

Matthew 6:1-8

Proper Preparation for the Place of Prayer

When ye pray...v. 7

Hypocrisy has long been the scourge of the church. The most widespread excuse for having nothing to do with church is the excuse – *there are too many hypocrites there*. It should be noted that often times the ones who put forth that excuse are doing so in order to mask their own hypocrisy. The real reason they don't attend church is not on account of hypocrisy but on account of their own depraved and sinful dispositions. They want nothing to do with God and for them to suggest that they do have some interest in God only exposes their own hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy was certainly prevalent among the Jews in Christ's day. His most scathing denunciations were saved for those who were hypocrites. So we find Him in Mt. 23 directly addressing the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites. 7 times He pronounces His woe upon them with the phrase: *Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!*

It's no wonder, then, that when the Lord Jesus set forth the precepts that would govern those who would be true subjects of the kingdom of heaven, He would endeavor to steer them away from hypocrisy. That is especially the case with the section we are now studying in Mt. 6. So we read in:

- v. 2 *When thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do...*
- v. 5 *When thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are...*
- v. 16 *When ye fast, be not as the hypocrites.*

We see in our Lord's exhortations what could be termed – a call to genuineness. And the importance of such a call can hardly be overestimated. If we would convey any testimony at all that could be used of the Lord for the extension of His kingdom then we must be perceived as genuine. If we would avoid bringing reproach to the cause of Christ then we must be perceived as genuine. If God Himself would reward us for our almsgiving or our prayers or our fastings then God must perceive us as genuine.

The true subject of the kingdom of heaven is someone who is real. His Christianity is real. He does not merely play at religion. His spiritual exercises are real. He does not merely go through the motions in order to impress others. In this section of the sermon on the mount Christ is drawing from 3 different spiritual exercises in which His followers must show themselves to be true and to be free from hypocrisy.

The first of these exercises we considered in our last study – the exercise of giving, or to be more precise – the exercise of performing deeds of mercy which includes but is not limited to charitable giving. We come now to the second of the three exercises which is the practice of prayer. *When thou prayest* our Lord says in v. 5 *thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are. But thou, when thou prayest* (v. 6) *enter into thy closet, and when thou hast*

shut thy door, pray to thy Father. And in v. 7 – But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do; for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.

These verses are, of course, preparing us for one of the most familiar passages in the New Testament – the Lord’s prayer. And it’s good to keep in mind the setting that is given to us in these verses which establish for us the true context for the Lord’s prayer. Let’s consider these verses then with the broader context of Mt. 6 in mind. What I want to do is call your attention to the phrase:

When Ye Pray

Consider with me first of all:

I. The Implication of the Statement -

When ye pray – our text reads. You’ll notice that the Lord does not say *If ye should decide to pray* – nor does the text contain a command to pray. It’s a very simple matter-of-fact statement – *when ye pray*. And the implication behind the statement is that true subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven will indeed pray.

It is impossible to envision a subject of the Kingdom who does not pray. Prayer is one of the marks of those who have been translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God’s dear Son. You’re probably familiar with the text that describes the Apostle Paul once he was converted on the Damascus road. A man by the name of Ananias is commanded by the Lord to go to Paul and lay hands on him that Paul might receive his sight. So we read in Ac 9:11 *And the Lord [said] unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for [one] called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth.*

This follows Paul’s Damascus road experience. The first mark by which he could be identified now as one of Christ’s own was the fact that he prayed. What was true of Paul was also true for the early church. This is not something unique to Paul. Following the Day of Pentecost – that day when Peter preached and thousands were saved, we’re given a general statement to describe their behavior in Acts 2:42 which tells us: *And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.*

And if you read through the book of Acts you discover that the early church was a praying church. I love the text in Acts 4:31 which tells us *And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.* Oh that we might have the kinds of prayer meetings in which the place is shaken where we are assembled. How we need the kinds of prayer meetings that would embolden us in our day the way the early church was emboldened in its day.

