

The Prayer Jesus Taught  
Matthew 6:5-15  
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9-20-13

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Before I begin, I want to ask, am I alone in feeling like life has officially shifted and we're now already beginning the business of Advent and the Christmas season? Maybe it's me, but with the Chili Cook-off yesterday and Spaghetti Supper next week, the weather officially changing for good and football season in full swing, something switched in me this week, and things went from the laid back atmosphere of summer to the frenzied fervor of fall. And I love it.

With all that is taking place around this community, it is easy to get caught up in the stir. Which is why this fall is such an important time for us as a church. What keeps us grounded? What keeps us centered? What keeps us from getting physically and emotionally and spiritually lost in the shuffle? Prayer. Jesus said at the end of His sermon on the mount that it's not just about what you know about God, but it is about putting what you know into practice. And he drew a picture of what this looks like by telling us of a wise man who built his house upon a rock. Daily, hourly, moment-by-moment dependence upon the only one who can keep us from derailing amid the fury of our world.

So as we look together at our Lord's most important words on prayer, let's take a moment to prepare our hearts to hear his word. Let us pray.

Father, as we step aside from the world for these few brief moments this morning, we come hungry for the life-giving nourishment of your Word. And to those who are weary, those who don't know where to turn, those who have so many appointments and responsibilities crowding their schedule, you give us a gift. You give us words, a prayer, that when uttered with sincerity of heart draw us instantly into the very grace of God. Refresh us and renew our life as we pray the way you taught us, for we do so not in our own strength, but in the strong name of Jesus the Christ who is our Savior and Lord, Amen.

Matthew 6, beginning at verse 5 reads this way.

**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. 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. "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. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this:**

**Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.**

The Gallup Poll indicates that there are more people this week who will pray than those who will operate a car, or go to work, or engage in romantic intimacy, or exercise. Nine in 10 of us say that we pray somewhat regularly, and yet if we ask those people whether we think we're growing in our life of prayer life, the answer is overwhelmingly no. Our series this fall, as it has been said each week, is not that we would have more ideas in our minds about prayer, but more prayers on our lips to God. But the fact of the matter is there is still a lot of confusion about what we're supposed to pray about.

One of my favorite movie clips about prayer comes from a movie called "Meet the Parents."

[Movie Clip]

Now as someone who is often called upon to professionally bless the meal, I love that clip. But it brings to light a number of questions regarding prayer. What are we supposed to say? And does it really matter? If God already knows what we want and need, should we bother asking? Is there anything that is off limits in prayer, for example praying for a sports team? Has anyone ever prayed for their sports team to win? And don't you think there are others from the other side praying the very same thing? Here's a conundrum for you, who do Colts fans pray for their team this afternoon or their beloved former captain Peyton Manning?

Back in the 80s, a local pastor was invited to give a chapel service to the Chicago Bears. And Coach Ditka began by asking William "Refrigerator" Perry to say the Lord's prayer to get the service underway. At that moment, Jim McMahon, the QB of the team leaned over to the pastor and said 50 bucks says he doesn't know the Lord's Prayer. The pastor, not really believing that he's actually betting on the Lord's Prayer, bows his head as The Fridge begins: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." And Jim McMahon is in the back kind of shaking his head, and he leans over and hands the pastor 50 bucks and says I can't believe The Fridge knew the Lord's prayer.

So, we need Jesus to teach us how to pray. In the Gospels, of all the recorded words the Disciples say to Jesus, the only thing they ever ask Jesus is this: "teach us how to pray." But before Jesus gives them the how's of prayer, he first gives the how nots of prayer.

Look back with me at verse 5: Jesus says **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.**

Jesus says, when it comes to prayer, don't pretend, don't be a hypocrite, don't pretend to be something you're not. This word hypocrite is an interesting one. In Greek, the word *hypo-kritos* in Jesus' day was a word associated with actors in the theater; it literally means play actors. When you pray, don't be a play actor. I discovered something really interesting in my research this week about a theater in a town called Sepphoris. I believe we have a picture of it. Archeologists' best guess dates this theater between 10 and 20 AD. And Sepphoris is just up the road from a little town called Nazareth. Do you know anyone who is from Nazareth?

It is very possible, and there is a lot of writing on this, that a craftsman from Nazareth named Joseph and his son Jesus—whom he was teaching the trade—could have gone to work each day building this Roman Theater. And Jesus would have grown up around these Hypokritos who performed on that stage.

