

The Lord's Prayer (1)

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn together for a short time to Matthew chapter 6. Matthew chapter 6, I'm reading from 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. 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.

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. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Pray then like this, and so on. Well, it goes without saying that we're not commenting on anyone who has prayed here this evening when we're taking these words.

I have never, ever experienced anyone in this place to pray publicly in a way that drew attention to themselves or contradicted the way in which Jesus here brings before the disciples that which they are not to seek, to be, or to do in prayer.

[1 : 1 7] We are thankful to God that those who are asked to pray know of these things already, and that they do exercise care, and seeking to be true to these scripture principles also, among others, even in public prayer.

We should be grateful for that itself. But here in this passage, we find Jesus giving instruction to the disciples about prayer. And it's an important passage, and I want to just take some time.

We're now, for some months actually, have the words of the Lord's Prayer in the bulletin sheet, particularly for the children, so that they can learn it off by heart. It used to be done in school, but sadly that's not the case, mostly at least nowadays.

But we want ourselves, obviously, to do that, so that we can get into it more as to its teaching, and more into what it says to us in regard to how we too should pray, and what the Lord himself expects of us when we come to pray.

Isn't it interesting itself, and it's actually quite telling, that even in terms of praying, the fact that they were being taught by Jesus did not itself guarantee that his disciples would carry out to the letter all his instructions.

[2 : 3 8] There were times when they fell asleep, when they should have been praying, even a place like Gethsemane. And even in prayer, they were very obviously not perfect in following the Lord's own example and instruction.

They were just sinful human beings like ourselves. And even though instructed and taught by the Lord, nevertheless, they showed their fallibility in these things too.

But here we have, right through these verses we've read, we have a very prominent thread right through the verses 1 to 18. Because whether it's in terms of giving, in verses 1 to 4, when you're actually giving alms or gifts out to the poor, then in prayer, and then in fasting, these are the three great topics there, the thread that runs through them is that in all of these cases, they are not to be done so as to be seen.

They are not to be done so as to be ostentatious or proud or just showing ability off to the world. They are actually the opposite, as we'll see tonight, that Jesus is actually instructing them to be the opposite.

The feature of the world, and nowhere more than in our own generation, a feature of the world, a prominent feature of the world, is to flaunt itself, to take pride in things which we know the Bible itself denounces, to take pride in arrogance against God, to take pride in what they imagine is just exercising freedom of will and freedom of conscience to do contrary to what we know is even natural, or as the Bible says, that nature itself teaches us, let alone the Word of God.

[4 : 18] So pride and the gaining of approval and doing things in order to be praised, that's the spirit of the world, that's what God has taken us away from. And it's quite telling all the way through the teaching of Jesus and the whole indeed of the Scriptures that you find again and again and again an emphasis on humility and on meekness, on the things that are so, so difficult and impossible without the grace of God working in us.

You go back to the way in which he taught them even to, in regard to those who are blessed and the Beatitudes. Look at all the way through the Beatitudes the kind of qualities that he is expressing, the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, those who are pure in heart, those who are peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

The world will say, that's not the kind of life that I would want to live. That's for people who want to live a very narrow and restricted and unfulfilled life.

Actually, you know yourselves very well it is the opposite. It's not fulfilled at all as we're seeing early on in our studies in Ecclesiastes. So here is Jesus teaching the opposite of this ostentatiousness and pride and flaunting of oneself and of our activities.

And it's interesting and important, therefore, that before we come to the prayer itself, he gives this introduction, as it were, to the prayer itself, following on from the first part of the chapter.

[5 : 52] When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. You must not be like the Gentiles. You must not be like those who don't seek God, whose idea of prayer is very different to the prayer of God's people.

And so there are four points here in these verses, verses 5 to 8, four points that are important for us to look at as a kind of introduction, if you like, to the prayer itself, the Lord's Prayer, in verses 9 to 13.

There is, first of all, an emphasis that prayer should be done frequently. Secondly, the prayer should be done humbly. Thirdly, that prayer should be done plainly.

