

I. Introduction

- A. Teaching on prayer through all the major sections of the Bible: Law, Prophets, Psalms/Wisdom and today we come to the Gospels, specifically Matthew 6 (Sermon On The Mount)
 - 1. Today we will be working through Matthew 6:5-8. These are Jesus' introductory teachings on prayer before He gives us the Lord's Prayer.
 - 2. Next week we'll cover the prayer itself and look at that alongside a prayer we find written by the Apostle Paul in the epistle to the Ephesians.
- B. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6 on prayer is likely the most clear and instructive passage on prayer in all of Scripture.
- C. Before Jesus teaches us how to pray, His first concern is that we UNLEARN malformed motives and beliefs about prayer.
- D. Story: As a kid learning to play baseball. Hit the ball and let go of the bat.
 - 1. Had to unlearn this for my hits to do any good
 - 2. If we bring our wrong motives and wrong beliefs into prayer, God is gracious, but it can have a deeply negative effect on our prayer life.

II. Jesus, in teaching His disciples to pray, first describes for them two malformed ways of prayer and how to repent from them and pray in a different way. The first correction is malformed **motives**; the second is malformed **belief**.

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father Who is in secret. And your Father Who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:5-6)

- A. When we pray, our MOTIVES matter.
 - 1. Don't be like the hypocrites, the "pretender."
 - a. "Hypocrite" original meaning: Greek stage actors
 - b. 1st century use: a person whose public persona is a pretense and doesn't line up with their true character.
 - c. In this critique, Jesus is calling out the religious elite of Israel: Scribes, Pharisees, etc (we know this because of "in the synagogues").
 - d. Jesus then gives reason WHY His disciples should not be like the hypocrites.
 - 1) Their motive is to be SEEN BY OTHERS (admiration of other PEOPLE)
 - 2) Our motives in our prayer determine who it's truly addressed to.
 - a) When we pray with the motive to be noticed and admired by people, we are not stepping into the throne room of Heaven. We are stepping onto the stage of Earth.
 - b) If the praise of man is the intention of our prayer, then man is the recipient. But if intimacy with God is the intention of prayer, then God is the recipient.

2. When we pray, are we seeking to be seen by people or by our heavenly Father?
 - a. This motive is mutually exclusive. It cannot be both.
 - b. There are consequences of wrong motives in prayer.
 - 1) When I pray with selfish ambition as my motive, Jesus says that I have “received my reward in full.” The attention, admiration, or even the rolling of eyes from the people who see right through me is the sum total of what that prayer has gained me. The benefit of that prayer begins and ends in that very moment.
 - 2) Inward intention has relational consequence.
 - a) Prayer, done with the motive of man’s attention, is warped into a personal glory-grabbing endeavor in which the reward is only as lasting as the moment of praise itself.
 - b) And the longevity of our reward matches its source. If praise and reward come from men, their longevity is just like them: fleeting, fragile, and dying, a mere breath or mist. But if the praise and reward come from the heavenly Father, their longevity is just like Him: deeply substantial, indestructible, and eternal. Which kind of reward do you want?
 3. The motives of our prayer will determine the recipient of our prayer. The recipient of our prayer will determine our reward.
 - a. So when we pray, Jesus instructs us to go into our inner room and shut the door behind us.
 - b. Jesus speaks in a way to provoke our imaginations.
 - 1) He is not commanding us to only pray in a locked and closed room and never in public or with other people.
 - 2) Jesus Himself and His Apostles are seen in Scripture praying publicly.
 - 3) Jesus is not depicting a literal action here as much as He is envisioning the state of our heart and our intentions when we pray.
 - c. In this way, our prayers are directed to God as the recipient. He sees us, hears us, and rewards us in that quiet place of intimacy with Him, whether we’re completely alone or surrounded by a crowd of 10,000.
- B. When we pray, not only do our **motives** matter, what we **believe** matters.
- And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. (Matthew 6:7-8)*
1. Earlier, Jesus critiqued the religious hypocrisy of some Jews, who on the surface worshiped the one true God but did it with very false motives; but now, in v.7 Jesus contrasts how His disciples should pray with the practice of the pagan religions of the Gentiles.
 2. Jesus says they do what they **do** because of what they **believe**; and in one fell swoop, Jesus both corrects their actions **and** uncovers two lies the Gentiles were believing.
 - a. What they **do**:
 - 1) Construct complex, long-winded prayers, likely attempting incantations to impress or obligate their god to act.

