

Jesus on Prayer - Part 1

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[0:00] Matthew chapter 6, and we're going to read the first 18 verses together, and let's hear God's Word. Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them.

If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they'll be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. This then is how you should pray. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Amen. This morning, as we begin to think about what does Jesus teach about prayer in this section, in verses 5 to 8, we're going to think about lessons that Jesus gives on how to and how not to pray. So as a church, our next month is going to be given over to teaching about prayer. So we're going to work through what Jesus says here, focusing for the next few weeks on the Lord's Prayer. In the evenings, we're going to be thinking about learning to pray using the Psalms, praying the Psalms in Christ. In early September, we're going to have a week of prayer, where we want to set aside time to pray, to enjoy God, but also as we think about a term that's coming up, to commit our plans to God. Now why do we do that? Why do we focus on prayer? Well, today,

I hope as we see from the teaching of Jesus, prayer is a wonderful privilege that we enjoy as Christians, but it's also a responsibility for us to exercise. Perhaps the greatest privilege that we have as human beings is this opportunity to enjoy communion with God, to call the God who made us our Father in heaven, to know Him, to enjoy Him. We've been made in God's image, and one of the things that that brings then is our ability to communicate, and so it's an instinct within each person's heart to want to communicate with God. In much the same way, when you think about tiny babies, very quickly, even before they can speak, they want to find ways to communicate with their parents. So prayer is an instinct for all of us, but it's also a precious gift that God gives to His people. So we're going to think about that, that privilege of communion, of enjoying fellowship with God, but it's also a responsibility. We are talking about the work of prayer, that is kingdom work to be done. Jesus is going to tell us to pray, your kingdom come, and so we have a responsibility as a church to be praying, because we believe that God uses prayer, that God chooses to work through His people's prayer.

And so we come to the start of a new term. At the start of a new term, there's always lots of things that are planned out in our church. Anyway, there's lots of things that will be happening, new

ministries beginning, and we want that to be prayed over and prayed through. We want us to do kingdom work so that all our activity will be for the glory of God and God might use it. So in this little section, Jesus is teaching us both how to and how not to pray. He's inviting us to enjoy this great privilege of prayer, and we're going to hear a call to exercise our responsibility to pray, knowing who we pray to.

[5:38] So the first thing to think about is this word communion. Here's a question for you to think about. Do you pray to enjoy God as your Father?

The context for what we just read is that this is part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus giving some extended teaching to His disciples with the crowds around. In chapter 5 and then into this section, there's been a focus on heart attitude and motivation for a follower of Jesus. Here in chapter 6 in particular, heart attitude and motivation as we go about our religious lives, as we give to the needy, as we pray, as we fast. How do we do that? So we're thinking about prayer in particular here in verse 5.

Notice the way the verse begins, and when you pray, Jesus expects that the people of God will pray.

That's been true all the time. To have a relationship with God involves God speaking to us from His Word, and we respond in prayer. So there's an expectation, but there's also in a sense in which it's a command, it's a duty, but it's a privilege that we have. Jesus draws a caricature for us to show us how we shouldn't pray. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites. So we need to just stop and think, what's a hypocrite? Well, in Jesus' day, that word was used of somebody that performed in a play, somebody who used a mask as a second face. You know, when we think about hypocrite, we think about someone who says one thing and does another, somebody who's two-faced comes from that, somebody who puts on a show, putting on a performance here in particular, a religious performance. And so what's the hypocrite like? How should we not pray? Well, let's read about them in verse 5. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men.

Now, it'd be wonderful if the sentence stopped, for they love to pray. That's a wonderful quality. But for this hypocrite, he is deliberately arranging his schedule. So the Jewish people had set times to pray, and this man was very carefully making sure that when it was the time to pray, he was in a very public place. So either in the synagogue or in the street corners, he could pray long, he could pray loud, so everyone could hear him, and everybody could see him. His audience is not God. His audience is his peers, the crowds. He wants to give a performance of religious good. We're told that at the end of verse 5, I tell you the truth, the hypocrites, they've received their rewards in full.

Praying simply to have the applause of people to have someone say, well done, you're very religious, motivated by pride, is not true praying according to Jesus. Now, the problem isn't with public praying. That's always been a part of worship. The problem is not with praying in a public location. In fact, you could say it's a good thing to have people who pray in church, but who also pray in the streets, who don't just think prayer is confined to special places. But the problem, the danger for us as well today, is that you can have that outer shell of religion while there's a heart that's empty. Boys and girls, I don't know if you spent any time at the beach over the summer. I know some of you did. This summer, we spent a fair bit of time doing some rock pooling, which you may or may not enjoy. So I had that experience of trying to grab hermit crabs. That's one of my favorite things to do in the summer, trying to grab hermit crabs. I don't know if you've had this, where you see one scuttling along and you get your hand in the water nice and slowly and you know what shell it is. And then you try and move really quickly to grab it. You think you've got that good looking shell, you turn it over, you come up empty.

