

Introduction

Prayer is critical to the life of a Christ follower. Martin Luther said, "To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing." The Bible highlights the importance of daily prayer more than 250 times. Consider some of the biblical directives to pray.

1 Thessalonians 5:16 – pray without ceasing

Philippians 4:6 – in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Colossians 4:2 – Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

Jeremiah 29:12 – Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.

Romans 12:12 – Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

Psalms 145:18 – The Lord is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.

Jeremiah 33:3 – Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.

Hebrews 4:16 – Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

1 Peter 4:7 – The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.

James 4:2 – You do not have, because you do not ask.

Ephesians 6:18-19 – praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel,

That we should pray seems to be clear. But the question remains, “How are we to pray?” The Jews were big on prayer. There were prescribed prayers for them to pray at certain times and in the midst of specific situations. But here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was addressing many warped perspectives held and practices performed by the Jews and especially the Scribes and the Pharisees. And among the concerns he addressed was prayer. They may have prayed a lot, but how to pray was no less important than that they pray.

In this particular section of his sermon, Jesus was explaining the worthlessness of practicing righteousness before others in order to be noticed by them. Whether giving to the needy, praying, or fasting, these aspects of worship are ruined if they are motivated by a desire to be noticed or applauded by other human beings. And as Jesus mentions prayer in particular, he expands his instruction to address several fundamental elements which answer the question, “how are we to pray?” Starting today, we are going to focus carefully on Jesus’ instructions in the Sermon on the Mount on how to pray.

[Read Text and Pray]

I. Even Lost People Pray (v. 5)

Notice that Jesus begins the section on prayer with the complete awareness that people of all kinds pray.

A. He begins the section saying, “And when you pray.” He recognizes that people pray. Even lost people pray. Jesus emphasizes that hypocrites pray. The behavior of hypocrites betrays them. They say one thing but do another. They profess holiness but are full of death. But nevertheless, hypocrites pray. In Jesus portrayal, hypocrites do not belong to the kingdom. They pretend to love the kingdom. They make a great show of

loving God, but their hearts are far from him. The prayers of hypocrites are more of an offense to God than anything else. And yet hypocrites pray.

B. In verse 7 Jesus says again, "And when you pray." This time his attention is on the Gentiles. The word Gentile is literally translated "nations." It points to all the non-Jewish peoples of the world. And in this setting the intent is to express the prayers of the peoples of the nations according to their pagan beliefs and practices. The stress is on the lostness of the peoples of the world. Before the gospel came, Paul describes the Gentiles (Ephesians 2) as "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world."

But people without hope and without God in the world pray. They cry out to pagan idols. They cry out to the sun, to the moon, to Baal, to Artemis, to the Great Spirit. But they cry out. People know deep within their hearts that human beings are not the result of a chance collision of atoms. The other day I saw a cartoon drawing of two snowmen. One was saying to the other, "Don't be absurd! Nobody made us! We evolved by chance from snowflakes!" Some human beings argue there is no God, but they really know the absurdity of such thinking. Even lost people can recognize the absurdity of such thinking. And one of the universal evidences is prayer. People need someone greater than they are. And they cry out for that someone greater to help them, especially when they are in trouble.

Now, that does not mean their prayers are acceptable to the one true God, but part of Jesus' point is that they pray.

C. Jesus is speaking specifically to his disciples and to the multitudes and he says, "When you pray." He did not say if you pray, but when. Hypocrites pray. Pagans pray. And you should too. Citizens of the kingdom of God, followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, sincere lovers of the one true God, Jesus basically assumes that we will be praying.

A question I have for us this morning is "Are we?" Are we praying? Do we pray? Do we pray? Is it a regular thing for us? At the very least, this far into what Jesus is saying, it is the thing we first need to consider. Do we as

Paul said of himself to the Ephesians, "bow our knees before the Father"? Do we not cease to give thanks and pray? Are we devoted to prayer? Are we regular and consistent? Is prayer the life stream that feeds our relationship to God?

Prayer is not an option to the disciple of Christ. And it is not an occasional once-in-a-while booster. It is life and it reflects the vitality we have in respect to the God of the universe. If hypocrites pray and if pagans pray, then what of those of us who worship the one true God and his Son Jesus Christ?

It is a matter of discipline in the life of a Christ-follower to deal death to the lazy flesh. Every day the flesh beats against the very fundamentals of walking with God. It tells us it is not that important to read the word of God. It tells us we are tired and fellowshiping with other believers is not that important. It tells us that outreach is more important than church. And it certainly tells us that we really do not need to pray. After all God is going to do what God is going to do.

It is like a husband reasoning that he is married and he is never going to be any more married than he is, so why spend time with his wife? Why talk to her? Why cultivate the relationship? It is just as absurd that the flesh seeks to persuade us that we really do not need to pray.

We should respond with a sermon to our hearts. And here is the sermon. Jesus did not say, "If you pray . . ." but "when you pray." Hypocrites pray. Pagans pray. And if they in their lost condition are smart enough to pray, how could I be so foolish?" How could I neglect the life connection to the God I love?! No I can't and I must not.

D. This is New Year's Eve. It is a good time for us all to take stock of how we pray. Some people are not fans of resolutions. They say, "I don't want to resolve to do something I know I am not going to do." Well, that is not a resolution. A resolution is a personal determination to act. And transformation starts with resolve. And whether it is a new year's resolution or a new week's resolution, or a new day's resolution, you cannot go wrong resolving for the glory of God and the strength of your walk with Jesus

Christ to be devoted to prayer, to be consistent in prayer, to daily bow your knees before the Father! For crying out loud even lost people pray. What about you?

