

## Sermon 24, Covert and Genuine Prayer, Matthew 6:5-8

On prayer: Augustine's Letter to Proba, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102130.htm>

This if taken in its plain sense teaches the hearer to shun all desire of vain honour in praying.--Jerome

OT Reading: Psalm 91, "The Secret Place"

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**Proposition:** Don't pray like a hypocrite or a heathen; pray in secret, trusting your Father's bounty.

I have never seen any of you pray in an ostentatious fashion. No one in this church has tried to impress me with his or her piety. At least, if you have, you've done it so subtly that I haven't even noticed. And yet, the sin of ostentatious piety is the sin Jesus targets in our text this morning. He warns us especially against praying in a way calculated to draw attention to oneself. But He doesn't only warn; He also tells us what prayer is all about. Prayer is about going to talk to your Father. Prayer is an intimate conversation. And that's why we are looking at this text this

morning — not so that we can all be condemned as hypocrites, but so that we can learn to talk to our heavenly Father better. What I hope to show you is simply this: don't pray like a hypocrite or a heathen. Pray in secret, trusting your Father's bounty.

### **I. Hypocritical Prayer, v. 5**

Jesus begins by addressing hypocritical prayer. As we have seen over the last few weeks, hypocrisy is projecting a false version of yourself. A hypocrite tries to make everyone think he's so pious, when in actual fact he is nothing of the sort. Jesus takes this truth about the hypocrite and applies it to prayer. Believe it or not, you can pray and yet be sinning. How?

#### **A. Its Method: Ostentatiously Self-Advertising, v. 5b**

Well, when your prayer is for human adulation and not to bring you into contact with God. The warning here is that you can pray not only seeking the adulation of others, in the synagogues and in the streets — on the street corners and on TV, we would say today — but even seeking your own admiration. A prayer that is performed in front of anyone, even if you yourself are the only audience member, is at risk for falling into the sin Jesus describes here.

#### **B. Its Motive: Human Adulation, v. 5c**

Indeed, the point is not where you're praying so much as why. If you are praying to be admired, then your prayer is a sin. Imagine, if you will, that you're on a date with your wife at a fancy restaurant. You think to yourself, "Wow, she's being so sweet tonight! She is saying all kinds of things I like to hear." As you get happier and happier listening to her friendly prattle, how would you feel if you later found out that she was having an affair the whole time and that her kind words were actually directed to a concealed microphone that transmitted to her lover across town? Suddenly, the sweet words wouldn't seem so sweet. Suddenly, you would be enraged over the fact that she said so many kind things. Why? Because she didn't say them to you, but to her lover. Her words were nothing more than a fake performance designed to fool you into appreciating her.

Brothers and sisters, whenever you pray with an eye on the audience, you are guilty of doing that to God. You are guilty of using Him to glorify yourself, making Him the ostensible target of your prayer when in reality its purpose is not to communicate with Him but to impress other people.

It's easy to believe, even after a lot of hard experience, that working with holy things makes you holy. You can think that studying the Bible all day makes you a better person, or that prayer makes you godly. But prayer and Bible study and every other holy thing can be abused and have been abused. They can be pursued and are pursued by people so wicked it makes your brain hurt to think about them. You see, Jesus is saying that we are so wicked that even in the most holy things, even in the most serious obedience to God's commands, we can still be sinning dreadfully. You might think you're good because you're praying. The instant you think that, you start comforting yourself by how holy you must be, because surely you couldn't pray like this if you weren't such a holy person! Nonsense, says Jesus. Prayer is not a performance — not for yourself, and not for anyone else.

### **C. Its Reward: Vainglory, v. 5d**

After all, if you do it for yourself or for others (instead of doing it for God), your reward is transient praise. Others will be impressed with you for a brief time. You might be impressed with yourself for days or even weeks. But these kinds of impressions don't last. You'll know in your heart of hearts that you aren't really praying for God, but in order to feel good about yourself. Others, even if they're impressed by your "holiness," will do very little to back that impression up.

Imagine your favorite movie star showing up at your front door, tired and alone and saying, "I'm down on my luck and I just need a little help." You might help him out that one time. But imagine that he keeps coming back, day after day, asking you to support him and pay all his expenses. How long would he remain your favorite movie star? But that's the thing. The transient glory of this world won't translate into real concern. It won't translate into care and compassion over a lifetime. I won't do squat for you because you played so-and-so in that big blockbuster. In thirty years, no one will remember that big blockbuster.

