

The Pattern for Prayer

Matthew 6:5-15

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The Bible teaches us the power of prayer, I really believe that. I believe that prayer makes a difference; I believe that prayer is effective, I believe that prayer works.

I believe prayer is effective because there is a record of its effectiveness revealed in Scripture. But beyond that there is the explicit statement of the Word of God itself that prayer is effective. In James chapter 5 and verse 16 it says, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much".

Now don't take that out of context and "claim it" for what it isn't. We are not studying James tonight – but suffice it to say, the point for us this evening is that prayer is effective.

Further it says, giving illustration of the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man , "Elijah was a man subject to **like passions as we are** (read nothing special compared to us), and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit."

If God answered Elijah's prayer God will answer our prayers.

We may not be able to pray the same things because we don't have revelation from God of what is his will, but we, in agreement with God's will, have the same right to expect God to move.

- God is sovereign.
- God has predetermined the flow of the universe
- God knows the end from the beginning
- God will do what God will do.

On the other hand prayer works, if you don't understand how those come together don't let your theology destroy your prayer life. And that happens. That kind of attitude that says, well it's all going to be done his way anyway, so what's the need to pray?

This attitude literally denies Scripture.

What is prayer?

It is more than simply talking to God. Romans 8:26 states, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." So there are times when we cannot talk, but we can still pray.

John Piper defines prayer as, "Intentionally conveying a message to God."

There are numerous kinds of things we pray about:

- You can ask for something
- You can praise God and marvel at his works and adore him
- You can thank him for his goodness and gifts
- You can confess your sins in repentance, expressing your sorrow to the Lord
- You can complain to God. Although I think we need to be careful with this one. Complaining to God displays that our hearts really don't trust God's plan and care for us.

So how did you learn to pray?

- I learned to pray when older men invited me to a men's prayer meeting on Wednesday nights. As a new believer I listened to these men pray for months and thus, I began to mimic their prayers. At that time the church used the King James Bible so my prayers contained many uses of thee and thou. I often "beseeched" God with great "adoration".
- If you learned to pray in a college group as a new believer, your prayers probably sounded a lot like, "Jesus, we just want to thank you for being here..."
- Some of us learned to pray from the "just" people. "Lord we are just here because we just love you. And we just want you to know that we are just here to worship this morning. And we just do this because we are just us. And we ask you to just do **this** because we just want you to do **that**. And we just want you to be you Lord because that's who you are, just you. And I just want this prayer to be over."
- We have the "Lead, Guide and Direct" folk.
- We teach our children to pray. Al Mohler calls this "Prayer Child Abuse", because we often mislead our children in how to pray. And many adults can pray no more intimately or substantially than a child. "God is great; God is good, let us thank him for our food. Amen"
- We can often discover a person's theology by listening to them pray.

And so, we are desperately in need of correction.

For the next two Sunday evenings we are going to look to Jesus to correct our thinking, and thus, our praying. Tonight we begin in Matthew chapter 6. Turn there with me. We are going to look at the Lord's Prayer this evening but first we need to see the context in which Jesus teaches us to pray.

Let's read Matthew 6:1-18.

Look at Matthew 6:1 – "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven."

Back in chapter 5 verse 20, Jesus told his disciples of the superior righteousness expected of them. He wrote, (for I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.)"

Now he warns them of the danger of religious hypocrisy. The focus has changed from righteousness in a purely positive sense to righteousness in a formal, external sense.

This verse introduces the three chief acts of Jewish piety - giving to the needy, prayer, and fasting.

In each asked the logical structure is the same:

1. a warning not to do the act to be praised by men
2. a guarantee that those who ignore this warning will get what they want but no more
3. instruction on how to perform the act of piety secretly, and
4. the assurance that the father who sees in secret will reward openly

So we have a contrast here between doing these things in front of others and doing these things in secret in front of God.

Each of these three instructions assumes two things from the start.

- First, it is you who do these things. The “you” is singular. In this context, the giving, the praying, and the fasting, our personal acts of piety, not corporate.
- And second, Jesus assumes his disciples will give to the needy, will pray, and will fast, when he uses the word “when”.

Now that we have set the context, read Matthew 6:5-15 with me.

We immediately see a couple things:

- In verses 5-13 we see Jesus’ Design for Prayer
 - In verse 5-8 we see what must be avoided
 - In verses 9-13 we see what must be followed
- In verses 14-15 we see the Dynamics of Forgiveness

Tonight I want to cover what must be avoided and next week what must be followed and I want you to track with me because I think this will give you some fresh insight into prayer

The prayer Jesus gives was not meant to be repeated as a prayer itself. This is clear for several reasons.

First, Jesus states in verse 9, this is how you should pray – not this is what you should pray. He is saying pray “along these lines” or “in the following manner.”

Second, Jesus had just warned His followers *not* to pray with babbling meaningless repetition in verse 7. To then give a prayer whose primary purpose was to be recited verbatim would have been an obvious contradiction of what he just said.

