

# Prayer - how not to pray

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[ 0 : 00 ] So this morning and on for the next two Sundays as a little series of three our subject is prayer. That's what we're going to be thinking about together, prayer. The early church devoted themselves to prayer.

From one angle, very brief introduction, praying is and should be natural to us as human beings, if I can put it like that. Because we are, all of us, creatures made in God's image and we're wired up to hear him and love him and trust him and pray to him.

It is no surprise that through all of human history many people have prayed. And yet praying is also now, in a sense, so unnatural to us.

For as fallen creatures, as those who turned away from our Creator in offensive, sinful independence, we love to stand on our own two feet without him.

We love to pretend we can make it on our own, our hearts and lips clamped shut towards him. And yet, as we've thought about already this morning, God, the Holy God, is so full of kindness and grace towards tight-lipped sinners.

[ 1 : 18 ] Because wonderfully, through the work of Jesus Christ for us, through the work of the Holy Spirit in us, the living God acts in history and in our lives to bring us back to himself.

For as we say so frequently, almost every week, when today a person places their trust in Jesus Christ, our God forgives us and restores us to a living relationship with him.

And the majestic King in heaven adopts us into his family so that today we can know him and we can sit and we can pray to our Father in heaven.

And prayer is such a privilege. And yet, if we're honest, for many of us, actually praying, speaking to God can be a struggle.

Do you not think? I want to pray. I'm a Christian believer. I want to pray. I'm meant to pray. And when I do, it's so right to pray. And yet, well, what gets in the way?

[ 2 : 21 ] Busyness, tiredness, smartphone distractedness can get on top of me. I can't find the space or concentration to pray. Maybe a sense of guilt or unworthiness may make us feel we can't pray.

Maybe a sense that we're coping just fine means we don't pray. Or a secret doubt that it will make any difference means we won't pray.

So often we struggle to do what we want to do, pray. And we need help. And that is why, just over this next three Sundays, we're going to listen to these, in a sense, very simple words from Jesus in Matthew chapter 6, which we've got open in front of us.

Just to introduce, this is the middle of the famous Sermon on the Mount. And Jesus has gathered his first followers around him. And he's teaching them in this section about religion and here particularly about prayer.

And my hope is whether we're long in the tooth Christians, 50 years, or we're on the fringes of church looking in, or we're anywhere in between, this teaching of Jesus just in these verses will very simply give us help and encouragement and move us to be people who pray.

[ 3 : 39 ] Not to some distant deity, not to our mate, but to our dear Father in heaven. So this morning, one of three, we're going to dive into verses five to nine as Jesus, well, see this with me.

Jesus looks out at the praying world around him. And then with really very brief, sharp, clear words, he says to his followers in these verses, don't pray like those people.

Let me tell you how to pray. And so here it is first in verses five to six, for those of us who want to learn, when you pray, don't be a play actor.

Let me read verse five. Let me read verse five. 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 others.

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. A hypocrite here, it means a play actor. It's someone who plays a role in public.

[ 4 : 44 ] You deceive people, maybe even yourself, because you say and do something and yet at some level you're just acting out a part.

So why are these people in Jesus' sights hypocrites? What do they play acting at? Well, here it is. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on street corners to be seen by others. In the synagogue, in the public gathered meeting, there's loads of people to watch you pray. And on a street corner, you can be seen from down two streets and not just one.

So here are people who love praying publicly and Jesus says that what they do is religious hypocrisy. Why? It's because, if you can picture it, as these people put their hands together and pray, they're not actually relating to God.

They're not actually speaking to their Father in heaven. They're putting on a religious act for other people to see. Jesus is teaching on prayer here.

[ 5 : 49 ] It comes within a little bit of the Sermon on the Mount that's all about the poison of doing empty religion. Do you see in front of us? Chapter six, verse one sums it up.

Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you'll have no reward from your Father in heaven. Or verse two. When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets as the hypocrites do in synagogues and on the streets to be honored by others.

