

"Pray"

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Preacher: Matt Coburn

[0:00] Well, good morning. I do have one other quick announcement that I heard from Chris Hill this morning. Next Saturday is our Rake and Run event, which is youth group and others are helping to rake people's lawns.

Now, you may have noticed in the last week, all the leaves from all the trees fell onto the ground, except for the oak tree in my backyard, which is still holding back half of it for November or December.

So it's holding back. But if you have a lawn and would like help getting it raked, or if you have a neighbor who has a lawn and they would use help being raked, if you could please contact Chris Hill.

His contact information, this announcement's been in the weekly email. It's on the website as well. I just wanted to mention that because he still has space in his slots for more people.

So contact him to see whether that will work into the plans, but they would love to serve more than what they have signed up for right now.

[1:09] All right. Well, this morning, I have a desire, and that is to renew your and my prayer lives.

Whenever we talk about prayer, it's easy to just feel guilty, right? It's kind of like, how's your diet going? How's your prayer life going? It's always going to be guilt-inducing whenever we talk about it.

And it's easy for us to fall into seeing prayer as a duty and not a delight. But in fact, prayer is a gift, and I hope to renew that joy that God intends for us to have in prayer this morning.

Why am I talking about this? Well, because this is what Jesus is talking about this morning in the Sermon on the Mount. We're in a series going through Matthew chapters 5 through 7, and Jesus is proclaiming the kingdom that he is bringing, the distinctive nature of the kingdom that he will bring as he is coming into the world.

And as we've seen over and over again, one of the major things is that it is marked not by external conformity, but by heart transformation. And what we see in chapter 6 of Matthew is one of three... we see three spiritual disciplines, and if you want to hear more about that, Pastor Nick preached a great sermon that was a bit of an overview of this whole section about the way that spiritual disciplines are God's gifts to train our hearts to be active in pursuing his kingdom in the right ways.

[2:54] And Jesus assumes that when we pray, when we give, when we fast, that we're doing these things, and he wants to instruct us on how to do it.

Not like the first century Jews, not like the non-Jewish people of the first century, but distinctively praying as followers of Jesus.

So that's what we're going to look at this morning. If you want to turn in your pew Bible, we're going to be on page 761. We're going to be looking at Matthew 6, verses 5 through 15, and we're going to be looking at the question, what does Jesus have to say to us about prayer this morning?

Let's go ahead and read the passage, and then we'll pray and ask God for his help in understanding it. Matthew chapter 6, starting in verse 5.

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogue and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others.

[4:02] 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. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

[5:14] This is God's Word. Will you pray with me? Lord, thank you for this word. We thank you that in your, Lord, infinite wisdom, you have given us instruction on how it is that we might pray to you.

And Lord, we need this. I need this this morning. Lord, by your Holy Spirit, teach our hearts to delight in your ways.

Teach our minds to think after your thoughts. Teach our will and our hands to do what you have called us to do. Lord, we pray that we might know you more in the grace that you've shown us in the gospel this morning.

May we sit under your word this morning, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen. Kingdom prayer frees us from our self-centered hearts to live a God-centered life.

So we're going to look at this in two sections. They're not balanced in length. The first section is verses 5 and 6 about how kingdom prayer frees us from self-centered religion to communion with God.

[6:40] And verses 7 through 15, kingdom prayer frees us from self-reliant religion to trusting God. So let's see how this plays out and what it is that Jesus has to tell us this morning about prayer.

Starting then in verses 5 and 6, how kingdom prayer frees us from self-centered religion. Jesus starts by saying in verse 5, when you pray, you must not be.

So he's starting with a negative example. He says you must not be like the hypocrites. And if you remember from last week, Pastor Nick talked about how hypocrites in Greek culture were those who were actors who wore a mask.

And so they put on an external thing to play a role that didn't match the internal reality of their being in their heart. And this created a dissonance. And Jesus says don't be like these people who are disintegrated between their outside and their inside.

He goes on to explain what does this look like for them. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners that they may be seen by others.

[7:54] And here Jesus hones in and focuses on the heart issue that he really wants to get at in this first point about prayer, that they may be seen by others.

