

PRAYER

Prayer: What It's Not

January 7, 2018 - 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.

Religious & Pagan Prayer

Why is the “For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the Glory...” part not in my copy of the New Testament?? For more on that this is a great blog to read - <https://pastortimlecroy.com/2012/09/06/long-ending-lords-prayer/>

5. *And* links on another example. *Whenever*, as in verse 2, gives a general instruction suitable for all times of prayer. For *pray* see on 5:44; Matthew has a good deal to say about prayer. There is a change from the singular to the plural, but this does not seem to have great significance. *You shall not be* is another example of the use of the future with imperatival force; Jesus is not so much uttering a prophecy as giving a direction. For *hypocrites* see on verse 2; again the word signifies those who profess to do a pious action, but do so with their eye on people when they should be concerned with God only. *For* is not used here in a causal sense; it rather has a meaning like “seeing that.” *Standing*¹⁸ was a normal posture for prayer (cf. Mark 11:25), though when the worshiper wished to adopt an especially lowly position he might prostrate himself, as Jesus did in Gethsemane (26:39). People might pray kneeling (Acts 21:5) or sitting (2 Sam. 7:18). Clearly the posture is unimportant. As we have seen before, the synagogue (see on 4:23) was the center of community life as well as the place of worship. Here it is the place where God is worshipped, and it is singled out as a place where there would be many people. To pray standing in a synagogue was to take up a very public posture. The same must be said about praying on street corners. The junction of two streets would be a very public place and to

pray there, in a place not especially given over to religious exercises and with many people to observe what was going on, was to court notice and to win the approbation of people who liked to observe religious activities in progress. There were prayers that were offered at prescribed times (cf. Ps. 55:17; Dan. 6:10; Acts 3:1), and it was not beyond the ingenuity of some to order their affairs so that they were in a public place at the time of prayer and thus “compelled” to pray where they would be seen. *In order that* introduces the purpose of the activity: the public exercise of which Jesus speaks was nominally aimed at addressing God, but it actually sought to achieve visibility to men (the masculine, of course, is inclusive and means “people”). The words about reward are repeated exactly from verse 2. Like the demonstrative givers of alms, those who pray merely to put on a show have been “paid in full” for their efforts. In all this Jesus is not condemning public prayer or praying in a public place; it is praying in such a way as to maximize its effect on other people that he condemns.

6. *But* is adversative and marks a contrast, while *you* is emphatic. The followers of Jesus will not pray in that demonstrative fashion. *Whenever* means that this is the way they must always pray. Jesus is not, of course, forbidding prayer in public, for example, in services of public worship or on other occasions when united praying is required. Rather, he is giving direction for one’s own prayers and indicating that they are to be undertaken with a single eye on God, not with a side glance at people who could be impressed. *Go into your room*²² (the word means an inner room) prescribes a private place for such prayer. The room itself is secure from observation from the street, and shutting the door secures it from the observation of those who have legitimate business in the house. Every precaution is to be taken that the prayer should be unobserved. “The secret of religion is religion in secret” (McNeile). *Pray* is a command; prayer is not simply desirable but necessary. In verse 4 the giving of alms is said to be in secret and the Father is said to see in secret, but here we have the interesting expression *your Father who is in secret*. The secret place will exclude other people but not God; he is there, in the secret place. The expression may also hint that the essential nature of God is hidden from those he created. For his seeing in secret and rewarding see on verse 4.

7. Jesus has significant teaching on the importance of conciseness in prayer. His followers are not to *babble*, where the unusual word forbids prolixity. To pray at length was regarded by *the Gentiles* as the way to make sure that one’s prayer was appreciated by deity, and there is no reason for thinking that this error was confined to the Gentiles; Jews could also err in this way (cf. Mark 12:40; the Talmud speaks of pious men who prayed for nine hours a day! *Ber.* 32b, though we should remember that Jews, too, could advocate short prayers, following Eccl. 5:2). Over against the conviction that the multitude of words indicates piety, Jesus points out that babbling is not the way to the heart of God. For *Gentiles* see on 5:47; it stands for Gentiles over against the Jews, the people of God. Such people do not understand the way to pray. *For* introduces the reason for their practice and *that* the content of their thinking. The Gentiles think of prayer as effective only if long (cf. 1 Kings 18:26–29). They agree that God hears and answers, but hold that he does so in proportion to their wordiness.