And that prayer, fourthly, should be familiarly, or in terms of a child speaking to their father. So frequently, humbly, plainly, and familiarly.

These are the distinctives, or the qualities, if you like, that Jesus sets out here for how we pray. When it comes to what we're to pray for. So to Jesus, it was important how we pray, because that itself was part of how we would seek to glorify God and to elevate the name of God and to act in a way that's becoming of us in the presence of God.

[7 : 19] But he says here, when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. They love to stand and pray in the synagogues and in the street corners. And as you go through the passage, you see, it's not saying if you pray, but when you pray.

And then you go to verse 11, for example, and you can see, give us this day our daily bread. So there, and of course elsewhere throughout the Bible, you have an emphasis that prayer should not be infrequent, that it should not be just on occasions, but rather frequent or even continuous as much as possible.

And so the frequency of prayer for Jesus is also at the very heart of our relationship with God. The world is mistaken about how a Christian lives, what sort of life a Christian life is.

And they're mistaken to the extent at least that they many times will have the idea that all we're doing is just following a certain set of rules or a creedal statement of some kind or even the statements of the Bible itself as a rule book.

Of course the Bible in that sense is a book that actually provides us with the information, with the rules, sometimes with the commandments that our life is to be shaped by.

[8 : 37] But the Christian life is not in the first and foremost. It's not following a set of rules. It's living out a relationship. It's living out a relationship with a God that we pray to.

A relationship with the God who has saved us. A relationship with the God who is so precious to us that we know of him having brought us into that relationship of friendship, of reconciliation, of even being his children by adoption in Jesus Christ.

And in that relationship, as you live out that relationship, it's far more than a following out of rules. Those rules guide you and rules are important in order to inform your mind and propositions of the word and promises of the word and commandments of the word and warnings of the word all feed into the kind of mindset that we must have as Christians.

But our primary emphasis in what a Christian is is that it is someone in a living relationship with God. With God as their creator and savior.

Now as you know, communication is at the heart of any true and proper relationship, even in human terms. Communication is very important.

[9 : 57] And sometimes you'll find that the lack of communication lies behind certain breakdowns in relationships. It isn't just between individuals, you find it also between various groups of people, whether it's in business or in economics or anything like that.

If communication breaks down or even in the military, you've got a problem and things will actually then start to go sometimes very badly wrong. Communication and constant communication and proper and efficient communication is important even in worldly terms.

But it's absolutely vital and that's why God has given us the desire to pray as a means, as the means of communication with himself.

So when you find somebody saying, well, I'm a Christian but I really don't bother with prayer, that person's not a Christian unless they're terribly, badly backslidden. Because when the Lord brings you to know himself, one of the first things you want to do is pray.

When God came, when Jesus met with Paul on the way to Damascus and even though Paul, I'm sure, had prayed the prayer of the Pharisee many, many times in his life as Jesus shows here itself and elsewhere the prayer of the Pharisee wasn't really through proper prayer at all.

[11 : 19] It's just a formal, cold, standard form of ritual. But when Paul met with Jesus and then Jesus said to Ananias to go to where Paul was for he says, behold, he is praying.

First thing that Paul did after Jesus met him and changed him around was to pray, to speak to this God, to communicate with this Savior, with this powerful Redeemer that had met him and changed him and turned him inside out.

He began to pray as he hadn't been praying before. And that's how it is with ourselves. And as we go through this prayer, we can see the structure of prayer as to what to pray for as a kind of wonderful skeleton of prayer that we find elsewhere then fleshed out in different parts of the Bible.

So the loss of communication is important and it's important in this relationship as well because very, very often backsliding begins by not really keeping up your prayer activity with God.

And one of the things that the devil will seek always to get you to do is to stop praying. And even when you come to bend your knee in private or wherever it is you pray, even if you have the form of words to pray, the devil will still be active to keep you from actually praying and just be satisfied with the form and with going through the motions because he knows very well if the communication with God breaks down, if it's not meaningful, if it's not kept up properly, then that relationship begins to be affected negatively by that.

[13 : 09] And so we have to absolutely make sure that we actually have this communication open, that we maintain it open, that we keep it clear, that we don't allow things to interfere with it, that we do it not just privately but such as you're doing this evening.