Look at me, how generous I am. And then later in verse 16, when you fast, when you stop eating, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting.

Do you see that, the link? So as with giving, as with fasting, so with playing, don't be a play actor. You ask, is that useful to hear?

I think it is. I mean, obviously, of course it is. Because the rotten truth is that so much of religious practice around the world, Christian or otherwise, ends up about being trying to impress other people, putting on a show so others will think you're holy.

[ 7 : 02 ] You see it in religious professionals, enjoying being the center of attention, standing in the place of honor, praying in a special religious voice, wanting to be looked up to.

But not just that. It could be any of us, actually. In a church meeting or in a small group, when you pray out loud, you pray loudly.

Or you try to put on an authentic prayer voice. Or you desperately look for the right cliches, the polished turn of phrase, the clever biblical connection.

And as you pray with others, and it's good to pray with others, as you pray supposedly to God, secretly in your mind's eye, you're looking right and left at people around you.

Are they impressed with me? Meg and I had a couple round for a meal quite a while back now. They're not from St John's. And the man is an older Christian, he's in his 60s, and he's written books and is well known, and I look up to him.

[ 8 : 05 ] And at the end of the meal, he suggested that we pray together. Great. And as I prayed out loud around the table, I was kind of nervous. Like, will my prayer match his full depth and reverence?

What will he think of me as I pray? Will he be impressed? Which was horrible. Because in part, I was play acting as I was praying. Maybe you're not like that.

Actually, this is slightly turning Jesus' teaching a little bit here. My guess is that many of us really don't like praying in public where others can hear. Actually, we hate it.

But it's worth asking why. Could it be because actually we're afraid of what people will think of us? And so we stay quiet and look prayerful.

And maybe we can impress or not disappoint others in that way. I don't know. Jesus says, don't be a play actor. Don't pray to be seen by others.

[ 9 : 11 ] Truly I tell you, end of verse five. If you pray like that, you've received your reward in full. People will be impressed with you or they won't, but that's all you'll get from your praying. The no.

So what should we do instead? How should we pray? Well, verse six now. Pray in secret to your father who sees.

Look at this with me. In verse six, Jesus speaks to you individually. So if this morning you're someone who follows Jesus Christ, you've been adopted into God's family.

He is your father. Do this. Look. When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your father who is unseen.

And then your father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. The word room here, it means a store room or an inner room or a bedroom.

[10:16] Somewhere you can go to and close the door and be by yourself in private, in secret, where no one else at all can see. If I say no one else, actually, when you are in the secret place, there is one person who will see you.

Your father, the almighty king of heaven seated on his throne, who is unseen, but is there with you. And says Jesus here, in the secret place, pray to him.

Speak to him, pour out your soul to him, because he will see and he will hear you. So do you see the contrast? Verses five and six.

Don't be a public play actor to impress others. Pray in secret to your father who sees. We should say it, we will say it.

Jesus is not against praying in public with others. He's not against you coming to a prayer meeting. What he's saying is that prayer, fundamentally, is about relating to and speaking to our heavenly father.

[11:27] Not about impressing others. And if we have him as our father, we should, we must find ourselves praying in private, in secret, to him.

That makes sense, doesn't it? When I was a young boy, my dad and I used to sing in a church choir. It's kind of the big thing we did together, socially and in public.

And when we were at choir practice and often standing around before services and so on, I think people would have seen my dad and I got on pretty well together, because we did. It would have been very, very strange if I'd talked and chatted to dad lots at choir practice, all smiles when other people were around.

But when we got home, I blanked him. I didn't bother speaking to him at all. It would have shown that actually at choir practice, I was just play acting.

I wasn't really interested in him. Because the proof of our relationship is how we relate in private, when no one's looking.

[12:35] And so says Jesus here with the living God. Don't be a play actor. Don't just join in with prayers at church. That would be very, very revealing. Rather go into your room, shut the door and in that private place, just you and him pray.