[9:50] The disappointment of rock pooling. It is true for some people that they can look very good, religiously have that shell, but have hearts that are empty. Jesus is warning us, maybe especially people that come to church. We can go through all the motions of religion, but have no love in our hearts, no joy as we pray. Perhaps we pray at our set times. We don't have set times in the day, like a clock, but maybe we have set times where we pray at meal times. And that's a good thing, but it can also become just a ritual and a routine that we do in a mindless way.

Perhaps our other set time is certainly, I think it's true in wider culture, that when there is an emergency, when we have need, people will often pray then. And that's a good thing, but I wonder, do we pray simply to enjoy being in God's presence? Do we pray simply because we are overwhelmed by this amazing fact that we are the children of God and we are invited to talk to Him as our loving Father in heaven? Do we pray to Him simply to enjoy Him? Let's look at, if that's the picture of the kind of prayer that God isn't pleased with and how not to pray, let's look at how Jesus teaches how we should pray in verse 6. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. So notice here, this is a different person praying, but they too arrange their schedule, but they arrange it very differently. They're arranging time where they can go into their room and they can close the door, they can find a quiet time to spend with God, avoiding distraction, avoiding the eyes of others, to enjoy quality time with God their Father. That's a very different way to arrange a schedule.

This person praying also has a very different audience. Jesus calls us to pray to our Father. Somebody has said that adoption into the family of God is the high point of Christian privilege. And if that's the case, then surely prayer is part of that great privilege. That Jesus has come to transform us from being God's enemies, where we had this sin that was a great barrier that's stopping us from knowing God. Jesus has come and He's paid the price for that.

If our faith is in Him, we've been forgiven, we've been brought into the family of God, we're children of God, so that we can pray our Father in heaven, just as Jesus prayed to His Father.

[12:59] When you look at the life of Jesus, when you read the Gospels, you discover that Jesus enjoyed communion with His Father. He often spent time alone in prayer. He'd find a quiet place away from all the busyness, away from the distraction in order to enjoy time with His Father. Mike Reeves has said, prayer is learning to enjoy what Jesus always enjoyed. That's a wonderful gift of the Christian life, to enjoy what Jesus always enjoyed. And here Jesus is reminding us of the great reward of true prayer, that when we pray with a heart motivation that is right, desiring to meet with God, then God meets with us in that secret place. Ultimately, God Himself, knowing more of God, is the reward as we spend time in prayer, as we enjoy this communion with our Creator and our Savior.

So two questions before we leave this. Do you have a secret place? Do you have that place where you can go and seek out quality time with God? A place where you can be free of distraction, perhaps especially free of digital distraction for many of us. A location, a space that's quiet, where we can be with God, where we've got time to read God's Word, to think about it, to turn it into prayer. Jesus is saying that's something that we should have, to enjoy the privilege of prayer that we're given. Are you on speaking terms with God today, at this phase in your life? We understand, don't we, as people, that all relationships grow and develop largely through communication, the sharing of hearts and thoughts. God speaks to us.

God speaks to us through His Son, and God speaks to us in the Spirit through the Bible. Are you enjoying a growing relationship with God in your prayer life? Are you hearing God regularly in His Word, and are you responding in prayer? Why did Jesus come? Jesus came to reconcile us to the Father, so we could enjoy talking to our Father in heaven. Prayer is about communion. It's about learning to enjoy more of God. But it's not just about communion. It's also about kingdom. Here's another question before we move on to verse 7. It's this one. Do you pray, trusting God as your good Father? Do you know who you are talking to? Do you know what He is like? Again, Jesus draws another caricature for us in verse 7.

Not a hypocrite this time, but a pagan. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they'll be heard because of their many words. Now, pagans were people who worshipped false gods and idols in Jesus' day, and they had a particular way of praying because they thought of their gods in a particular way. For them, the gods were distant and far away. For them, their gods were unpredictable.

For them, their gods were harsh and could be vindictive. And so it was really important for a pagan to pile up a big heap of words and to try and earn merit before this distant and harsh God.

[16:55] And maybe one good place to see it in the Bible is in the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Perhaps, boys and girls, you know that story where there's this challenge to see whose god is the true god, the god of the Bible or Baal, the false god. And Elijah goes up and the prophets of Baal go up and they both build altars. And there's this challenge, which god will answer by fire? Well, as the pagan prophets pray, we hear them shouting and screaming and dancing and cutting themselves out, and they're praying for hours and they're hoping they'll pile up enough good words that their god will answer.

Of course, their god is no god at all. And you compare that with Elijah, he simply prays to the god he knows and god answers by fire. That story and this teaching of Jesus reminds us how I think about God affects how I pray about God, how I pray to God rather. It's really important to know the character of the god that we are talking to. Otherwise, we are in danger of being like the pagans, of also thinking God is distant and disconnected and uninterested in us, and perhaps harsh and vindictive. That's not the god of the Bible. But unless we're reading the Bible, we might think that's what God is like.

