

The Aim of Prayer

a sermon in the series
Sermon on the Mount

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Matthew 6:5-8

And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 6 But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. 7 And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

In the last message we showed how prayer is used by religious people as a means to prove their great spirituality, and to earn their answers from God. Their lives are not based upon grace, but their own efforts. Today, Jesus is going to show us what the ultimate purpose of prayer is. He outlines for us the heart of why we pray and the aim of prayer.

But first He shows why most people pray, whether they are Christian, Muslim, or Hindu. It does not matter. Most people pray the same kind of prayers. They may use different terminology, address different gods but their prayers are basically the same. True communication with God is different. I pray you will see this.

Most of us get hung up on the form, the structure of prayer. Jesus will address this later in the chapter, but before doing so He must deal with the function of prayer in the life of a true disciple. As you look at verse eight, “your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him,” the question arises, why do I need to pray if He already knows my need? If God already knows what we need, already loves us, why do we need to pray? What’s the purpose? If I serve a God that is all-powerful, all-loving, and knows everything about me, why do I need to ask?

It’s a logical question that has to be asked if we are to understand what Christ is saying. Why wouldn’t He just go ahead and meet my needs? Wouldn’t that be the most loving thing? As a parent, you meet your children’s needs; they don’t have to ask you, you don’t require them to make supplication to you. You meet their needs. Wouldn’t love necessitate that God do the same, or would it not?

Before I can answer that question, Jesus introduces another question, the question of public

praying. Is Jesus against public prayer? Look at what He says in verse five, “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men.” Verse six, “But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place.”

Is Jesus advocating public prayers should cease, and that we should only pray in private? The answer is no, of course not! Jesus prayed publicly. On several occasions, He prayed where others could hear Him. One chapter in the New Testament is nothing more than a prayer of Jesus, prayed in the hearing of His disciples—John 17. Public prayer happened before the day of Pentecost as the early church assembled for ten days of prayer and waiting on God. In Acts 4 we see Peter standing up and praying that magnificent prayer crying out to God for help in the threat of persecution.

Jesus is not against public prayer; He is against public prayer that is not for God’s glory but for the glory of the person praying. So here is what Jesus says about public prayer: first, your audience cannot be those whom you see. Look at verse five, “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets that they may be seen by men.” The Pharisees prayed, and they prayed a lot, but they prayed to those whom they could see. In other words, their prayers may have been addressed to God, but they were really praying to the people.

The people that Jesus is talking about conducted themselves in public prayer for the approval of others. The good Jew prayed three times a day, nine o’clock, twelve o’clock, and three o’clock. This is the practice of the Muslim today, only they pray five times a day. If you live in a Muslim city, the call for prayer sounds out and people stop and find the place of prayer. The same happened in the day of Jesus, but these certain people would conveniently know the time and coincidentally be on a street corner when the hour of prayer was called. Of course it wasn’t happenstance or coincidence. They timed it because they wanted others to hear their prayers and know they were truly spiritual men. They desired people to listen and say, “Wow, what a beautiful prayer, he must really be sincere.”

You can pray to others and not to God; in fact, you can actually pray to yourself. Consider the parable that Jesus taught about the Pharisee in Luke 16. Jesus said, “The Pharisee stood and prayed, thus with himself.” He was addressing God but really he was praying to himself. So often when we pray publicly we pray to those listening, and even in our own prayer closets we run the hazard of praying for our own benefit. We pray in order to congratulate ourselves that we are spiritual. Therefore, your audience cannot be those you see. This is absolutely clear.

Public prayer is necessary and good. In public prayer one person prays and represents those in the meeting. Yes, we should pray publicly, but when public prayer occurs, it is one person praying on behalf of the group. Therefore, if you lead in public prayer, remember that your audience is not those you can see. It is the Lord God whom you cannot see. You must shut the audience out, ignore to some degree the people you represent and concentrate on the Lord God. If you’re

not careful, you'll find yourself drifting, wondering 'how did that sound?' In fact, that's one of the reasons people don't like to pray publicly, they cannot divorce the audience from God. They complain they can't pray eloquent prayers, they can't pray as beautiful as another. Well, dear friend, if this is the way you feel, you've misunderstood public prayer. In fact, you've misunderstood prayer altogether. The Lord cares nothing about the beauty of the words used in prayer. No, His care is for the heart and its passion.

Another thing I would say about public prayer is you must avoid preaching, teaching, and lecturing in your prayers. It's to God alone you are speaking on the behalf of others. He doesn't need a sermon, a Sunday school lesson, or a lecture. I confess I'm often guilty of this. I, too, forget that it is God I'm addressing and begin to think about my audience who sits before me. So much of the time I find myself slipping back into the preacher mode as I pray. But I'm not the only one guilty. I've heard your prayers too. We do have that tendency, every one of us. So let us guard against it. We are to bear the needs of the people to the Lord. In that regard we are to remember those whom we can see, but only remember them in order to pray for them and on their behalf. That is all. In summary, Jesus' entire point about public prayer is when you pray publicly, you must not care about the approval or disapproval of those listening. You should care only for God's approval.

