

JESUS' SERMON ON THE MOUNT

XI. "Get Real in Prayer"

1-14-07

Ken Peterson
Mtt. 6:1 and 5-15

INTRODUCTION

In the church of my earliest years, it was customary to spontaneously call upon various congregational members to lead in prayer. So, for the invocation, the prayer for the offering, or other times of prayer and praise in the worship service, various members would be called upon by the pastor to lead out in prayer. In my six or seven-year-old mind, I tended to think of some of the most impressive pray-ers as the most spiritual people in the church. Generally, I thought those with the long prayers, quoting lots of Scripture, though boring, we're probably the best. Myrtle was especially impressive. There was usually a bit of a tremor in her voice revealing great sincerity and passion. But then I was shocked when my dad, who was a small business owner, said she was one of the biggest liars, cheats, and gossips in town. She didn't pay her bills, lied about it, and fabricated stories. I had to conclude her "in church persona" expressed in prayer was not real.

She was one of those whom Jesus refers to as "hypocrites" in our text this morning, "for they love to pray standing in [church] to be seen by men" (Matt 6:5). Fortunately, there were also some wonderful models of consistent, sincere-to-the-core Christianity in that church as well— so it didn't really turn me off on all Christians. But it has served as a caution and illustration of the statement of Jesus with which he opens this segment of the Sermon on the Mount,

Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them (Matt 6:1).

Jesus begins this second chapter of His sermon with 18 verses dealing with three pillars or practices which the leaders of that day said formed the core of following God— almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Last week we covered giving. Also, I mentioned how these three practices represented three relationships.

1. In giving, we relate to others.
2. In prayer, we relate to God.
3. In fasting, we relate to ourselves, our own bodies.

In these three core practices, Jesus warns us of the danger of just outward practice to impress others. That constitutes hypocrisy. These practices all need to come from the right inner motivation, a heart that is sincere before God. In all three of these, we see the subtle danger of sin in the form of pride, contaminating and making odious even the most important practices of our faith.

As Jesus turns to prayer, it is by far the longest treatment of these three practices with 11 verses, close to four times longer than either giving or fasting. But, he follows a well-ordered pattern for

each subject: first how not to practice it and then how to. So here, we have two verses on “How not to pray,” followed by eight verses on “How to pray.”

HOW NOT TO PRAY

Jesus warns of two ways prayer can get off track: by making it an outward performance and by thinking the length of prayer is the point.

Now the culture of Jesus’ day was highly religious and prayer-saturated. Every good Jew recited the Shema, which begins, “Hear O Israel, the Lord God is one...” (Deut. 6:4-9) when they first got up in the morning and before going to bed at night. Also, daily they were required to repeat the “Shemoneh ‘esreh,” consisting of 18 prayers. There were prayers for every event: lighting a fire, seeing a lake, receiving good news, using new furniture, entering or leaving a city. Plus, there were set times for prayer: 9 a.m., 12 noon, and 3 p.m. Wherever they were, whatever they were doing, they were to stop and pray at those times. So it was common to see people on the streets or wherever praying— a lot of public, visible prayer going on. It was the thing to do to fit in. Not to be seen praying at those times would be awkward. Also prayer was generally out loud. If you’ve visited the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, you’ve seen this practice. In that culture, you can see how prayer could become performance, a “looking good” kind of thing.

This all sounds very strange to many Presbyterian ears— all this public, visible praying. I know even praying out loud in a small group is a stretch for some and were I to randomly pick someone to lead the congregation in prayer at the close of the service, it could cause some to be paralyzed by fear. Don’t worry, I won’t do that to you! And for some, saying grace over a meal in a restaurant or a school cafeteria may take more boldness than they can muster. If you’re in that category, you may take comfort in this Scripture, thinking prayer is supposed to be private, personal and not seen. BUT, are there times we don’t pray because of what people will think? Isn’t that rooted in the same pride that makes a show of prayer? So, a lack of prayer in public can make us just as guilty.

Just as secrecy was the antidote to pride in showy giving, so again we see the need for secrecy. Whether pride is manifested in impressive public prayer or by cowardly not praying when we should “because of what people might think,” that antidote is prayer “in secret.” No one knows about this kind of prayer, or needs to be impressed by it. This is where our pride is stripped away before God and we get to know Him intimately. It’s in secret when we really get down to praying with no phoniness, pouring out our hearts to God. Here is true prayer coming from the depths of the heart— confessing our sins, our failures, our emptiness, and our needs. Ron Hutchcraft refers to these as “O, God” prayers— a desperate call for help. That prayer, Jesus says, will be rewarded.

