

How Not to Pray

(Series: "Lord, Teach Us to Pray")

Scripture:

⁵ "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. 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. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

(Matthew 6:5-8)

Message:

Kenneth Bailey tells of a young woman he met in the Soviet Union. She was a Christ-follower. He asked her how she came to faith:

"Was there a church in your village?"

"No, the communists closed them all."

"Did some saintly grandmother instruct you in the ways of God?"

"No. All the members of my family were atheists."

"Did you have secret home Bible Studies, a radio program or was there an underground church in your area?"

"No, none of that."

"Then what happened?"

She shared the following story with him:

At funerals we were allowed to recite the Lord's Prayer. As a young child I heard these strange words and had no idea who we were talking to, what the words meant, where they came from, or why we were reciting them. When freedom came at last, I had the opportunity to search for their meaning. When you are in total darkness the tiniest point of light is very bright. For me, the Lord's Prayer was that point of light. By the time I found its meaning, I was a Christian."

Jesus taught "this prayer" to be a very bright point of light – and for the next few weeks, we'll try to uncover some of its meaning, brightness, and power.

In the middle of his mountain message, Jesus pauses to teach on prayer (**Matthew 6:5-15**) and give his listeners a pattern for their praying. Jesus teaches this prayer those who are following him...listening. Ironically, Jesus

never actually prays this prayer (i.e., this is not really *The Lord's Prayer*; **John 17** is really *The Lord's Prayer*).

In **Luke 11**, one of Jesus' disciples, after having witnessed Jesus' praying, asks him to teach them how to pray. Jesus responds with a similar prayer pattern.

Jesus teaches this prayer to his disciples – to pray. This well-known prayer is probably better titled, *the disciple's prayer*. Since then, this prayer has been repeated at funerals and weddings, in foxholes and before surgeries, at inaugurations and coronations, around dinner tables and at bedsides, in worship services and denominational gatherings, in public invocations and personal devotions.

In his mountain message, Jesus begins by teaching “How Not to Pray” and then “How to Pray.” We will follow that pattern.

First, Jesus inaugurates a new age by praying in Aramaic (instead of in Hebrew). He sets aside the precious heritage of a sacred language and a sacred culture and makes any language, and every language, into an adequate “manger” into which the Word of God can be placed.

Then, Jesus further dismantles widely held but incorrect conceptions of prayer. And, having cleared the foundation of rubble, he then builds the edifice of *The Disciple's Prayer*. All in a few verses in the middle of his mountain message. The introductory statement (in Matthew 6:5-8) by Jesus gets at the heart and nature of prayer.

NOT FOR SELF-PROMOTION

“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. 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.” (Matthew 6:5-6)

An old Rabbinic rule forbade people to pray loudly in public. Their rule was designed to encourage public praying – i.e., out loud but quietly, so as not to draw attention to oneself; the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is a primary example. It is public praying with a focus on personal meditation. So, a Jewish believer would often say their prayer on the street--at low volume.

Jesus saw through the hypocrisy of the practice. He knew public private devotion was a contradiction; a piety directed toward God that promoted oneself was a contradiction: *“Look at how pious I am!”*

No doubt, many justified their piety, as we often do: it is a witness to God and our faith!

For example, some tend to defend their table grace in public restaurants the same way. In addition to thanking God, some contend it is a powerful witness – but to what – their faith? Some worry that others who know them will judge

them if they don't bow their heads. (Just for the record, blessing God for providing us our daily food is always appropriate before eating – even in a restaurant – if the focus is solely on God.)

Public praying is not a form of evangelism or witnessing; prayer is to be addressed to God - exclusively, not to (or for) other people to notice or appreciate. Prayer, to be prayer, must always be vertical. Redirecting an activity designed to be directed solely to God into an activity designed to make a good impression on others is labeled phony by Jesus.

To avoid this, Jesus says “when [we] pray to go into [our] room [lit. supply room].” The supply room was often the only room on a Palestinian farm that could be locked. At the same time, it was the least sanctified place in the house. It was used to store feed, small animals, tools and other supplies. But the most important factor was not the furnishings; it was the fact that it was out of sight.

In a single sentence Jesus revised a commonly performed Old Testament practice and theology. It was no longer the Holy of Holies in the Temple where the believer could meet God; it was now a secular farm room where one was out of the public eye.

Of course, God is near at all times; but Jesus also knows that serious prayer requires our serious, undivided attention.

The King James Translation (1611) also did a disservice when it translated “supply room” as “closet.” (The word now has a quite different definition than when originally used.)

I don't know about you, but I have trouble getting into my closet, let alone getting comfortable (it does promote standing ☺ and does sometimes resemble a supply room).

