

Sermon Title: When You Pray  
Scripture Text: Matt. 6:5-8 (Sermon on the Mount #20)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 12-13-20

---

Let's come this morning to Matthew Chapter 6. We are continuing in the Sermon on the Mount. We are in what, in our Bibles, is the second of the three chapters which are the inspired summary of all that Jesus preached on that day (see also Lk. 6:20-49).

And now, we come to the subject of prayer. It's another situation in which Jesus used some of the twisted things of the "scribes" and the "Pharisees"—the "hypocrites," as He called them (Matt. 23:13-15, 23, 25, 27, 29)—to contrast between what they were teaching and what the truth is.

This time, as I say, it's about prayer. Today are the four verses which are the run-up to a very familiar portion of Scripture which is usually titled "The Lord's Prayer." Next time we come to the Sermon on the Mount, that will be what we'll be looking at.

But today, we're going to talk about prayer in a more general way. I've titled it "When You Pray," because that's what Jesus said: "When you pray, don't do this but do this, and here's why."

I think a lot of people are convinced that prayer is a wonderful gift from God, but they just can't figure out what He wants them to do with it. They try to use this gift, but sometimes it seems more frustrating than useful. Sometimes it seems wonderful, but sometimes it actually feels like a *burden* rather than a blessing. They can't get rid of it—it's not a gift you can *regift*—but, try as they might, they also can't seem to be blessed by this gift; and the more testimonies they hear about how wonderful it is—when, in fact, in *their* experience, it's frustrating—the more disillusioned some people can become.

Prayer is poorly understood by many Christians; and because it's not always well-understood, talking about it from a purely Biblical perspective sometimes produces spiritual indigestion. Prayer is one of those things where there is theology, and then there's *mythology* that seems to get attached to it as well. If you read something you aren't accustomed to, it can cause physical indigestion; and learning something that you aren't accustomed to spiritually can cause you to feel kind of a spiritual indigestion—kind of a discomfort with that.

Many books and sermons about prayer mainly produce a *huge* load of guilt, rather than encouragement. Have you ever read a book about prayer and said, "Ah, I'm so glad I pray this much"? No! It's always, "You need to pray *more!* You need to pray *better!* You need to pray *more seriously,* more fervently!"

Well, I want to help you understand that prayer is part of your *relationship* with your heavenly Father (Jn. 16:27); and I want you to feel, not guilt, but more confidence and more encouragement than ever in spending time communicating with Him (see Ps. 6:9; 62:8; Prov. 15:8). I mean, it's *you,* and *you* get to talk to God Almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth, who is holding the whole world together by His power (Heb. 1:3)—and He loves to hear from you *personally* (1 Pet. 3:12). If that isn't a mind-boggling, joy-filled, humility-producing thing, I don't know what is!

Sermon Title: When You Pray  
Scripture Text: Matt. 6:5-8 (Sermon on the Mount #20)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 12-13-20

---

Now, nobody can understand *exactly* how prayer functions within the infinite mind of God. If you think you *can* explain that, well then, you've got a pride problem—because you can explain something that only God knows! But I'll try to tell you what the Bible says, and then we'll try to *stop* with what the Bible says.

The repeated error throughout history, in many areas of Bible doctrine, is that people take *part* of what the Bible says, and they carry that thing to an extreme so that they wind up discounting or ignoring other things that the Bible says; and prayer is a classic example of that problem, in illustration form.

One extreme emphasizes the great truth—the life-changing, majestic truth—of God's sovereignty. If you emphasize that to the point that you subordinate everything else to that one truth, it's a problem. In its most extreme application, that view holds that, since God will work according to His perfect will, regardless of what men may pray (Eph. 1:11), then it really doesn't matter if you pray. Trust me, that's not what the Bible says (see Matt. 7:7; Jn. 16:24; cf. Jas. 4:2b; 1 Jn. 5:14). For those who think like that, prayer amounts to nothing more than "you tuning in to God's will." Now, I've *said* that, because that *is* a joyful product of prayer; it *does* help me think through and understand the will of God as I seek to apply what the Word of God says, and want to pray according to that. But there's *more* than that!