I remember my mother’s prayer closet. The KJV uses the word “closet” here in vs. 6, where our NIV text uses “room.” Some of us might be hard pressed (literally) in getting into one of our closets to pray! But our home in my early years had a large closet off my parent’s bedroom— one of those that are built under a stairway, so it was deep. In the back of that, my mother had her

private place of prayer. These were not always silent. At times I would hear sounds of praise, songs of praise, and groans of intercession. It gave me comfort to know I was a recipient of some of those intercessions. Her private prayer life was huge and God revealed incredible things to my mother in prayer and her prayers “availed much” (James 5:16).

Certainly Jesus is not against praying in public. Elsewhere he encourages us to unite in prayer, agreeing together. Public prayer is modeled in the Old Testament and in the New Testament – especially the book of Acts where many prayer meetings are detailed. Coming together for prayer is commanded by God and used powerfully in accomplishing His will. Jesus is here cautioning us against pretense and unreality in our prayers– going through the motions of prayer or trying to impress anyone else with our prayer. Our goal in public prayer should be in being sincere and real with God. A humble honesty before God doesn’t call attention to yourself. Our purpose is to help everyone in focusing on God, bringing our concerns before Him. And, the “amen” is meant to be a spoken response– saying, “Yes, I agree. I’m praying that with you.”

The second problem Jesus mentions is our tendency toward being impressed by wordiness. Jesus says that is pagan. The practice of all religions of that day were that much gets more. It was emphasized by Jews in the common saying, "Whenever the righteous make their prayer long, it is heard." Jesus says, this is based upon a false view of God– that He has to be badgered as if reluctant, needing to be "talked into things" or worn down by our much arguing or that He doesn't know about our needs so He has to be told. Jesus says, God isn't like that. He knows about our needs before we even ask, and is lovingly attentive, involved in our lives.

There are two liberating principles here.

1. "Not much"– the quantity and the time are not the essential part of prayer. However, often it takes us quite awhile to get real before God, to let go of our stuff and focus and listen to Him. That is always the most difficult part of prayer.
2. "He knows"– frees us from amount of information we think we need to give Him.

Brian Roennfeldt, from Australia, gives an illustration the power of secret, simple prayer. His wife went to a rough high school where there were few Christians apart from one teacher, David Bunton. Years after this teacher left his position, dozens of his former students had become believers with many becoming pastors and missionaries. Curious about Mr. Bunton’s influence, Brian tracked him down and told him of all the former students he was aware of that were now following Christ, with many of them attributing their conversion to his influence. Choked with emotion, Mr. Bunton said that many times he had prayed softly over his classes as he sat back in his desk and watched them work. But apart from that he’d done nothing else to influence these students toward Christ.

Listen to *The Message*’s paraphrase of this section:

"Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.

"The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They're full of

formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don't fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply.

HOW TO PRAY

Here we get what we commonly call, The Lord's Prayer. Of course this warrants a series of sermons in itself (and I have preached a series on this prayer). This morning though, we're going to avoid the tendency to detail. This prayer is both very simple and extremely profound. I want us to take a moment to bask in the sheer simplicity of this model prayer and the assurance it gives of how to pray and serves as a model in approaching God. It can be prayed, even slowly, in less than a minute. And, yet it contains all the petitions we should ask. I like Dr. Dale Bruner's description of this as a kind of handrail along which to proceed in forming our own petitions.

The prayer is divided into two almost symmetrical parts. The first three petitions contain the word "your"; the last three petitions include "our" or "us." The first half is about God the Father and the last half about us— our human petitions.

The prayer begins with the address: "Our Father who art in heaven..." This defines a relationship. Prayer begins with knowing God is our heavenly Father. It is not automatic, but a choice we make. We are adopted into His family through Jesus Christ. As Jesus later explains, a good earthly father delights in giving good gifts, blessing his children and caring for their needs. Likewise, we can approach our heavenly Father with that same assurance.

The word "our" is inclusive, universal. You are not alone before God, but others stand with you. This includes all Christians from all time and all places. We cannot reject, or fail to accept any of His children.

Then, we have **three petitions relating to our relationship with God**— all denoting a kind of relinquishment, a letting go of our wills to His perfect will.