A Christian may become careless when it comes to his duty to pray. He may be guilty of negligence when it comes to the matter of prayer. But he cannot go long before the desire to pray will at last draw him back to the Lord's presence. At some point his cry will become the cry of the Psalmist - Ps 42:2 *My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?*

The reason for this soul thirst is because the child of God has tasted and seen that the Lord is good. Remember the foundation for the sermon on the mount – the beatitudes. The true subject of the Kingdom of Heaven has been made empty and then he's been filled. His spiritual blindness has been healed and his heart has been cleansed so it can be said of him that he is blessed because he's pure in heart and because he's pure in heart he has seen God. He has seen him with the eye of faith. He has been drawn to Christ. He has not merely subscribed to a creed – he's been born from above and born, therefore, into the kingdom of heaven. As that text in Ps. 42 suggests – he knows God not merely as some abstract theory but his soul thirsteth for the *living God*.

The very opening words of the Lord's prayer emphasizes the fact that the subject of the Kingdom of Heaven has been brought into a relationship with God. So he begins in prayer with an acknowledgement of that relationship when he prays *Our Father which art in heaven*.

When ye pray – our Lord says. And He makes that statement with the knowledge that His followers will have the desire to pray. He knows that His followers will see their need for prayer. He knows that His followers will avail themselves of the privilege of prayer. As subjects of the Kingdom it is our privilege to enter into the inner sanctuary of heaven where we approach a throne of grace and where we obtain grace and mercy to help in our every need. As subjects of the Kingdom you know at least something of the truth expressed by Psalmist in Ps. 16:11 *in thy presence is fulness of joy, at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore*.

I wonder, this morning, based on the implication of the Lord's statement – are you a true subject of the Kingdom of Heaven? Is the place of prayer a given in your life – the way it's a given in Christ's statement? I'm afraid that all too often we fall into a hardened stupor. We devote so much time to the world and we draw so much from the world. And then we wonder why church seems hard? We wonder why our personal worship and our own family worship withers on the vine and dies. The cause is all too often not hard to trace – we've become prayerless. And the reason we've become prayerless is because we've become worldly.

May the Lord deliver us from hard hearts. May we begin especially as we come to the close of one year and we anticipate a new year – may the Lord give us the resolve to adjust our priorities so that we overcome the world and the flesh and regain the spiritual sensitivity by which we cry *Abba, Father*.

It's a given, then, that the subject of the Kingdom of Heaven will pray. *When ye pray* our Lord says. This is not to say that prayer will come easy. Indeed I would have you see in the 2nd place that *when ye pray*:

II. You Should Expect to Face Obstacles

The Lord focuses on two obstacles that have to be overcome when it comes to the practice of prayer. The first obstacle is the obstacle of hypocrisy – which is the desire to be seen of others – the desire to flaunt our piety, so to speak, so that others will take notice of how spiritual we are. I find the statement rather striking in v. 5 that tells us we are not to be as the hypocrites are – and then note what the Lord goes on to say – *for they love to pray*. Isn't that incredible? Isn't there a sense in which hypocrites can put many true Christians to shame – *they love to pray*. Can you examine your own heart and say that you love to pray?

Of course their love for prayer is entirely for the wrong reason. They love to pray because they love to be seen of men. *They love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men* Christ says of them in v. 5. The picture that emerges is the picture of a Jew who is on his way to the synagogue and is supposedly so engulfed by the need to pray that he can't wait until he gets there. And so he prays in the corner of the streets. And when he gets to the synagogue he must occupy the most forward and visible place there so that others may see in him what a great desire he has for God.