Jesus not only recognizes that lost people pray, he also has something to say about . . .

II. How Lost People Pray

The fact that lost people pray is good enough to exhort God's saved people to pray. But how lost people pray is a lesson in how not to do it.

A. Jesus begins with the hypocrites. "You must NOT be like the hypocrites." So what is wrong with the prayers of the hypocrites? They love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners. That sounds pretty good. They love to stand and pray! Standing and praying was a common posture. Furthermore, the Jews had certain times that a prayer was called for and if on a street corner, well then on a street corner. Loving to pray is a wonderful thing. The problem with the Jewish hypocrites wasn't that they loved to pray. It was why they loved to pray. More than anything they loved to pray because it gave them prominence in the performance of a religious work in front of others. Being seen by others, this was what they really wanted. They were proud and thought highly of themselves. They cherished the regard and the applause of other people. They did not pray for the glory of God but for their own glory.

That is not what prayer is for. Pray? Yes! Pray for recognition and applause? That does not please God. Jesus declares that God does not reward such praying! You pray for the applause of others, take what you can get because that is all you will get!

B. From the hypocrites, Jesus turns to the pagans. The Gentiles heap up empty phrases, hoping to be heard for their many words. The Gentile or pagan approach to prayer is to get what they want. They approach a given deity to receive a favor from the deity in accordance with their longings. And so they approach the deity in a performance mode. They hope to receive from a deity because a deity is pleased with their performance or somehow persuaded by their many words. They use their words to manipulate the deity.

It is impersonal and self-centered on the part of all involved. For the pagan, there is no sense that the deity really cares or that the one who is praying loves the deity. It is all business. It is all show. It is a combination of fear and manipulation. The god uses the worshiper, and the worshiper uses the god.

This is not the way it is with the one true God. This is not the God of whose glory Jesus is the radiance and of whose image he is the exact imprint.

C. So here is how not to pray. Do not pray for your own applause. And do not pray as a heartless, superstitious manipulator. This is not who God is and this is not what pleases him.

From focusing on how not to pray, Jesus turns to teach instead . . .

III. How God's People Ought to Pray

The way God's people, the citizens of His kingdom, ought to pray is in contrast to the hypocrites and the Gentiles.

A. In contrast to the prayer of the hypocrites, the prayer which is a delight to God is secret prayer. Here is how Jesus expresses it. "When you pray go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret." The sign that this manner of prayer pleases God is that he rewards those who pray this way.

Properly interpreting what Jesus is saying is important. What is fundamentally wrong with the approach of the hypocrites is not actually where they are but why they pray. They pray to be noticed by other humans. When Jesus says go into your room, he is emphasizing the point that pleasing prayer is prayer that is unaware or which does not care that anyone else is listening. It is prayer for the ear and for the heart of God. There is nothing wrong with public prayer in the church or on the street corner. Prayer is communing with God, not performing for men to call attention to me. MacArthur rightly says, "The closet could be the street if you were unpretentious and silent and unattracting."

B. Second, in contrast to the Gentiles, the prayer which is a delight to God is one that conceives of him rightly. The problem with the Gentiles is that

they do not know God. They conceive of the gods to be just like sinful human beings. They are users and abusers. They can be bribed and extorted. They can be tricked or bewitched. Ultimately they do not really care. That is not God. See what Jesus's great corrective is for his kingdom citizens with regard to prayer? Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

The one true God is not like what the Gentiles conceive. He is a Father! He cares like a father cares for his children. He is wise and knows all. You do not need to convince him to care. You do not need to convince him what you need. He knows what you need better than you do. Praise God for that! The truth is I think I know what I need. Although sometimes I must confess I do not know. But when I pray to my Father in heaven, I pray not to a disinterested deity. I pray to the One who gladly gives good gifts to his children who ask.

Fred's surprise gift to Melissa – the cordless stick vacuum.

What Jesus is calling for is a heart of beloved children who direct their request to the One who knows what is best for them and who can do what is best for them. Prayer is not about performing adequately for God in order to get his attention. If you are his child, YOU HAVE his attention. If you are his child, YOU HAVE his love. Don't heap up empty words, and don't try to bewitch God with your prowess. Let him have your heart. Let him have your trust.

Tell him what you want. Let your request be made known. But trust him to do what is best. When you pray this way, you do not get mad at God or angry when God gives you what you were not expecting or something different from what you asked for. When God says, "No," you can pour out your heart to him. "Father, you know I was hoping for something different." "Father, this is not what I thought you would do." But at the same time, he is your Father who cares deeply for you. And if you ask for bread and he knows you need bread, he will not give you a stone. So you can accept from his hand what he gives. That is when you show that you trust him. That is when you demonstrate a different approach than the Gentiles. My God loves me. He knows me. He is my Father. I accept what

He gives even when it is unexpected, even when it is other than what I thought I needed.

Conclusion

How can you pray this way? With this confidence and trust and assurance? Because he is a God like no human ever imagined on his own. He is the God who cares, really cares for his people. And he demonstrated it so uniquely. Paul writes in Romans 5. "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us."

The God who sacrificed his own Son in order to reconcile sinners to himself can be trusted to do for them what is best in response to their prayers.

How should a sinner first pray to God? Not as a hypocrite trying to impress others but as a sinner who agrees with God about his sin, humbly admit your sin against him. Not as a Gentile who tries to manipulate, but as a child who would accept a free gift. Trusting in Jesus, ask God to forgive you and cleanse you, and he will be pleased to do so.