Now we turn our attention to private prayer. Look at verse six, "But you, when you pray, go into your room and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place and your Father, who sees in secret will reward you openly." Jesus says several things about private prayer. The first is the certainty of it. There is no doubt that Christians would pray. Jesus says, "when you pray" and not, "if you pray." For the Christian there is a necessity of prayer. He must pray.

The Christian cannot live without prayer. The believer has an inner compulsion to pray. John Bunyan said the man who doesn't pray is not a Christian. Why? Because every believer has within him this inner desire to know God and to communicate with God. It doesn't mean we pray as much as we ought to, or even regularly, but there is this compulsion, this inner desire to know God and to speak with Him. Prayer is a necessity and God has established the Christian life so that you can't live without it.

He also states the nature of private prayer; He communicates what prayer's essence is, its heart, what it's like. "When you pray go into your room and when you have shut the door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place." Prayer is communication with God. It's you talking to God, sharing your heart with Him. "Go in secret." Why secret? Because that's where the Father is. You go where God is and you express yourself to God.

We can say it this way: prayer is the expressing of your heart's desires to God. Where do I get this? It's in the word *prayer* that Jesus uses. Here the word prayer is made up of two words, the word *toward* and the word *desire*. The word means a "desire toward." In other words, prayer is a desire directed towards God, that's all it is, you expressing your desires to the Lord, unleashing the heart to God. Therefore, grammar is not important nor selecting the most appropriate

words. What is important is the heart and its desires. That's why David said in Psalm 25:1, "To you O, Lord I lift up my soul." Prayer is a lifting up of the soul. The soul is the inner man, that most important part of us. Prayer, then, is communicating the desires of the soul to the Lord. That's all prayer is.

Some people define prayer as a conversation with God. The only problem with that is the Bible does not describe prayer this way. Every time prayer is mentioned in the Bible, it is man expressing his desires to God, not God talking to men. When the word is used never is God doing the talking, it is always men or women.

I bring this point up in order to rescue you from a lot of heartache that I've experienced in learning how to pray. I grew up believing that prayer was a conversation where you sat down and talked to God and God responded. I was taught that prayer was this holy, top of the mountain experience, where you go up and talk with God and then you come back down into the real world. Your prayer closet was this place where God shows up and shares His heart with you. But it doesn't always happen that way. If you define prayer as a conversation, as men have conversation, you will be very frustrated and wonder what's wrong, "God, why aren't you talking to me?" Desperation will set in and you will say, "I just can't pray. I'm either not good enough, or I don't know what to do."

My friend, God does speak to us, I believe that often He does come into the closet of prayer and makes His presence known. I'm thankful to tell you, after years of trial and error, I find the presence of God far easier to be experienced than I used to. But when I entered the closet of prayer expecting a conversation, most of my prayer was dead because it wasn't based upon the biblical concept of prayer. Prayer is where you express your desires to God. Private prayer is where you express your heart to God; you lift up your soul to the Lord God.

Why does Jesus say go to your room and shut the door? There are a couple of reasons. I think it is not just because we need private prayer, but because God desires us for Himself. God wants you to shut yourself away from all of your activities, all of the things you busy yourself with, and demonstrate that you value Him so much you're willing to turn from everything else. God wants you for Himself. He delights in the fact that you find Him most valuable.

There is another reason why He says the "secret place." It does not mean God is not in the public place. "Your Father who is in the secret place" means God is not like people. Men are visible, but God is not. You cannot point to Him and say there He is—He's sitting on that pew. Jesus is saying you're praying to someone who exists in the invisible realm. It doesn't mean God isn't in the public place. He is there, but not in a visible manner. Therefore, go where you're not distracted by other people and pray to the One whom inhabits all places, yet invisible.

Jesus is also referring to certain texts in the Old Testament that speak of the place of God's dwelling. The Bible says God dwells in a secret place and only those who are holy can dwell there with Him. For example, Psalm 27:5, "For in the time of trouble, He shall hide me in His pavilion;

in the secret place of His tabernacle, He shall hide me.” The word *tabernacle* does not mean the tabernacle of meeting where the priests offered the sacrifices. It means God’s secret dwelling, His house, His place of dwelling. David said the Lord would take him to dwell where He is. David says again in Psalm 31:20, “You shall hide them in the secret place of Your presence.” In this verse the psalmist defines what he means by the secret place, it’s the presence of God. It’s that place where you know you are in the very presence of God.

