

WHEN YOU PRAY

Matthew 6:5-8

There is a principle of Bible interpretation called the principle of repeated mention. It means the repeated things in scripture are usually the emphasized things. This principle leads us to the theme of our text. Verse 5 begins, "*And when you pray.*" Verse 6 begins, "*But when you pray.*" Verse 7 begins, "*And when you pray.*" This repeated phrase carries several foundational assumptions. First, the text assumes righteous people pray. There are many passages that command us to pray. This is not one of them. This passage assumes true disciples pray. Prayer is to the soul what oxygen is to the body. Show me a person who does not pray, I'll show you a person who is spiritually dead. Righteous people pray.

The second assumption of the text is imbedded in Jesus' instructions on prayer. The Lord assumes his people pray. The grammatical emphasis of the verb "*pray*" speaks of it as a continual practice. Yet Jesus still deems it necessary to teach on how to pray. The assumption is that though you may regularly pray, you do not know all that you need to know about prayer. All of us need to join the disciples in the request of Luke 11:1, "*Lord, teach us to pray.*" Romans 8:26 applies to us all: "*For we do not know what to pray for as we ought.*" At some point, Jesus would say to us what he said in response to the request of James and John in Matthew 20:22, "*You do not know what you are asking.*" So Jesus teaches what to do and what not to do when you pray.

This lesson on prayer is a part of THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT, recorded in Matthew 5-7. Matthew's Gospel declares Jesus to be the promised Messiah-King. THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT is the constitution of the kingdom. As the crowds grew with heightening Messianic expectations, Jesus sat with his disciples on a grassy hillside and taught them what it means to be citizens of the kingdom of heaven. The requirement for kingdom citizenship is as simple as it is impossible: TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS. It was important that the crowd overhear this message. Many of them erroneously thought they were already in the kingdom because they confused being religious with being righteous. Jesus announces that such people have phony kingdom passports.

Matthew 6 teaches how righteous people do religious stuff. Verses 1-4 teach how righteous people *give*. Verses 5-15 teach how righteous people *pray*. Verses 16-18 teach how righteous people *fast*. Our text is the less famous part of the Lord's instructions on prayer. THE LORD'S PRAYER recorded in verses 9-15, is the famous part. Our text is not as well known as the Model Prayer. But it is more than just an introduction to it. Our text is the equally important counterpart to the Model Prayer. In the Model Prayer, Jesus teaches how to pray. In our text, Jesus teaches how *not* to pray. What Jesus has to say about how not to pray is just as important as what he says about how to pray. The fact that Jesus gives the negative instructions first may

mean that he deemed it more important that we know how not to pray than how to pray.

These negative instructions Jesus gives may be more important than the Model Prayer in that the Model Prayer teaches the power of prayer, while our text teaches the power of sin. You will never understand the sinfulness of sin if you only consider the horizontal effects of sin. Sin will affect your relationship with other people in your life.

- Sin will lead you to cheat on your spouse.
- Sin will lead you to neglect your children.
- Sin will lead you to dishonor your parents.
- Sin will lead you to betray your friends.
- Sin will lead you to rob your employer.

Sin hurts your relationships with the important people in your life. But in this text Jesus deals with an even more dangerous aspect of sin; namely, sin will hurt your relationship with God. Sin can corrupt your relationships at home, school, or work; but sin can also corrupt the most Godward of acts – like giving, prayer, and fasting. Not only will sin mess up your marriage, job, or education, sin will also mess up your worship, so that rather than glorifying God in worship, you start using God in worship to bring glory to yourself. So before Jesus teaches how to pray, he first teaches us how not to pray. The Lord's instructions can be summarized with two prohibitions: Do not pray like the hypocrites and do not pray like the Gentiles.

I. DON'T PRAY LIKE THE *HYPOCRITES*.

Verse 5 says, *“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites.”* *“Hypocrites”* is a transliteration of the Greek term for performers in Greek theater. Actors would don masks to conceal their true identity, go on stage before an audience, and play a role in which they pretended to be someone else. In the Gospels, Jesus used the term to describe religious phonies who pretend to be something they are not to impress other people. Jesus is the only one to use the term this way in the Gospels. But the Lord never used it to describe notorious sinners like prostitutes and tax collectors. He only used it to describe self-righteous people, who pretend to be something in front of others that they knew they were not before God.

Jesus says, *“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites.”* Notice the definite article: *“the hypocrites.”* Jesus had a specific group in mind: the scribes and Pharisees. Matthew 5:20 says, *“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* The scribes and Pharisees were considered the most righteous people in the land. The crowd must have thought, “How can anyone be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees?” Jesus answers by teaching that true righteousness is examined for its quality, not measured for its quantity. Righteousness is not about how many righteous acts you do. It is about whether your righteous acts come from a heart that is in right standing with God. It is about what God sees, not what man sees. So in

teaching how righteous people pray, Jesus says do not be like the hypocrites. How do you know if a prayer is hypocritical or sincere? You know by the “reward.”