So if you want vainglory, go for it. Pray to show off to me, or to your church family, or to yourself. But if you want a real reward — if you want someone who will care about you for a lifetime and beyond — then you'll need to learn to pray in a different way.

## **II. Real Prayer, v. 6**

### **A. Its Nature: A Posture of Dependence and Reliance Towards God**

What is prayer? "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies" (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 98). Boiled down into an even shorter form, we could say that prayer is simply an attitude, a posture, of dependence and reliance on God. Often that will take the form of expression in words. But the deepest prayers are made in "groanings too deep for words," as Paul says in Romans 8. Prayer is simply the acting out of trust in God. If you trust that God is who He says He is, then praying to Him is, for you, simply talking to Him based on what you know He's like. Prayer is talking to God, trustingly. It's not cussing Him out, or telling Him off. It's asking Him for help because you trust. It's a little girl crawling up into her Father's lap.

### **B. Its Necessity: "When," vv. 5a, 6a**

Notice, then, that Jesus assumes that all His disciples will pray. He says it twice, not "if you pray," but "when you pray." When you pray! Do you pray? How often? How much? Why? We won't get into most of those questions directly, but I invite you think about them. Could you say with a straight face, "When I pray, I . . ."? If not, you need to examine whether you are truly a disciple of the Lord Jesus. However, we will talk right now about *how* to pray.

### **C. Its Method: Giving God Your Undivided Attention, v. 6b-c**

How do you pray? Giving God your undivided attention. One way to do that is to hide in your closet. Another to go pray on a mountain all night, like Jesus did. Another way is to "close the door of your heart," particularly if you are in a crowded place (a theater, airplane, bus, etc.) and

focus on God deep inside. The point is that you pray by getting with God. Jesus isn't forbidding public prayer here; rather, He is teaching about private prayer. In the same way, this sermon is a sermon on private prayer. When you're going to pray privately, here's how you do it: you hide from observation, and you go right to the Father. You can have a "private conversation" at a restaurant, and you can pray privately in a crowd. But you can only do so if your attitude is a private attitude. Once again, you must not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. You must not pray in order to impress yourself with your own goodness.

#### **D. Its Recipient: The Father, v. 6d**

To whom should prayer be offered? Jesus specifically teaches about praying to the Father, both here and in the next few verses (the Lord's prayer). Is it wrong to pray to Jesus and the Holy Spirit? No. Just as Baptism is offered in the singular name of all three Persons, so any and every act of worship is appropriately directed all or any of the Three. But it is nonetheless most fitting that prayer be offered to the Father — and thus not to the crowd or to oneself. Don't offer "the finest prayer ever offered to a Boston congregation," as one newspaper reporter had it. This applies to the living and to the dead. Jesus doesn't say to pray to saints or angels, living or dead. Don't ask Peter and John and Mary to hear your prayer. Pray to your Father, who is in the secret place.

#### **E. Its Reward: The Father's Bounty, v. 4c**

And what will you receive? The Father's open reward. What is this reward? Ultimately, it is the reward of Himself. He will hear you. He might give you exactly what you ask for, in the exact way that you ask for it. He often does. Think of all the safe trips you've had, all your children who are walking with the Lord, all the times you've been provided with your daily bread and had your sins forgiven. But sometimes, He won't give you what you ask in the way that you for it. You might ask for the wrong thing, or ask for something He knows would not be best for you at this point. But let me ask you this: in an ideal world, what would be the point of talking to your spouse? Getting her to wash the car on her way home, right? Getting her to take the kids to lessons this week so you don't have to, right? Of course not. The point of talking to your spouse, in an ideal world, is not to get something out of her, but just to grow in intimacy with each other. Well, that's what prayer is about too. God's reward is that you will get to know Him better, and there is nothing more satisfying or interesting than you heavenly Father. "The soul of a landscape is a story, and the soul of a story is a personality," said Chesterton. The best experiences in the world are rather pointless if you have no one to share them with. Shared delight, among the three Persons of the Godhead, is at the heart of the universe. If you can't share your delight with God, then it is hardly even delight any more.

But the Bible promises plenty of other rewards — long life and prosperity. Heaven. Peace of conscience. Joy. Never being abandoned or alone. All of these things are things that God gives to His people. They are rewards from the Father's hand. It's not that they are "achieved" or earned by prayer. No. But nonetheless, prayer is the means God has determined to use. Prayer is

the instrumental appropriator of the promises of God. It's the shovel we use to dig up His buried promises, as Calvin said. So seek that reward!

