought they were righteous because _____ righteous deeds: alms, prayer, fasting

Matthew 6:1 - True righteousness is concerned about _____ as well as action

Alms given to gain honor from _____ only receive that reward

The Proper Purpose of Prayer - Matthew 6:5-6

Hypocrites pray to be seen of _____

Luke 20:46-47 _____

Luke 18:9-14 _____

The Pharisee, vs. 11, "*prayed thus to* _____ "

The publican, vs. 13, sought _____

What is the _____ behind the prayer?

Matthew 6:6 _____

Praying in _____ : John 11:41-42; Acts 3:1; 21:5; 12:12 _____

_____ your practice of prayer - Daniel 6:10 _____

_____ Prayer - Acts 2:42 _____

Pray to talk with _____ - without concern of who else may hear

The Proper Practice of Prayer - Matthew 6:7-8

No _____ prayers that lose meaning

No repetition as if God _____ you

_____ in prayer - George Mueller

Believe God and _____ Him to answer

Philippians 4:6-7 _____

Isaiah 26:3-4 _____

Conclusion

The Proper Purpose of Prayer is to talk with _____ without concern for what other people think

The Proper Practice of Prayer is to talk to God in simple _____ and then trust Him to answer