And let's think about this a bit. As we try to connect this teaching with our lives, an obvious danger is that we start to feel weighed down by guilt.

Because most of us, I'm sure pretty much all of us would probably say, we really should pray more. We should pray more in private, oh dear. But I'd love us to see though that I think in these verses, Jesus isn't trying to lever us into praying.

He's not trying to guilt trip you. He's not trying to weigh you down and force you to try harder.

Rather, I think verse six is, it's a beautiful verse.

It's a beautiful verse. Here to motivate us and attract us and move us. Don't you think? Go into your room, close the door and pray to your father who is unseen, and then your father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

[13:53] Let me ask if you can imagine it. Can you picture you doing this? Like instead of spending 15 minutes scrolling through Facebook, put that to once.

Imagine this. I wonder where would be your room or secret place if you thought about it now, you personally. Where would your secret place be?

Sitting on your bed maybe? Or in the living room where others are out? Or in a quiet corner of your allotment? Or in the car parked up somewhere?

Have you, you don't have to have somewhere, but have you got somewhere that's your place? Your chair? So picture yourself now in that exact place. And it's early morning or middle of the day or late night, it doesn't matter.

But you're by yourself. Can you see yourself? You're a creature sitting there, just as you are. And no one is looking. And it's almost quiet in your room.

[14:55] And you hear yourself breathing. And in that secret place, that ordinary place, you are in the presence of almighty God.

Your Father, who's enthroned in heaven. And as you sit there and as you open your mouth and you speak to him, though he's unseen, he is there with you.

He's not distracted, he's not distant. You have his full attention. In your secret place, you are communing with your God. And his eyes are on you, his dearly loved child, as you speak to him. Isn't that glorious? And it says here, as you speak to him, as you speak to your Father honestly and reverently in the secret place, and no one else knows.

Jesus says here, your Father will reward you. What will reward? It's not spelt out here, but as we pray, maybe a sense of his pleasure and approval.

[16:05] The joy of knowing him deeply. The peace that he gives you, what a relief, as you cast your anxieties and your stresses on him.

The assurance of his fatherly love, as you pray, you say, I trust you, Amen. And the knowledge that he loves you floods through you. Ultimately, for those who know and pray to him as Father, the future reward of seeing his face.

Jesus says here, don't be a public play actor. But pray in secret to your Father who sees. Will you? Like if you never have, or if you've got out of the habit here, or if you haven't for a while, will you do this? Set your alarm, switch off your phone, find your quiet place, shut the door, know that your Father sees you.

And pray. Okay, first thing. Let's go on. Firstly, says Jesus here in these verses, don't be a play actor.

[17:13] And secondly, now, touch more briefly, in verses seven and eight, when you pray, don't be a pagan. So look at this now from verse seven.

And when you pray, Jesus says, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they'll be heard because of their many words. Don't be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

We don't really use the word pagan very much anyway. The word pagan here, it simply means, so just you've got this in your head, it's people who really don't know the true and living God.

And particularly in the Bible, people who worship false gods. Do not keep on babbling like those people, Jesus says.

In Bible times, just as today, false religion so often sees God or the gods as those to be manipulated and cajoled into doing things for us.

[18:13] And put the time in, say enough prayers and things might happen. The word babbling probably describes the sound of this kind of praying. Babble, babble, babble, kind of heaping up empty phrases is what we're talking about.

So you speak and speak and speak, you pray and pray with your mind switched off, hoping you'll be heard because of your many words. What does that look like?

It's not quite with words, but there we go. In Tibetan Buddhism, a prayer wheel has written mantras wrapped around it. And you spin the wheel and it's like you're speaking the prayers over and over again.

A bit close to home, maybe, I might be wrong about this, you tell me if you think so. Maybe the rosary, the popular Catholic prayer said along with rosary beads.

Last week, Russell Brand, I don't know if you know this, Russell Brand was baptized in the Thames and survived even in the water in the Thames. And he was teaching his 11 million followers on X to pray the rosary.