Right? Jesus isn't saying they shouldn't be praying in the synagogues. He isn't saying that they shouldn't be praying on the street corners. He isn't saying that you shouldn't be standing while you pray. What he is saying is if you are praying to be seen by others, this is the problem.

This is not a benign visibility where I want to live my life before others so they can see God's gracious work in me. This is a thirst and a hunger for the praise and acclaim of others.

This is a desire for us to improve our reputation so that people will think, oh, he's a great spiritual man or woman. Look at the way he prays.

It's possible that some in the first century in the Jewish community would time their day and their travels so that they might find themselves on the right street corner to be seen by the maximum number of people when their time for prayer would come about during the day, calculating so that they might be seen by the most number of people as they pray or to make sure they get the right seat in the synagogue so when they stand up, everyone says, oh, yes, brother so-and-so is praying again today.

[9:33] What a great prayer he is. Friends, there can be such a danger, isn't it, in us just wanting to look spiritual rather than being spiritual because when we look spiritual, when we think other people think of us as spiritual people, it helps us.

We feel secure. We feel important. We feel worthwhile in the religious community around us. But in doing so, we take something that God intended for us to be towards him and we turn it towards others.

And we do it for our own selfish ego boost. And Jesus does warn us. He says, if you do that, you will have your reward.

Because we all know this is true, right? We all know it's easy, even in a church, even in a good church, even in a Bible church, even in a humble church, it's so easy for us to fall into this looking good before others and other people are going to give us praise for it, for our performance.

But Jesus says we are not to pray like this. This is a misguided application of the principle and the practice of prayer.

[11:00] He says, instead, we should be seeking communion with our Father who sees not in this assembly, but who sees in secret. He says, go to your room.

And it's fun. Do a little word nerdery into this. Your room is probably a storehouse in the middle of a first century home that had no windows so that no one could see in and was often the place where the treasures of the household would be kept because they'd be most protected and you couldn't break the window to reach in and steal them.

I think there's richness in that imagery of this is the room to go in where no one can see you but God Himself. Just a side note.

Jesus is not precluding public prayer. Obviously, we just did it. We'll do it again. Right? He's not saying that we shouldn't do this. Jesus Himself prayed in public when He fed the 5,000 before He raised Lazarus from the dead.

And the epistles seem to indicate in 1 Timothy 2 and in 1 Corinthians 11 that in the assembly people are praying before others. So it's not a complete condemnation of public prayer.

[12:17] But again, it's the heart attitude. When you pray, and the instruction here is to say, do the practice of closet prayer so that you learn that prayer is about communion with God.

So that even when you're praying with others around, you're not looking at them, but you are looking at God. He is to be our focus.

And friends, what a great and wonderful and beautiful invitation this is. That God invites us to actually talk to Him.

Think about how distinctive that is from religions of the world. How many people feel are invited by their God to come and have communion with Him in a secret room.

And friends, we need to be careful too that this communion isn't a baptized version of what's running around in our world today of simply mindfulness.

[13:25] Now I want to be careful here. Mindfulness done properly can be a helpful technique. It helps us recognize how our bodily positioning and rhythms can affect how we are in the world.

It can help us grow in self-awareness of the things it causes. But so often, mindfulness in our world has replaced communion with God.

And mindfulness can so easily be emptying ourselves, but ultimately, it's actually still focused on us.

I want to be at peace. I want to feel peace. I want to lay aside my anxieties. And ultimately, it's about us. But when God invites us to prayer, He says, we are to go into prayer so that we can look to Him and have communion with Him.

And if some of the techniques of bodily position or quieting your mind, if that's helpful in getting you there, that's great. But make sure that God is the end of it and the goal of it and the center of it, that you might have fellowship with Him.

[14:41] And recognize that in all of this passage, have you noticed how many times Jesus reminds us that it's not just to God, the transcendent God who is the creator of all the world, but God, our Father, who sees in secret.

Ten times in 18 verses, Jesus calls God, our Father. He is a Father who delights when we turn to Him, when we run to Him to tell Him about our day, when we call on Him in an emergency, because we need to hear His voice and we need to hear His instruction and we need to know His embrace and His comfort.

