

Matthew 6:5-15 (NKJV)

Mt 6:5 "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 6 But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. 7 And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. 9 In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. 10 Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread. 12 And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. 13 And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. 14 "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Ok so we started chapter 6 with a warning that **we should not do acts of service toward God**, acts of righteousness, for **any purpose other than** pleasing God. We should not do it because people are watching or because they might have a **particular attitude** toward what we may or may not be doing.

Then Jesus talks about doing charitable things, giving to meet needs. And Christ lets us know that they are best done in secret. Partly because when they are done in secret we can be more sure that they were not done for dual reasons. Obviously not all needs can be met in secret. But the ones that **can be** kept secret **should be** kept secret for our benefit.

Now Jesus moves to the topic of prayer. Charitable deeds we usually do for a fellow human's benefit and we often do it to the man. But prayer is done directly to God, even if done on behalf of other men.

And again Christ says, **When** you pray. Not **if** you pray. It is assumed that every child of God will talk regularly to His Father. He is not **encouraging** His children to pray. He is **assuming** His children will pray. He is simply showing us how to

discern what is **true worship** and what could be **very deceptive**. Remember again, the deciding place is the heart. **Why** are we doing what we are doing? Now let's start with the basics. What is prayer? And prayer is, by its simplest definition, communicating with God.

Us talking to God. What could be more spiritual than that? What could be **better** than that? Us communicating with our Father **allowed** by the blood of Christ and **enabled** by the Holy Spirit.

How could something so good **be bad**?

And the answer is when it is jaded with pretend. When it involves play acting. When its primary purpose is not what it looks like. When the audience matters to us more than the one we are addressing. When communication with God is not our primary motive.

Again, this is not something where one of us can stop another one of us in our tracks in prayer meeting and say, **"Stop it. Now you are just showing off. You aren't praying to God. You are just talking to impress the other pray-ers."**

The truth is, unless God were to give us some divine insight into it, we do not know what is going on in another person's heart. I suppose if we were suspicious, we could ask the person what their motives are. But when talking about motives we are always at the mercy of the other person's honesty and self knowledge. Maybe they know themselves and will tell us the truth. Maybe they don't know themselves well and cannot tell us the truth. Maybe they know the truth but won't tell it. We do not know.

This leads us back to a previous emphasis from our general text. This is directed to us as **individual followers** of Christ. No one can do this work for us. We must take heed to what Jesus says and then look at our hearts.

And look at the great crime this is. Here is a wonderful privilege that God provides us through Christ. We have the ability to speak to God. We can lift up our hearts to Him. And look at what can happen to **even that**. It can be **corrupted** by flesh. It can be **ruined** by flesh using a precious gift from God to find a way to exalt ourselves.

Think about this. What this says is that our sin nature is so ingrained in us that it is even prone to **profane** the **most sacred things** we can do. This particular sin is done when we have admittedly brought ourselves into the direct presence of God. We intend to speak to Him, directly. That is what we are saying we are doing. And sin is still with us. We still must guard our hearts from our hearts, even while doing the most sacred things. Remember that these are our Lord's instructions to believers, not unbelievers.

This is the danger that the first part of our text warns us about.

Brother Jones says this:

if you really want to understand something about the nature of Satan and his activities, the thing to do is not to go to the dregs or the gutters of life; if you really want to know something about Satan, go away to that wilderness where our Lord spent forty days and forty nights. That is the true picture of Satan where you see him tempting the very Son of God.

All that comes out in this statement. Sin is something that follows us even into the very presence of God.¹

OK let's delve into our text.

Mt 6:5 "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 6 But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. 7 And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

Let's break this up.

Notice that Jesus is telling us not to do **two things**. They are two errors in prayer. They are two things people believe about prayer that caused them to err.

The first is **prayer's improper focus**. Verses 5

The second is **misunderstanding how prayer works** in verse 7

Look at the Pharisee in verse 5. Now who here thinks that God would **best** hear your prayer if you were praying very loudly in the **Walmart** lobby? Who would think that this would be the ultimate place to influence God? to connect with God?

