

# The Sermon On The Mount

*Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.  
2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: (Matthew 5:1-2 ESV)*

## **When You Pray (Part 1)**

**November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2024**

**Matthew 6:5-8**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 6.

As I explained last Sunday, in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is warning us about the danger of hypocrisy. The term ‘hypocrite’ was originally used in the realm of drama and theatre to describe an actor who wore a mask. Jesus seems to be saying here that – as we seek to grow in holiness – we will all face a very REAL and DANGEROUS temptation to put on a mask and to perform for one another. Have you ever felt that pull in your heart?

If you’re familiar with the opening chapters of the Bible, you might recognize why this temptation to wear a mask is so powerful. Do you remember what Adam and Eve did after they first sinned in Genesis 2? They HIDE. Because of sin, each and every one of us has a strong, unhealthy instinct to HIDE. We know that we’re not yet who we want to be. We know that some areas of our lives are still out of order. But rather than dealing honestly with ourselves, and bringing our sin out into the light so as to move forward, we do what Adam and Eve did.

We hide. From God, and from one another.

Adam and Eve hid behind a bush, but we hide behind all sorts of things. In fact, what Jesus is exposing in this section of the Sermon on the Mount is that sometimes we even hide behind ‘righteousness.’ We hide behind a carefully curated image of ourselves that we project out to the world. We hide behind perfect Sunday attendance, and long theologically rich prayers. This isn’t simply a temptation the PHARISEES faced. We are ALL tempted to put on a performance to try

to convince the people around us that we are something that we are not. Do you see that in yourself?

The scary thing is – as we saw last week and as we will see again today – that performance often WORKS! In the short term, you CAN convince the world that you are someone that you're not, and they might even pat you on the back and puff up your ego. But in the long term – eternally – when it comes time to stand before your heavenly Father and to give an account for this life – hypocrisy will leave you empty. This is what Jesus warns against in verse 1:

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.** (Matthew 6:1 ESV)

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is warning us not to trade treasure in heaven for a pat on the back in the foyer. Don't trade eternal glory for a temporary boost to your pride. That's the warning, and Jesus goes on to apply it to three areas of our spiritual lives: Giving, praying and fasting. We heard the warning against hypocritical giving last Sunday, but today we are turning our attention to his warning about prayer.

To that end, look with me to Matthew 6:5-8. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

<sup>5</sup>“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. <sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>“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. <sup>8</sup>Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:5-8 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Here in verses 5-8, we find a warning about how NOT to pray. Now, if you look down at your Bible, you will notice that this warning is immediately followed up in verses 9-13 with a positive example of how we OUGHT to pray. We're going to consider that example – what is commonly

known as ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ – in a separate sermon, because there is SO much for us to learn in that prayer and it deserves to stand on its own.

This morning, then, we will be restraining our focus to the warning before us in verses 5-8. As we turn our attention to this passage, Jesus gives us two clear examples of what prayer is NOT.

## What Prayer Is Not

First, Jesus reminds us here that:

### 1. Prayer is not a performance

We see this in verse 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. (Matthew 6:5 ESV)

The reference here to praying on the street corners is connected with what Jesus’ warned about in our passage from last Sunday. When public fasts were declared, trumpets would ring out in Jerusalem and people would flock out onto the streets. Some people – as we saw last Sunday – took advantage of this opportunity to give gifts to the poor at a time when the whole community could witness it. Other people – as we see in this verse – took advantage of this opportunity by praying on the street corners so that the whole community could witness their prayer life.

Be it in the synagogue, or on the street corner, what Jesus is warning about here is the hypocrite’s incessant *need for an audience*. They chose these places to pray *so that they would be seen*. For them, prayer had become nothing more than a performance for other people.

Now, I want to fence this before we go any further because I don’t want you to misunderstand what Jesus is warning against. He is NOT saying here that it is wrong to pray in front of other people. If that were true, then Paul wouldn’t have written 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 to teach us about what prayer should look like in our corporate worship services. And we wouldn’t have so

many examples in the book of Acts of prayer meetings like the one we find in Acts 12. It is *good* and *biblical* to pray with other people. So Jesus *isn't* saying that we should never pray in public.