He delights when we come to Him with a single-minded devotion, love, and dependence. He delights when we know that He is always there, that He always loves, that He always hears, that He always sees.

this is the Heavenly Father that Jesus knows and calls us to be in prayer with. Some of us haven't had human fathers like that, and it's hard to imagine God being like that.

But let the Scriptures transform not only your thoughts, but your emotional pathways to see that God is a God who loves you and delights for you to come to Him in communion.

[16:26] So do you see then this pattern, how it frees us from the performing, self-centered, religious prayer that so often we fall into?

Right? At a church like Trinity, we might fall into a danger of preaching rather than praying. Have you ever noticed that? Sometimes we want to say so much about God that we're not talking to Him in our prayers.

Something for us to grow in. Sometimes, here at Trinity, we're too self-conscious about being theologically correct and precise, and some of us feel like, oh, I can't pray at all in this church.

Oh my gosh, no. I might say something wrong. Do you see how both of those are still very self-centered prayer? They're not looking to God who is our Heavenly Father who invites us.

And if we stumble, and if our theology isn't always right, we can gently encourage one another towards the truth, but let us have freedom in prayer in this.

- [17:39] What does it look like to go into your closet? Some of you are really busy people. You never get five minutes to yourself, it feels like, during your day. What does it look like?
- Maybe it's prayer along the way. Maybe it's praying in the car as you're running errands. Maybe it's prayer before bed or when you wake up in the morning.
- And look, there's no form. You can walk. You can kneel. You can sit. You can stand. You can do it anywhere. You can do it anywhere. And you know what? If you need to, the church is open from nine to four every day.
- Come here if you want to come and just sit in the quiet and pray if you have that freedom of time. You can speak your prayers. You can think your prayers.
- You can write your prayers. You can sing your prayers. You can turn them into spoken word poems. Do whatever you want to to pray. God gives us great freedom and form and place because He wants us to come into communion with Him.
- [18:45] So this is the first thing Jesus teaches us. Don't fall into self-centered religious prayer, but let it be a pursuing of communion with God as we pray.
- Jesus then goes on, and if you're noticing, Pastor Nick mentioned this last week, there's this pattern verses three and four is one and then verses five and six is one and then we'll see verses 16 and 18.
- It's almost a formulaic pattern. Verse seven, Jesus breaks out of it completely. He's like, oh, I have more to say to you about prayer than just this pattern.
- So here we go. He says, kingdom prayer frees us from self-reliant religion. To trust God. So, he's already said, don't be like the Jewish people who do it to be seen by others.
- That's their fault. That's their heart condition. It's not just because they're Jewish. It's because their heart is wrong, right? And now he goes after the Gentiles. And the Gentiles here don't mean their ethnic identity.
- [19:55] It means people who don't know God. People who worship other gods who are atheists. People who just don't know God at all. And he says, what do they do? Look with me in verse seven. 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.
- Empty phrases is a fascinating word. It's only used once, not only here in the Bible, but throughout all of antiquity. This is the only time this word has ever been used. So we have lots of translations.
- Some say babbling. Some say vain repetition. Some say, as the ESV, heap up empty phrases. Another says thoughtless repetition.
- At the core of it, what's the problem? Again, the form is not the key, but it's the heart that's the key. That they will be heard for their many words.
- Artie France just mentions that prayer in the non-Jewish world in the first century was often characterized particularly by formal invocations and magical incantations in which the correct repetition counts rather than the worshiper's attitude or intention.
- [21:12] This seems to be at the heart of what Jesus is warning us against. And we might talk about other religions and how other religions pray, but I want to focus in on how we as the church, broadly speaking, has fallen into some of these patterns ourselves.
- Right? And I want to be careful because there is a joy in learning. I have experienced great joy in learning from brothers and sisters from different theological traditions, from different parts of the world, different cultures.
- So I want to be careful to say there's lots for us to learn from one another about how to pray. But here are two strands that I could see that maybe we would fall into around here that might be dangerous.

One is because we live in a predominantly Catholic, I don't typically pick this out, but the praying of the rosary is problematic in light of Jesus' teachings here.

Okay? If you don't know, the rosary is a necklace and there's a process that you go through and you pray through things. And there are ways in which it could be a helpful tool.