From what I have read that is what the corners of the streets means. This was not describing **back** streets. A different word would have been used. This is the busiest of the thoroughfares. This is a point of **high visibility**. This is where you go to **advertise** stuff.

¹ Lloyd-Jones, D. M. (1976). [*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*](#) (Second edition, pp. 338–339). England: Inter-Varsity Press.

The same is true at the synagogues. These are points of highest visibility. So what is being sold? What is being advertised? The absolute **glory of God**? No. If that were the case **the word of God would be being read or preached about**. No. What is being advertised is the spirituality of the one **doing** the praying. The focus is not on the best way or place to communicate with God. The focus is on the **best place to show off** one's standing with God, one's own worthiness before God. It is essentially showing off how lucky God and God's kingdom is to have someone as spiritual as ourselves.

This was not new in conversations with Christ. We all know this story well. It is so key to understanding our salvation.

Luke 18:9-14 (NKJV)

⁹ Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.

¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

Here the Lord reveals even more of the **deadly motives** of the Pharisees. See that they **trusted in themselves** and notice the phrase "he **prayed thus with himself**". Jesus is making it **so obvious** that it cannot be missed. All of this man's focus is on the **relationship he has with himself**. It has nothing to do with the relationship He has **with God**.

Look even at the prayer. I am better than other men. I do not sin like other men. I do spiritual tasks that cost me a great deal. As if **God is so lucky to have me**, and you who are listening ought to be able to see that **I am much better than you**.

This is nothing less than **self advertising** and **self trust**. He would have done better to have used **his own name** as the one he was praying to. It would have reflected more truth. **Dear self**, I thank you that I am better than everyone else. I thank you that all your efforts have earned God's approval.

Can you imagine anything more dangerous than deceiving one's self into thinking that **self worship** is really **God worship**? This prayer that is **focused on self** and **centered on self** is the danger we are being warned about. And it can happen in lots of subtle ways. In fact I am pretty sure we can fall into it and recover from it in the same sentence when we pray publicly. It is a real danger.

Desire for recognition and approval, self worship really, can easily have us praying in ways that are more for **a performance for the people** than **honest communication with God**. It is a danger any time we pray publicly. Are we praying what we pray to influence a person to change while we pray? This is likely a prayer **for the people** rather than to God. Do we preach a sermon when we pray? We may be doing the same thing. What sentences are we speaking that are not intended to invoke action from God or to be received as thanks or praise from us? The other stuff can easily be suspected of improper praying. Pharisee praying. Praying for the crowd. Praying to have an effect on someone other than God.

Then look at real prayer. The **good example** used is really a shipwreck of a person. This is a person who has made many bad decisions. His life was dedicated to pursuits that were ungodly. He knows better than to **pray to self**. His self righteousness is clearly worthless. So this is what **he** prays.

¹³ **And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'**

¹⁴ **I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."**

Here is a man who was praying so God would hear him. There is nothing of self in his prayer. Notice that he **stands afar off**. The crowd was not needed or welcome in his prayers. He wanted to have a **heart to heart** with God. And when we want to have one of those conversations with a human, do we not try to find an environment where **other people will not hear**? How much more so with God?

So we looked at **prayer's improper focus**. Verse 5

Now let's look at **misunderstanding how prayer works** in verse 7

7 And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

Look at the understanding here. If you were to ask a Pharisee "how I can pray more effectively" the Pharisee would tell you that it all depends upon **your** efforts. It all depends upon **your** performance. You must **earn** the answer by your many words.

The first error Jesus mentioned focuses on the results of prayer based on the **superior moral conduct of the one praying**. The second focused on the **superior skillful effort in the prayer being offered**.

Both are ways of earning the answers to prayer by works.