Jesus teaching about prayer begins with this word hypocrite. Over and over again, 17 times in the New Testament, Jesus calls out these Hypokritos, people who claim to be something on the outside but are something very different inside. Jesus takes to task people who fake spirituality on a stage while in their hearts they are far from God. Jesus is calling us out for the people who we look at, who we tend to judge, and who we really are on the inside.

We have the ability to smell false sincerity, play acting, disingenuousness a mile away, but it turns out the only hypocrite I don't want to turn in and expose for who they really are is me. That's not what Jesus wants. Turns out, what Jesus wants is not pious actors, or righteous religious people, but humble sinners. Jesus is telling us, as one has put it, to bring the real you to the real God, because God knows the real you anyhow.

Psalms 62:8 says this: **pour out your hearts before God; for he is a refuge for us.** Pour out your hearts, don't hold back, don't filter the hopes, or fears, the eager anticipations and the longings of your hearts. Give them to God honestly and without pretense. As I said a few weeks ago, just ask.

This leads us to the second bit of this, Jesus says, 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. Second insight from the greatest pray-er who ever lived: Don't Perform.

Now this doesn't mean that you don't pray aloud. In fact, there are people in our church and in our community who gather every week to get on their knees to pray for our world. And one of the most exciting thoughts is to one day see what mighty wonderworking deeds those prayers brought about in God's kingdom. But what Jesus is talking about here is people who pray to put on a show. Prayer is the intimate conversation between you and I and God, and sometimes making that conversation public only diminishes the loving intimacy God opens in that space. This quiet personal prayer is simply this: talking to God about what we are doing together.

So find a place where you can pray. Jesus knows that place has an incredible impact on how we will be able to pray. As Amy will attest, one of the things that is most exciting to me about our house is a little corner of the family room with a book shelf, lamp, and comfy purple chair with an ottoman. That chair has been many places. It once belonged to the Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Fort Wayne, it has been reupholstered and restuffed, it's been with us to New Jersey and Illinois, and now it sits in my living room and it is the place where I go to meet God in the mornings.

For some of you it might be outside. Maybe you go for a walk and want to be out in nature. For some of you it may be at a desk or in the car. For some others, you might even say it happens out on the golf course, and your justification goes something like this: "Honey, I'm going for a 5 hour quiet time on the course." Wherever it might be, let it be the place where you go to meet God and not perform. Simply abide in his presence. And having that place is really crucial. In fact, I believe that if you make time and place a priority, those times with God will change your life.

Now in the interest of full disclosure, let me say this that there have been times in my life when that time of quiet prayer has been rich and meaningful and incredibly fruitful, but there have also been times when it has been rather barren. For example, right now, with two kids, the word *quiet time* sounds more like a cruel joke. There is no quiet time in our world.

For those of us who struggle to find time to be quiet with God, let me say this: if all this does is create guilt, then we're not seeing what God wants to share with us. Prayer and time alone with God is a gift. It's not a forced thing, but an invitation. If all this does is remind you of how little you are praying right now, then that is the righteousness of the Pharisees and the Scribes, and let me tell you that is a dead end. Prayer is a gift, not an obligation. It is a chance to move us into the ongoing joyful awareness of our God. And as our eyes become increasingly opened to God's presence, we come to want what God wants. Our desires become aligned with God's desires, as Dallas Willard says. So that soon our deepest desires expressed in prayer are precisely the vision God has for this world. For it is not my will but yours, your loving, perfect, insurmountable will that through prayer will soon become my will, as well.

Bring the real you, before the real God, not only because the real God knows the real you anyway, but because the real God loves the real you, wants to fill the real you with meaning and purpose and his glorious kingdom. So that you would know, when you stand up and when you lie down, in your coming and your going, in sickness, want, abundance, and provision that God meets his people in prayer.

And as we close, I invite you to listen as I pray that prayer that joins people of all places and times together under the name of Jesus. And as I speak these words that are as old as our faith, and as real as the breath in our lungs, I am going to pause between clauses and invite you to add your personal prayer to God for his hallowed, for his kingdom, for gratitude for his daily provision, and the forgiveness he offers leading all who utter them with believing hearts to the promise of everlasting life in the presence of our Loving God.

Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name....

Thy kingdom come thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...

Give us this day our daily bread...

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors...

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...

For thine is the kingdom, power and glory forever...Amen.