Moses knew that place, a place so holy that his shoes had to be removed. The secret place is the place of His presence for Moses said in Psalm 91:1, “He who dwells in this secret place of the most High shall abide in the shadow of the Almighty.” It’s the presence of God.

The first thing we are to do when praying is to acknowledge the presence of God. Doing so will do more for your prayer life than anything else I could suggest to you. Before you pray, understand and be aware of the presence of God. Which should tell us, the most important thing you need to do when you enter into your time of private prayer is not to start talking. The most important thing you can do is to acknowledge the presence of God. Become aware of His presence and consider whom you are addressing.

Let me move quickly to the purpose of prayer in verses 7-8. “And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do, for they think they will be heard for their many words. Therefore, do not be like them, for your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.” Words do not get you to God. Many pray thinking the more words they use the closer to God they will get. Many words and certain words do not get you to God. They never have and never will.

The Hindu and the Buddhists do this in transcendental meditation. They take a word and make a mantra by saying the word over and over until they hypnotize themselves. The Roman Catholic has his certain prayers, like the Rosary, which he believes that God will hear. He thinks they grant him access to God. But Jesus says no amount of words and no certain kinds of words will guarantee God to hear you, not even the words ‘in Jesus’ name.’ How often our Lord’s name is used at the end of a prayer like it was some magical incantation, as if the prayer now has power because of adding “in Jesus’ name.” Such is witchcraft!

Some of the most sincere praying is done when not one word is uttered. I think often we pray and don’t realize it. Our Lord Jesus is telling us that praying is the lifting up of the soul to God and that soul that is moved by the burden of God is always heard. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 8:26, “Likewise, the Spirit also helps our weaknesses for we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.” When the Holy Spirit gets involved in our praying, often there is nothing but groans. You can’t put it into words, the intensity of the burden is so strong you can’t find a phrase or the right word at that moment; all you can do is cry out to God.

This groaning is the highest form of prayer uttered by human lips. The groans of the soul. How

many have groaned this week? How many of you have groaned in pain, groaned in weariness, groaned even in discouragement? God heard it. God heard it and I say to you it was not your words that carried you to the Father's heart, it was the Spirit of the living God, the Spirit of Christ.

Words do not get us to God, Christ gets us to God. We already have access to God. I don't need to believe if I say the right thing and say it poetically or eloquently that I will impress God to say, "Ah, you speak well, come closer," I'm already in His presence. I'm already seated at His right hand in Christ Jesus. Christ gets us to God, which tells me something, dear friend, that prayer never costs you and me anything. I'm ashamed of myself for saying many times in the past that prayer was costly to us. Oh, it may cost us time, yes even effort, but the truth is, it is so little compared to what it cost God so that we might call upon Him in prayer. It cost Him His Son. It cost Jesus Christ the banishment of His Father's love as He hung on the cross. It cost Him everything. It cost Him the royal courts of heaven, to become a man and be subject to every weakness of humanity. To be tempted as a man yet without sin, to suffer the rejection of His Father and the indignation and shame of sinful men. It cost Him dearly.

How can I compare my labors in prayer to some price paid? I should gladly come in prayer to God knowing I have access through Jesus Christ. Notice what Jesus says in our text, "for your Father knows the things . . ." He says God is my Father, and in these statements I find the purpose of prayer. Since we already have access to God, we should seize and experience the Lord and express our hearts to Him.

There is the purpose of prayer. Was it too subtle, too simple that you missed it my friend?

The purpose of prayer is not complicated. Jesus is saying something very profound, but at the same time something very simple; don't be like the heathen who think praying the right words or the right length of prayers will get you answers. Prayer is not about prayer. Prayer is about God and experiencing Him and drawing near to Him. If your goal in prayer is to list your many requests so that you might gain some kind of answer, you have made the secondary reason for prayer the primary reason and you've missed the whole purpose of prayer altogether.

The purpose of prayer is to experience God whom Christ has paid the price for our access to. God is already your father if you are a believer. "Your Father already knows what you need before you ask Him." Our needs are not the main reason we pray. He already knows what you need and His supply was made before the need appeared. So relax, and make God the object of your prayer. Make prayer about the experiencing of God's presence. This is what we need most. When Mary said to Elizabeth in her worship, "My soul magnifies the Lord," it meant her soul was caught up in the glory and the greatness of God, that my friend is what I need. That's the goal and purpose of prayer and it is the greatest need that outweighs all needs, physical, mental, financial—that my soul be filled with the magnificence of God.

Puny Christianity is a result of puny souls, souls filled with so little of the magnificence of God.

