

Taking off the Mask

Discussion Guide for Matthew 6:5-8

The Lord's Prayer

5 “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 6 But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

7 “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. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Discussion Guide

My favorite example of prayer in Hollywood comes from Jimmy Stewart’s character in the movie *Shenandoah*.

Watch it online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzzyZ1M-kVU>.

This classic film reveals a lot about how people often approach prayer. It’s an act of duty, obligation, or self-flattery with no awareness of our total dependence on God for every moment of our lives.

Begin your discussion today by brainstorming a little bit.

- Who in your life do you love to hear pray?
- Why do you love that person’s prayers?
- Was the prayer honest? How do you know?
- How is prayer connected to the way that person lives?
- What is your relationship to that person?
- Conversely, have you ever been in a public situation where you were uncomfortable with the way that prayer was being offered?
- Did the prayer reveal something about the character of the people offering the prayer?

Christians often don’t pray. I don’t believe this is typically out of a lack of belief in prayer or understanding that God hears it and is capable of giving them what they need. Instead, I believe that we are simply intimidated because our prayers don’t measure up or we fear being labeled

as hypocrites.

The goal of the discussion today is to remove any fear of prayer. I hope you see that God loves his children to come to him openly and honestly without any show or pretense.

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Matthew 6:5-7

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins a discussion on prayer by telling people they don't need to be like the religious authorities when they go to pray.

Keep in mind that this is the original context for how we define “hypocrite” today. When Jesus used it, he was saying those who practice a form of religion that is meant to be seen by other people and not by God are no different than actors who put on masks in a drama.

When hypocrites pray, you do not get a sense of who they truly are. The only thing you know about them is what they want you to see as you pass by in synagogue or on the street corner.

The very first principle of prayer is that it must be rooted in honesty, sincerity, and authenticity. This is at the core of what it means to have a relationship with God.

Today's equivalent for the crowded street corner is social media. If you have a Facebook account, you have an audience.

The problem for so many people today is that they have an online “virtual” life that is carefully constructed in such a way to please an audience. These virtual lives have absolutely no resemblance to what our actual lives look like. Everybody has a perfect family, fabulous style, hours of uninterrupted quiet time in the morning (complete with a prayer journal, open Bible, and hot cup of coffee), great health, a clean house, and the ability to take an exotic vacation every month.

Whenever I see someone on Facebook talking about how perfect and wonderful their spouse is, I am immediately concerned they are headed to divorce court.

It's kind of like high school for grown-ups. You put on your best clothes, associate with the popular people, and start drama just for kicks. But at the end of the day, what people think about you online has no meaning or bearing for who you are and what your life is like. It's the

definition of hypocrisy.

If prayer is not meant to please others, what is it for?

Simply put, it's about knowing God.

God is not fooled by your social media account. Even if you are as fabulous as you portray online, God is not impressed. He knows who you are.

That is scary, but it is also comforting. I don't have to be a hypocrite. I don't have to entertain God. I don't have to perform so that God will give me what I ask.

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Matthew 6:8

How awesome is that?!? I don't have to worry about forgetting something when I pray. I don't have to worry about telling God something he doesn't already know. I don't have to be concerned that God will think less of me because of my prayer.

I asked you to think of a person you love to hear pray because I suspect your answer might be similar to mine.

There was an old man in my home church in Tennessee who lived by himself and had some mental disabilities. He has gone to heaven now, but I don't think anyone will ever forget listening to him pray publicly in front of the church. He was full of sincerity, simplicity, and joy every time he opened his mouth to speak to God. There were no big words, there were no new concepts, but the evidence of God in this man's life was in every word of his prayers. He wasn't trying to impress anybody, he was simply talking to God.

At the end of the day, the quality of our life with God is only as strong as the quality of our life in prayer. If prayer is performance, then we also think that salvation is based on performance. But if prayer is simply time spent with God, then we can begin to believe that salvation only comes as a gift from God to the children he loves.

Discussion Questions

- How is prayer like or unlike a social media post?
- What do you find most difficult about prayer?
- Do you find it easy or difficult to be honest with God?
- Why do you think that God values honesty?
- How does the way that you pray reflect what you believe about God?