

The Secret to Prayer
Matthew 6:5-8

Please turn in your Bible's to Matthew 6. As we began this section last week, we looked at the key principal which sets chapter 6 and 7 into the context for us to understand Jesus' primary point. Jesus says in Matthew 6:1, "*Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.*" As Christians there's an expectation, an assumption that we will practice spiritual disciplines in our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. Spiritual disciplines are practices found in the Bible that promote and develop spiritual growth in our lives. Last week we looked at benevolent giving, over the next three weeks we'll look at prayer, and then finish up the examples Jesus gives by looking at the spiritual discipline of fasting. As we saw last week, spiritual disciplines are practices, not mere theory, they are assumed as a part of the life of a discipline and follower of Christ, spiritual disciplines come with rewards given by God, spiritual disciplines are to be done in secret – that is away from the limelight of others, because ultimately spiritual disciplines are about God as the lone audience. The key principal was this – Practice spiritual disciplines for God's audience; not others. As Christians our desire is to bring praise to God and not to ourselves. To see God glorified and not ourselves. To exalt our God and not ourselves.

Oh but how easily this is said than done, because too often we simply don't understand the deceit and treachery, the pretense, duplicity, and deceitfulness of sin. **Sin is often thought of as merely wrong actions.** If I lie to someone I have sinned. If I hurt someone physically, emotionally I have sinned. If I cheat I have sinned. We focus in on the observable, experiential action. **But the Bible teaches that sin is a disposition, it is a state of the heart.** For human beings in a post-Genesis 3 world, sin is our very nature, and character. Sin is not a part of who we are, the Bible says human beings are sinners to our very core. Romans 3:23 reminds us that as human beings, "*...all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" Why bring this up?

Because, **the deceit of sin is the most deceptive when we convince ourselves we are worshipping God while we are actually worshipping ourselves.** Here Jesus is speaking about spiritual disciplines, activities and actions, practices that are supposed to be done for our spiritual growth and for the acclaim and audience of God alone, yet, when sin is given the opportunity it will seize what is intended for good and twist it for self-centered, self-glorifying, and self-worshipping purposes. I think this is why Jesus gives us a warning about doing our acts of righteousness, spiritual disciplines, for the audience of God alone, to be aware of the temptation and tendency to claim our actions as worshipping God when the reality is I'm worshipping myself. And I think one of the more subtle ways sin deceives us that we are worshipping God when in reality we are worshipping ourselves is in this whole matter of prayer.

What is prayer? **Prayer is a conversation, a talk, a communing with my heavenly Father.** In the Bible prayer just is, there is not a story in the Bible in which prayer is given an origin story. Prayer simply is, you want to talk with a deity, you pray. And the Bible is filled with the prayers of God's people, some formal, most informal. There is a health mix of private and public praying in the Bible. Both the Old and New Testament assume prayer, and put heavy emphasis on its centrality in the lives of God's people. Prayer is assumed as a natural part of the relationship between God and His people. Just as we grow and nurture our relationship with our spouse, children, friends, and co-workers through conversation so too, one of the ways we nurture and grow our relationship with God is through speaking with God in prayer.

As an aside, this is why **prayerlessness in the life a Christian is functional atheism.** In being prayer-less we are essentially saying we have no need to communicate with God because we have no relationship with God. This is not to say you can't struggle with prayer, have dry seasons in prayer, or not quite understand prayer, but to simply not pray, to have a disposition that doesn't see any need for prayer, as a Christian, is effectively to say we don't believe there is a god who will hear, so why talk. Prayer is an assumed an essential part of the life of a disciple of

Christ, and we must be a praying people, individually and corporately, if we are going to see vitality and growth in our lives as Jesus' followers and if we are to see our churches thrive and grow.

As Jesus addresses the spiritual discipline of prayer, he gives two examples of how not to pray and two examples of prayer that is glorifying of God. Let's look at the examples of how not to pray first. We find the first in Matthew 6:5, Jesus says, "*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.*" The first way not to pray is hypocritically. A hypocrite is a pretender or a person who puts on a false appearance. The word in the greek is hupokritai. And was used of **actors in a play; those who speak words for effect without regard for truth**. And this is what our actors do today. They speak words for effect, to elicit an emotional response, or to convey a particular message – but actors are speaking words written by another and it's irrelevant if an actor in the role they are portraying actually believes the words they're saying or not. Jesus is saying, prayer is not something that we should be acting at. Christians should not speak words in prayer for effect. To do so is to **do a right thing, praying, for the wrong reasons**, to be seen by others. For the one who prays hypocritically, they are acting as though they are speaking to God and concentrating on God, when the reality is they are **concentrating on self; the one praying rather than the One praying too**. Notice that this is prayer occurring in a public venue, but this can just as easily occur in private as well. Hypocrisy knows no bounds, and can be equally deceptive in private as it is in public.

Jesus gives a second example of how not to pray, look at verse 7. Jesus says, "*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.*" The second way not to pray is praying by heaping up empty phrases. There's two key phrases here, heaping up many words, and being heard for their many words. Heaping up empty phrases and using a proliferation of words, can be a type of **unthinking repetition in prayer**. We've all heard this, it's prayer that sounds a little like this, "Father God, I just love you Father God, than you Father God for all you give, Father God you are great Father God you are good Father God. Father God..." This kind of prayer Jesus cautions against, because there can be an air to it, that the more I say a name for God or call upon God, god will be obligated to hear my prayers. But there's also a more subtle tone when we do this, we heap up these empty words, because we don't have anything else to say. Repeating Father God or Lord Jesus or whatever title you like, can become empty words as they are simply filler because we aren't engaged mentally in prayer, we're just letting words flow.