At the end of the day, of course, his desire is not for God and his worship is more directed toward himself than it's directed to God. This is an obstacle, then, that must be overcome – this desire for self-adulation. Listen to the way Lloyd-Jones expresses this matter: *It has always been agreed, I think, that the highest picture that you can ever have of man is to look at him on his knees waiting upon God. That is the highest achievement of man, it is his noblest activity. Man is never greater than when he is there in communion and contact with God. Now, according to our Lord, sin is something which affects us so profoundly that even at that point it is with us and assailing us.*

This is borne out, of course, by what Paul writes in Rom. 7:21 *I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me*. Even in his noblest activity – even in his highest achievement – sin accompanies the child of God right into the place of prayer. It would be nice, wouldn't it, if we could set aside our sinful natures when we enter into prayer, or when we enter into the sanctuary. But it can't be done. Sin is with us everywhere. Sin is with us when we're at our worst and when we're at our best.

Again Lloyd-Jones: *We tend to think of sin as we see it in its rags and in the gutters of life. We look at a drunkard, poor fellow, and we say: There is sin; that is sin. But that is not the essence of sin. To have a real picture and a true understanding of it, you must look at some great saint, some unusually devout and devoted man. Look at him there upon his knees in the very presence of God. Even there self is intruding itself, and the temptation is for him to think about himself, to think pleasantly and pleurably about himself, and*

really to be worshipping himself rather than God. That, not the other, is the true picture of sin. The other is sin, of course, but there you do not see it at its acme; you do not see it in its essence.

This desire for self-adulation is, therefore, an obstacle to be overcome. And as our Lord will go on to show – it can be overcome. There are those, you know, who would argue against prayer altogether because of the temptation to exalt one's self. I have heard of those who are against church prayer meetings because they think such meetings provide an opportunity to flaunt our piety before each other. By this line of thinking we are able to rule out just about any spiritual exercise. We can rule out preaching – because the preacher may be tempted to preach from wrong motives. His desire may be simply to be seen and heard of men.

What our Lord teaches us in this section as well as in the model prayer that follows is not that prayer is to be surrendered, because of the temptations it may present to our sinful nature – but obstacles must be overcome. He does not say – *don't ever pray, because your sinful nature will always tempt you to put on a show for men.* No – He says rather, *When thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are.* We are to overcome hypocrisy when we pray.

The second obstacle that must be overcome is given to us in v. 7 and this obstacle could be called a distorted view of merit. *When ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.*

I'm reminded of the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1Ki. 18. Each side, so to speak, was to build an altar to their God and then call on their God to send fire. The prophets of Baal went first and they called on their god from morning until noon saying *O Baal, hear us.* And when the length of their praying and the fervency of their praying weren't enough we're told in v. 28 of that chapter that *they cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them.* What devotion, the spectators might have reasoned. They're praying long, and they're praying loud, and they're demonstrating such fervency. It was all in vain, of course, since they were calling on a false God.

But here is a practice of the heathen, that Christ tells us we're to avoid. And I think the point Christ is making is that we must guard ourselves from the temptation of attributing merit to an area where there is no merit. There is no intrinsic merit to the length of our prayers. And there is no intrinsic merit to the volume of our prayers. There is certainly no merit to our own self destruction as an act of devotion.

We must be very careful, therefore, to realize where the merits of our prayers are to be found. I call your attention, once again, to Christ's words back in 5:17 *Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.* The merit upon which God will hear and answer prayer is, therefore, the merit of Christ. He came to fulfil and He did fulfil the law of God. His praying was perfect. His praying was untainted

by sinful human pride. His praying was always with the right aim of glorifying His Father in heaven.

It is because of His merit that you and I can come into God's presence and have our prayers heard and accepted. And so we find encouragement to pray – indeed we find confidence to pray. We know that our own praying is tainted by our own sin. We know that we face the temptation to focus on ourselves and we know that in our selfish pride we may harbor a distorted notion of where the merit of our praying lies. These are obstacles to be overcome and they can be overcome. They can be overcome with that sense of being poor in spirit and meek that we've studied already. And they can be overcome by taking heed to the word which the Lord gives in v. 6 and this leads me to our final consideration. We've seen the implication behind the statement *when ye pray*. We've considered the obstacles that must be overcome when we pray.

