



“When You Pray”

MATTHEW 6:5-8

**Baxter T. Exum (#1177)
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If you were here with us last week, you might remember that we took a few moments to look together at the Lord's Supper, and in our study, we learned that the church in Corinth had a problem. They had turned the Lord's Supper into nothing more than a common meal, and beyond that, some were getting full on it, and others were being neglected and were going away hungry. In response to that abuse, we learned in 1 Corinthians 11 that Paul told them, first of all, that they were to be mindful of one another, they were to think about the sacrifice that was made on their behalf, and they were to examine themselves very carefully. And with this, we discussed the importance of partaking of the Supper in a ***“worthy manner.”*** We will never be worthy of the Supper, but we absolutely must partake of it in a ***“worthy manner.”*** That is, we have to pay very careful attention to what we are doing.

This morning I would like for us to consider a second act of worship by thinking very carefully about the prayers that we offer together as a congregation. It is an awesome thing to be asked to lead a group of people in any kind of a public prayer. And when I use the word “awesome,” I am thinking of the definition, “to be full of awe or fear.” In some ways, it is terrifying to lead a group in prayer, to try to summarize the thoughts and concerns and joys of an entire congregation, and to take those thoughts and to present those concerns and celebrate those joys before the throne of God in heaven. Yes, leading in public prayer is an awesome responsibility.

It is a privilege that men of God have had for thousands of years. We remember one of the most famous examples, the prayer that King Solomon led at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem back in 1 Kings 8. We studied this prayer back in February 2008. In the New Testament, we read about the disciples coming together to chose a replacement for Judas, and in Acts 1:14 we find that they ***“...all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer.”*** A few chapters later, when Peter was arrested and put in jail, the early church met together in the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, and the Bible says that on that occasion, ***“...many were gathered together and were praying.”*** So, we know that God's people have a long history of coming together to offer prayers as a group. As we think about this tradition, I would like for us to look together at what the Lord had to say about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6 (p. 1509). This passage is certainly not limited to public prayers, but it would definitely include public prayers. So, I would encourage everyone to find this passage, and I would encourage you to keep your Bibles open as we study. Let

us start, though, by looking together at Matthew 6:5-8 (the words of the Lord as He sat on the side of a hill at some point near the beginning of His 3 ½ years of preaching) – Matthew 6:5-8,

5 “When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 6 But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. 7 “And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. 8 So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

- I. There are a number of powerful lessons in these four verses, starting with the Lord’s incredibly clear statement in verse 5, **“When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites.”** Perhaps that is another way of saying that we are to be **AUTHENTIC** in our prayers.

Or, we might say that when we pray, we are to live the kind of lives that we talk about in our prayers. In a parallel passage (in Mark 12:38-40), the Lord condemned the scribes, because in their prayers, they were praying such beautiful words, and yet as they prayed, they were constantly thinking of new ways to take the homes away from the widows. In that passage, the Lord said that those men, **“...devour widows’ houses, and for appearance’s sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation.”** Or, as we might say today, there is a special place in hell for those who pray one way but live another. On the outside, certain men appeared to be leading very righteous prayers. If you heard them lead a prayer, you would say, “Wow, that is a righteous person right there!” But on the inside (where the Lord really pays attention), these men were plotting to rob the widows. So, back in Matthew 6, the Lord points out that we are not to be like that, **“When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites.”** If we offer a prayer in public, we are to be living a sincere life, and we are not to be living a secret life of wickedness.

We remember what James said in James 5:16, where he said that, **“The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.”** Think for just a moment about the opposite of that statement. If the prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much, then it stands to reason that the prayer of an unrighteous man will accomplish little. What we pray for, then, should match the way we are living. We are to be authentic! Now, before some of you men come up to me after the service this morning and ask me to take you out of the prayer rotation on our weekly worship assignments, I would point out that not praying doesn’t really fix this problem, does it? Looking back at Matthew 6:8, the Lord was not saying, “Do not pray,” but He was saying, **“When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites.”** Let us please consider a few examples. If we pray for the sick, “Oh, dear Lord, please help the sick,” then it seems to me that we should probably actually be concerned about the sick in some concrete way – we can visit someone in the hospital, we can watch someone’s little children as the rest of the family goes to some appointment, we can bring a meal to someone recovering from surgery, we can make a call to show our concern for someone who doesn’t show up for worship – there are a hundred ways we can help the sick. Otherwise, think about this from the Lord’s point of view: Here is a man who gets up on Sunday and says, “Dear God, please help the sick,” and the Lord is thinking, “You hypocrite! Why should I care about the sick based on your prayer if YOU don’t even care about the sick!” The same applies for just about everything else we pray for.

As I was doing the research for this morning’s lesson, I ran across a lesson my dad preached back in 1998, and in that lesson he referred to a man from the church where he grew up who would always pray on Sunday morning, “Lord, please bring us back at the next appointed time,” and yet that man would not come back to

the Wednesday evening service. He obviously was not thinking about what he was praying in that prayer, because the “next appointed time” was Wednesday evening at 7 o’clock! But the Lord’s point at the beginning of verse 5 is that we are not to be hypocrites (saying one thing and doing another) when we go to God in prayer.