But an English “closet” in 1611 was not for clothing or shoe storage but a small room where the Lord and/or the Lady of the manor could gather with friends for an intimate conversation.

Sadly, as a result, we have lost the concept and power of corporate prayer which so dominates the New Testament Church – and many people now perceive prayer as a purely private activity.

At first glance, this might seem to inhibit rather than encourage prayer. Pray in the dark (in a dimly lit room), amongst animals and their lingering smell, alone? And pray where no one notices or sees me; how will anyone know I am praying?

Jesus says, “This is what separates the (true) follower from the hypocrite.”

A hypocrite, by etymology, is an “actor, a stage performer, a pretender.” A hypocrite is someone who proclaims and promotes, in word or action, something they do not believe privately.

Jesus says, *"When you pray to God, don't read someone else's script, don't get up on stage so others can see you, don't pretend to be someone you're not."*

Let me add something about hypocrisy (before we move on). Unbelievers are known to have said, *"Christians are hypocrites because they pray on their knees on Sunday, and they prey on their neighbors the rest of the week."*

Don't misunderstand: Christian faith speaks of radical and pervasive depravity. Failing to be the loving people we desire and profess to be isn't hypocrisy, it is sin.

I like the saying: *"Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven."* The Church is a gathering of forgiven sinners who are growing in God's grace.

God knows the difference. You can't hide it from him.

Paul Stolkey (Peter, Paul, and Mary) said, *"We built a recording studio in Maine in a former chicken coop. We had it steam cleaned, paneled, painted, carpeted. Then we put in the finest recording equipment available. But when it rains, you can still tell it was a chicken coop."*

We long to appear respectable, righteous, and religious. But when the storms come, or the stress mounts, you can tell. You can tell by their praying, too.

Prayer is not about us.

NOT TO GAIN FAVOR

"When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard for their many words." (Matthew 6:7)

At first glance, this teaching might appear puzzlingly: The prayers of Jesus recorded in the Gospels are all quite short; but Gospels also say he occasionally prayed all night.

Did prayer for Jesus include long periods of Spirit-filled silent communication with God that was beyond the need for words? The early church fathers were convinced of it. Isaac the Syrian (7th c) wrote about this "stillness" which he defined as "a deliberate denial of the gift of words for the sake of achieving inner silence, in the midst of which a person can hear the presence of God."

But that's not His point here. Jesus is challenging the pagan idea that there must be much prayer (quantity) before prayer (actually) works. It is easy to assume that a long prayer equals a good prayer and a short prayer is an immature prayer.

This rests on the assumption that the pray-er must prove themselves sincere by spending time in groveling and begging before God will listen. This rests on the assumption that God is reluctant to listen to a prayer unless it is long, and we have pestered him appropriately (cf. **Luke 18**). This rests on the assumption that God is a grudging giver, and we need to "earn" his benevolence. (All of which are not true.)

Sadly, much of this false theology has leaked into our understanding of prayer. We innately believe some people are better pray-ers than others. How do we know? Based on what? More words? Bigger words? Better words? More organized words?

In our modern world we are drowning in words. Every day we are bombarded with thousands of billboards, ads, letters, magazines, newspapers, television commercials, radio broadcasts (talk radio), spam, catalogs, junk mail, phone calls, (instant) text messages, faxes and endless (junk) mail. Sit in any waiting room or airport and you can listen in on multiple phone conversations and television screens. We are immersed in words and as a result, they have become cheap. Rarely are words treasured as pearls, carefully selected and artistically strung on a golden thread called a sentence.

It is easy to assume the more prayers and pray-ers, the quicker we'll get God's attention and positive response. (The day after David, a high school student, had lost control of his car on an icy patch of road and had sustained significant injuries – including head injuries, I sat with his parents, family and friends in the critical care waiting room. We talked, cried, encouraged each another and prayed together. A couple of David's classmates sat in a corner with a United States map trying to connect with people in each of the fifty states to pray for David. When they complete that they started to see how many countries they could find people to prayer from...)

We assume the better the prayer, the better the pray-er, the better the answer; I wonder if that is why the pastor, the “professional” pray-er in the room, is usually asked to offer prayer.

The Jews knew how to pray, and the pious Jews prayed (at least) three times a day: at sunrise, a three o'clock in the afternoon, and at sundown. The practice was common and widespread long before Jesus came.