On the other extreme, there is the view that God's actions pertaining to us are largely determined on the basis of our prayers. When I was very new in Christ, I heard somebody who seemed to really know what he was talking about say: "Prayer is the slender nerve which moves the hand of God." I was blown away by that. You mean, *when I pray*, God's hand moves?!? Can I cause Him to have a reflex action to my prayer? Uh-oh, what if I pray wrong and I hit His funny-bone? Am I actually touching the nerve of the hand of God? And what *is* the "nerve of the hand of God," anyway? That saying sounds really good, though.

Or, pretty much in that same time frame, I was a very young Christian and I happened to tune in on the TV to Jimmy Swaggart's program. I didn't know anything about him at that time. I didn't know the flaws of what he said; it *seemed* like the "Christian" thing, and he said specifically: "God's hands are *tied* until we pray!" Uh-oh! You mean, if I don't flick the switch of the nerve of God, poor God *can't do anything*?! I kind of saw through that one right away.

But, who is right? *Both* of those extremes *leave out* a whole bunch of stuff. Is prayer a way of lining up with God over what He has *already* determined to do, and it doesn't matter whether I ask or not? Or is prayer a matter of begging and pleading with God until I convince Him to do something that He otherwise *wouldn't* do? Well, the fact is, the Bible teaches and illustrates things that *lean* toward *both* of those views—but *not* to an extreme, and not to the exclusion of the other. Rather than subordinating one to the other, or vice versa, the Bible teaches *simultaneously* that God is absolutely sovereign—He knows "the end from the beginning" (Is. 46:10); we cannot overpower Him (Dan. 4:35; cf. Pr. 21:30); He is not dependent upon us in any way (Acts 17:25; Rom. 11:35)—

Sermon Title: When You Pray  
Scripture Text: Matt. 6:5-8 (Sermon on the Mount #20)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 12-13-20

---

but the Bible *also* teaches that *within* His inexplicable sovereignty, He calls us to pray! (Phil. 4:6; cf. Ezek. 36:37) It's just like: God "chose" you "before the foundation of the world" that you would believe in Him (Eph. 1:4; cf. Jn. 6:37, 44, 65; Acts 13:48; 2 Thess. 2:13)—and yet, He begs you: "Come" (Matt. 11:28), "Be reconciled" (2 Cor. 5:20)! Well, what is it? Is it your choice, or is it God's will? And the answer is: "Yes!" It's *both* at the same time! If you let go of either one of those, you lose your balance.

We rightly ask God for guidance, for protection, for daily provision, for mercy, for forgiveness, for any and every need. James 1:5—"But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." (NASB-1995, and throughout, unless otherwise noted)

It is not your duty—it is not even *possible* for you—to try to figure out how or why prayer is effective; and many are led astray by some conclusions that go beyond what the Bible says (1 Cor. 4:6). So let's look at what the Bible says, let's *take it* for what it says, let's *apply it* as it is meant to be applied...and then leave it there; and realize: You're not going to figure out all the whys and the wherefores.

And I want you to understand: Since prayer is one of those things—kind of like Christmas—where there is great theology, and there is also a whole bunch of silly *mythology*, it is quite possible that when we open the Scriptures and look at what God says about prayer, some of your own long-held beliefs about prayer *might* be exposed as flawed. That's okay! Don't be frightened. I thoroughly believe that you will find that what Jesus actually teaches about prayer is both simple and liberating. And if it attacks one of your favorite misunderstandings, understand: Sacred cows do make good hamburger; and sometimes, we need to slaughter them because they're not helping us. Most things that man comes up with on a subject so close to the heart of God as prayer are *just the opposite* of what Jesus says. Jesus gives us something simple and liberating; and then we think about it real hard, and make it complicated and burdensome (cf. Mk. 2:27).