And I would point out one other idea here, an idea that goes back to how some people will say, “There are hypocrites in the church; therefore, I will not be a part of the church!” Think about that for just a moment: If a hypocrite is standing between you and God, then it seems that the hypocrite might be closer to God than you are. As I look at it, then, yes, there might be a hypocrite here and there from time to time, but I will not allow a hypocrite to keep me from doing what I know I need to be doing. Remember: The church is a perfect organization that is made up of imperfect people.

II. There is a second main idea in this passage, and that is: When we pray, WE ARE NOT TO ATTRACT ATTENTION TO OURSELVES.

Several months ago, we discussed the verses right before this with reference to our giving – we are not to sound a trumpet when we give, and the Lord says something very similar concerning prayer. But as we look very carefully at the warning in verse 5, I want us to notice that what the hypocrites were doing was not wrong in and of itself. Notice: They were praying. In fact, we notice that they “*love[d] to...pray.*” Could that be said of all of us? Hopefully so, but these men loved to pray. And even more specifically, there was nothing wrong with the position they took as they prayed. They were standing. A number of times in the Bible, people are described as standing in prayer. Sometimes we stand as we pray here. So, there is nothing wrong with standing. Also notice: There is nothing inherently wrong with WHERE they prayed. They prayed in the synagogues. The synagogues were the places of prayer and worship for those who lived too far away from the temple in Jerusalem. So, there was nothing wrong with praying in the synagogue. They also prayed on the street corners. And again, there is nothing inherently wrong with praying on a street corner. I am thankful for that, because I like to walk here in Madison, and with traffic the way it is, some of my most fervent prayers have been on street corners – asking for God’s help to make it safely across to the other side! As I see it, then, there is nothing inherently wrong with anything these men were doing – they loved to pray, they prayed in the synagogues, they stood up while they prayed, and they prayed on the street corners. The problem, though, came with their motivation! According to the Lord (who can see into our hearts), these people prayed like this “*...so that they may be seen by men.*” The problem is not that other people saw them praying – the problem is that these men prayed in a certain way, in a certain place, and at a certain time, so that they would be noticed. We know from history that the Jews had specific times that they were to stop and pray – almost like the Muslims have today. And in the ancient world, if you wanted to be noticed, you could make sure that you were out there on some busy street corner at the exact moment that it was time to pray. Several years ago, I told you about going to one of the lectures on Islam on the UW campus. As I remember, it was held in the Fluno Center. It was scheduled to begin at something like 6:45. I got there around 6:30. But as people started coming in, everybody started to realize that the time for prayer was coming up at 6:42 (or something like that – the time of prayer is tied to the time of the sunset). So, here I am in a room of several hundred people that is maybe 80% Muslim, and just as we are all getting settled into our seats, roughly 80% of the people have to get up to leave to go pray for a few minutes. It was an interesting experience. As I remember it, someone got up and apologized for the scheduling error, they quickly rescheduled the assembly to reconvene at 7 o’clock, they gave directions to where the men and the women could go to their separate places to pray, and the meeting was delayed for a little bit. I am certainly not saying that that was done on purpose, but in the ancient world, the Jews were doing it on purpose. They would make sure to be in some very obvious place at the time of prayer, and then they would do their best to look all religious as they gave these lengthy prayers in public.

And Jesus makes a statement here that He also made about giving (a little earlier), ***“Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.”*** In other words, by the time they say their “Amen,” that prayer has already done all that it will ever do, because God will not answer the prayer of a hypocrite.

At this point, the Lord gives these people an alternative – if you hypocrites want God to answer your prayers (notice verse 6), ***“...when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”*** As I pointed out earlier in this lesson, we have many examples of people offering public prayers with God’s approval – several weeks ago, we studied a beautiful public prayer in the book of Nehemiah (in our Sunday morning Bible class), Paul prayed publicly on the beach at Miletus with the elders from Ephesus, Jesus Himself prayed publicly on the cross – so the Lord must not be banning all public prayer here, but it seems to me that He is addressing our motivation. When we pray, we are not to pray for the purpose of gaining attention. We are not to pray for the purpose of looking good. One author has pointed out that our public prayer life ought to be nothing more than the tip of the iceberg. In other words, just as only about 10% of an iceberg is visible above the surface, so also our public prayers ought to be only a small percentage of all of the prayers that we offer. A vast majority of our prayers ought to be offered behind the scenes. The same author pointed out that for many people, though, their prayer life is more like the Titanic than an iceberg – it looks good on the surface, but underneath the ship is filling with water. And I believe that is what the Lord is warning about here. A vast majority of our prayer life is to take place in private – as we wake up each morning, before we eat, in the car on the way to work, at our desk as we eat lunch each day, somewhere where we do not make a huge display out of it. As I was preparing this lesson, I read about Susanna Wesley, the mother of 17 children, the mother of John Wesley (the founder of the Methodist Church). When she needed a private moment, she used to pull her apron up over her head to pray – that was her signal to those 17 children that they needed to leave her alone until she pulled down the apron! That was her private place.