8. *Therefore* introduces the reason: there is a fallacy in the position of the Gentiles, which is obvious as soon as it is stated. *Do not be like them* means, of course, “Do not pray as they do,” “Do not make the error they make.” Jesus justifies this by going on to refer to the knowledge the Father has of his children. Before they offer any prayer, he knows exactly what their need is. They pray, not to inform the Father on matters of which he is ignorant, but to worship him.²⁸ Jesus is not, of course, forbidding long prayers; he himself on occasion could pray all night (Luke 6:12) and on one occasion he taught his followers “that they should always pray and not grow weary” (Luke 18:1). Nor does he forbid repetition, for in Gethsemane he repeated his prayer (26:39–44). It is prayer based on the view that length will persuade God that he discourages. (Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (pp. 139–142). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.)

6 Room refers to the storeroom, probably without windows and the only lockable room in the house; it represents the least public place. 7 *Keep on babbling* translates a ‘nonsense word’ unknown elsewhere in Greek, suggesting what we mean by ‘gibberish’. The focus is not on ‘repetition’ (as the av suggested) but on meaninglessness and noise, on the attitude to prayer which thinks that God needs to be bullied into taking notice. **True prayer is not a technique nor a performance, but a relationship.** (France, R. T. (1994). *Matthew*. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 913). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.)

6:5–15 (Luke 11:2–4). Jesus then spoke about the practice of prayer, which the Pharisees loved to perform publicly. Rather than making prayer a matter between an individual and God, the Pharisees had turned it into an act **to be seen by men**—again, to demonstrate their supposed righteousness. Their prayers were directed not to God but to other men, and consisted of long, repetitive phrases (Matt. 6:7). (Barbieri, L. A., Jr. (1985). *Matthew*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 32). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.)

5-15. Second example: prayer. **Standing in the synagogues.** This was the usual manner (Mk 11:25) and place for prayer and is not denounced. But the intent of one who claims that the hour of prayer caught him in a prominent place and who loves such display is condemned. **Enter into thy closet.** Public prayer is not pronounced wrong (Jesus himself prayed publicly, Lk 10:21, 22; Jn 11:41, 42), but vain display is. Private praying is the finest training ground for public prayer. Omit **openly. Vain repetitions** (i.e., *babbling speech*) are characteristic of pagan (heathen or **Gentile**) praying, as ostentation is of **hypocrites**. Such action regards prayer as an effort to overcome God’s unwillingness to respond by wearying him with words. Yet it is not mere length nor repetition that Christ condemns (Jesus prayed

all night, Lk 6:12, and repeated his petitions, Mt 26:44), but the unworthy motive that prompts such religious acts (Pfeiffer, C. F., & Harrison, E. F. (Eds.). (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: New Testament (Mt 6:1)*. Chicago: Moody Press.)

Matthew

6. ⁵ And when thou shalt pray, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites: for they are wont to pray standing in the synagogues, and in corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Verily I say to you, that they have their reward. ⁶ But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and, having shut thy door, pray to thy Father who is in secret: and thy Father, who seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly. ⁷ But praying, use not vain repetitions, as the Heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard on account of their speaking much. ⁸ Be not you, therefore, like them: for your Father knoweth what things ye need, before ye ask him.

5. *When thou shalt pray.* He now gives the same instruction as to *prayer*, which he had formerly given as to *alms*. It is a gross and shameful profanation of the name of God, when hypocrites, in order to obtain glory from men, pray in public, or at least make a pretence of praying. But, as hypocrisy is always ambitious, we need not wonder that it is also blind. Christ, therefore, commands his disciples, if they wish to pray in a right manner, to *enter into their closet*. Some expositors, thinking that this has the appearance of absurdity, give it an allegorical turn, as referring to the inward recesses of the heart: but there is no necessity for such trifling. We are commanded, in many passages, to pray to God or to praise him, in the public assembly, amidst a crowd of men, and before all the people: and that for the purpose, not only of testifying our faith or gratitude, but also of exciting others, by our example, to do the like. Christ does not withdraw us from such an exercise, but only admonishes us to have God always before our eyes when we engage in prayer.