Jesus IS warning against the kind of person who *only* prays in public. D. A. Carson says here:

The person who prays more in public than in private reveals that he is less interested in God's approval than in human praise.<sup>1</sup>

Let me take this opportunity to repeat a warning that I shared last Sunday: Do not – I repeat – DO NOT listen to this sermon and say to yourself, ‘I’m so glad that Susie is hearing this! She is such a hypocrite!’ That is exactly the self-righteous, holier-than-thou thinking that Jesus so firmly rebuked in the pharisees! The reality is, you have NO IDEA what Susie’s or *anyone’s* private prayer life looks like. The only private prayer life you can see is your own. So, in humility, apply this warning to your own heart.

I’m going to provide a few diagnostic questions for your consideration: Have you prayed more in the service this morning than you did all of last week? When you gather your kids together to pray at the dinner table, is that the only time of the day that mommy and daddy pray together? When you pray in your prayer group, is there a part of you that is trying to impress the people you’re praying with? Does your *public* prayer life paint a false picture of your *private* prayer life?

If that is true of you, Christian, then it is a symptom of a deeper problem. By misusing prayer in that way, you are ROBBING yourself of an incredible gift that God has entrusted to you! You’re trading the reward of an audience with the Maker of heaven and earth, for the ‘reward’ of an audience of men and women. And, while they might think highly of you, and while they might momentarily stroke your ego, that’s where your reward will end. As Jesus says here:

Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. (Matthew 6:5b ESV)

Don’t fall into that trap. Don’t make that trade. Prayer is not a performance.

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Matthew-Luke)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelein, vol. 8, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 165.

In the second example, Jesus explains that:

## 2. Prayer is not a ritual

Look with me at verse 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. (Matthew 6:7 ESV)

Jesus is drawing our attention here to a pagan approach to prayer – the idea that we can somehow *obligate* God to grant our requests if we perform the right ritual. We find a striking example of this approach in the Old Testament. The prophet Elijah called together the prophets of Baal, and he challenged them to see whose God was powerful to answer prayer. They each sacrificed a bull and put it on an altar, and then they waited to see whose God would send fire from heaven. In 1 Kings 18, we read:

And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it **and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, “O Baal, answer us!”** But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. (1 Kings 18:26 ESV)

When the repetition didn’t work, the prophets of Baal took their ritual to the next level:

And **they cried aloud and cut themselves** after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. <sup>29</sup> And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention. (1 Kings 18:28-29 ESV)

This is an extreme example, but it captures the heart of what Jesus is calling us away from. God is not a genie. You don’t need to follow some mystical steps to summon His presence. Nor is He a vending machine. He’s not waiting for you to insert the correct number of repetitions before He will drop your blessing.

Looking back at the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal, after they had chanted, and shouted, and cut themselves all day long to no avail, they turned to Elijah to see what his God would do. Elijah soaked the altar with water, then he prayed a simple prayer, and we read in verse 38:

Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. (1 Kings 18:38 ESV)

What's Jesus warning against in this passage? Is he saying that we should never ask for something in prayer more than once? Certainly not! Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow to teach us that we SHOULD bring our requests to God again and again. Is he warning, then, that we should never pray LONG prayers? Certainly not, because there are prayer meetings in the book of Acts that lasted through the night!

So, what is Jesus warning against?

He's warning us not to pray like pagans.

God is not more inclined to say 'yes' to your request because you prayed for 15 minutes rather than 5. He's not more inclined to say 'yes' because you prayed on your knees rather than on your feet. He's not more inclined to say 'yes' because you used fancy words, or because you wept, or because you raised your voice.

Christian, your prayers are heard because JESUS has opened the door for you to come before your heavenly Father! HE is the reason that your prayer is powerful! All you need to be a prayer warrior, then, is faith. Jesus taught us that! He said:

For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you. (Matthew 17:20b-21 ESV)

Prayer is a door that leads into the very throne room of heaven! And if you are in Christ – if you have confessed your sin and placed your trust in Jesus Christ – then that door is WIDE OPEN!

Don't stand outside the door trying to impress us! Prayer is not a performance.