### **III. Manipulative Prayer, v. 7**

The second error in prayer which Jesus addresses is the error of manipulation. You can pray for the sake of being admired; that's a sin, and it brings its own reward of vainglory. But manipulative prayer is just as wrong. What is manipulative prayer? Sadly, I would have to say that this kind of prayer appears to be rampant in American Christianity.

#### **A. Its Nature: Mind-Bypassing Ecstatic Utterance, v. 7a**

What is it? It is repetition, pure and simple. It is saying the same words over and over again. Jesus calls this "vain" or empty repetition. We could say that it is, by definition, words without thought. And as King Claudius says in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*,

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:  
Words without thoughts never to heaven go!

Vain repetition is further identified as the type of prayer engaged in by "Gentiles" — i.e., we would say, by heathens, by non-Christians, by people who have don't believe in the true and living God. They repeat themselves over and over.

What's the largest number of times that a single word is repeated back-to-back in Scripture? Three times. Holy, holy, holy! Why doesn't the Scripture repeat that word more often? Because too much repetition shuts down the brain. It becomes a way of bypassing thought and entering an altered state.

#### **1. An Attempt to Experience God**

But why do so many non-believers seek an altered state in their religion? That they do seek such a state is beyond doubt. Whether through drugs, alcohol, sexual experiences, thudding and repetitive music, or generally a combination of all four, to this day you can easily witness or even participate in such pagan rituals all over the world. Whether in nightclubs or at powwows or in Hindu temples, these four things are very frequently combined to induce a feeling of transcendence. I read about one person who got high on the drug ecstasy. He said the best way to describe the feeling is as if the entire world had just been transformed into a giant snuggie. Buddhists and some other ascetic sects often achieve similar results by repetitive chanting and sense deprivation, especially through hunger and lack of sleep.

Why do people do this? Because they want to experience God. Plug in and feel the divine surge through your veins! That's the promise of all of these kinds of religious experiences. Now, I want to be careful here. But I have to ask the question: do you see any parallels between this "vain repetition" of the Gentiles and some sectors of the contemporary Christian music scene? Can you think of any Christian songs that are so repetitive that they tend to shut the mind down rather than to engage it? Do some Christian bands seem to be seeking to create an altered state through their music? Do some Christian churches have an overpowering "worship" time where

through loud music and overwhelming repetition they succeed in shutting down worshipper's brains and getting them to just "feel"? One church near my parents' home in Windsor, Colorado, has written over every door into its building "Experience Jesus!" That, I want to suggest, is precisely the goal of these overpowering, mind-bending kinds of "worship experiences" that "worship bands" often create with "worship music." The worship of many sectors of contemporary American Christianity has been hijacked by the vain repetition of the Gentiles in a foolish attempt to capture and experience the divine.

Brothers and sisters, worship is not about "experiencing Jesus." It's about praising Jesus and knowing Jesus. What would you think if I said, "I absolutely love experiencing Alexa! When I feel her glorious femininity surging through my veins, my head pops and my eyes spin and my mind reels and it's groovy!"? I trust you would have the maturity to come to me after the service and say, "Uh, Caleb, Alexa is a person to be known and not an amusement park to ride to be experienced."

You can feel a force, but you can know a person. Jesus isn't a force; He's a person, and you worship Him by communing with Him and praising Him, not by experiencing Him. Don't fall into the heathen error of worshipping God with vain repetitions that give you an experience of the "divine."

## **2. An Attempt to Placate God**

Well, the other possible use of vain repetition is as an attempt to placate God. This, too can be seen in many of the world's religions, often as an activity complementary to experiencing the divine. In this variation, God or the gods are seen as offended or at least touchy. It is the worshipper's responsibility, then, to make them propitious. Many of the prayers that survive from the first century are in this vein, where multiple gods are named and described at length, then petitioned for favor and help. "Hallowed be thy name, whatever name you choose to go by!" as one Roman poet wrote. This kind of thing can be seen most often in contemporary society with the environmental god, for example. In college, for my first rhetoric assignment, I looked at recent news articles that used atonement language to talk about making up for sins against the environment. I was shocked by how many articles I found that explicitly said that one could "atone" for pollution by buying carbon credits, or reducing one's carbon footprint, or recycling, etc. Do you attempt to placate the environmental god?