We must not literally interpret the words, *enter into thy closet*: as if he ordered us to avoid the presence of men, or declared that we do not pray aright, except when there are no witnesses. He speaks comparatively, and means, that we ought rather to seek retirement than desire a crowd of men to see us praying. It is advantageous, indeed, to believers, and contributes to their pouring out, with greater freedom, their prayers and groans before God, to withdraw from the gaze of men. Retirement is also useful for another reason, that our minds may be more free and disengaged from all distracting thoughts: and accordingly Christ himself frequently chose the concealment of some retired spot for the sake of prayer. But this is not the present subject, which is only to correct the desire of vain-glory. To express it in a few words, whether a man prays alone, or in the presence of others, he ought to have the same feelings, as if he were shut up in his closet, and had no other witness but

God. When Christ says, *thy Father shall reward thee*, he declares plainly that all the reward, which is promised to us in any part of Scripture, is not paid as a debt, but is a free gift.

7. *Use not vain repetitions.* He reproves another fault in prayer, a multiplicity of words. There are two words used, but in the same sense: for $\beta \alpha \tau \tau \omicron \lambda \omicron \gamma \acute{\iota} \alpha$ is “a superfluous and affected repetition,” and $\pi \omicron \lambda \upsilon \lambda \omicron \gamma \acute{\iota} \alpha$ is “unmeaning talk.” Christ reproves the folly of those who, with the view of persuading and entreating God, pour out a superfluity of words. This doctrine is not inconsistent with the praises everywhere bestowed in Scripture on earnestness in prayer: for, when prayer is offered with earnest feeling, the tongue does not go before the heart. Besides, the grace of God is not obtained by an unmeaning flow of words; but, on the contrary, a devout heart throws out its affections, like arrows, to pierce heaven. At the same time, this condemns the superstition of those who entertain the belief, that they will secure the favour of God by long murmurings. We find Popery to be so deeply imbued with this error, that it believes the efficacy of prayer to lie chiefly in talkativeness. The greater number of words that a man mutters, the more diligently he is supposed to have prayed. Long and tedious chanting also, as if it were to soothe the ears of God, continually resounds in their cathedrals.

8. *For your Father knoweth.* This single remedy is sufficient for removing and destroying the superstition which is here condemned. For whence comes this folly of thinking that great advantage is gained, when men weary God by a multiplicity of words, but because they imagine that he is like a mortal man, who needs to be informed and solicited? Whoever is convinced, that God not only cares for us, but knows all our wants, and anticipates our wishes and anxieties before we have stated them, will leave out vain repetitions, and will reckon it enough to prolong his prayers, as far as shall be necessary for exercising his faith; but will reckon it absurd and ridiculous to approach God with rhetorical embellishments, in the expectation that he will be moved by an abundance of words.

But if God *knows what things we have need of, before we ask him*, where lies the advantage of prayer? If he is ready, of his own free will, to assist us, what purpose does it serve to employ our prayers, which interrupt the spontaneous course of his providence? The very design of prayer furnishes an easy answer. Believers do not pray, with the view of informing God about things unknown to him, or of exciting him to do his duty, or of urging him as though he were reluctant. On the contrary, they pray, in order that they may arouse themselves to seek him, that they may exercise their faith in meditating on his promises, that they may relieve themselves from their anxieties by pouring them into his bosom; in a word, that they may declare that from Him alone they hope and expect, both for themselves and for others, all good things. God himself, on the other hand, has purposed freely, and without being asked, to bestow blessings upon us; but he promises that he will grant them to our prayers. We must, therefore, maintain both of these truths, that He freely anticipates our wishes, and yet that we obtain by prayer what we ask. As to the reason why he sometimes delays long to answer us, and sometimes even does not grant our wishes, an opportunity of considering it will afterwards occur. (*Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010).*)

Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Vol. 1, pp. 311–314). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.)

6:7 Repetitive Prayers

“But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” (KJV).