When You Pray: Matthew Chapter 6, Verses 5 through 8. These four verses fit quite neatly into a three-point outline. Number 1: How And Where *Not* To Pray, Verse 5. Number 2: How And Where *To* Pray, Verses 6 and 7. And then, Number 3: Why You Can Pray Sincerely, Verse 8—I think the best verse in this *whole chapter* about prayer.

Let's start at Verse 5—"When you pray..." Now, understand: When Jesus says that, He's *assuming* you're going to pray. He doesn't *command* that you pray; He *assumes* you're going to pray! God's people pray! You can't know God and not want to pray (Ps. 42:1). It's like prayer is to spiritual life like breathing is to physical life. You inhale; you take in what He says to you—that's His Word. You exhale; you "pour out your heart [to] Him" (Ps. 62:8)—that's prayer.

So, "When you pray"—now He's going to tell you what not to do—"you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full."

Sermon Title: When You Pray  
Scripture Text: Matt. 6:5-8 (Sermon on the Mount #20)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 12-13-20

---

This is like all the other examples that Jesus has used of the problems with the teaching of the Pharisees. We started with them at Chapter 5, Verse 21, and we've gone through a series of them all the way through the end of Chapter 5, and now He's talked about giving in the beginning of Chapter 6, and now He turns to prayer.

The Pharisees and the scribes had corrupted and twisted what the Scriptures actually teach. In Jesus's day, most Jews didn't understand the essence of prayer. They didn't understand the essence of a relationship with God, because it had been filtered out under the mound of legalism that had been poured over the top of it by the scribes and the Pharisees. And these days, a lot of Christians are equally unsure what to do with prayer.

He's talking here about any kind of praying: public, private, specific, general—whatever it might be. There was a tremendous amount of cultural peer pressure for a devoted Jew in that day to pray. There were morning prayers, afternoon prayers, evening prayers. According to the historian Josephus, there were sacrifices, including prayers, that were offered in the temple twice a day—in the early morning and at the ninth hour, which is about three o'clock—and there was also a sunset service. So if you were in or near Jerusalem, it was natural to try to go to the temple as often as possible at those times. If you weren't near the temple, maybe you would try to go to the synagogue as often as possible during those times, or you might even stand on a street-corner and pray at those prescribed times.

By the way, I don't know if you've ever done it before, but if you've ever been around a group of Jewish people praying, you'll see it isn't quite like what we usually do in our prayer meetings. We sit politely in a circle, and we take turns talking to God. Jewish folks usually stand, and they all pray at once; sometimes they all pray out loud at once—it can be kind of frightening!

But when you think about it, that's a whole lot more *efficient* than the way we do it. I mean, it's not as if God can only listen to one voice at a time! Trust me—with seven and a half billion people in the world, and quite a few million of them being Christians, there's no time that you can pray that somebody else isn't praying. Don't worry about God being able to sort it out! He has *a lot* of bandwidth, if you want to use common terminology. So it was very common for them to pray, and it was a public thing.

In the Old Testament, faithful people prayed while they were standing, while they were kneeling, sometimes while they were lying prostrate—or, in no particular posture whatsoever. The most normal situation in which they prayed was standing, so the part of this verse about "stand and pray"—that's not the issue; that was normal for people to stand and pray.

The issue was: praying in such a way, and in such places, so as to *maximize* the possibility of being seen by other people, just like what He said in the four verses before this—giving in such a way as to maximize the possibility that people see you give, and they praise you for it.

Sermon Title: When You Pray  
Scripture Text: Matt. 6:5-8 (Sermon on the Mount #20)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 12-13-20

---

Scripture does not condemn public prayer, nor does it condemn private prayer in a public place. It's certainly not a problem if you pray on a bus, in a restaurant, wherever you might be.