The Lord, then, is not banning any kind of public prayer, but He is forbidding public prayers that are offered with the purpose of attracting attention to the one who is leading the prayer – we need, then, to be very careful when it comes to our motives.

III. **There is a third big lesson in this passage, and that is: As we pray, WE ARE TO AVOID MEANINGLESS REPETITION.**

And to me it is interesting that instead of using the hypocrites as an example, the Lord now turns to the Gentiles. To many of those outside a covenant relationship with God, they saw prayer as a kind of formula, as a kind of contract, as a kind of magic spell, that if you said the right words in the right order the right number of times, then the gods were obligated to give you what you wanted. They thought that the gods were not interested in what was going on here on this earth, that they were too busy with their own concerns and problems, so they thought that they basically needed to harass their gods into listening – they had to repeat things over and over again, almost as a way of getting their attention, as a way of getting their gods to “snap out of it.” We see this with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel in 1 Kings 18. The Bible tells us that from morning until noon they cried out nothing but, ***“O Baal answer us!”*** (over and over again). We see a similar example in the New Testament with the riot in Ephesus as the pagan worshipers shouted out, ***“Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”*** (over and over again). There was no thought behind it, but they were repeating themselves so that their gods would hear. It reminds me of the Buddhist prayer wheels, where a prayer is written on a wheel, and it is repeated every time the wheel is turned. And really, it also reminds me of some of the meaningless repetition we see in some of the rather large denominations we see around us – the constant repetition, “Hail Mary, full of grace...” and so on, the lighting of candles – I pay for a candle in a church, and

then that candle represents my prayers (a kind of repetition), so that God will hear my prayers. Notice the money involved – I have to PAY for that candle so that God is then obligated to hear my prayers.

I should point out, though, that not all repetition is being condemned here. Notice, the ban is on **“meaningless repetition.”** I am thinking of the night before He was murdered, the Lord Himself repeated a prayer over and over again. He asked God to take away the **“cup”** that He was about to endure. He prayed for His Father’s will to be done. And the Bible tells us that He prayed that same basic prayer and repeated it over and over again. I would suggest, that those prayers did not fall into the category of **“meaningless repetition.”** We can repeat something without it being **“meaningless.”**

With this in mind, please notice the Lord’s reason why the long and meaningless kinds of prayer will not work. In verse 8, the Lord refers to the Gentiles and says, **“So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.”** The meaningless repetition is not needed, because God knows what we need before we even ask Him! In other words, when we pray, it is not for God’s benefit! We don’t really pray to inform God, but we talk to God because He is our Father! When we pray for the sick, it’s not as if God didn’t know about some sick person somewhere. I can almost see God, “Oh, I’m so glad you told me! I didn’t know about that sick guy over there. Thanks for letting me know about that.” But no! Prayer is for OUR benefit! We do not need to go on and on with the meaningless repetition, because God knows what we need even before we think to ask. It is not a matter of repeating something so often that God is then magically obligated to give an answer. There is no formula to it, but prayer is to be the honest and open communication of a child to his or her father. Dads, what would you do if your child came up to you and just blindly repeated something over and over, “Dad, can I have a new toy, can I have a new toy, can I have a new toy?” “Knock it off!” Maybe it’s the same way with God – He is not impressed by meaningless repetition. By going to God in prayer, we are opening our hearts, we are sharing our burdens, and joys, and struggles with our Father who truly cares about what we are going through. We don’t need to pray for a certain length of time. We don’t need to use any fancy words or phrases. But we simply talk to God like a child talking to a Father. We go to God in prayer knowing that He is on our side, knowing that He knows us even better than we know ourselves.

Conclusion:

This morning, we have studied the awesome privilege of prayer, and we have looked at some warnings from the Lord Himself. To me, it is interesting that our prayers are to go through the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray to God the Father, but those prayers are offered through Jesus, and it is interesting to me that it is Jesus (the Mediator) who tells us how to pray. When we pray, then, we have to be authentic (we are not to pray one way and act some other way), our prayers are not supposed to attract attention (that is, our motives have to be pure), and then finally, we must avoid the danger of meaningless repetition (and we do this with the understanding that God already knows what we need – all we’re doing is openly sharing our thoughts and concerns with our Father in Heaven).

Lord willing, I’d like for us to continue next week by looking at the next few verses, at what is commonly referred to as the Lord’s Prayer. Between now and then, I would encourage you to try to figure out how we know that this is the one prayer that the Lord never actually prayed. Why is this prayer not really the “Lord’s Prayer”? But hopefully we can study this prayer in more detail next Sunday morning.

If you are not yet a Christian, we invite you to make the decision to follow Christ this morning. God sent His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. We respond to that sacrifice with faithful, loving obedience. We turn away from sin, we confess the name of Christ as being the Son of God, and we allow ourselves to be briefly dipped

in water for the forgiveness of our sins. At that point, we are born into the family of God. If you have any questions or if you would like for us to pray about some situation in your life right now, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com