[19:24] And the rosary, many of us will know, is composed or based around sets of Hail Marys. And a Hail Mary goes like this. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.

Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death. Amen. And often if you say the rosary, you repeat that 50 times, along with five Lord's prayers and five Glorias.

I might be wrong. It seems to me that that may well encourage babbling, mindless repetition. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and there and there. Maybe that's got nothing to do with us.

Or think about a prayer marathon. Like I became a Christian when I was a student. And we said together, let's do an all-nighter.

Let's pray, let's make sure there's always someone doing a one-hour prayer slot. And we'll keep the prayer fires burning till he has to answer. Well, it could be we're trying to be heard because of our

many words, bashing the door down.

[ 20 : 37 ] It's possible actually to pray like a pagan for 10 minutes at home. Where when you sit down or you sit down and half thinking about other things, you just go through the motions, the same stock phrases.

Father, thank you for a new day. Thank you for my family. Please help us today and keep us safe. Pray for the kids at school that they've learned good things. Pray that you'd help Meg to trust you and me too. And so on and so on. Just babbling through my list of prayer points.

My lips are moving. I'm putting the time in. And I'm rattling on until, Amen, I've done, I've prayed. Great. Jesus says don't pray like that.

Because all that heaping up of empty phrases, it's, well, can you see what's wrong with it? It's not relational. It's not personal.

It's not how you'd speak to a person sitting in front of you. And it's not really speaking to my Father in heaven. Prayer like that treats God as less than he is.

[ 21 : 49 ] So you say, what should we do instead? How should we pray? Well, verse eight onwards, finally. Pray straightforwardly to your Father who knows.

Pray straightforwardly. Because in the verse here, here's why babbling to God is so stupid. Do not be like the pagans. For your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Jesus is saying we don't need to badger God and manipulate him. And mindless repetition won't unlock his favour.

No, no, for Christian believers, he is our loving, attentive Father. He sees us through and through. He knows us even better than we know ourselves.

And as your perfect heavenly Father, so intimately involved with every detail of your life, he knows your every thought and your every desire. And Jesus says here, verse eight, your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him.

[ 22 : 56 ] Isn't that great? So you don't need to badger him. Just speak to him. No babbling. No flowery language needed.

No many words. Just pray. Straightforwardly. Speak to this one who knows you. You say, pray what?

Well, something like this. Not just this. But something like this. Verse nine. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Give us today our daily bread. And so on. Matthew six, verses five to nine.

I wonder if you thought we said a lot or a little this morning. We're starting to talk here in these verses about how we should pray. And let me just focus on this. Do you see the real heart of it in these verses?

[ 24 : 02 ] The heart of it is this amazing privilege for those who place their trust in Jesus Christ. An amazing privilege that will last forever. Which is to know our Father in heaven.

To be known by him. Here's a quote from some Christian writer. Prayer then, is enjoying the care of a powerful father.

Instead of being left to a frightening loneliness where everything is down to you. What if we really grabbed hold of this for ourselves? What if it came to us more and more clearly that this God in heaven is my Father and his ear is towards me.

Knowing him as my Father, who sees me and knows me and loves me. But I won't be bothered anymore about seeking other people's approval.

And I won't have much time for religious performance. I don't need that. It's empty. I need to go through the motions of praying like the pagans do. Babbling and babbling, watching the time job done. No.

[ 25 : 11 ] Now as a forgiven child of God, with open access to the throne room of heaven. And knowing that he sees me and knows me and I am his and he is mine.

I will pray. I will pray. In my room and in public. Reverently. Confidently. Gladly. Straightforwardly. I will open my lips and I will pray to my God and Father who sees me and knows me and loves me and rewards me.

I will love these three weeks to be a good time for some conversation together. How is it for you when you pray? What is there in Matthew 6 here that grabs you this morning?

Can we talk about that together after the service? And then go into our weeks and say, together we will pray to him. We will pray. And what we are going to do together is, well in a moment we are