What the Lord is condemning is ostentatious praying—praying so as to be seen by other people. That's called *sin*. That's *pride*. That's *arrogance*. That's the *opposite* of humble faith. Making a show of how you pray by calling attention to it so others will be impressed, or telling them how often you pray, boasting about the time that you spend in prayer or the fervor that you attach to it—that's just *out of bounds* for what Jesus is talking about!

When Jesus spoke of the difference between the Pharisee and the tax gatherer—you know that one over in Luke Chapter 18, when He compared the two praying in a public setting—the hypocrite did it so that there was the greatest likelihood of being noticed. The tax gatherer did it sincerely, with the greatest humility, "even unwilling to lift up his eyes" (vs. 13); *he* was talking to the Lord, and Jesus said *that man* "went to his house justified rather than the other" (vs. 14).

So Jesus's message here regarding prayer is the same as giving, it's the same as adultery, it's the same as lying, it's the same as anger, it's the same as broken relationships: The inner attitude is what is most important. God blesses *the heart* that is truly and humbly devoted to Him (2 Chr. 16:9; Ps. 84:5; 112:7).

When Jesus spoke this, He was talking to people; there were scribes and Pharisees present, and He singles them out and goes after them pretty specifically, but He was also talking to people mainly who were under their influence; and we have a pretty good understanding of what the teachings about prayer were that were keeping these people in bondage—some of the errors that had crept into Jewish prayer practices by that time. We can make a little list of them, and it will illustrate what Jesus is saying, and it'll tell you *why* Jesus said what He said; and also, I think it'll help you see some of the same problems today.

One thing about their prayers is that they had become *ritualized*. The wording of the prayers was often formulaic; it was memorized to be repeated "by rote" (Is. 29:13). Those two-or-three-times-a-day prayers in the temple could very easily degenerate from genuine devotion into an opportunity to parade your piety—you could say the prayer more eloquently than someone else could because you knew the ritual better.

Closely related to that, they had developed *prescribed prayers* for virtually every occasion. Now, you can repeat a prescribed prayer, and if it happens to be what you are genuinely thinking in your heart, that's perfectly fine. But it can also be just an outward pretense of devotion; it *could be* just a show.

They also *limited* prayer mainly to those specific times and those occasions. Now, there's nothing wrong with praying at predetermined times—that's perfectly fine. There's nothing wrong with praying in conjunction with certain activities, like praying at every meal, or

Sermon Title: When You Pray  
Scripture Text: Matt. 6:5-8 (Sermon on the Mount #20)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 12-13-20

---

having a set time in your day to pray. But when that's *all you do* to pray—just hit the mark of those specific times—you're missing the point that prayer is a relationship-thing, it's a person-to-Person communication between you and God! First Thessalonians 5:17, that command to "Pray without ceasing"—I don't see a schedule attached to that! That's *anytime, anywhere, anybody, any issue*—you can pray "at all times" (Ps. 62:8; Eph. 6:18; cf. Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2; 2 Tim. 1:3).

They also put very high esteem on *long* prayers. We know what Jesus said just a day or two before He went to the Cross: "In His teaching, He was saying: 'Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes'—they were *there* walking around in "long robes" when He said that—"and like respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets, who devour widows' houses"—and then He goes on right after this to talk about the widow who gave the last two coins she had, and then went home to basically give up; that's what their religion did to them—"and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation' " (Mk. 12:38-40)—Wow! Those are pretty strong words!

Now, it isn't that a long prayer automatically makes you a hypocrite, automatically means you're insincere; but a long prayer *lends itself* to pretense. Many people back then, and many people now, believe that the longer the prayer, the more likely that it will be answered in the affirmative. And that's another problem—we only think of answered prayer as: We got what we wanted. *All* prayers are answered; we'll get to that in the next couple of visits here.