Prayer is not about prayer, it's about God. But what have we done? We've made prayer about prayer, about how we pray. When people hear sermons about prayer, most come under guilt and say, "Okay, tomorrow morning I'll start being more faithful in my prayer life. I'm going to get up fifteen minutes early, no, no, thirty minutes early, and I'm going to pray. Yes, I'm really going to start praying." Friends, please do not respond to this sermon like that, for you will not only have done the Lord Jesus Christ a disservice, but you will have dishonored everything about prayer. It's not what I'm aiming at, that's not the focus of this sermon. The sermon's focus is this: How much do you love your Father? How much do you prize Christ? Is prayer really about God or is it about you getting things? Prayer is not about overcoming reluctance in God to help you or bless you; it's about us coming into agreement and alignment with God's greatest good for us.

Prayer, real prayer, is a soul thirsty for God and God alone. That's the kind of prayer that magnify and honors God, that's the kind of prayers He listens to; souls that are thirsty. When you're hungry, you can feel your stomach rumbling, even people around you can hear it rumble. It's hungry. Can God hear the rumbles of your soul? Are you hungry and thirsty for Him? Do you feel it? Until you have, you're not praying, you're just putting words into space. You're praying to hear yourself pray. To pray becomes the major goal. No, no, no, to pray is not the goal—God is the goal.

"What about my need," you ask, "it sounds like I should never ask for anything." No not at all! Jesus will instruct us to ask when we get to the Lord's, or the model prayer, as it is called. When I view God as the object of my prayer and He is what I'm really hungry for, He becomes the shaper and the molder of my desires. I know this is radical thinking to some of you only because you've been so conditioned by institutionalized religion to think of prayer as a list of petitions. You've been taught to say "your prayers."

What you need is a heart alignment so that you are more desirous of God's presence and His love, than you are in getting some need met. Because there is no need that outweighs this need: the need for God Himself. And when God becomes the need, it's amazing what takes place in the soul. Your soul comes into alignment with His will so that His will becomes your will and the desires that you express in prayer are according to His will. He works that into your heart.

Let me see if I can illustrate this. A British Christian tells his personal story of a very wealthy friend who summoned him to his office because he felt led of the Lord to give him some money. The man was in ministry. He arrived at his friend's office and the man told him he wanted to give him one pound. He signed the check, folded it in half and handed it to him. The minister thanked his friend and went directly to the bank to cash the check. When he opened the check to give it to the cashier, he noticed it didn't say one pound, it said one thousand pounds.

Now what should he do? What would you do? This friend was very wealthy, he wouldn't miss a thousand pounds, and the check did say one thousand pounds. By all legal rights, he could have cashed it and received a thousand pounds. But there was one thing that bothered the man, one thing that made him hesitate, the man had expressed his will and it was for only one pound. The expressed will of the friend would not allow the minister to cash the check.

Often prayer is illustrated as a blank check that God has already signed. No doubt you've heard that illustrated. The verse is quoted, "Whatsoever you ask in My name, that will I do." That is the blank check. Jesus has already signed it, now put in the amount and go cash it for whatever you want. And to some degree there is truth in that, but the context of the truth must be the Father's will. God has a will for each of us and unless we seek to know His will we are likely to ask for a thousand and He knows one will be best for us.

The man who had this experience made the better application of the illustration. He said,

In our prayers we are coming to a Friend—a loving Father. We owe everything to Him. He bids us come to Him whenever we like for all we need. His resources are infinite. But He bids us to remember that we should ask only for those things that are according to His will—only for that which will bring glory to His name. John says, "If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (1 John 5:14). So then our Friend gives us a blank check, and leaves us to fill in 'anything'; but He knows that if we truly love Him we shall never put down—never ask for—things He is not willing to give us, because they would be harmful to us.

How can you pray like this? You can't unless God becomes the prize and the object of prayer.

I might add I don't think our problem is God saying He's going to give us a pound and we want a thousand. I think often we limit our God who wants to give us a thousand and we're only asking for one. Again, the key is not what I think God would want, but what I know He wants because I know His heart. How do you know His heart? You hear it expressed in His Word and that Word which expresses His will shapes your heart in prayer.

Dear friend, as I conclude, this is the aim of prayer and it has come to us at a very high price. As I've already said, Jesus refers to God as our Father and I note every time Jesus prayed to the Father in the New Testament He always addressed Him as Father. Jesus always addressed His Father as Father when He prayed, except one time. And that one time is on the cross, when He says "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" Why not then? Why not pray, "My Father, My Father, why have You forsaken me?" The answer is He was stripped of God's Fatherhood and was made the enemy of God. The relationship of Father and Son was denied Him so that He could not cry out "My Father." In our place He was condemned so that we who were the enemies of God, stripped of the Fatherhood of God, void of access to the Father could now cry, "Abba, Father."

That's why you ought to pray. Jesus endured so much for you so you might be able to pray. Get to know your Father and you will know what He desires for you. He already knows what you need, why don't you find out what you really need by getting to know your Father. May God help us to do so. Amen.