

To Be Seen By Men, Part II: Praying

Call to Worship: Psalm 15

1st Scripture: Matthew 23:1-36

2nd Scripture: Matthew 6:5-8

Hymn #712- *I Know Whom I Have Believed*

Hymn Insert- *Amazing Love*

Hymn #696- *God Will Take Care of You*

Introduction

We've begun looking into a third major portion of this sermon, where our Lord has started to address the ungodly *actions* of the religious leaders. And to this end, we considered several connective elements that exist among the three acts of worship that make up the first portion of this section, which led us to extract the general underlying principle that is to be applied to all areas of worship. And as we have seen all throughout this Sermon on the Mount (thus far), once again, our Lord has brought us to recognize, that God is concerned about the heart; that is, the *interior* motives which drive our *exterior* actions, and not merely the actions themselves. In fact, from the standpoint of God, the identifying mark of hypocrisy, is found where any form of Christian service or act, is ultimately done from motives that are impure. And motives that are impure, are motives that are driven not unto the glory of God, but unto the glory of self, no matter how good, generous and holy the (proceeding) act may look outwardly.

And so, as we have seen last time, there are forms of worship even, where individuals seek to perform their religious acts in the sight of men, with the desire to impress men. They have no real desire to serve God, and they ultimately use even what God prescribes, as a means of gaining the praises of men for themselves. Those who worship with such motives, our Lord states, already receive their reward (that is, the praise of men), and therefore, ought not to expect anything from God. The religious leaders of our Lord's day were masters of such acts.

To this end, we looked at "charitable giving," last time, where our Lord had commanded His true followers to do their charitable deeds in secret, and not with the intent of being seen by men. This morning then, we continue on, to consider our Lord's addressing of the matter of prayer.

I. Praying as the Hypocrites Prayed (vs. 5)

Let us begin then, by first considering the ungodly actions of the religious leaders, concerning the way, in which, they were praying, before considering the way that we ought to pray, in keeping with our Lord's teaching here.

“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” (Matthew 6:5).

Again, we see that our Lord calls the religious leaders “hypocrites,” alluding to the fact that their motives for praying were ungodly, insincere and unacceptable to God. What did they do? They went out of their way to parade their prayer lives before others, in at least two ways:

1) They would intentionally show off the simple fact that *they were praying*. By their mannerisms, they would, in essence, be saying to all, be it in the synagogues or on the street corners (at crossroads, where there would be a constant flow of people traffic), “Look at me. I am a prayer warrior. I constantly humble myself and come before God in prayer.” Perhaps, standing with their bodies jolting upward, they held out their arms wide, so that people could see, or maybe (at times) they even fell down on their knees or on their chests, to look very pious, humble and religious. Whatever the case, they went out of the way to show that they were men of continuous prayer. Even in the market places, they were just so “God-focused” and holy, that they couldn't even wait to get to the synagogue (or the temple) to pray. They had to do it then and there. Such was the piety they wanted to flash before all, compelling others to say, “Look, if only we prayed like them, God would hear us, and we would witness His blessings poured out upon us. But, we could never attain to such holiness. We are without hope.”

2) They would pray elaborate, lengthy, stylistically rich prayers, probably using fancy words and exalted language, which the common and simple people could not even dream of doing. They would include checklists of all of their good deeds, their religious exercises, their regular fasts, their tithes and offerings, including a catalog of pious ways in which they performed righteous acts and didn't commit the types of sins that were committed by many of the commoners around them. Indeed, they used such praying opportunities in the public square

and in the synagogues, as a means of displaying their piety before the world, rather than truly communing with the living God. They were actually monologuing rather than praying.

And so, all in all, they used prayer (communion with God!), as a means of drawing the attention of the people to themselves! They wanted men to see them. And so, our Lord stated that they had their reward. They gained the praise they were looking for (from men), and therefore, ought not to expect anything from God, who they simply used for their own self-glorifying purposes.

II. Praying as a True Child of God (vs. 6)

In contrast then, consider how our Lord commands His followers to pray:

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” (vs. 6).

And so, again, what is our Lord’s main charge here? As was the case with charitable deeds, one ought not to flash their prayer lives before others, but rather, they ought to be intentional about having private dealings with God; not seeking to parade their words and actions before others, but rather, fixing their attention solely and truly on the Lord Himself. This is what our Lord means, when He states, “Go into your room, and when you have shut the door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” The idea is to pray in such a way, that only God knows that you are seeking Him, sincerely and truly.

And while, for the sake of maintaining a God-centered focus (in the absence of distractions, as much as possible), and for developing a fervency in our prayers as we secure that focus (it can be very helpful to literally go into a private room to pray), yet, it doesn’t mean that this cannot be done, even silently in the mind, when in any location. John Paton had one of the sweetest times of fellowship with the Lord, while hiding up in a tree, as a tribe of cannibals were searching for him below, planning to eat him. It’s not so much the “location” that our Lord has in mind (although location can help—how often would He go by Himself to the mountain to pray?), but rather, it is the state of mind and the motive for praying, for which He is ultimately

concerned. It is to ensure that our attention is fixed on God alone, and not on those who might be surrounding us, which might drive us to pray toward them, seeking to impress them (or something upon them), rather than truly addressing our Heavenly Father. Again, it gets back down to the heart. The religious leaders used even communication with God, as a means of seeking to gain the praise and admiration of others. That we are capable of such evil, speaks so loudly of the gravity of our fallen nature, doesn't it?