Some of the rabbis in the Lord’s time taught that oft-repeated prayers were of certain efficacy. This type of praying was an imitation of the heathens of the time who were noted for repetitive prayer. When Elijah challenged the worshipers of Baal, they called on their god “from morning even unto noon, saying, O Baal, hear us” (1 Kings 18:26, KJV). When Paul excited the rage of Demetrius, who in turn aroused the mob at Ephesus, the angry crowd “all with one voice about the space of two hours cried out, ‘Great is Diana of the Ephesians’ ” (Acts 19:34). It would seem that the further people become removed from true spiritual worship, the greater estimate they put on oft-repeated forms. (*Freeman, J. M., & Chadwick, H. J. (1998). Manners & customs of the Bible (p. 413). North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers.*)

Be Righteous! But be Careful! (2): Praying

(Matthew 6:5–15)

A. *The Exhortation*—6:1

B. *The Examples*—6:2–18

The first example to which Jesus appealed was giving (vv. 2–4). We now turn to the second: praying (vv. 5–15).

1. *the warning*—v. 5a

It really isn’t prayer that they love, but themselves and the opportunity that public prayer gives them for self-adulation. Jesus mentions the synagogue and street corner as their favorite locations. Why? a) The synagogue service was led by one man who prayed publicly in front of all. The temptation was to pray to the people rather than to God through the use of cliches, appropriately timed sentiments, sonorous tones, pious platitudes, well-pitched and well-timed fervency. Jesus has in mind the kind of prayer which is designed to have more of an effect on the audience than on God. b) Prayer in the streets often occurred if a person planned it that way: at 9:00 a.m. when the morning

burnt offering was made, again at mid-day when the afternoon sacrifice was offered, and at sunset when the Temple gates were closed. Loud trumpets were sounded from the Temple to signal the afternoon prayer. If a person timed it just right, the trumpet would call would find him/her on the busiest street corner in town, providing the individual with an excellent opportunity to parade his/her piety for all to see.

2. *the guarantee*—v. 5b

Remember: there is no reward from God for those who seek it from men.

3. *the exhortation*—v. 6a

Jesus is not prohibiting public prayer. He himself prayed in public (John 11:38–44), as did the early church (Acts 1:24; 3:1; 4:24–30; 1 Tim. 2:8). But be careful. Even here hypocrisy can raise its ugly head. God knows how prone we are to take advantage of the situation in order to impress others with our eloquence and passion. Jesus' recommendation of privacy was to provide us with an alternative to ostentatious and self-seeking prayer. When purified of selfish designs and focused on the glory of God, public prayer would certainly have met with his approval.

4. *the promise*—v. 6b

The Lord's Prayer—6:7–15

We begin with several important observations.

- First of all, the prayer may properly be called “the **Lord's** Prayer” only in the sense that he is its source. Jesus authored the prayer on behalf of his disciples, not himself. The one in whom no sin exists does not need to pray, “forgive us our debts.” And although Jesus is in one sense our “brother” (Heb. 2:11–13), it is also true that God is “Father” to him in a way that he is not “Father” to us. In the light of what we know about his divine *sonship* would it not be inappropriate for Jesus to join with us in saying, “our Father in heaven”?
- The question has been asked whether this prayer should be used in corporate worship. As noted above, there is nothing wrong with praying in public. But the form and content of this prayer may make it inappropriate for corporate use. Jesus evidently intended this prayer to be something of an *outline or sketch* of the principal themes that should occupy us when we pray. Our prayers are to be concerned with the glory of God's name, the advance of his kingdom, and the implementation of his will. But that does not mean that in praying for such things we need only to repeat those three brief utterances. The petition “your kingdom come,” for example, is something of a topic statement. It provides us with a general theme for our prayers but hardly with all the particulars. Jesus was saying: “When you pray, make the kingdom of God one of your primary concerns; it is one of the central issues to which you should devote yourselves in prayer.” Thus, if we do employ this prayer in corporate settings we must guard ourselves

from thinking that repetition of it in unison with other believers exhausts our responsibility.