Consider finally that *when ye pray*:

III. We Must Aim in the Right Direction

We've seen the two things to be avoided when we pray. These things approach the subject of prayer negatively. There is also a positive precept that our Lord gives in v. 6 – *But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.*

This verse has been misinterpreted to mean that all prayer should be private prayer. This is something of a favorite verse used by secularists who would ban prayer from any and every public institution. According to this mindset – this is one of the reasons prayer need not be allowed in our public schools. This is one of the reasons prayer should not be allowed before our government institutions convene their legislative sessions. And the verse has been used to set forth the notion that prayer meetings in church should not be allowed.

These misapplications of the verse, I believe, completely miss the point that our Lord is making in this text. The idea that there's no place for corporate prayer meetings is easily overcome by the very first word of the Lord's prayer. Note in v. 9 how that prayer begins – *Our Father which art in heaven.*

There is a recognition in this very word *our* that the true subject of the Kingdom of heaven is tied very closely to all the other true subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven. The prayer does not begin *My Father which art in heaven* – but – *Our Father which art in heaven*. There is a consciousness in this first petition that the one who is praying is not merely praying on his own behalf, but he's representing all those who are subjects of the Kingdom.

Add to this the example of the early church in the book of Acts where we read in Acts 1:14 *These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and*

Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren – and I think you can see that our Lord's words in v. 6 were never meant to rule out corporate prayer meetings.

I believe that the point Christ is making in v. 6 can best be determined by remembering what His remark is being contrasted to. We are not to pray as the hypocrites pray in order to be seen of men. This does not necessarily mean that we won't be seen or heard by others – it simply means that our aim is not to be seen by others.

By way of contrast – when we pray we are to pray in such a way that we close in with God. I take this to be the meaning of v. 6 – enter the closet and close the door. It doesn't mean that we literally and physically have to hide so that we're completely out of the view of others – it means, rather, that we spiritually close in with God – so that our focus is more on God than it is on others.

In other words – we're to be very conscious of who we're approaching and who we're addressing. We're to be certain that our faith is in the operating mode, so to speak. We're to be mindful of His glory and His majestic splendor. We're to remember that while we're invited to come boldly we are not invited to come irreverently. And we're to do our best in the power of the Holy Spirit to shut out every distracting element so that we come by faith face to face with the living God.

Simply put – we're to be more God-conscious than we are man-conscious when we come to the place of prayer. It may well be that in order to achieve this end we do need to get away from everybody and everything. There is certainly nothing wrong with literally going to the closet and shutting the door if that's what it takes to close in with Christ.

But on the other hand – where faith is in operation – we can close in with God while walking down a busy street. We can close in with God while we're in a crowded elevator or a bus or an airplane. We can close in with God in any circumstance of life so long as our aim is communing with God through Christ.

Now the question that naturally arises is *how*? How do we close in with God in these varying circumstances? And I believe this question is answered by Christ Himself through the model prayer that He gives us in vv. 9-13. We can close in with God by beginning our praying with our focus on our relationship to God. He's *Our Father which art in heaven*. There's a good way to enter the closet and close the door. *Our Father which art in heaven*. And we close in even further when our focus is on the hallowing of His name. *Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name*.

I believe that if you'll take the time to carefully and thoughtfully begin your praying that way – you will be accomplishing the task of entering the closet, spiritually speaking, and closing the door.

When ye pray – our Lord says. Prayer is a given in the Christian's life. It is, as some have called it – the very breath of the Christian. This does not mean that it's necessarily easy. Quite the contrary – there are obstacles to be overcome – but those obstacles are overcome

when we learn how to truly enter the closet and close the door. May God help us, then, to be engaged much in the practice of prayer in the right way and for the right reasons.