

Jesus Reveals Hypocrisy in Praying

Matthew 6:5-8; Psalm 91:1

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In all the years that I have been a minister, one needed area of growth that continually comes from lips of members I counsel and visit is this: “We need to improve and grow in our prayer life. We know it is a necessary part of our spiritual growth in Christ, but we feel so inadequate.” If that expresses your own heart’s cry today, I urge you not to despair (2 Corinthians 2:16; 2 Corinthians 3:5).

In our text today (and in the verses that follow), Jesus addresses this necessary part of our Christian life: prayer. There is not a greater need in our lives than to pray without ceasing, than to pour out our hearts in praise and supplication to our loving Father through the gracious mediation of Jesus Christ, than to enjoy blessed communion with our Savior who has sacrificed His life for us to make us eternally His own beloved bride. We may profess the truth, but without a vital communion with Jesus Christ through prayer, we will have a dead orthodoxy. We cannot walk by faith in the promises of God if we do not walk daily in communion with God through His Word and prayer.

You have heard this many times over and even believe it is true, but still you struggle in prayer more than any other part of your Christian life. I am praying for you that through these series of sermons on prayer that the Lord will use His own Word and that the Spirit of the living God will work within you such a desire and conviction to commune with Jesus that your prayer life will be transformed by His almighty power.

The main points from our text today are: (1) The Hypocrisy of the Pharisees in Praying (Matthew 6:5,7); (2) The Communion of the Faithful in Praying (Matthew 6:6,8).

I. The Hypocrisy of the Pharisees in Praying (Matthew 6:5,7).

A. The Pharisees believed they were good and were righteous in the sight of God because they kept His Law. But Jesus reveals they were not good and were not righteous in the sight of God because they broke His Law and were sinners who justified themselves.

1. Most people think of themselves as did the Pharisees. Because they have not murdered anyone or because they have not cheated on their spouse or because they provide for their family, they are good people and should be given entrance into heaven. That’s exactly how the Pharisees believed as well.

2. Jesus exposes their self-righteousness when He declares that they had broken God’s Law by their angry words, by their lustful looks, and by their personal hatred for their enemies. They were neither good nor righteous. Paul says that is true of all of us (Romans 3:10-12). There was no hope for the Pharisees if they believed that lie about themselves (nor is their hope for us). The only hope for the Pharisees (and us) is to look away from such lies about ourselves and to receive by faith alone Jesus, His righteousness, and His forgiveness as our very own.

B. Jesus exposes the Pharisees as hypocrites (actors) in three areas of religious piety: caring for the needy (Matthew 6:1-4), praying (Matthew 6:5-15), and fasting (Matthew 6:16-18).

1. The Pharisees outwardly kept these divine ordinances, but they did not do so out of love for God and to the glory of God, but in order to be seen by man (*theáomai* in Matthew 6:1; *phainō* in Matthew 6:5). They outwardly appeared to be pious, but the Lord does not judge by mere outward actions—He judges the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).

2. We may fool those around us, but we cannot fool the God who knows all and sees all and before whom all will one day stand in judgment. How foolish it is to play games with God. He hates all

mere lip service (just as we do—we despise it in others, but we practice it with God). When our heart/desires are under the lordship of Jesus Christ (not my will but thine be done), so will be our lips, ears, eyes, and hands.

C. Jesus doesn't condemn the Pharisees for not praying nor does He condemn them for the content of their prayers, but for the motivation behind their prayers: "that they may be seen of men" (Matthew 5:6).

1. What is prayer? *Westminster Shorter Catechism* #98:

Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.

Prayer is the appointed means by God wherein we enjoy communion with Him who loves us from everlasting to everlasting. Prayer reveals whether we truly believe what we profess (whether we love the Lord) or whether we are just playing games. Without earnest prayer, God is a distant stranger—One we may know certain truths about, but not One whom we personally know. Without fervent prayer there is no intimacy, no fire, no passion for Jesus Christ, there is only a knowledge about Him. Without sincere prayer, the Lord is a mere fact, not a personal Savior.

2. Jesus assumes His followers will pray ("When thou prayest"). Prayer is not optional. Prayer is not a suggestion. It is a necessity (Acts 2:21). It is a necessary to our spiritual life as breathing is to our physical life. Even the Lord Jesus spent hours (all night) in prayer, and yet He was God in the flesh (Luke 6:12). How much more we need that communion with God, crying out for His help in our time of need.

3. The warning issued by Jesus is to take care that we do not practice hypocrisy in our praying—that we do not utter our prayers before others with our eyes upon ourselves so that others might be impressed with how we pray (Matthew 6:5). The Pharisees "love to pray". Why? In order to draw attention to themselves rather than to God (whether in the synagogue or even in the streets). Jesus is not condemning public prayer (whether in public worship or in the streets—John 17; Acts 4). It is not the location or posture (standing) that is condemned, but rather the motive that moves them to pray: "that they may be seen of men" (Matthew 6:5). Jesus says that if they pray to be seen by men, then that is the only reward they will receive—the fleeting, earthly praise of men, but there will be no praise or reward from God.