The form of Jewish daily prayer began with the recitation of the Shema or **Deuteronomy 6:4-5**: “*Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God is one LORD.*” Then came a series of eighteen prayers called the *Amidah* (meaning, standing) because they were prayed while standing. They were also commonly referred to simply as *Tefillah* (prayers), were in use in Jesus' day, and are still heard in synagogues today. (There are numerous similarities to the *Lord's Prayer*; but the “*Disciple's Prayer*” is much shorter – fewer words - than the *Amidah*.)

Jesus attacks this idea that “much prayer” is better than “less prayer” mercilessly as unworthy of God being a Father to his children. It empties both of their distinctive character. Instead, he invites us into a world where words are few, well-chosen and powerful. In this world, each word is offered with the care it deserves.

At first glance, Jesus' attack on quantitative prayer seems unsound. When Jesus discourages quantity prayer, doesn't he discourage prayer itself? The paradox of

prayer is that only when we've been relieved of the necessity of much prayer will we receive the freedom for much (or little) prayer.

It is an immense relief to know that our heavenly Father is not a reluctant listener. He doesn't require certain minimums before we get access to His Throne. Few things encourage prayer more than being released from the burden of having to pray much. Luther translates this passage: "*Prayers should be brief, frequent, and intense.*"

What about the passages that seem to contradict this teaching? For example, in this same mountain message, Jesus teaches us to "*ask...seek... [and] knock*" in persistent prayer (7:7-11).

What about parables (cf. **Luke 11, 18**) that encourage us to be persistent in our prayers? And doesn't Paul say, "*Pray without ceasing?*" (**1 Thess. 5:17**)

The answer is: We can only effectively pray without ceasing after we realize God listens, not because of our activity, but because of his mercy. We cannot earn the right to be heard, it is a gift of his grace – that he extends to his children.

It is another question to ask, "*What does 'pray without ceasing really mean?'*" (Perhaps a whole message sometime). The answer is: it doesn't mean more words. The answer is: it means *practicing the presence of God* throughout our day. The answer is: it means *keeping your times of prayer faithful and focused on the Father* - not allowing life's routines/pressures to crowd God out of our life.

God isn't as interested in your words as much as he is in what you have to say, in what is in your heart.

Remember, the basis of prayer is not a good disciple, but a good Father. A Father who says come away, get quiet, seek me, and you will find me. He promises to always be there...and he is.

NOT TO GET WHAT WE WANT

"Do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (**Matthew 6:8**)

The third anti-principle, after "not self-promoting" and "not to gain favor," is that we don't need to give the Father a "heads up," he already knows.

This, again, really sounds counter-intuitive. If God already knows what we need, and our telling him isn't going to enhance our getting what we want, why pray at all? This teaching seems to seriously inhibit rather than encourage prayer.

This passage actually underscores two basic Christian principles: God is God and God cares about his children.

Prayer is not an intelligence briefing; it is our conversation with the God of the universe. And Jesus wants us to realize that God already knows our needs and that actually makes our conversation easier: Confession is easier (he already

knows I messed up); intercession is easier (if I get the name or circumstance or solution messed up, he already knows), petition is easier (I don't have to beg, he knows I need it).

To say "*Only if God does not already know our needs does prayer make sense*" may sound logical but it certainly doesn't provide us any assurance or comfort.

Consider the alternative. God doesn't know. What kind of God is that? Certainly not one who can help us with our deepest needs. And God is not only God; he is our heavenly Father. He cares about us deeply.

Giving his testimony, he said, "When I got off the train in Philadelphia, I had to beg for money to keep my body and soul together. My clothes were rags, my face unshaved; I looked horrible. After begging for over a year. I came up behind a man, touched him on the shoulder and asked, "Mister, can you spare a dime?" As he turned. I recognized him as my father. He didn't recognize me. "Father, don't you know who I am? I'm your son!"

Suddenly it hit him. He grabbed me: "Son, I've been looking for you for 18 years. Everything I have is yours." "Imagine," he said, concluding his testimony, "I was asking for a dime from my father who wanted to give me everything he had."

The fact that God knows what we need even before we ask is a great comfort; the fact that he is willing to share it all with us is an amazing blessing.

Prayer, Jesus reminds us, is essentially about our relationship with the Father.

If we take these truths to heart, we are freed to pray – not for self-promotion or to impress others, not to try and gain favor with God (Jesus did that for us); not to get what we want (God actually knows the best plan).

We can simply pray what is on our heart because the Father isn't impressed by our words, understands our complete dependence on him, and already knows everything there is to know.

The Amidah

The *Amidah* contains nineteen blessings. Each blessing ends with the signature "Blessed are you, O Lord..." and the opening blessing begins with this signature as well.

The first three blessings as a section are known as the *shevach* ("praise") and serve to inspire the worshipper and invoke God's mercy.