III. Praying as the Heathen Prayed

Finally, our Lord moves on to address another negative aspect of praying, which was especially found among the heathen (the non-Jewish) nations. And He warns His disciples to avoid praying in the way that the heathen do, as well.

“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. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him” (vs. 7-8).

How did the heathen pray to their false gods? They used repetitive phrases, and thought that by doing so, they would eventually gain the attention and blessing of their gods. And we are not to pray to the true and living God like that. Rather than praying from the heart, they merely chanted and repeated statements over and over again, hoping that eventually their gods would hear and reward their rote repetitions. This is a form of mysticism that is likened to using magical enchantments, which lead individuals to concentrate thoroughly on various words and statements, in the hope that somehow, God can be moved by them. It really is the attempt to control God with mere words, rather than speaking to, and communing with God, who is our Heavenly Father. Jesus intentionally speaks of God as our *Father* here, so as to assure His disciples that we can speak to Him intimately and directly, as such. The Greeks, who were Gnostics, viewed their gods as so distant that, they could not imagine for a moment, any concept of closeness or fatherliness or intimacy with a god. That was a foreign concept to them. And so, they relied on mystical chants and various appeasing acts to move their gods. [Proph. of Baal]

We are not to pray like that. We are never to think of God as some distant machine, who can eventually be moved, if we oil His parts with our constant repetitious prayers. And so, this

does not so much address the idea of repeating thoughts or ideas in our prayers (which can be somewhat natural to our human weakness and frailty—not everyone is a poet), as it again, has to do more with motives and with trusting in the *form* of our prayers, rather than focusing on sincerely speaking to God Himself. God doesn't want impersonal rote and plasticity. God wants our hearts. And to this end, probably some of the most wonderful prayers in the sight of God, are not necessarily long, and probably don't sound overly elaborate, and are probably made through stuttering, quivering lips that blurt out some of the basest and choppiest, simplistic vocabulary in existence. God is not impressed by lofty language. He welcomes and delights in simple sincerity of heart, which is worth more than a million lofty phrases. [The RCC rosary]

Hence, He closes with the statement, “Therefore do not be like them. *For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.*” Again, he uses the term “Father” here, to emphasize the way, in which, God relates to us...not as too distant and not wanting to be disturbed, but as welcoming and desiring closeness with us. And then, to debunk the whole notion that rote repetitions or anything having to do with eloquence of form, have anything to do with gaining the ear of God, He reminds us that God already knows what our needs are, even before we ask Him for anything. He doesn't have to be shaken by clanging repetitions. He doesn't have to be awoken to the voices that are way down here, so that, He can bend His ears to our needs. He knows what they are already. He is concerned about us and cares for us, individually and personally. He is well acquainted with and aware of our circumstances. We don't need to push the right buttons repeatedly, to get an answer. God is already attentive, caring, close and very near to us.

III. Closing Thoughts and Applications

1) Let us always remember that God is far more concerned about sincerity (and the heart), than He is about form. Eloquence means very little to our God. He cannot be impressed by us, and He wants us to focus on communicating *with Him*, rather than *on communicating*, in and of itself. Carry reverence and humility into the prayer closer with you, but avoid getting lost in formalities.

Now, the glory of this reality, brethren, lies in the fact that there is not a single person in this room, who cannot communicate with God, in a way that is pleasing to Him. Fancy words, high speech, impeccable grammar and a rich vocabulary, mean nothing to our God. Jumbled sentences, garbled words and a kindergarten vocabulary, which come from a sincere and reverent heart that is focused upon, and attempting to communicate with, God, is precious in His sight. Never let eloquent communicators or those who are perhaps more comfortable in forming their sentences, cause you to shy away from praying. Don't get caught up in form, being bound to time slots (how long you need to pray), fancy wording...etc, just focus on God Himself; just focus on speaking to God; Just speak to God from a sincere heart, and with an obedient conscience, and He will always receive you and delight in you, in Christ. Throw out your checklists, and just pray.

You know, I love the "Valley of Vision," puritan prayer book. The prayers are so touching and theologically rich, but we must be careful not to compare our prayers to them, as if our sincere prayers are any less received or honorable to God.

2) Remember that God is a personal God. God delights in intimacy with His people. He knows and understands our needs, and doesn't want us to jump through all kinds of hoops to create prayers that would somehow reach Him. The only thing that prevents us from reaching God, is our sin. And the Lord Jesus Christ bore that burden for us, on the cross, so that, we can come before Him freely, at anytime, into His very throne room, with humility and boldness, knowing that He hears and receives us. He is not "out there" somewhere. He is right here, always, all the time! Believe it! Live like you believe it! Pray with that knowledge in mind, because it's true!

3) None of this is to say that there is no place for public prayer, such as the prayer meeting. Repeated calls in Scripture to "pray together," along with the examples and pattern we have in Acts, clearly show that it is indeed important to pray corporately with the people of God. However, even in that setting, we ought to make sure that we are not trying to impress those who are with us, nor are we to use public prayer time as an opportunity to preach to others. In one sense, we should almost forget that anyone is listening along, and again, just focus on God.

4) Finally, let me ask you this morning, do you have a personal relationship with God? I'm not asking if you are religious, or if you go to church, or if you were baptized...or anything like that. Do you have a *personal* relationship with God? Are you walking daily with God, and communing with God? Are you a true disciple; a true follower of the Lord Jesus Christ?

If not, you can come before God right now; you can seek Him now, and be certain that He will receive you, no matter how sinful you have been; if you seek Him humbly, and with a repentant heart, in Christ!

The Gospel!!!

Amen!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-25