But as Christians, the more common form of this is attempts to buy God off. When you've done something wrong and know that God is displeased by your sin, how do you approach that problem? Do you promise Him that you'll be good in the future? Do you deliberately try to do something extra nice for your spouse or child or co-worker so that you don't have to feel so bad about the wrong thing you did? Do you double down on your theological correctness as a way to make up for your moral incorrectness? Do you hold everyone around you to a higher standard to make up for your own deficiencies — say, in watching football when you know you should be working on that honey-do list project?

Folks, you can find all kinds of ways to try to fool your conscience and to try to placate God. Long, repetitive prayers are some people's "drug of choice," but Jesus really forbids all kinds of ways to trying to placate God.

How can an offended God be made propitious? Not by you giving up meat for Lent. Not by you making sure that your kids obey. Not by you swearing off a particular sin. No. An offended God can be made propitious only by the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Don't abuse prayer by making it vain repetition. Don't try to turn prayer into a way of experiencing God or a way of placating God. Don't be like the heathens. Instead, use prayer for what it's supposed to be — a way to get to know your Father.

### **B. Its Goal: Cajoling God into Compliance, v. 7b**

Repetitive prayer is an attempt to get God to do what you want, whether what you want is an experience of the divine or some kind of divine favor that can only be gotten out of God when He's "in a good mood." Heathens truly believe that they have to talk God into whatever they want out of Him. They have to transform themselves with sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll before they can experience God, or convince Him to be favorable to their request.

Do you ever think that God pays more attention to longer prayers than to shorter ones? Do you imagine that my prayers, as a pastor, carry more weight with God than your prayers as a lay Christian? Believe me, God hears prayers from everyone alike. He doesn't assign pastor's prayers a heavier weight, or listen to them harder than He listens to other people's prayers. He doesn't say, "A twenty-minute prayer is worth twenty times as much as a one-minute prayer." Don't think that God hears you based on the emotional and spiritual condition into which you work yourself. He doesn't. He hears you based on His goodness, and His ever-listening ear.

## **IV. Trusting Prayer, v. 8**

Indeed, Jesus says that true prayer simply trusts the Father.

### **A. Its Description, v. 8a**

What is prayer? Well, it's not like what the heathen do.

#### **1. Not an Attempt to Bypass the Mind**

Real prayer doesn't attempt to bypass the mind. It doesn't try to use frequent, vain repetitions as a way of altering consciousness. It doesn't sing the same word or phrase repeatedly, or use prayers that actually don't make any sense or prayers that lack any cognitive content.

#### **2. Not an Attempt to Cajole God**

Further, real prayer is not an attempt to talk God into something. It is simply a heartfelt request, yet one that respects God enough to know that He will do what is best.

Heathens can't trust that their god will do what is best. They have to show their gods what's best, and convince the god to do it. But the true God already knows what's best, and already knows what you need.

### **B. Its Presupposition, v. 8b**

Indeed, that is the presupposition of true prayer.

#### **1. The Father's Omniscience**

You are praying to a God who knows everything. Everything! He knows what you're going to ask for, and what you truly need at this moment. Not only that, He knew it before you were ever born.

Then why pray? Because He likes to be asked, as C.S. Lewis said. God has said that He will give in response to prayer. But He doesn't always deliver us everything we need without us ever lifting a finger. He delivers the vast majority of what we need that way. But not everything. He wants us to ask for the things we need, and His omniscience only guarantees that He will give what is best.

## **2. The Father's Bounty**

Indeed, the Father is more generous than we can imagine. Yes, we know what kind of a world He has created. Yes, we can count our blessings and spend weeks doing it. Anne Voskamp, as I understand it, urges you to make a list of the top 1,000 things you're most thankful for. But we should realize that God can and will give far more than He has already given. "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" (Rom 8:32 NAS). Yes, that's right: He gave His Son. It's the life and death of Jesus that allow God to show favor toward us. Your Father knew you needed forgiveness and reconciliation before you ever asked Him, before you were ever born. And that's why He provided His Son, as a sacrifice for your sin and my sin. If He's willing to give that, will He really withhold anything else?

So don't be like the heathen. Don't try to cajole God into giving you what you want, or try to work yourself into a frenzy in which you "experience the divine." Instead, pray secretly. Pray trustingly. Your Father loves to hear from you. Amen.