1. **"Hallowed be Thy name"** is the beginning petition. "Honored as holy" is what is meant by "hallowed." Remember a name is the essence of person in Biblical usage, descriptive of them, of their nature, and their character. Thus, this is a prayer that God will be central in all of life, honored in His holy, pure essence. We will not try to shape Him into something less— like "our buddy" or "our heavenly butler to serve our needs." He is God and we are not. In this first petition, we are submitting ourselves to live in a relationship that acknowledges his Holiness, His "otherness," and His intolerance of sin. Remember, Jesus is the perfect interpreter of the nature of God. So, it may be most helpful for you to think, "May all that I am and do as well as everything in this world, be honoring to Jesus."
2. **"Thy Kingdom Come,"** is a petition for God's purposes, and plans to be worked out in our history. Jesus came announcing that kingdom and inaugurating it. It continues to grow in history by God's action in and through Christians. This prays that we may be in line, in tune with his rule and reign.
3. **"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."** With this, we are saying, "not my will, but Thy will be done." It is a letting go of our control and our desires to fulfill what God

wants. It is saying, “May I or nothing else in this world operate inconsistently with your will, Father.” It acknowledges that our wills, sin and Satan can stand in the way or hinder God’s actions in this world, at least in the present. However, ultimately, in the long run, all things will obey His will.

So far, we've prayed for God's honor, His rule and His perfect will. Now, in the second half, the **three remaining petitions are about our needs.** Here, "us," "our," and "we," are as significant as "Yours" was in the first half.

1. ***"Give us this day our daily bread."*** This is a prayer for our daily needs, and provision. It includes all we need: shelter, health, and food. It is an unapologetic asking God to supply our basic needs in life. He ultimately is the source of all we have— our strength, our resources, our knowledge— it all comes from His gracious hand.
2. ***"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."*** This refers to sins of commission (what we do that we shouldn't do) and sins of omission (what we fail to do that we should do). And, here's one of the great theological questions, “Why do Presbyterians use ‘debts’ and other protestant churches use "trespasses?"” Actually, it is for them to explain. We're the ones following Scripture here— the text says “debts.” Luke's version of this prayer says "sins," but I find no "trespass" in any translation of Bible. In our first church, there was a period of time in the community where our Presbyterian church was the only one of the four churches with no debt. A member of another church wryly commented, "Maybe some of the rest of us should pray, 'forgive us our debts.'"

There is a sobering condition attached to this— our need to likewise forgive others who sin against us. “As” is a tiny word, but sobering in it’s implications. Lest we miss this, it is the only part of the prayer Jesus expands upon at the end of the prayer, saying:

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matt 6:14-15)

If we want to be forgiven, we must forgive. None of us can stand the luxury of harboring unforgiveness in our hearts.

3. ***"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."*** Elsewhere, Scripture makes it clear that God tempts no one with evil. Temptation is Satan's doing. So, this can best be seen as a prayer for guidance, asking God to help us follow Him in way that He may keep us from those places that may prove a snare to us, and cause us to fall. And, the second half of that petition, “deliver us from evil,” I see as a prayer for deep cleansing and wholeness. Most of us have pockets of inner sin, selfishness, corners where evil may still lurk within us. This is asking God to deliver us from all that. It is also a prayer for protection from evil in the world.

Then, there is that final, wonderful ascription of praise: ***"For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever."*** You'll notice that you only find that included in the footnotes in the NIV and RSV translations. The reason for this is, it is not in the best, the oldest of the manuscripts The thinking of scholars is that this final ascription of praise was probably added very early on as the early church began using this prayer. While it may be "iffy" whether Jesus said it, it certainly is a wonderful, Biblical affirmation of praise with which to end— affirming His

reign, power and glory, and that His purposes will prevail in the end.. I believe the Roman Catholic Church omits this ascription at the end. So, be cautious when you are attending a Roman Catholic church lest you continue on alone!

CONCLUSION

Here, Jesus gives us simple, straight-forward, honest prayer to counter all our pretenses and all our attempts to impress one another and God. It cuts through the fluff to the core of what we need to do in our relationship with God and one another and what we really need to pray about.

Jesus' plea in this section is to guard our hearts from any phoniness so that our practice of discipleship is real and we don't end up deceiving ourselves. Prayer in its essence is always an honest, heart to heart conversation with God– whether public, or in a small group or private. The goal is first and foremost to get real with God, relinquish ourselves to Him and trust to His provision.

I'd like to encourage you to try using this prayer as a handrail to guide your prayers this week. Formulate your prayers and concerns around this. It is Jesus' model for us– like a framework to keep us praying in and for the right things.