The fifth thing that we know about this is that they frequently used *meaningless repetition*, just like pagans did in their prayers. Do you remember how the priests of Baal prayed during that "battle of the sacrifices" that they had with Elijah? We're told about it in First Kings Chapter 18, Verses 26 and 29. It says they "called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, 'O Baal, answer us!'... When midday was past, they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice..." We're just going to keep saying it and saying it and saying it and saying it and saying it and saying it—and *eventually*, we're going to wear him down, and he will answer us!

There's another one, very closely related as well. It was the worst for a fault; it was the overarching flaw that Jesus was getting at here. It was that they prayed with *the desire to be seen and heard by other people*.

Now, is it a sin to repeat a prayer over and over again? No. That can be the outpouring of an earnestly-felt need. I mean, is there anybody that you know who isn't saved, and you keep praying for them? *Of course you do!* It's not the *repetition itself*, it's the repetition so that you repeat it enough times to make sure that everybody there knows what you're saying. Same with a long prayer—sometimes a long prayer is the only way to unburden your heavy heart. Same thing with praying at a specific time—that can be a very healthy spiritual discipline. Even praying a well-written prayer on a specific occasion—that might truly express your heart to God, and what you really mean.

Sermon Title: When You Pray  
Scripture Text: Matt. 6:5-8 (Sermon on the Mount #20)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 12-13-20

---

Those things aren't wrong in themselves, *except* when they're taken too far, and mainly in order to be seen and heard by men. *That's evil!* If your desire in praying is to be seen and heard by men, that's it! That's not motivated for the glory of God, that's motivated for *self*-glory; that's just pride, it's hypocrisy (cf. Prov. 21:27). If you want people to notice you praying, or if you want them to know that you pray a lot, then your greatest reward will be: if they notice.

Next, Jesus gives us a very simple and direct description of How *To Pray*—a way that you pray that is pleasing to God: How And Where To Pray, Verses 6 and 7; we'll start with Verse 6—"But you, when you pray"—there's the phrase again: "when *you* pray"—"go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

"Go into your inner room"—where is that? Well, it's where you would go if there was a tornado coming. What He means is: Get alone, get isolated (cf. Matt. 14:23). The point is to do the *opposite* of making yourself conspicuous. The emphasis isn't on the layout of the place in which you pray, it's *the attitude of your mind* when you pray. Prayer, according to Jesus, is to be done mainly at a time when you shut out the world. You get alone with God. You go to your "inner room" where it's just you and the Lord, and nobody else is watching, and nobody else is hearing.

And He says "close your door"—that describes secluding yourself from distractions. *Most* of your prayer is meant to be in private—between you and God. Corporate prayer—well, it has a valid place (1 Tim. 2:8). I prayed on behalf of us all, earlier in the service. We are told, for example, to come together and to pray "for kings and all who are in authority" over us (1 Tim. 2:2); we're told to pray "together" (Acts 4:31; 12:12)—that's perfectly fine, but it should be a small fraction of our prayer time compared to praying in private (Lk. 18:1; Rom. 12:12b; 1 Thess. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:5; 2 Tim. 1:3).

Look at a cool phrase there: "Close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret..." God meets you in that secret place. Well, after all, He is with you all the time everywhere anyway, right? He *is* omnipresent (Ps. 139:7-10; Jer. 23:24). But the only purpose for flaunting your praying is so that other people will be impressed. And notice, He says God "*is* in secret," not just He "sees in secret"—He does see in secret, but *He's there*; you don't have to go *find* Him! He's with you, so just shut off everything else and talk to Him. You know what? *He likes that!* He *enjoys* that! It pleases Him (Prov. 15:8b; cf. Ps. 141:2; Rev. 5:8).

And then when He says "your Father who sees what is done in secret," it means that He's not impressed with the outward display that other people see; He responds to you on the basis of what is in your heart (see 1 Sam. 16:7b). *Even if* you are doing that praying in public, even if other people *do* see it, even if they *are* impressed, God is going to deal with one thing: you and your heart; *that's* what He is going to respond to, regardless of any façade that you might put up along the way. There's a song that Marsha and I like; it's not a profound song; it's not particularly spectacularly artful, but one line from it we love: "God is not impressed with the loftiness of men." I remind myself of that *all the time*.