The middle thirteen blessings compose the *bakashah* ("request"), with six personal requests, six communal requests, and a final request that God accept the prayers.

The final three blessings, known as the *hoda'ah* ("gratitude"), thank God for the opportunity to serve the Lord.

The *shevach* and *hoda'ah* are standard for every *Amidah*, with some changes on certain occasions.

The nineteen blessings are as follows:

1. *Avot* ("Ancestors") - praises of God as the God of the Biblical patriarchs, "God of [Abraham](#), God of [Isaac](#) and God of [Jacob](#)."
2. *Gevurot* ("powers") - praises God for His power and might. This prayer includes a mention of God's healing of the sick and [resurrection](#) of the dead. It is called also *Tehiyat ha-Metim* = "the resurrection of the dead." ([Rain](#) is considered as great a manifestation of power as the resurrection of the dead; hence in winter a line recognizing God's bestowal of rain is inserted in this benediction. Except for many Ashkenazim, most communities also insert a line recognizing dew in the summer.)
3. *Kedushat ha-Shem* ("the sanctification of the Name") - praises God's holiness. (During the chazzan's repetition, a longer version of the blessing called [Kedusha](#) is chanted responsively. The *Kedusha* is further expanded on Shabbat and Festivals.
4. *Binah* ("understanding") - asks God to grant wisdom and understanding.
5. *Teshuvah* ("return", "repentance") - asks God to help Jews to return to a life based on the [Torah](#), and praises God as a God of repentance.
6. *Selichah* - asks for forgiveness for all [sins](#), and praises God as being a God of forgiveness.
7. *Geulah* ("redemption") - asks God to rescue the people Israel. (On fast days, the chazzan adds in the blessing [Aneinu](#) during his repetition after concluding the *Geulah* blessing.)
8. *Refuah* ("healing") - a prayer to heal the sick. (An addition can ask for the healing of a specific person or more than one name. The phrasing uses the person's Jewish name and the name of their Jewish mother [or *Sara immeinu*])
9. *Birkat HaShanim* ("blessing for years [of good]") - asks God to bless the produce of the earth. ([A prayer for rain](#) is included in this blessing during the rainy season.)
10. *Galuyot* ("diasporas") - asks God to allow the ingathering of the Jewish exiles back to the [land of Israel](#).
11. *Birkat HaDin* ("Justice") - asks God to restore righteous judges as in the days of old.
12. [Birkat HaMinim](#) ("the sectarians, heretics") - asks God to destroy those in heretical sects ([Minuth](#)), who slander Jews and who act as informers against Jews.
13. *Tzadikim* ("righteous") - asks God to have mercy on all who trust in Him, and asks for support for the righteous.
14. *Boneh Yerushalayim* ("Builder of Jerusalem") - asks God to rebuild Jerusalem and to [restore the Kingdom of David](#).
15. *Birkat David* ("Blessing of David") - asks God to bring the descendant of [King David](#), who will be the messiah.
16. *Tefillah* ("prayer") - asks God to accept our prayers, to have mercy and be compassionate. (On fast days, Ashkenazic Jews insert *Aneinu* into this blessing during *Mincha*. Sephardic Jews recite it during *Shacharit* as well.)
17. *Avodah* ("service") - asks God to restore the [Temple services](#) and sacrificial services.
18. *Hoda'ah* ("thanksgiving") - thanks God for our lives, for our souls, and for God's [miracles](#) that are with us every day. (When the chazzan reaches this blessing during the repetition, the congregation recites a prayer called *Modim deRabbanan* ["the thanksgiving of the Rabbis"]).
19. [Sim Shalom](#) ("Grant Peace") - asks God for [peace](#), goodness, blessings, kindness and compassion. Ashkenazim generally say a shorter version of this blessing at *Minchah* and *Maariv*, called [Shalom Rav](#).

Prior to the final blessing for peace, the following is said:

We acknowledge to You, O Lord, that You are our God, as You were the God of our ancestors, forever and ever. Rock of our life, Shield of our help, You are immutable from age to age. We thank You and utter Your praise, for our lives that are delivered into Your hands, and for our souls that are entrusted to You; and for Your miracles that are with us every day and for your marvelously kind deeds that are of every time; evening and morning and noon-tide. Thou art good, for Thy mercies are endless: Thou art merciful, for Thy kindnesses never are complete: from everlasting we have hoped in You. And for all these things may Thy name be blessed and exalted always and forevermore. And all the living will give thanks unto Thee and praise Thy great name in truth, God, our salvation and help. Selah. Blessed be Thou, O Lord, Thy name is good, and to Thee it is meet to give thanks.