- [22 : 26] But in the midst of it, there's a repetition three times and then ten times, multiple times, of Hail Mary, full of grace. Right? And apart from the theological misdirection of prayer that is a serious problem because we're not called ever to pray to Mary, there's also this pattern of repetition that seems to be a heaping up of saying the same thing over and over and over again.

The official Catholic website says, repetition is to help us to calm your head. But when I look at this pattern, I think, really? Three times? Ten times? Over and over again?

This is how everyone ought to pray all the time? How easy is this to start to feel like it's mechanical or magical and formulaic?

So that's on one end of the spectrum. There's another kind of problem with prayer. This comes more from the Pentecostal charismatic end of the church where there's a deep rejection of all liturgy, of all formal...

But there is, at times, what creeps in is this kind of magical thinking. If we pray the name of Jesus in just the right way, there is power and we're going to repeat it over and over again.

- [23 : 53] And in that, we're going to see God moved and the world changed. And friends, I have to tell you, the kind of repetition that I hear sounds a lot like what Jesus is concerned about here.

because remember, what is He concerned about the most? That God will hear us because of our many words. Friends, is this the God of the Bible?

Right? This is a fundamental misunderstanding of prayer because it's a misunderstanding of who God is. God doesn't need us to come to Him in a particular form or a particular way.

He is not impressed or moved by the volume or the repetition of how many times we pray for something. Verse 8 is so central here. God knows what you need.

Is God going to be moved because you say, hey God, I have this need that you don't know about. What does He not know about? God, I have this thing that I deeply care about.

- [24 : 57] Can you please do something? As if He didn't already care about you and the situation you're praying about. God knows these things.

Don't believe that you're going to move God to do something He doesn't want to do because of how you pray. We're not informing God or convincing Him by how we pray.

God is a good and a loving and a heavenly Father and He delights in us as we come to Him. Every parent knows this.

We know the needs of our kids and sometimes when they come and ask for it, it gives us great joy to respond in a particular way in that moment. But our provision is not contingent upon them asking and our love for them is not contingent on how they ask.

God is a good Father. And because this is true, it means some liturgical prayer can be great.

- [26 : 08] It can be really useful. I've been really helped by reading and sometimes even actually just praying the words of historical prayers. The Valley of Vision is a great book that's a book of Puritan prayers or Every Moment Holy that you may have seen that's prayer in everyday life.

These are helpful tools when we use them to tune our heart and to go to God, not because we think He's going to hear us by how we do it, but because these help us in our prayer to God.

And it's okay for us to pray for a long time. Martin Luther used to get up and pray for three hours. Now, he was a monk, so maybe he had a little latent Catholicism in that. But even so, he, you know, it's okay for us to pray for a long time as long as we don't think, well, I'm going to be more spiritual and people are going to think I'm a greater person because I pray longer or God's going to hear me more because I pray longer.

Those are the things that Jesus is saying. Don't fall into these traps because when we do that, prayer gets misguided, misdirected. Rather than having communion with God, our Father, it becomes something else.

And so having warned us about all these things, Jesus gives us a form. He gives us a model prayer that we can repeat verbatim or we can use it as a model to think about how we pray.

[27 : 39] It's called the Lord's Prayer. You heard me when I read it earlier and it seems that it was picked up early in the church and used repetitively or regularly in gatherings of corporate worship.

Some of you may wonder, what about the ending? For thine is the kingdom and the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen. That I grew up learning when I was a kid in the church that I grew up in.

Well, the church added that maybe from a verse in, sorry, I didn't put it in my notes. I can't remember. Second Chronicles, First Chronicles, something or other. They pulled this phrase from somewhere else and added it on to the end in the form that the church used outside of the Scriptures.

It's okay that we did that. It makes it a rich prayer, right? It's scriptural. But it's not here. It's not what Jesus taught in Matthew 6. He gives us this form to pray.

Now, you're all looking at your clocks and thinking, oh my gosh, is He going to preach through all of this now? It's already 11:15. So, here's the good news. We're going to come back to this.

[28 : 49] We're going to preach this week. We're going to have a Thanksgiving service, testimony service next week. We're going to preach one more time on fasting. Then we're going to go into Advent. And on January 5th, we're going to come back to the Lord's Prayer.