Sermon Title: When You Pray  
Scripture Text: Matt. 6:5-8 (Sermon on the Mount #20)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 12-13-20

---

Now look at Verse 7—"And when you are praying"—so notice: "when you pray" (vs. 5), "when you pray" (vs. 6), "when you are praying" (vs. 7)...He *assumes* you're going to pray—"do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words."

This is a condemnation of certain kinds of prayers that are essentially patterned after pagans. It's pagan thinking that says: The longer and louder you pray, the greater the chance of getting the desired results. Remember First Kings 18? The priests of Baal cried out in prayer "from morning until noon" and they hadn't gotten what they wanted, so they kept on doing it until "evening."

This one is *really* common. In certain corners of Buddhism, you can find the prayer wheel, inscribed with certain written prayers to recite; you're supposed to ritualistically work your way around the wheel. The Rosary is another example of violating the very same principle: You get your prayers answered, you earn merit with God by praying the same thing over and over and over and over and over—repeat it, repeat it, repeat it, repeat it...it's *exactly* the right thing to do today, and exactly the same prayer is the right thing to do tomorrow, no matter what your circumstances are.

The flaw behind *all* of those things is the notion that the acceptability of your prayer depends, at least in part, on the number of words or the number of prayers that we can rattle off! It's turning it into a mechanistic-thing instead of a relationship-thing.

And it astounds me that so many Christians fall into *exactly* the same thinking by taking the *model* prayer that Jesus gave to the disciples—it's coming up; it's only two verses away now—and so many Christians take that *model* prayer, two verses after the verse that condemns "meaningless repetition," and they turn that *model* prayer into a *ritual* prayer to be recited corporately, every time you get together!

Now, is that an *evil* thing to do? No; it's Scripture, and I don't mind you reading Scripture, memorizing Scripture; I don't mind us saying Scripture all together—but when you think that there is some kind of *special power* attached to *the ritual* of reciting that prayer...Friends, you've *got to* have a memory longer than two verses, and He just said: Don't do it with "meaningless repetition," so don't meaninglessly recite what He gave you.

Now, don't get me wrong! Recite it if you want to—but it's *not* a ritual, it's an *example*. And when we come back and study it, you'll see what a *glorious* example it is. That example will open up *all sorts* of vistas for ways to pray that may just make your prayer life more glorious than you've ever known before!

He tells us How And Where *Not* To Pray, How And Where *To* Pray: in the "inner room, close your door"—that should be your emphasis. But here's really the coolest part of this whole section: Why You Can Pray Sincerely. Chapter 6, Verse 8—"So do not be like them..." "Them" who? "Them" Pharisees, "them" scribes—the ones who do it as a ritual, over and over with repetition, publicly to be seen by men—"Do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."



Sermon Title: When You Pray  
Scripture Text: Matt. 6:5-8 (Sermon on the Mount #20)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 12-13-20

---

And you say, "Aha! That's on the extreme that you talked about, you sneaky *Calvinist*, you! I mean, God 'knows what you need before you ask Him,' so you don't need to ask Him!" Does it say that? *No!* This is a *great* comfort! This is a *great* encouragement! But maybe up to this point, you've been starting to think, "Why pray at all? My sacred cow is *staggering* over there—she's about to go down! What am I supposed to *do* with this?"

Well, look: Jesus wasn't condemning pouring out your heart to God (see Matt. 26:41; Lk. 18:1, 7). If it takes you an hour to do that, *take an hour!* If it's one of those emergency prayers—"Help, Lord" (Ps. 12:1); "Lord, save me!" (Matt. 14:30)—*do it!* "Pray without ceasing!"—*any* time, *all* times, *every* situation, *every* circumstance, *every* need, *every* time you don't have the "wisdom" that you need. So He's not condemning pouring out your heart to God; He's not commenting on telling God things that He already knows as if that's a problem, because you *can't* say anything in prayer that God doesn't already know (see Ps. 139:4; 147:5; Is. 46:9-10; Jn. 16:30; 21:17).