4. When we pray over our meals, in family worship, with others (believers or unbelievers), at a Prayer Meeting, or as Christ's minister in public worship, to whom do we want those who hear to be directed—to the Lord of glory or to us and our words? As we pray, are we wondering how others will like our prayer? Are we seeking to impress others with our prayers? Are we more concerned with what others will think about us when we pray or what God will think about us when we pray? We should sincerely search our hearts as to who our prayers are truly directed? To our most holy and gracious God or to those who hear it? If others are blessed by our prayers—praise God! But our prayers should be expressive of our communion with Jesus Christ and in so doing draw others into that communion as well.

D. Next, Jesus condemns the use of "vain repetition" in prayer (Matthew 6:7).

1. It is not mere repetition in itself that Jesus condemns in prayer, but vain repetition or literally, "babbling words"—using words repeatedly to mindlessly fill up space in a prayer. To use the same words or to repeat that which has already been said because it weighs heavily upon your heart is not what is condemned here. What is condemned is mindless repetition of the same word or phrase as if repeating it was some kind of magical incantation, as if by simply uttering those words God will hear and answer prayer (Jesus, praise the Lord, in the name of Jesus). God wants to see broken and contrite hearts. He desires faith, love, and sincerity of the heart. The most simple prayer sincerely uttered by a child in faith and love for God will be more acceptable before Him than the most theological prayer that a minister prays whose mind and heart are far away from the Lord. When we pray as though we are heard for repeating the right words or for the length

of our prayer, we are looking to ourselves as the reason our prayers are heard rather than to Jesus as to why our prayers are heard (Rome and Pentecostals).

2. If we are more concerned about how long we spend in prayer than with our sweet communion with the Lord Jesus (and however long or short it might be, it seems that it passed so quickly), then Jesus says we are praying like the hypocrites “who for a pretence make long prayers” (Mark 12:40).

II. The Communion of the Faithful in Praying (Matthew 6:6,8).

A. Jesus emphasizes here in Matthew 6:6 that prayer is seeking to shut out all others that may be listening to your prayer and to withdraw to the secret place spiritually to be alone with your loving Savior.

1. That secret place may actually be a literal “closet” or special room where you go to pray when you are alone, but that secret place will always certainly be (whether you are praying alone or in the presence of others) a place inwardly where you are all alone in prayer to the Lord in reverence, faith, love, confession, and praise (Psalm 91:1).

2. The truth that Jesus is conveying here is that the audience that we must desire above all else to hear and to be pleased with our prayer is God our Father, the Lord Jesus, and the blessed Holy Spirit. If others are blessed—praise God. That for which we earnestly yearn above all else is for our God and His loving countenance to smile upon us in our prayer—to please Him whether anyone else is pleased (Psalm 42:1-2).

3. When it is that inward secret place that we seek to be with the Lord in our private, family, and public prayers, then the Lord who meets with us in that secret place will reward us openly on that great and glorious day when we stand before Him. Rewards we receive from God are not meritorious as if we could earn them or as if we deserved them. He graciously works within us both to will and to do His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13), and then He rewards us for doing His good pleasure. What are these rewards (1 Corinthians 2:9)?

B. Jesus declares in Matthew 6:8 that we must not be like the heathens who believe they have to inform their gods of what is going on in their lives because their gods are not omniscient, omnipresent, or sovereign over all of creation.

1. Prayer is not to inform God of anything. He is omniscient, omnipresent, and absolutely sovereign over all His creation. He has ordained all things that come to pass. He is not surprised by anything.

2. Prayer is not in order to satisfy some need in God—He is completely sufficient and has no needs at all. Prayer is in order to satisfy our needs—we are needy and completely dependent upon the Lord. God does not need us. We need Him. He chose us and redeemed us and delights to commune with us because He set His love upon us. Anyone who doesn’t believe that is completely deceived by his own pride.

3. Prayer is not in order to change God’s mind, but to change our mind and to bring us to that place of loving submission to His will. We are to ask, seek, and knock in prayer, but true prayer lays all those desires before God and is content to pray, “Not my will, but thine be done.”

4. Our glorious Father knows what we need before we ask. So why do we ask Him in prayer? That we might know that though He is a God exalted in majesty unto whom no one or nothing can be compared, yet He is a personal God that loves us and wants to commune with us in bringing our needs and desires that are agreeable to His will unto Him. As a gracious Father He delights to have us ask, seek, and knock (Matthew 7:7-11). **In asking**, we behold His goodness, love, and faithfulness in supplying our needs. **In asking** and seeing Him supply all our needs our faith is strengthened and we are not only able to read and believe that nothing is impossible to Him, but we are able to see and experience it in so many ways. **In asking**, we behold His wisdom when He doesn’t give us that for which we have asked in saying “No” or in saying “Wait”. We learn through prayer to find our place of humble submission under the loving lordship of Jesus Christ. Prayer is God’s great blessing to us in Christ.

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