And we're going to preach through it line by line through January and February. So, we're going to do this deep dive. So, I'm going to do it at a really high level for the next few minutes.

What does Jesus teach us in this model of prayer? The first thing is He starts with a God-centered focus. Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed, that is, make holy or set apart your name is great and beautiful.

Jesus says, when we pray, let's start by looking at God, the personal and transcendent God who invites us as a heavenly Father to come to Him because He is benevolent and gracious.

And then, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Our focus is not, God, this is what I need and this is what I want and this is how I want you to act in the world.

[30 : 01] But God, what do you want in this world? What do you, what is your plan? What is your will? How is your kingdom going to come to this earth? Not my kingdom coming to heaven, but your kingdom coming to earth.

We start with a God-centered expression because we want to orient our hearts towards Him. And then from that, Jesus says, and then having fixed our eyes on Him, then we can say, give us this day our daily bread.

God, provide for our everyday needs. You know them all. You are the one who provides all that we have. Lord, we are reminding ourselves and reminding you, God, you will provide.

Give us this day our daily bread. But recognize that as He talks about His needs, He doesn't go on about my car that needs repaired and Aunt Josie's, you know, corns on her toe.

Look, it's fine to pray for all of those things. But recognize that for Jesus, in this prayer, there's one line about give us this day our daily bread. And then He goes on. And the other needs that He asks for are actually more spiritually oriented.

[31 : 19] Forgive us our sins as we forgive others. And deliver us from temptation. Right?

Lead us not in temptation, but deliver us from evil. Keep our spiritual lives from being destroyed by sin, by Satan. Lord, help us to remember and to live in the grace in which we now stand in Jesus that is the grace of Your forgiveness of our sin.

I want to say something really briefly about verses 14 and 15. And again, we'll come back to this probably much more in depth. But I don't believe Jesus is making our forgiveness from God conditional.

That would seem to be contrary to say Ephesians 1.7 where it says the forgiveness of sins is a gift of grace, not because we have deserved it or done anything to earn it.

But I think instead, maybe Ephesians 4.32 is a key, that we are to forgive as the Lord has forgiven us. Jesus is calling us to remember our salvation and the forgiveness that God has given us and then to be forgiving towards others because that is true.

[32 : 41] And there is a warning in there, which is, if we aren't forgiving of other people, do we really know God's forgiveness? But it's not a condition. God only forgives me as much as I forgive others.

Jesus ends His teaching here saying, this is the most important thing. This is the central.

This is the core, right? It's bringing us back to the gospel again. Do you see how prayer flows from the gospel?

Because in the gospel, what do we confess? That a grace-filled God in love has initiated towards us with a plan of salvation.

He sent Jesus His Son to rescue us when we were lost in sin, far from Him, enemies of Him, rejecting Him in our foolish pride that thinks we can control God, in our foolish plans of self-delivering that by success or by doing the right things we might actually be acceptable to Him.

[34 : 03] We had rejected God in all of these things, but God initiated towards us to say, no, that is not the way, but I am sending you the way. Jesus has come to save us from our sin in grace, giving us what we don't deserve, the forgiveness of our sin through Jesus' death for us, the renewal of our personal relationship with God our Father so that we can enter into Him, a high priest, Jesus, who now sits in the heavenly realms so that when we approach a God of all glory and honor and holiness, He doesn't cast us away because of our sinfulness, but covers us with the righteousness of Christ so that we can actually approach God the Father through Jesus and be received and accepted and heard.

The gospel tells us that we have a new spiritual life where the Spirit of God dwells within us, and this Spirit will help us pray heart-oriented prayers to God that are right.

This is the kingdom that Jesus is bringing, a kingdom of those who pray to God their Father because they know that He is a good and loving Father who delights when they come to Him in need.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank You. We thank You for all that You have done for us so that we can even do what we're doing right now, coming to You in prayer.

Lord, we pray, we pray that as we meditate on this passage that You would renew us, renew us in our understanding of what a good Father You, we have in our God.

[36 : 05] Renew us in our desire to come to Him. Renew us, Lord, in our sense of utter dependence and in our delight in bringing our needs.

Lord, renew us in our worship of our God, our Father, through Jesus. Oh, Lord, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.