Don't stand outside the door learning fancy words to try to earn your way in. Prayer is not a ritual.

Jesus has opened the door!

How, then, should we pray?

## When You Pray

As I mentioned off the top, we are going to devote an entire sermon to the Lord's prayer, so for this morning, we're going to focus in on the lessons that Jesus spells out in verses 6 and 8.

As we do that, I want to give a word of encouragement to those of you in the room who are new to faith or who are confused about prayer. Jesus' teaching in this passage is so beautifully SIMPLE! Listen closely and be encouraged! If I faithfully present what Jesus is saying here, then every single follower of Jesus in this room should go away with a great assurance that you CAN PRAY!

First, and very simply, when you pray:

### 1. Remember Who you are praying to

We see this in verse 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. (Matthew 6:6 ESV)

It is almost entirely lost on us how *radical* this statement is. We might be tempted to think that God's people have always addressed Him as 'Father', but that's not the case at all. As one commentator notes:

The fatherhood of God is not a central theme in the OT.<sup>2</sup>

It was rare for God to be referred to as 'Father', but Jesus took that rare language and transformed it into our PRIMARY language. We needed new *language* because Jesus was about to usher in an entirely new *relationship*!

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<sup>2</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Matthew-Luke)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 8, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 169.

It's important that we understand that – apart from Jesus – we have NO BUSINESS addressing God as Father. Apart from Jesus, we are creatures made in the image of God, but we are not sons and daughters. We BECOME sons and daughters when we place our trust in Jesus – the TRUE SON – and when we are filled with his Spirit who marks US as sons. Paul explains in Romans 8:

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but **you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons**, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”<sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:15-16 ESV)

We have *received* adoption. Which means that there was a time when we were not children of God. There was a time when – because of our sin – the door to the throne room of God was entirely closed to us. But now – if you are in Christ – that door is WIDE OPEN, and you can COME TO YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN WHO LOVES YOU!

Wrapping your heart around that reality is the secret to prayer. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes:

I suggest that if you can say from your heart, whatever your condition, ‘My Father’, in a sense your prayer is already answered.<sup>3</sup>

Do you see that, Christian? If you really understand how much your heavenly Father wants to hear from you, you will *never* waste your prayer time trying to impress the people around you!

Therefore, if you find yourself struggling with a temptation to perform for others – if you find that corporate prayer provokes pride in your heart – then I’m going to say something that might sound controversial: You might actually need to take a BREAK from the prayer meeting.

Listen, I say that as someone who wishes that every single person in this room was part of a prayer group! Prayer groups are biblical, and valuable, and *necessary* for the ongoing health and vitality of this congregation!

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<sup>3</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 327.



But if prayer group has become a platform that you use to try to impress other people, then you might just need to return to the prayer closet. Not FORVER! But for a season. Get back to the basics and remember how incredible it is that you get to commune with God! Shake off all the bad habits that you developed over the years of using your prayer time to try to show off for the people in the room. That's not what prayer is for. Return to the simplicity of talking to your Father in Heaven.

Remember Who you are praying to.

And then, finally, when you pray:

## 2. Remember that He knows what you need before you even ask

Look again at verses 7-8:

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. <sup>8</sup>Do not be like them, for **your Father knows what you need before you ask him.** (Matthew 6:7-8 ESV)

If we could wrap our hearts around this truth, it would take SO MUCH PRESSURE off of our prayer lives! It's not about us! It's not about how great our prayers are! He ALREADY KNOWS what we need before we even BEGIN to pray! So, RELAX! This truth takes the pressure off of us in two ways.

First, it takes the pressure off of us to try to twist God's arm. As we saw earlier, in these verses Jesus is calling us AWAY from a ritualistic approach to prayer. The Gentiles treated prayer as if it were like a magic key. There were blessings to be had from God, but in order to *unlock* those blessings, they assumed that they needed to follow the right procedure, say the right words, and then VOILA! God would hear their prayers!