A. MAN REWARDS HYPOCRITICAL PRAYER.

Verse 5 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.”* It is important that we be very clear about what Jesus condemns here. First, there was nothing wrong with what the hypocrites did their self. They prayed. In fact, Jesus says something about them that cannot be said about many of us. He said, *“They love... to pray.”* Could that be said of you? Second, there is nothing wrong with how they prayed: *“standing.”* Standing was the common posture of prayer in the ancient Near East. Third, the problem was not where they prayed. The synagogue was the place of prayer, worship, service, instruction and fellowship, attended by people who did not live close enough to the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus speaks of men who regularly showed up for prayer meeting. But they just did not pray in the synagogue. They also prayed on the street corners. There is nothing wrong with that, either. Too many of us are courageous prayer-warriors in church with other believers, but frightened secret agents when we are in the streets among unbelievers. The issue was not the act, manner, or place of prayer. It was their motivation: *“that they may be seen by others.”*

The problem is not that men saw them praying. The problem is that they prayed and prayed how, where, and when they prayed to be seen by men. An elaborate and polished prayer given in a fashionable Boston church was once described as “the most eloquent prayer ever offered to a Boston congregation.” That is the issue. It is the intended audience: *man, rather than God.* Any person who prays to be seen by men is a hypocrite. Jesus says do not pray like hypocrites, because only men reward hypocritical prayer. Verse 5 says, *“Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.”* This is the second of three times Jesus makes this statement. He makes it in verse 2 about *giving.* He makes it here about *prayer.* And he makes it in verse 16 about *fasting.* When Jesus says, *“They have received their reward,”* he exonerates the heavenly Father from any responsibility to respond to hypocritical prayer. If a man prays to be seen by other people, he got what he really wanted when people see him praying. By the time he says, “Amen,” he has already received everything he will ever get for his prayers.

B. GOD REWARDS SINCERE PRAYER.

Verse 6 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.”* This verse commands us to pray in private. But it is not a prohibition against public or corporate prayer. The New Testament records and recommends the public and corporate prayers of Jesus, the apostles, and the early church. It even commands

us to pray together. Jesus orders private prayer here to make the point that the true rewards of prayer are only found in the private place with God. In his book *The Prayer of Jesus*, HANK HANEGRAAF summarizes: "The secret to prayer is secret prayer." This is true for two reasons Jesus gives verse 6. First, Jesus says the Father is in the secret place. This is not to say that he is not in the synagogue or the street-corner. The Lord is OMNIPRESENT. He is never late, tardy, nor absent. God is fully present everywhere at the same time all the time. When Jesus says the Father is in the secret place, he means the spiritual rewards of sincere prayer are only found in the secret place with God the Father. If you are going to find his reward, you will not find it in the public place with men. You find it in the private place with God.

Second, Jesus says the Father who sees in private will reward you. The word "openly," is not in the best, oldest, and most reliable manuscripts. But it really does not matter if the Father rewards you openly or not, if you are doing it to glorify and enjoy him. Secret prayer brings a reward from God. Moreover, secret prayer is its own reward. There is no reward God can give you that is greater than intimate communion with him. Psalms 91:1 says, "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty." Where is your secret place? You may not have an actual room that is exclusively reserved for prayer. But you ought to have a secret place to meet with God. It can be your bedroom. It can be the shower or bath. It can be in your car on the way to work. It can be in your office or cubicle during lunch. It can be a park that you steal away to. It may be that long walk you take by yourself. But you need a secret place. That secret place where only God sees is the place where sincere prayer is rewarded.

Public prayer ought to be the tip of the iceberg. About 10 percent of an iceberg floats above the surface of the ocean, while the other 90 percent is submerged. In the same way, your public prayers ought to be supported by a large mass of private prayers throughout the week. Unfortunately, the prayer life of the average Christian is more like the Titanic than an iceberg. We are proud vessels above the surface, but underneath our respectable Christianity, the bulkheads are filling with water, the pumps are failing, and we are in danger of sinking in the sea of spiritual neglect.

II. DO NOT PRAY LIKE THE *GENTILES*.

Verses 7 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.*" Gentiles, heathens, or pagans refer to people who do not know God. Jesus says that people who do not know the true and living God still pray. But they pray to false gods. Psalm 115:5-7 describes these false gods: "They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat." The gods of the Gentiles are dead. Psalm 115:8 says, "Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them." Idol gods are dead. So are those who make them, trust them, and pray to them. So Jesus says do not pray like people who do not know God. How can you tell if you are praying like the Gentiles?