The Lord’s Prayer is not a set group of words to repeat. It is fine to recite it, as we recite many parts of Scripture. It is certainly fine to memorize it and to rehearse it in our minds and meditate on it in our hearts. But it is not so much a prayer in itself as it is a skeleton which believers are to flesh out with their own words. It is not a substitute for our own prayers but a guide for them.

How Not to Pray (verse 5-7)

In these verses, Jesus laid down two restrictions on prayer, and we need to take these restrictions seriously because God is neither honored nor pleased by prayer of the type Jesus addressed here.

The first type of prayer Jesus condemned is hypocritical prayer. Jesus applied the word hypocrisy to people who were going through the motions of prayer, making a great external show of piety, but whose real state did not match this outward show. Their piety was a sham; it was phony and fraudulent. It was a fake form of godliness, one that had been mastered by the Pharisees. Prayer, for them, was a business. Prayer was something that was expected from people in their positions, so they made a public display of their piety.

Every dimension of their spiritual experience involved hypocrisy. They were phonies when they gave. They were phonies when they fasted and they were phonies when they prayed. And Jesus is pointing out that God's standards for his kingdom are the genuine standards of true piety, not the false standards of their pretense.

The way to avoid hypocrisy is not to cease praying, but to do so with such secrecy that others scarcely know that we have prayed. The ritual approach to prayer replaced the reality of a poured out heart. This is not uncommon in our day.

Some of you come from backgrounds where your prayers were ritualistic. Where you were part of a liturgy where at the right time and the right moment you said the right kind of prayer. Some of you may have been familiar with prayer books, missals and things like that that you were involved in. Prayer was a routine thing for you. So it's not uncommon in this day.

We have our own little rituals too. All of those little things we teach our children and the formula that we pray before every meal and the little bones we toss at God in the name of prayer here and there that are rather meaningless.

We need to be careful here, because we Christians are instructed to bear witness to our faith, which means making the invisible visible. But sometimes we think that one of the primary ways of bearing witness to people is by demonstrating our Christian spirituality with public prayer. That's dangerous, because the motivation for prayer is not to display our spirituality before the watching world. Prayer is to be intensely private. That's not to say that Christianity is to be private.

Christianity is personal. But it is not private. The New Testament gives us all kinds of mandates to declare our faith publicly. We are to bear witness to the world of our commitment to Christ and not hide it. However, prayer involves a special kind of communion. It is part of the special relationship between God and a believer individually or the church corporately. It is not meant to show anything about the person who prays.

The second kind of prayer Jesus condemned is pagan prayer. "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words."

(v7). The New American Standard uses the phrase, “meaningless repetition”. That phrase resonates with most of us. It is the word for babble.

It’s onomatopoeia. Sounds that mean nothing. These are batman words – boing, splat, argh, bash, clunk. Don’t speak noise. Don’t just say hey Batta, Batta, Batta, hey batta batta batta...

Jesus was saying here that we must not regard prayer as some kind of magical incantation, for that is how pagans pray. They recite certain phrases over and over again, with no understanding of what the words mean. In these contexts, prayers are used as mantras, with the hope that they will change the environment or the circumstances in which a person lives.

In 1 Kings 18 Elijah encounters the prophets and Baal and we see an example of this pagan praying:

“And Elijah came near to all the people and said, “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” And the people did not answer him a word. 22 Then Elijah said to the people, “I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal’s prophets are 450 men. 23 Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. 24 And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, he is God.” And all the people answered, “It is well spoken.” 25 Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it.” 26 And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. 27 And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” 28 And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. 29 And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.”

We often condemn other religions and denominations for praying three of these or six of those, or praying through a set of beads reciting the same prayer over and over for each bead. But Christians can easily fall into a pattern of praying in a repetitious fashion, without engaging their minds. Christians gather for a meal and the host will say to someone there, “Jim, will you please say grace for us?” The host doesn’t ask for someone to lead in prayer but to say grace. That kind of language suggests a mere recitation, not a prayer that comes from the heart.

After warning His disciples against hypocritical prayer and pagan prayer, Jesus went on to say, “Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (v8)

With these words, Jesus echoed the thoughts of David, who wrote: “O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, And are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O Lord, You know it all” (Ps. 139:1-4).

Prayer is giving God occasion to manifest his power, to manifest his majesty, to manifest his might, to manifest his love and his providence and his care and his concern. God will do things and we won't be able to glorify him if we haven't communed with him about those things. But if we've done that and we see his hand, we know it's from him and we give him praise.

In conclusion, what is God asking us? What is Jesus saying? He is saying when you pray, first of all, pray with a devout heart; a devout heart. That is a pure motive seeking only the glory of God.

Secondly, a humble heart seeking only the attention of God, not men.

Thirdly, a confident heart knowing full well that God already knows all that you need and with childlike simplicity in faith, you simply take your heart to Him and await the majestic display of his glorious response.