Of course, that approach to prayer implies that – if you pray with the *wrong* formula – God WON'T hear your prayer. I think I've shared this before, but when I first started preaching, I was absolutely HORRIFIED every week. In my Sunday morning routine, I knelt in my office and prayed earnestly for God's help. And He DID help! Every time. But I remember one Sunday when

– for whatever reason – I *didn't* spend my prayer time on my knees. I had prayed at my desk. And late that morning, when I realized that I hadn't prayed on my knees, I felt a strong urge to rush back to the office to say my prayers again from my regular kneeling position! Do you see what was happening in my heart? There was something inside of me that was believing a lie that God was *more likely* to answer my prayer if I prayed it from my knees. I had slowly begun to turn prayer into a ritual.

But our Father in heaven hears our prayers – not because of our verbal eloquence, or our physical posture – but because of the *worthiness* of His Son Jesus who is seated at His right-hand interceding for us right now! God has opened the door for you to come to Him in prayer, and He WANTS you to come! You don't need to twist His arm.

The second way that this truth takes pressure off of us is that it frees us from fearing that we might not ask for the right thing. How you ever found yourself in a situation where you have NO IDEA what to ask for in prayer? 'I know what I WANT. I have a suspicion of what I *think* I need. But what if I ask God to open this door, and then He does, but then it leads me in the wrong direction?' One commentator notes:

I will be frank to confess, if I really thought I could change the mind of God by praying, I would abstain. Because I would have to say, "How can I presume, with the limitations of my own mind and the corruptions of my own heart – how can I presume to interfere in the councils of the Almighty?"<sup>4</sup>

If God was obligated to do exactly what I asked Him to do, then I would be a FOOL to pray! What do I know?!

Thankfully, however, Jesus reminds us here that that is NOT how prayer works. God's not waiting for our directives – He knows what we need *before we even ask*! In fact, as we come to Him with our clumsy requests, and our best attempts at figuring what we should be asking for, He takes those prayers, and He *perfects* them for us. In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul explains:

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Nicole as quoted by G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 242.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but **the Spirit himself intercedes for us** with groanings too deep for words.<sup>27</sup> And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because **the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.** (Romans 8:26-28 ESV)

Consider that chain of events. When you pray, the Holy Spirit takes that prayer, and he intercedes for us – he presents it to Jesus on our behalf – but as He presents it, He *perfects* it! He brings it into alignment with the will of God. He wipes off the stuff that we asked for that we shouldn't have, and then He adds in the stuff we didn't ask for that we should have.

Jesus then takes those requests, and He presents them under His authority to God the Father. That, by the way, is what we are communicating when we pray 'in Jesus' name'. We are saying, "I am asking for this – not because of my own righteousness or on account of what *I* deserve – but I am asking for this because of JESUS' perfect righteousness and on account of what HE deserves! In JESUS' name, I pray, amen!"

The Spirit perfects our prayers and presents them to the Son. The Son then brings our prayers before the Father and requests them by His own authority. The Father answers – according to His perfect will – having known full well what you needed before you even opened your mouth! THAT is what happens when you pray!

When you wrap your heart around that process, you will come to see that your contribution to that process is *embarrassingly small*! When you wrap your heart around that process, you will come to see that the length of your prayer or the eloquence of your words has absolutely NO BEARING AT ALL on how God receives that prayer! NONE!

Now, of course there is nothing wrong with long, eloquent prayers, but we DO realize that God is just as pleased with short, simple, childlike prayers, right? Do we know that? I prayed with a new believer this week who began his prayer with the words, "Good morning, God" and it stirred my heart! Why does the pharisee inside of us take things that are so beautifully simple and transform them into things that are so terribly complicated? Listen: God isn't asking for a monologue! He isn't asking for a theological treatise. He's simply asking His children to come to Him in faith. You don't need to train for that. You were *made* for that.

Prayer is not a performance. I don't need to impress you, and you don't need to impress me.

Prayer is not a ritual. You don't need to learn the fancy words before you can talk to God.

When you pray, remember Who you are praying to. You're not praying to the people around you. You're praying to your Heavenly Father. He loves you, and He wants to hear from you.

And remember that He knows what you need before you even ask. His door is wide open. You don't need to impress Him. You don't need to get your words just right. You just need to come with the faith of a mustard seed and ask.

To that end, let's pray together.