Now it is interesting to look at how verse seven is worded. Where it says “**do not use vain repetitions**”, what it would have really sounded like to the people listening was don't say batta batta batta when you pray. It is difficult to know exactly what it means but most understand it to mean babbling. Saying words that cease to carry any meaning.

I believe the core of the meaning is that we should not depend upon **our method** of praying to be the thing that we believe **produces the results**. We cannot look to **HOW** we pray to be the thing that produces the **results** in prayer. It is always about **WHO** we pray to.

Think about it.

When you want a prayer answered, what do you think will turn the corner?

Is it the number of hours prayed?

Do we think we would get the thing if we only prayed all night?

Is it the fervency with which you pray?

Is it the number of people who are praying for it?

Is it the spirituality of the one praying?

Is it the accuracy with which one asks?

While all those things have a place, we have to be careful of how we think about them.

Do you see what I mean? We can easily get the idea that the answer to our prayers depends ultimately on **how good** we are at asking. It is easy to make the same mistake as the Pharisees. We may think it is by our **many** words, or our **perfect** words, or our **accurate** words, that we can do the **magic thing** that gets our prayer answered.

But look at the story we just read. What does **it** say?

The prayer the tax collector prayed was:

'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'

The evidence was that there was no **play acting** in what he said. He just asked for something very simple that he deeply needed. There was zero self dependence in his prayer. He was completely depending upon **God** to provide for Him what he needed. He knew **God** alone could give it to Him. And he knew he could never **deserve it** by any work. He did not think his prayer, or anything else for that matter, could **get from God** what he so **desperately needed**. He was **fully reliant** upon God (or FROG as Jack would say) to have His prayer answered. And while he did not pray **long** or **professionally** or **impressively**, his prayer was answered because that is what God is like. The man humbled himself. The man told the negative truth about himself. He oriented to his absolute unworthiness. And that

is the beginning of receiving something from God. When we humble ourselves God exalts us. That is where we must begin in order to have our prayers answered.

It is interesting when you look at the effort being poured into prayer in verse 5, it is clearly the Pharisee who wins the award **for effort**. But they lacked the sincere humility that drives a person to proper prayer, to the kind of prayer God hears and responds to.

Jesus said this.

Matthew 23:14 (NKJV)

¹⁴ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.

Jesus continually said that the Pharisees were doing their acts of righteousness to be seen by men. Their motivation didn't come from the desperate state of humility. They did not begin in being **poor in spirit**. So their prayers went unanswered. That is not to say that they were **unrewarded**. They **received** the reward that they were doing the acts for. They got the reward from the people being deceived into thinking the Pharisees were the spiritual experts.

Consider that. They traded being **right with God** for having people **think** they were right with God. What a horrible trade. The reverse of that would be vastly superior any day of the week.

Now how did Jesus tell us to pray?

6 But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Go into your room.

Now in the Old Testament, were there public prayers? Absolutely. And God responded with favor to some of them.

In the New Testament were there prayer meetings held after this by Christ's disciples? Sure. Peter crashed one of them when he was miraculously freed from prison.

Ok So was Jesus saying **never pray in public**? If so the Disciples completely disobeyed Him. No. I think this is a firm affirmation about how we **have been interpreting** the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is talking about how a believer lives in the world. He is not giving rules that apply to **every circumstance** a person can encounter. He is not saying a Christian should never defend loved ones from an evil person. He is not saying a person married to a non believer cannot remarry if

the non believer leaves. He is not saying that we should never do an act of service if it will be seen. And He is not saying here that you **should never pray** except for in your **closet**.

But He is saying to **do everything you can** to deprive yourself of factors that encourage you to do **the right thing** for **the wrong reasons**. Do your acts of righteousness in private as much as you can.

If you have the choice to pray where people will **see you pray** or **hear you pray** or to pray where **no one knows** what you are doing, choose secrecy.

Why?