- 2) Jesus describes this kind of prayer as “empty.” Some translations render it as meaningless repetition or babbling.
- b. But **why** did they **do** this heaping up of empty phrases?
 - 1) Jesus says it’s because of what they **believe**: “They think that they will be heard for their many words.”
 - 2) We see that pagan **belief** was leading to futile **behavior**.
3. Lie #1: The **power** of prayer is in our **words**.
 - a. The power of prayer isn’t in **our anything!** It is totally and completely in our heavenly Father’s mighty rule over all things!
 - b. There are even brands of so-called Christianity today that would have you believe this same lie: That words in and of themselves have power and if you can just harness the power of words, you can somehow materialize the things you need and want, and that God is somehow obligated to facilitate the whole thing.
 - c. This is the same old lie that Jesus critiqued the pagans for! And somehow 2,000 years later it has been re-branded and re-packaged and called “Christianity.”
 - d. The power of prayer is not in our words. It is in the High King of Heaven to Whom we speak.
 - 1) Don’t believe, don’t trust, and don’t give any attention to anyone who would feed you this pagan lie.
 - 2) Jesus’ instruction here uncovers a second lie that we tend to believe.
 - 3) In verse 8, Jesus says “Do not be like them” but why shouldn’t we be like them? “... for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.”
 - 4) Don’t be like them because they are believing something very false about our heavenly Father.
4. Lie #2: God’s attention and provision must be earned by long-winded attempts at flattery.
 - a. The pagan gods of Greek and Roman religion were not loving or fatherly.
 - b. They used, abused, ignored, or blessed human beings based on their whims and appetites.
 - c. This is why so much of pagan prayer and temple worship involved doing things and giving things to the gods that would somehow get their attention and appease them.
 - d. It was a transaction of humans giving honor and sacrifice in hopes of becoming a god’s “class pet” to receive abundance rather than indifference or punishment.
5. And so this is Jesus’ point: “Is that what you really think your Father in Heaven is like?”
 - a. That He is indifferent toward you? That He only takes notice of you when you make a big enough scene to get His attention? That His relationship with you is about what’s in it for Him? That you have to babble on and on to even get His attention?
 - b. Jesus says: “Don’t pray like THIS because God is not like THAT!”
 - c. Story: Again, baseball as a kid. My dad was one of those “coach from the bleachers” kind of dads; meant well but it made me so nervous. I just wanted to make him proud. Got on base and then to 3rd. Next hit, WAY out in the outfield... slid home. Didn’t need to slide. My pants came down a little and my slide didn’t

make it all the way to home plate. My motive was to impress dad and it just made me look foolish.

6. When Jesus was teaching His disciples about the Father's heart, I can't help but imagine that His mind was full of Psalm 139:

O Lord, You have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, You know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. Where shall I go from Your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to Heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, You are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me. (Psalm 139:1-9)

- a. The power of prayer is not ONLY because God is powerful. It's also because He loves us like this!
 - b. Jesus bases His critique of pagan prayer on the actual character of God: "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."
 - c. When we turn toward God in prayer, we find Him already there, already attentive, with everything we could need in His hands.
 - 1) This does not mean that we receive all we need immediately. Sometimes there is waiting. Nor are we the experts on what we actually need. Sometimes God must transform our definition of "need."
 - 2) We leave those details and timing in the hands of a God Who already knows what we need before we speak one word.
- III. Several years ago, I was studying this passage and writing out my thoughts and I want to share with you the entry I wrote that I hope will encourage you as you pray:

I believe that [prayer] is an issue of first things. What is the predominant nature of my communion with the Father? Is most of my prayer only with others? Or do I have a rich, deep and continuous inner/secret prayer life? I believe that our time alone, in relationship with the Father is meant to feed the rest of our life. It is in this quiet and secret place where we, with no other audience than the Father, pour out the genuine condition of our souls. This is where our intentions, wants, fears, needs and very core of our being is displayed shamelessly before our creator. It is only in this place of spiritual nakedness that we can be fully known and changed. It is only in this place of quiet vulnerability that we can lay ourselves down on the great Surgeon's operating table to be healed. Praying together, as the body of Jesus, is so very precious and important. But praying together must proceed from genuine foundation that is built by praying alone. If I desire that my prayer in public not be like the hypocrites ... if I desire that my prayer with the saints not be done like the devil ... my heart must be seasoned by the humility that comes from being fully known and loved by God in secret. And what will my reward be? I believe my reward for secret prayer with Father-ward intentions is that I am seen, heard and held by God Almighty ... Whose resources, memory and longevity are infinite and immeasurable. The Celebrity of all creation notices me, knows me, listens to me, speaks

to me and gives me Himself as reward. Not because I am the center of the universe. But because He is more loving than I can imagine.

Jesus is the King Who notices and treasures peasants-made-sons like me. He gives me His individual and intimate attention and calls me to respond in kind to Him. May my prayers be Father-ward and genuine, free from spectators whom I might use to rob myself of communion with God and eternal reward.