

## **Matthew 6:1-15**

***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.***

***2 “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.***

### ***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. 9 Pray then like this:***

***“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.***

***10 Your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.***

***11 Give us this day our daily bread,  
12 and forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.***

***13 And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.***

***14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.***

### ***Fasting***

***16 “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 that your fasting may not be seen by others but by***

***your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.***

On the one hand, prayer is one of the most natural responses of humans. Paul said to the leading men of Athens you pray to “an unknown god”. In times of crisis and terror, people pray. There are no atheists in foxholes. Whilst trying to quickly find some recent survey findings, I came across an article in The Guardian, one of London’s main newspapers. It said, even amongst non-religious people 1 in 5 pray regularly. One particular example was of an agnostic man who prayed daily – even as he felt hypocritical for doing so. On the other hand, prayer (at least the kind that God honours) seems most unnatural – the struggle Christians have to pray is universally attested to from the first disciples through every century, and every heart since. Our text today is one of the great passages on prayer in the bible, and I think we will find great encouragement within. It falls within a section of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount pertaining to how the disciples were to practice their “righteousness”. Righteousness here meaning acts of piety, or religious observances. He speaks of the practices of alms giving, prayer, and fasting, three of the chief acts of piety for Jews that Jesus wanted maintained.

The warning Jesus gives in each case is the same: ‘do not practice your piety before men in order to be seen by them’. This may seem to contradict Jesus’ teaching from the same sermon. Earlier he said: “let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works...” (Mt 5:16). How do we reconcile what looks like a contradiction? John Stott is helpful. He writes, “Jesus is speaking against different sins. It is our human cowardice which made him say ‘Let your light shine before men’, and our human vanity which made him tell us to beware of practising our piety before men.” **Alexander Bruce** sums it up well when he writes that we are to **‘show when tempted to \*hide\* and ‘hide when tempted to \*show\*’**. The goal is the same either way – the glory of God. Why are we to keep our piety secret? It is in order that glory may be given to God, rather than men. Why are we to let our light shine and do good works in the open? It is that men may glorify our heavenly Father.

Of these three acts, I will focus upon prayer and I am asking one question:

### **What does godly prayer look like?**

#### **1) Godly prayer is sincere**

*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.*

The passage does not condemn public prayer in synagogues or churches, or even as needed on a street corner. The warning is against, “that they may be seen by others.” The concern is not about the place of our prayers, but the attitude behind them. It doesn’t condemn the prayer that can be seen, but the prayer prayed *in order* to be seen. The contrast is therefore between a showy “look at me” performance and true sincerity. A man whose eyes look left and right during devotions ... has not much devotion. This said, prayer is fundamentally intensely private at its root. We come face to face with our God. All our public expressions of Christian faith – our gathering for worship, and word, and prayer, and good works, and fellowship – ought to be rooted in, and fueled by, our private devotion.

Notice that all of these expressions of piety (or righteousness) are expected devotions of one who believes: *when* you give to the needy (v3); *when* you pray (v7); and *when* you fast (v16). Not *if* you do but *when* you do. So, to be clear, the expectation of Jesus for us is that we develop the habit of praying alone. Whether anyone sees or not (in fact better if they don’t), pray everyday, for the rest of your days. Doing this in secret means no one else knows. But God does, and Jesus said that the Father who sees in secret will reward you. This is a mark of sincerity, we pray because we want the reward of God’s communion, not the admiration of men.

Quite likely, everything that is in you, and many things outside of you, will fight against this precious, secret time between you and the Lord.

Why?

- We’re don’t feel we are good at it.
- Busyness; how can I take time to pray when I have so much to do?
- We do not really believe God is listening (or cares)
- Prayer is generally about stillness: quieting our hearts and minds before God – this is unusual for us. In such quiet reflection we can feel uncomfortable or even bored.
- Lack of faith that anything happens, that our prayers mean anything
- Unconfessed sin/broken relationship
- Low view of God // High view of self

Prayer may be the most natural of human responses, yet the hardest habit to make natural. Many days you will not want to pray, but this is a habit Jesus expects us to have, and it is a habit of infinite worth.

I don’t think the weight of this passage falls upon prescription – that prayer must be at a certain time or place. A faithful, godly prayer life can look different in your life than mine. But it must look like something. Here is the best advice I can give: if you are not praying, or at least not regularly, start small. When I say small, I mean so small that you cannot fail. I mean it. What is that low bar for you? Perhaps it is 30 seconds. Start praying, everyday, for 30 seconds. Here is where you expect me to

say start small but don't stay there – no pastor is really going to say pray 30 seconds a day! You know what, I don't believe I have to say it because you won't be satisfied with 30 seconds ... *if* you commit to communing with the true God of Scripture. As you commune with his infinite worth, beauty, power, wisdom, and peace your communing time, and depth, will grow. You will receive the greatest reward – the gift of God himself!