A. PEOPLE WHO DO NOT KNOW GOD PRAY *DESPERATELY*.

Verse 7 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.”* “Empty phrases” translates the verb *battologeo*, used only here in the New Testament. *Logos* is a word or statement, something said. *Battos* is a proper name that referred to one of two ancient people. Some suppose the term was derived from the name of Battus, a king of Cyrene, who was said to have been a stutterer. Others suppose it referred the famous author, Battus, who wrote long, wordy, and tedious poems. Either way, the term refers to one who overspeaks. It is used in our text to refer to the Gentiles who worshiped many different gods with many different names. To make sure their prayers were heard, they would make their request to each to their different gods, directly addressing each by name. Verse 7 says they did this because *“they think that they will be heard for their many words.”* Jesus is not condemning repetition in prayer or repeated prayers. He is condemning vain repetitions that heaps up words thinking that the right words or the right amount of words will get their prayer answered.

Likewise, Jesus is not condemning long prayers. There is a place for long prayers. Jesus prayed all night long on several occasions. So he is not condemning long prayers. He is condemning the idea that your prayers have to be long or eloquent or structured a certain way for God to hear them. Mark it down: *Ritualistic* prayers don’t impress God. *Eloquent* prayers don’t impress God. *Long* prayers don’t impress God. Ecclesiastes 5:1-2 says, *“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.”* **Mark it down: Prayer is not overcoming the reluctance of God; it’s laying hold of the willingness of God.**

B. PEOPLE WHO KNOW GOD PRAY *CONFIDENTLY*.

Jesus gives a concluding command concerning the way heathens pray in verse 8: *“Do not be like them.”* This prohibition refers directly to the Gentiles, but it ultimately refers to Gentiles and hypocrites. Do not be like the hypocrite whose motivations for prayer are wrong. Do not be like the Gentiles whose manner of prayer is wrong. This is why you should not pray like them: *“For your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”* This is the third time Jesus mentions the “Father” in this passage. It is a significant contrast to the prayers of those who do not know God. Jesus says if you belong to me, you are not just citizens of the kingdom; you are children of the king. Verse 9 teaches us to address God in prayer as *“Our Father in heaven.”* That is a statement about both the love and power of God. He is our Father in heaven. If you are a child of God, pray simply about his name, his kingdom, and

his will. Pray simply about your bread, your forgiveness, and your temptations. You can pray with confidence because the kingdom, the power and the glory belong to your heavenly Father.

The major issue in prayer is whether you are a child of God. Are you? Are you a child of God? Do you know how to become a child of God? John 1:11-13 says, *“He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”* If you are not right with God or do not know where you stand with God, run to the cross! Put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Believe in his name. Ask God to forgive your sins for the sake of what Christ accomplished on the cross. And you will be saved. You will be born again. You will become a child of the Father in heaven. You can live with the confident assurance that he knows what you need. If that is true, why pray?

- We pray because the Father commands us to pray.
- We pray because there are needs in our lives that are so great that the only way we can handle them is to pray.
- We pray because God is our Father in heaven who delights to hear and answer the prayers of his children.

People who know God can pray with confidence that the Father is all-knowing. He knows what you need before you ask. Your asking does not inform God of anything he does not already know. It simply affirms that he is the one who is able to handle the situation. He knows. So pray confidently. Verses 31-33 says, *“Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”* **Mark it down: God knows!** Job 23:10 says, *“But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold.”* Psalm 1:6 says, *“For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”* And 2 Timothy 2:19 says, *“But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal; ‘The Lord knows those who are his.’”* I repeat: **GOD KNOWS!**

- When your burdens are heavy, God knows.
- When your faith is tested, God knows.
- When your heart is broken, God knows.
- When your mind is confused, God knows.
- When your way is dark, God knows.

DR. C.C. MCCUTCHIN of Oklahoma was on the highway, traveling from Tulsa to Oklahoma City, to visit a member who was in the hospital. But on the way, he got a flat tire. Thankfully, he made it to a “Call Box” on the side of the road. But he had never used it, and was a little bit confused. He picked up the phone, and a voice responded on the other end. Nervously, he began to try to tell her his problem. But she kept trying to cut him off. He kept trying, but the more he tried to tell her where he was, the more she kept trying to interrupt him. Finally, she got his attention and was able to tell him, “Sir, I have a computer on this end. I already know where you are. Just tell me what you need!”

WE ARE OUR HEAVENLY FATHER’S CHILDREN
AND WE ALL KNOW HE LOVES US ONE AND ALL

YET THERE ARE TIMES WHEN WE FIND WE ANSWER
ANOTHER'S VOICE AND CALL;
IF WE ARE WILLING, HE WILL TEACH US
HIS VOICE ONLY TO OBEY NO MATTER WHERE
AND HE KNOWS, YES, HE KNOWS
JUST HOW MUCH I CAN BEAR