Heaping up empty phrases and speaking many words can also make our prayers **formulaic in their repetition**. The thinking goes like this, if I say this kind of prayer in this kind of situation, or with these specific words, or with this particular inflection, then God has to listen to me and answer me. That's one way that formulaic prayers occur. But there is also the formulaic style of simply repeating a prayer as a rote habit – like reciting the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, but doing so without any thought to what's being said. And that's the issue in this second example Jesus gives of how not to pray, we can pray using lots and lots of words but do so with little to know thought being given to what we are actually praying.

And what can arise out of this is an **attitude that is seeking to manipulate God, rather than trust Him**. If I say enough words to God, he'll simply relent and give me what I want, or if I pray the Lord's prayer 10 times in a row surely that will give me a hearing from God to get what I want. And Jesus says, no, don't be like them, don't come to God as actors, speaking words for effect without regard for truth, speaking for the acclaim of men, don't come with empty words, simply filling the air or hoping to manipulate God with titles or formalities. These are the ways not to pray. So how do we pray? What is the secret to prayer that God hears, that honors God, that glorifies and worships God?

Ultimately, it's all a matter of the approach → in prayer, I am approaching God. Prayer is not about technique. I want it to be about technique, because I can master technique, I can manipulate technique, I can make sure that I say the right things, at the right time, and in the right way to get what I want. But prayer isn't about

technique, prayer is about approaching my Creator and Lord, approaching my heavenly Father who Jesus says, “... *knows what I need before I even ask*”. The secret to prayer is understanding that I am approaching God. So how are we to approach God? Jesus gives us three instructions.

First, we approach God exclusively. Verse 6, “*But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door*”. Christian prayer needs to be directed to God exclusively. He is the only audience, He is the only answerer, He is the only One we should be concerned is hearing our prayer. This may literally mean that when you pray you go somewhere to isolate yourself from others. Jesus saying go into your room and shut the door, has far less to do with a physical location, and far more to do with the attitude and state of our heart. When I am praying am I seeking God’s audience alone, even if there may be an audience in front of me or around me? Am I shutting out as best as I can the distractions to prayer around me? At the end of the day, to approach God exclusively is to shut out and forget other people, and having done that I shut out and forget myself. You can enter into that closet when you are walking alone on a busy street, jogging the rail trail, or going from one room to another in your home. You enter into that closet when you are in communion with God and nobody knows what you are doing. But if it is an actual public act of prayer the same thing can be done. I’m speaking to myself here in many ways as I pray publically often, and am asked to pray publically often. And when I do so I try to shut you all out and see the Lord in my mind’s eye high and lifted up as we read in Isaiah 6. This puts me in the framework of recognizing I’m coming into God’s presence and need to speak to Him. Going into your room and shutting the door, we need to approach God exclusively in prayer by forgetting others and forgetting ourselves.

Second, we approach God in prayer engagingly. Again verse 6, “*But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.*” To approach God engagingly is to realize who it is that I am coming before. We need to realize that in prayer we are coming into the very presence of God. The God who the Bible says is perfectly holy, perfectly just, unwaveringly righteous, otherworldly, omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), and omnipresent (all-places). When we come to prayer, we need to engage our minds and our wills in who it is that we are coming before, I’m not coming over to my buddy’s house to hang out for a bit, I am coming before the Creator God of the Universe, who upholds the Universe by the word of his power. So I need to engage God reverently, humbly, and fearfully in the sense of recognizing that this is God, and there is no other. But I also engage God when as a Christian I approach Him knowing that He is also my heavenly Father.

And this is the third way **we are to approach God, we are to do so expectantly and confidently.** Verse 8, “*Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.*” The irrevocable birthright of every Christian is being able to approach God and genuinely, affectionately, and truly address Him as Father. And as a good Father, before we even come to Him in prayer, God already knows what it is we need. Which begs the question, then why pray? If God already knows why should I pray at all? Let me ask those of you who have children, have there been times when you knew your child had some kind of want or need, and that you were already ready to meet it, but you were simply waiting for your child to ask? What they needed was not an issue, you already knew they needed it and had made a way to give it, but you were simply waiting for them to come to you and ask. You valued having relationship with them more than what it was they were asking. That’s what Jesus means. As a Christian God is your heavenly Father, a perfect provider and gift giver, seeking only the very best for you in all times and in all circumstances. But God built you for relationship, He redeemed you through faith alone in Christ alone, to have relationship with Him. So we approach God expectantly, expecting that God wants to be in relationship with us and give good gifts to us. We must get rid of this idea that God is standing between me and my desires and that which is best for me. We must see God as our Father who has purchased our ultimate good in Christ, and is waiting to bless us with His own fullness in Christ.

Paul reminds us in Ephesians that God is able to do for us exceedingly and abundantly above all that we can ask or imagine. May we as His people believe that and then go to Him in simple confident prayer.