First-Well if no human knows you are doing it, at least you know that you are not doing it to have an **effect** on **other humans**. You are not trying to receive a payoff from them. It is easier to be certain that your motives are proper. There is little fleshly motive to spend time talking to God if there is no other possible fleshly payoff. Now naturally we are tricky. So we might be doing it out of a sense of pride. That might need to be considered. But we can know it is not for some **human opinion** payoff. It is always helpful to eliminate those fleshly motive possibilities.

A **second** reason is that we tend to **seclude ourselves** with conversations that are the **most important** to us. Have you ever had a conversation that was very important to you that was interrupted by someone else and you never got back to the important conversation? When we don't want that to happen, we seclude ourselves to protect the importance of the conversation.

Third, in private we can pray the **real truth** and **all of it**. We can pray for someone as we really see it as opposed to those things we must guard in order not to gossip about a fellow believer. When we shut the door we have the freedom to pray more fully open and honestly than we could be, or should be, around others.

Fourth, when **all we have is God**, it is easier to **focus on God**. Our prayers are to be **to God**. They are not self help techniques. It is not some mantra that brings our heart rate down. It is conversation with a heavenly being. And in a room devoted to that conversation, it is easier to keep that perspective.

8 Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

Here is **why** we pray. Here is why we long for secrecy. Here is why we run to Christ to talk to Him. It **isn't** about formulas. It **isn't** about earning something.

Ultimately the driving factor is not even about **obedience** and **obligation**, although both should be considerations. Ultimately we come to Him because of **our relationship with Him**. We **need Him** and we need what **He provides** us. Every human is, in one sense, just a child needing their father's loving care. Not all of us had a loving earthly father. But every Christian shares a loving **heavenly father**. And if we had to pick between having one or the other, the **heavenly father** wins hands down. The ones with **that father** are the blessed ones, the happy ones.

In verse 8 Jesus tells us, don't believe the wrong things that the **Pharisees think** about God or about prayer. Don't depend upon your efforts to coerce God into doing something that He is not naturally predisposed to doing, thinking that with great effort you can change His mind. No. Don't think that. Don't believe that kind of nonsense. That is not what prayer is about.

Prayer is about going to **a father who loves you**. A father who **only** and **always** wants what is best for you. A father eager to **give you** what you need. That is the assumption He wants you to have when you pray. He wants you to **go to Him** because He is the **greatest pro-you** source in the universe. He doesn't even wait for you to tell Him what you need. (He wants you to tell Him. Telling Him is good for you to do so.) But that conversation is not providing God some service He needs in order to **serve you better**. It is not like He even **needs** that information. God's love for you is such that He **already has figured out exactly what the solution is before you describe the problem**. In fact, just like everything else, He had the solution laid out from the beginning of time. I think that is only logical in God's sovereignty. There is no chess game with God. It cannot be described as a game. All the moves and counter moves were known before the chess board was laid on the table. God **learns** nothing. He starts by **knowing everything**. There is no game. It looks to **us** like God is responding. There is a sense that He is responding. But there is a sense that He is not. God is **acting**, not **reacting**. And He is acting in the best interests of His children all the time.

Our coming to God in prayer does not provide God with a necessary service. But it **avails us** to **necessary provision**. It allows us to display our dependence upon a Father in heaven who loves us. And we would **not understand His love** if we did not find ourselves **needing it so much** and **asking for it so often**. The process of prayer is **for us**. And in it we can do things that God **finds pleasing**, but does **not need**.

It is very clear that God wants to reward us. He wants to reward us with **His presence**. And he also wants to reward us with **what we need**. And He also

wants to reward us for **acts of true faithfulness**. Our reward will be richer in heaven if we spend intentional prayer time in efforts to build the Kingdom. Our Father wants to give us good stuff. And in this passage there is no doubt what He says. He says **He WILL** reward our faithful prayers. That is a promise if I ever saw one.

Now how much do we really believe it? Well we aren't left with any mystery. How much do we **run to prayer**? That displays precisely how much **we believe it**. **Oh what peace we often forfeit. Oh what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry Everything to God in prayer.**