That's what we're trying to impress on people because sadly not everybody who confesses to be a Christian comes to this prayer meeting or other prayer meetings. That's their loss. Why is it their loss?

Because it's bound to be affecting even if they're praying in private. Nevertheless, the Bible gives such a lot of emphasis to Christians meeting together for prayer. You look at the early chapters of Acts and they met together so frequently for prayer.

That's setting the pattern. That's the New Testament church being established in the days of the apostles. Nowhere do you find the apostles encouraging an absence from where God's people meet together to pray.

When Lydia went to that place outside of the city, what was it known as? It was a place where prayer was frequently made or was wont to be made as the AV puts it.

[14 : 22] Prayer and being together for prayer absolutely vital part of the church's progress, health and life. And so it means when we leave that and don't give it the attention we should, things will begin to break down between ourselves and God and sometimes very often between ourselves and other Christians or ourselves and the church if you think of the church in the way in which the fellowship of God's people are bonded together by God.

I was watching a program last night by the chef Rickstein who has made his way recently through different regions of France and it came to I think it was either Burgundy or the Auburn, I'm not sure which of them, they were the two regions last night, it doesn't matter anyway but he met with this woman who ran a La Chateau type of place and was a chef or a cook there, a beautiful place and they were outside at a table, wonderful scenery and it was all so relaxed and he made a comment to her, this all seems just so very relaxed and so very easy the pace of life here out in the country, these beautiful views and taking time over this and what she said was, we make time to take time.

we make time to take time and I thought when I heard that well, that's a really good caption for prayer because that's really what it's about, we make time to take time with God, we make time for that, we make time to leave that space, however often we can do it, we make time for it, it's prayer frequently, secondly, it's prayer humbly, of course Jesus is not here when he says here you go into your closet or you go into your room as it says here, shut the door and pray to your father, that doesn't mean, of course you know that very well, it doesn't actually mean that he was against praying in public, but he's giving directions here to the disciples to be different too, to be the opposite indeed of the Pharisees which he calls the hypocrites, so they're not to pray the disciples like they see the Pharisees praying, the Pharisees love to stand out in public as he says here on the street corner and they love to be heard, thinking they will be heard for their many words, they like to be seen on the street corners that they may be seen by others and standing and praying in the synagogues, the showy type, the person that draws attention to themselves and says, am I a good theologian, am I really worthy of your attention?

That's what the Pharisees were doing. He says, you're not to be praying so as to be seen or praised by people or seeking human acceptance.

You're praying while it must take account of people that you're praying for and for the fellowship of God's people and for the church, your prayer is a matter between yourself and God, whether it's in public or in private.

[17 : 38] It's absolutely key to prayer to keep in your mind, I'm speaking to God. I am speaking to God. I'm telling God things. I'm asking God things.

It's God that I'm communicating with. That's why he calls them here, the strong word that he uses is hypocrites because he says that prayer is, that kind of prayer is false.

Now I have to stress again, I'm not going over this, just looking at it as the introduction, suggesting in any way that that applies to anyone here, but the tendency, we're all human, the tendency is there, especially when it comes to ourselves who have a place more prominently than others in leading worship and leading praise, the danger is there and you have to pray that God will keep us from actually drawing attention to ourselves or from wanting the praise of people, whether it's for the preaching or for the praying or whatever else it might be.

That's not what we're about. We have to actually pray against that. We have to actually seek whatever else is done, that it'll be Jesus who'll be presented through us, that it'll be God who comes across to you people as we actually preach the gospel.

God forbid that it should be ourselves, that we should pray or preach in a way that would actually draw people's attention to us. That doesn't mean if God has given people an ability to speak well, an ability of oratory or having a real skill with how words are put together.

[19 : 12] It's not wrong to use that in prayer. It's not to pretend somehow or other that you can sort of simplify that or just find some other language. Be as God has made you.

That's what he's saying. Don't be like someone else. Don't try and copy somebody else. Don't try and imitate whoever it is, whether it's here, the Pharisees or even somebody in the church.