The key truth from verse 8, I think, is this. God is not like the god, the false god that pagans imagine. God is more than you or me. Verse 8, do not be like them, for your father knows what you need before you ask him.

Jesus reminds us we come to a God who is wise, a God who is powerful, a God who is kind, a God who is generous, a God who is good. We can trust him and we can trust his intentions.

Also in the Sermon on the Mount, there's that verse that we read with the children. Let me read it again. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?

[19:02] If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?

We pray to a good God who gives good gifts, who's way more generous often than we imagine. And prayer, in a sense, is an act of faith, trusting that because of Jesus, because of what Jesus has done for us, God is for us, God is for us. God is for us as our open-armed father. Arms that are open both to welcome us, and arms that are open to give gifts freely to us, for our good and for his glory.

It's really important that our praying must connect with the real God. One of the reasons why we're going to spend a month in the evenings looking at some of the Psalms and thinking how to pray the Psalms is because they remind us so clearly the character of the God that we pray to. And when we remember the character of God, it gives us confidence to trust him and to pray with expectation. So connecting Bible reading and praying is really important for our Christian lives. Do we pray trusting God as our good Father? Let me apply this practically to one particular type of prayer, to the kind of prayer that we find in chapter 6 and verse 10, the Your Kingdom Come prayers. When we read in the Bible, we discover a God who wants people to be saved. And we discover a God who loves to reveal himself to surprising people in surprising places to amaze us with grace. We read in the Bible of a God who has grace that's greater than our sin.

We read of a God who shows his love for the world at the cross and a salvation that's freely available to anyone who will put their faith and trust in Jesus. I wonder when you and I pray, do we really trust that God is more than us? That he's more wise than us? That he's more generous and good than us? Do we trust that he's a good Father, that his intentions and his plans for us and for his world are good? Understanding that we come to a God who is both powerful and loving and good should help us to pray those big kingdom prayers with confidence in our good God.

To pray for our family members. To pray that they would come to faith. To keep praying, persevering, believing that God can change people's hearts. To pray for our children, perhaps, that they would persevere in their faith despite obstacles. Understanding the character of God and his desire for people's salvation helps us to pray for conversions. That our community would be changed, that the people around us would be changed, that more and more people would see their sin and their need of a Savior. That we'd hear more and more stories of people turning from sin and trusting in Jesus.

[22:34] That we'd pray for more and more opportunities to be able to share something of our faith with others, believing that God can use our words and our witness for his glory.

If we understand the character and the nature of God and his desire for his own glory through saving sinners, then we'll pray for the ministries that we have in this church.

That we pray that Becclew, small though we are, would have a lasting impact on our city as we gather and as we scatter.

That when we pray our kingdom come for ourselves, we would believe that God really can change our hearts. That he can change our desires. That we don't have to be stuck in these patterns of sin that perhaps we find ourselves in.

That God's grace is bigger than our sin. And he is at work in us to make us more like Jesus. Do we believe just how good and how generous and how powerful our God really is?

[23:39] Jesus said, don't be like the pagans. For your father knows what you need before you ask him. What we need most of all is to know him and to know him better.

To know him at work in our life and in the lives of others. So just as we come to an end, can I encourage you if you're a Christian here and you belong to this church, will you join in working for God's kingdom by praying?

Lots of chances to do that. We gather on Sundays at 10.30 before church starts. Great chance to commit the day to God to pray that he'd use our gathering.

And once community groups start up again on Wednesdays, we have a chance to pray in small groups together. But in our personal times, in our family devotions, will we pray your kingdom come?

Trusting in the goodness and the generosity of God. Will we pray for ourselves and for the people that we know, for our work and our witness? Whatever sphere that we are in, whatever opportunities that we have and the people that we know have, will we pray that God will be at work through us?

[24:53] Through our witness. Will we gather to pray your kingdom come for our city? That needs our prayers, for a nation that needs our prayers, for a world that needs to know the gospel.

We do so knowing the God who is good, the God who can be trusted. So Jesus reminds us, prayer is our greatest privilege.

We call God Father. And it's also our great responsibility. So let's ask God to make prayer our heartbeat as individuals and as a church.

And let's do that now, briefly. Let's pray. Thank you. We're going to give Christ. Thank you. Many crucifixions to forgive us. We are top 100,000.

We're going to give Christ to or half an ace a year. We are on to stage a Lord. Basically, we are on our phones. We're going to give Christ to the Lord. We're going to give Christ to the Lord. Whether we ever do that, desire to give Christ to the Lord. But if we're today, let's say that we're on our Tuesday.

[25:55] We are on our conse angel. And now, we do it right for you.