But *He loves to hear from you!* (Prov. 15:8b) He's called "your heavenly *Father*" (Matt. 5:48), right? Now, you understand how earthly fathers and mothers work. They understand their child better than anybody. They know his or her needs better than anyone else does. Well then, when the child will go with his needs to his mother or father, that's *exactly* what the loving parents *want* their child to do! When they come and say, "Mom, Dad," it melts your heart, doesn't it? And *you* know that they don't understand the full big picture, but they know that you're Mom, they know that you're Dad; and maybe they just need a hug! They just need to pour out their heart. They need to say what hurts.

You know, God delights in hearing the cries of *His* children—your joys *and* your sorrows! (Ps. 62:8) Think of it this way: God is in this relationship with you, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in joy and in sorrow, and in sickness and in health—and He says, "Come, talk to Me!"

What Jesus condemned is the spirit of fear and distrust that would cause a person to be skittish about approaching God, and babbling on and on to try to placate Him to get Him to respond favorably. He's already your Father! (1 Jn. 3:1) He already adopted you! (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5) He sent His Son to die, to bring you into this relationship! (Rom. 8:32) *He just wants to hear from you*, and He loves it!

Let me tell you this, too: Language doesn't matter in prayer. I know that it's possible to be intimidated by the way that some people pray. Several times, I was in the presence of a pastor that I knew; he's with the Lord now. He could pray, and he would make you suspect that you were hearing the echo of God's own voice! I mean, when he prayed, I felt *small*—and that's a good thing, because in the eyes of God, I am; but I come to my *loving* heavenly Father! (Jn. 16:27) When you hear some precious saint lapse into perfect Elizabethan English to pray, you might wonder if God would *ever* be listening to *your* stumbling little prayers. When you're around people who seem to pray in public as if it's second nature, you wonder if your prayers could ever be adequate. Trust me: *they are.*

Sermon Title: When You Pray  
Scripture Text: Matt. 6:5-8 (Sermon on the Mount #20)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 12-13-20

---

Maybe you're poor at speaking in front of people in *any* situation; and so, to do something as intimate and personal as let someone else hear your prayers—that may *paralyze* you! I have good news for you: You have an "inner room." Go there! "Close your door!" Stammer! Babble! Repeat yourself! Spend as long as you need to! The good news is: *none of those things matter in prayer!* The idea of using different pronouns and different verb forms in prayer or in quoting Scripture—*that's utterly ridiculous!*

God listens to your heart. By the way: Speaking with God is the *one and only time* that you can say that horribly-overworked phrase, and it's true—you can say: "You know! You know what I mean." Do you see it there? "...for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (vs. 8). He's the only one to whom you can say, "You know what I mean," and you can know for sure that you are speaking to someone who *truly* knows what you mean! And better than that, He *understands* what you mean—probably better than you do; He *cares* more than anyone (1 Pet. 5:7); and He can *do something to help!*

My friends, don't let prayer *intimidate* you! Let prayer just *warm your heart* to say, "I get to talk to God?!? And He *knows*?!? And He *cares*?!? And He deals with me *individually* and *personally*?!? I don't have to be dressed right, sitting in the right position; I can be in my 'inner place,' with the door shut; and He knows what I need, even before I ask Him?"

Now, my friends, I don't want to pray to anybody *but* Him! If He *didn't* know what I need, why would I go to *Him*, if He has to stumble around and figure it out? When you pray, God never says, "Well, let Me work on that a little while, and I'll get back to you." God "knows what you need before you ask." But notice the key thing: He knows what you *need*. We pray according to what we *know*, we ask for what we *want*, we ask for what we think best, and He gives us what we *need*—what we need for His glory (cf. Jas. 4:3).