## **(2) Godly prayer is simple**

Look with me at v7:

*“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.”*

Some of us are hindered in prayer (publicly and privately) because we can't pray as nice as so and so. Godly prayer is simple. Jesus teaches us to not pray in order to be seen or impress others, and now tells us about what to pray. Pagan prayers of the time of Jesus aimed to manipulate the gods with “many words”. Some felt the quantity of their words mattered. One of my children hated writing essays and so they loaded their writing with wordy empty phrases to fill the word count. Let me assure you, God is not looking at your word count! Others would invoke the names of numerous gods in the hope one of them may pay attention and grant their request. Or, perhaps, the same request is made over and over and over again. This is the picture we have from Jesus: this big heap of words, word upon word added to the pile, yet collectively called empty. It reminds me of the prophets of Baal in their standoff with Elijah on Mount Carmel for they cried to Baal “from morning until noon” (1 Kings 18:26). Besides their many words, they shouted and danced around their altar, even slashing themselves with lances – yet all of the show to nothing but silence. *“And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the ablation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention. (v29)”*

God hears every prayer. Perhaps you had a very distracted, or even distant father. One who kept an eye and ear on his business, his sport, his newspaper – while you wanted his attention. God the Father hears every prayer. He is never too busy, never indifferent, never distant. We do not need the right formula or beautiful eloquence to capture his attention. Sometimes, simple prayers are the best prayers. I can remember the first time I prayed in a fairly large gathering and everyone was told to pray “one sentence prayers”. All of us were experienced Christians. It was actually kind of hard, but so powerful. Simple, clear expressions of adoration, or joy, or thanksgiving, or petition. We have done something similar at our prayer and praise nights. Sometimes we have told you to add one word to a sentence. Something simple like: “I adore you Lord because you are \_\_\_\_\_”. It seems too simple, yet the focus becomes the collective attributes of God – put on display for all to remember and praise and find joy and comfort within. Take encouragement, we are called to simply pray, and pray simply. Please reject the notion that your prayers must be “good enough” to be worthy of God's attention.

Faith-filled, faithful, prayers are prayers that rely upon God's merciful generosity rather than our performance.

Godly prayer is trusting prayer because it roots its confidence in him!

### **(3) Godly prayer is sure**

Sorry, I couldn't resist the third "S". Godly prayer is sincere, simple, and sure. By sure I mean that confidence I just spoke of.

Verse 8 says, "*Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*"

This is not meant to undermine our prayers, like one may say "why pray if God already knows what I need." The intent is to ground our confidence in him – he really does know us.

We cannot tell God something he doesn't already know. Our goal then is not to amaze him with our insight, or convince him to hear – it is to commune with the one who already knows us, who knows our every need – the God who already knows and cares before we ask. But he still wants us to ask, and longs for us to commune. It is in that communion that we grow to know the Father. Daniel example. There are times, James tells us, that we "have not because we ask not, or because we ask amiss". "Ask amiss"; in other words, stumbly bumbly prayers. Poorly conceived, bad theology, misguided for any number of reasons. Yet Paul encourages us that the Spirit intercedes for us (Romans 8). The Spirit works upon us to perfect our imperfect prayers! Just as God patiently forgives and mends our failings, surely for the contrite heart he forgives and mends our imperfect prayers as well.

So, godly prayer is sincere, simple, and sure. What do we pray about? Anything and everything. Paul exhorts: "*do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God* (Philippians 4:6)."

Whatever is on your mind, tell him about it! Just speak to him. Does this mean godly prayer is whatever we make it to be? Not really. We can pray about whatever is on our heart and mind, but Jesus teaches us a helpful structure from which we can build our prayers. The Lord's prayer serves as a model for us, not to merely recite by rote, but to shape and guide how we pray. It tells us that we pray for his kingdom and the world we live within, we pray for our needs and others, we pray for forgiveness and the strength to forgive, we pray for deliverance from temptations and evil. The prayer begins with God, ends with the devil, and in between covers the petitions pertinent to life. Note, we go to God with our prayer as our Father in Heaven. We go to him because he is our Father, we are family. He is near us, he loves us, he never leaves us nor forsakes us. Yet, he is in heaven. A reminder that our Father is also our sovereign Lord and Creator. And so we go in prayer not only

The top of the page features a decorative header with a dark background and several colorful stained glass windows. The text 'THE STORY OF Everything' is written in a white, elegant script font, with 'THE STORY OF' in a smaller, all-caps sans-serif font above 'Everything'. Below 'Everything' is the text 'LUKE 24:27' in a smaller, all-caps sans-serif font.

THE STORY OF  
*Everything*  
LUKE 24:27

because our Dad welcomes us, we pray in confidence because the One who is near is also the One who is enthroned in heaven.

Pray in secret, pray simply, pray confidently!