- The structure of this prayer is also of importance. It is made up of six clearly defined petitions, three relating to God and three relating to us. The first three relate to God's name, reign, and will; or again, they relate to sanctification, sovereignty, and submission. The first petition conceives of God as our Father, the second of God as our King, and the third of God as our Master. The second set of three petitions concerns our bread, our debts, and our enemy; or again, we are to pray for provision, pardon, and protection. Some even see a Trinitarian element in the last three petitions. It is the Father who provides us with our daily bread, the Son who forgives us our debts by virtue of his redemptive sacrifice, and the Spirit who delivers us from the onslaught of temptation and evil.
- Surely, though, the primary focus of the prayer is not man but God. It is no accident that we begin with God and his name, his power, his purpose. See Mt. 6:33. This does not mean that we are to neglect the final three petitions. Stott reminds us that,

“a true understanding of the God we pray to, as heavenly Father and great King, although putting our personal needs into a second and subsidiary place, will not eliminate them. To decline to mention them at all in prayer (on the ground that we do not want to bother God with such trivialities) is as great an error as to allow them to dominate our prayers” (148).
- In vv. 7–8 we are told not to babble on with meaningless and repetitious phrases, as if God were impressed by such mindless verbosity. The reason is that *God knows what we need before we ask him*. But if God knows all our problems and needs *before* we ask, why ask at all? We must remember that, generally speaking, God has determined not to fulfill our needs unless we ask him to. Principle: ***we must not presume that God will provide for us apart from our prayers what he has ordained to provide for us only through our prayers***. Our petitions are the means by which God has purposed to give us what he already knows we need. There is something important to God about our asking him for things he knows we need. It would seem, on the surface, to be quicker and more efficient, and obviously less strenuous on all concerned, if God were simply to bypass prayer and get on with the giving! But that is not his way. He finds particular honor and glory in being the One to whom we must humbly come to receive that which we need.
- A related issue is found in the question: “What can I possibly tell a God who knows everything?” Some answer: “Nothing.” Jesus answers: “Anything!” The doctrine of divine omniscience compels us to be totally honest with God in prayer. When dealing with someone whose knowledge of you is limited, you can pretend, manipulate, deceive, even lie. In other words, *ignorance often generates hypocrisy*. Omniscience, on the other hand, demands honesty. What good is it to pretend or play-act with someone who already knows your heart and motivation? Thus, we need never worry about finding ourselves in a desperate condition and discover that God was caught short. “It is as silly as asking for

bananas in a hardware store,” says Bingham Hunter, “to ask God for something he doesn’t have. Because your Heavenly Father knows before you ask, he never gets surprised by your request and finds it necessary to send you a form letter saying your answer is back-ordered. He already has everything you will ever need. If God does not answer your petition, it is not because what you asked for is out of stock” (*The God Who Hears*, 41–42). Augustine once said, “God does not ask us to tell him our needs that he may learn about them, but in order that we may be capable of receiving what he is preparing to give.”

- Is our Lord’s denunciation of repetitious prayer in Mt. 6:7 a contradiction of his exhortation that we pray without ceasing and that we persevere in bringing our petitions to God (as, for example, in Luke 18:1ff.)? Carson replies: “In the particular example before us, if we absolutize Matthew 6:7 [babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words], the logical conclusion is that followers of Jesus must never pray at length, and seldom if ever ask for anything since God knows their needs anyway. If instead we absolutize Luke 18:1–8, we will reason that if we are serious with God we will not only pray at length, but we may expect the blessings we receive to be proportionate to our loquacity. However, if we listen to both passages with a little more sensitivity, we discover that Matthew 6:7f. is really not concerned with the length of prayers, but with the attitude of heart which thinks it is heard for its many words. Likewise, we find that Luke 18:1–8 is less concerned with mere length of prayers than with overcoming the quitting tendency among certain of Christ’s followers. These Christians, finding themselves under pressure, are often in danger of throwing in the towel. But they must not give up” (60–61). According to Calvin, Jesus does not “forbid us to persist in prayers, long, often, or with much feeling, but requires that we should not be confident in our ability to wrest something from God by beating upon his ears with a garrulous flow of talk, as if he could be persuaded as men are” (*Institutes*, III.xx.29). (Storms, S. (2016). *Biblical Studies: The Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6:5–15)*. Edmond, OK: Sam Storms.)