I'm going to share something with you as we close; I read it many, many years ago, and I've come back to it every time that I've studied prayer. It was written during World War 2, so this was written before I showed up on the planet. It was written by an Army chaplain; he wrote it for "His" Magazine, a Christian periodical in those days. We used to have this system where people would print things up and staple them together and mail them to you; they were called "magazines"—kind of a physical blog, if you will. He wrote this one for "His" Magazine; the title was: "Some Pray And Die."

It gets to a question that I haven't fully touched on today; we'll do more when we study the so-called "Lord's Prayer," but this overlaps with the issue of us accepting the leading of God, with us coming to Him understanding that He knows what we need before we even ask. See if your faith lines up with this guy's observations. It's a longer quote than I usually read, but I think you'll like it.

Now, remember: he's writing to men in war. He says: "Is there such a thing as getting the 'breaks' in prayer? What about the fellows who pray regularly, but get killed regularly?...I wish people would stop writing about the soldiers who pray and have their prayers answered by not getting killed. Why do all the other soldiers seem to get the *wrong* answer?"

Sermon Title: When You Pray  
Scripture Text: Matt. 6:5-8 (Sermon on the Mount #20)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 12-13-20

---

"What I want to know is this: What sort of an extra-special, super-powered prayer is needed to make everything turn out the way you want? That sounds facetious, almost irreverent; but I'm serious. I really want to know. I'm an army chaplain, and I could use some special prayers with my men—and heaven knows, we need them badly at times. Because the fact is, there are always more men who pray to come back than there are men who get back. Quite a lot more. What *is* the deciding factor?

"The thing for all of us to remember is this: *Someone else* does the answering...What you have in mind may not be what God has in mind. If you ask Him something, you must be willing to take what He gives...That is why I am a bit depressed by the writings of those who try to get other people to pray by telling them that you get what you want. People must learn to want what they get...When I talk to soldiers about prayer, I try to tell them that they must be adults. God expects us to be men! Only children demand a happy ending to every story. How old must we be before we begin to realize that even prayer can't get us everything we want, unless the thing we want is right for us to have?

"Who gets the breaks in prayer? Nobody. There is no such thing. We get what God, in His infinite love and foreknowledge, sees fit to give. That's not always the same as getting what we want. But it ought to be."

He wrestled with it! They all prayed they would survive this battle, but 20 of them were killed...Do you understand: God is the One who is answering, and He knows what we need, even before we ask (Ps. 84:11); so we can "pour out our heart to Him," we can "trust Him" (Ps. 62:8). And understand: Every prayer is answered! The typical three most common answers are: Yes, No, and Not Now. Well, wait! Every prayer is answered. And do you hear in there the echoes of the heresies of our days? "Come to Jesus and you'll get healthy and you'll get wealthy and you'll always get what you want!" No, no, no! That's not the God that *we're* talking about. Jesus says, "But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you... for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." Let's ask Him some things, shall we?

*Father, how we thank You for Your great grace; and we do ask You to strengthen our faith, to comfort us in our afflictions, to encourage us in our moments of weakness, to embolden us in our moments of fear, to strengthen us for the task that You've called us to. And Father, I know that You know what we need, even before we ask. How astounding, Father, that I can stand here in front of my friends and pray, and know that You are dealing with every single heart individually, exactly according to what we need. What a great God You are! What an unspeakable privilege to know You; to be declared righteous in Christ; to be justified by faith; to be standing in grace; and to know, Father, that not only do You delight to hear from us, but You delight to use us. In this season of celebrating the arrival of Your Son, please put on our lips the great good news of the Gospel: that that Son came, and that He died and rose again and ascended back to You, all so that our sins can be forgiven. Thank You, Father, for this marvelous existence into which You've called us, that we know as eternal life. To You be the glory, in Jesus' name. Amen.*