Take notes certainly of things but be yourself. That's what Jesus is saying to them there. And while he's saying that in regard to drawing attention to how the Pharisees are, the main emphasis actually in this passage in these words, these verses, is actually on private prayer or secret prayer.

And it's drawing the contrast by saying here are the Pharisees. their idea of prayer is mainly that they stand up in the synagogue, they go out in the streets, they stand on the corner, but your emphasis primarily is go into your room, shut the door, be alone with your God.

That's where you come to ask God, to thank God, to appeal to God, to plead with God. When you come and make the time and be in his presence by yourself.

[20 : 30] That's what he is saying to them. When you pray, go into your room, shut the door, pray to your Father who is in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

That is the secret to prayer. That's indeed the secret, I believe, to public prayer as well. Those of us who are asked to pray in public, that itself is backed up by what we are in private.

and if we are familiar with God in private, it will show in some way or other when we pray in public. Because that's really the key to it, being with God, getting to know God, waiting upon God, speaking to God, listening to God.

And you can only do that if you're alone with him whenever you're able to be that. So we pray with frequency, but we pray also humbly.

And notice the promise that's given there in verse 4, that your father who sees in secret will reward you. And then it's repeated here in verse 6, your father who sees in secret will reward you.

[21 : 42] Your father sees you in secret just when it's you and himself. That's all going, that's all happening without anybody else seeing it. But the reward of it will be open.

In other words, he's saying, here is the key to your to your praying, but here is the key to your blessing as well. You're praying to your father in secret, but the outcome of that when he comes to bless you, that's going to be noticed.

It's not that you actually show it off or you want to be proud about it, but inevitably when God blesses a life, that blessing shows in some way or other in that person's life.

And it's an answer to prayer. And it's God being true to his promise. Your father who sees in secret will reward you, whether it's in secret as it sometimes is or even in your life publicly, it will come to be noticed.

So we pray frequently but pray humbly. Thirdly, he mentions here we pray plainly. Verse 7, when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they'll be heard for their many words.

[22 : 53] Now this is not teaching the disciples, and it's not teaching us that it's wrong to repeat things in prayer. You know, there are times when you go in before God and something is so much on your mind and you want to place it before God with such urgency or such vehemence or zeal.

It's absolutely correct and right that you can do that more than once even in the one prayer that you just appeal to him more than once over what you're actually praying for.

and that happens very often, especially when it's somebody you're praying for or something in your own life. You just go and appeal to God and you repeat that appeal even before you come back from that prayer.

It's not against that at all. Again, what he's doing is, that's just really something that you see throughout the scriptures. Psalm 119 is a long prayer and it's full of repetitions.

So it's not against repeating yourself. In Daniel chapter 9 you go to Daniel and his pleading with God seeking to have God be merciful and be merciful towards them as a people and confessing the sins of his fathers and of the people that he belongs to.

[24 : 11] He took time over that with God and he kept on pleading with God and repeated his pleas. But by and large what you find is that in terms of being asked to pray in public there's a difference between that and praying in private.

Obviously there's a difference in terms of time. You can spend much more time if you have time available in private than you can in public. But while we can never specify length of prayer that would really be wrong in itself to say now you mustn't pray for more than five minutes or two minutes whatever it might be that would be wrong of us.

But by and large the Bible does not encourage longish prayers as public prayers. You can have that certainly in private prayer and secret prayer where you have more time to specify things to God.

And it's an interesting feature actually of revivals. When you read about revivals one thing you sometimes read about at least in revivals is maybe surprising in a way it was surprising to me when I first came across it because I imagined that at a time of revival people's prayers would be extended.

Public prayers would be much longer and they wouldn't feel weary and people wouldn't be weary in listening to them. But actually in revival the tendency seems to have been even experienced Christians prayed for a much shorter time.

[25 : 38] They weren't characterized by long prayers during revivals even in the island itself. We know that in times of revival when I was in Point I had the privilege of people who had still memories of the more recent revivals in Point and this is one of the things they kept saying to when they met for meetings after church services they would go to somebody's home and perhaps have seven or eight people praying but they didn't pray for long just four or five minutes each.

That was a feature of their praying whereas previously people would have prayed for longer. So that's itself showing that the blessing of God does not necessarily lead to extending the time that you spend in public prayer.

There's a phrase that's used very often in the world nowadays for different things you know the phrase less is more and that's true of public prayer as well.

Less is more. It doesn't mean we put a time limit on us as I'm saying but by and large that's what the scripture encourages but when you shut the door and you go into your closet and you're praying to your father it's a different set of circumstances you have and you can be more detailed as well and you can specify things in a way that you cannot to the same extent in public.

And from that point of view it's important that we bear that in mind but the emphasis here is really on plainness because he's saying don't heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do for they think they'll be heard for their many words.

[27 : 17] The Gentiles here were pagans. People had surrounded the Jews there around Jerusalem and that area. Around about there was a lot still of paganism.

Paganism was marked in terms of their religious practices by a superstitious repetition of various phrases and mantras and that sort of thing.

And if you go through the history of religion you'll find that that's very true of paganism wherever it's been found in history that you find those mantras and the Gentiles he says here are guilty of this.

Don't heap up empty phrases. Phrases that just are thrown out and built as a kind of ritual superstitious ritual thinking that that's really what's eventually going to lead to the gods that they're praying to to listen to them.

Buddhism Islam Hinduism you'll find that to this day in these religions where you find mantras repeated and repeated and you'll find going back to the Old Testament for example the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel it's obvious as Elijah taunted them in a proper way and he provoked them they actually went about their rituals just repeating the rituals and getting louder and louder he says don't be like that that's not what prayer is about but brevity and simplicity why does he say that well he says don't be like that they think they'll be heard for their many words do not be like them for your father knows what you need before you ask him in other words he's reminding us that prayer is not wrenching a blessing from a reluctant God God it's actually appealing to the generosity of a very kind and willing God that's a big difference to the pagan idea of repeated mantras trying to prize a blessing from the gods or trying to pacify the gods our goddess will see at the beginning of the prayer is our father father in heaven he's not reluctant to bless you don't have to extort blessing from him he's not heard for our many words we don't come with prayer thinking that the more we actually heap up words the longer we throw out of prayer the more likely he is to answer us no he says he knows what you need before you ask him but he doesn't mind you asking and this is one of the features that Jesus gave us of a preliminary introduction to the

[30 : 01] Lord's prayer so we pray frequently and we pray humbly we pray plainly and fourthly we pray familiarly do not be like them for your father knows what you need and the prayer itself begins as you know our father who is in heaven in other words the prayer of God's people that Jesus is teaching them prayer of a disciple is the prayer of a child to a father you can't imagine a father teaching a child to come in and ask things of them very formally very formally and stiffly as you would find maybe in a large house in the past with servants with the butler coming in a very formalized fashion to ask the master of the house for something a child just bursts into the study and says dad can you give me this we're not to be over familiar with God it's not what it's saying but it's not stuffy formality he is our father he is one who has made us his children and he hasn't made us his children so that we will think that proper familiarity with him is wrong that treating him other than as a kind father is somehow not becoming of us in his presence we heard in prayer that he's holy he's majestic he's great he's our creator he's our judge he is the one who upholds the whole universe by the word of his power who brought all things into being by the word of his power he is so immense that we cannot possibly conceive of his immensity but he's our father and in fact his immensity only lends wonder to the fact that he is our father and our relationship with him so don't think that it's an excuse in any way for reluctance or to keep a distance from

God neither is it of course in any way something which supports flippancy or treating God lightly so our father means we come familiarly we have a close family relationship with God isn't that a wonderful thing and come before God the God who made us the God who created us the God who sustains us the God who is our great redeemer in Christ we have a close family relationship with him he's made us like himself and his aim is to make us perfectly like himself to bear his image and glory that means we come before him not reluctantly not infrequently not proudly not ostentatiously not with many words or superstitious phrases and not in a way that is other than a child to a father that's the privilege we have of having such a

God and such an access to him and such a position of being his family let's pray what is is■■■