

Secret Virtues: Prayer

Matthew 6:5-8

I think most of us would agree that prayer is at the heart of the Christian life. We hear quotes such as, “Prayer isn’t preparation for the battle; prayer *is* the battle.” I think that’s right. I grew up singing songs like, “Sweet Hour of Prayer” that speak about extended times of intimate conversation with God.

And yet for many, many Christians prayer is very difficult. Occasionally I talk with people who say, in effect, “I just love spending time with God in prayer. It’s my favorite part of my day.” But more commonly I hear people talk about prayer as an obligation. People feel like they should pray, but they don’t pray much; and when they do it’s not very satisfying. Can you relate to that at all?

No matter where you are in terms of your habits of prayer, I’d like to bring us back to perhaps the simplest, most basic perspective on prayer that the Bible offers. In Matthew 6:5-8 Jesus gives a perspective that can breathe new life into our habits of prayer. Jesus reminds us that prayer is simply talking with our heavenly Father. Prayer is that simple and that intimate.

We’re in the midst of a sermon series on discipleship from the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6 Jesus urges us to excel in secret virtues. Instead of practicing our righteousness in order to impress other people, we should do them secretly for the eyes of God alone. His disciples are supposed to have a secret life that is rich in virtues such as giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting. The thing to avoid is hypocrisy – merely impersonating righteousness.

Last week we saw Jesus’ warning against hypocrisy when we give to the poor. We’re not supposed to try to impress other people with our giving. We shouldn’t put on a mask and impersonate compassionate, generous people. We’re supposed to give in secret simply because our hearts go out to people in need. If you missed last Sunday’s message you can catch it on our web site (go to the podcast section). Today we come to Matthew 6:5-8 in which Jesus similarly tells us to avoid hypocrisy when it comes to prayer. Jesus says two simple things:

Praying to Our Father in Secret (Matthew 6:5-6)

5 "When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

As I mentioned last week, Jesus didn’t say *if* you pray but *when* you pray. When you pray, “you are not to be like the hypocrites.” Remember that hypocrites were like actors in a play; they wore a mask in order to assume an identity. Jesus tells His disciples that they aren’t supposed to be hypocrites when it comes to prayer; they aren’t merely supposed to impersonate someone who is having conversation with God.

When Jesus describes “the hypocrites” He says that “they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men.” They didn’t “love to pray”; they loved to *be seen* praying. What really mattered to them was how they were perceived by others. There was nothing wrong with standing and praying; that was a normal

posture of prayer in many circumstances. And there was nothing wrong with praying in the synagogues or even on the street corners (see examples of corporate and public prayer in Acts 1:24, 3:1, etc.). Israel was a Jewish nation in which public prayer was part of their common life. Jesus is warning against hypocrisy in which people care more about others' perception of them than about God's perception of them.

Jesus pronounces: Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. If they want the reward of appearing devout and spiritual to other people, they can have it. But that's the only reward they get.

Personally I don't see a lot of Christians clamoring to show off their prowess in prayer in order to impress others. If anything I see a reluctance to pray in front of others. Nevertheless, it's worth considering whether the *main* time you pray is when you're praying with other people - whether with your family before meals or with your Life Group. In other words I see a challenge to make sure that when we do pray in public (or in the hearing of others) that it's the tip of the ice berg (with a vast prayer life beneath the surface), not the entirety of our prayer life.

What's the antidote to praying in order to impress others?

6 "But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

The term translated "inner room" is sometimes translated "storeroom" (see Luke 12:24). It's possible Jesus was saying that in this inner room there are treasures stored up, waiting to be discovered (Tasker's understanding; see Stott, p. 134). Jesus' point is simply that his disciple is to enter into a secret place where s/he can meet with his/her Father alone. Depending on your life experience, the idea of being alone with "your Father" in conversation may or may not sound appealing. But *this* Father - your heavenly Father - is a father who longs to spend time with you. Your heavenly Father really can't get enough of you.

Jesus is stressing that relationship is at the heart of prayer. Prayer, as we'll see in the next couple of verses, isn't a matter of proper technique. It's mainly a matter of relationship. It's a matter of us relating to God as children relate to their father. This is a different understanding of prayer than many people have. Many people think that prayer is something complicated - something that requires a vast amount of knowledge and skill. But Jesus suggests that prayer is as simple as children talking with their father.

That's why Jesus told grown men (His disciples) in Matthew 18:3 that they needed to be "converted" and "become like children." Only children have the desire and the will to spend time in an inner room with their father. Nobody else has time for that sort of thing. Nobody else really sees any value in that sort of thing. There are too many other things to do.

Deborah Smith Douglas writes about a conversation she had with her five-year-old daughter at the breakfast table one morning. Her daughter brought up the topic of her bedtime prayers; she told her mom that she didn't really know what to pray. This is one of those moments for which all parents long: that teachable moment when we are actually invited to impart some deep spiritual truth. Deborah Douglas said, "God likes to hear from us the same things all mommies and daddies like to hear from their children: please and thank you and I'm sorry." She said her

daughter licked the jam off of her fingers so she could count to three: please, thank you, and I'm sorry.

"Maybe there are two other things I say a lot that God would like to hear from me."

"What's that, honey?" I asked absently . . .

"Maybe," she suggested, "I could tell God 'Wow!' and 'I love you.'"

(The Praying Life, p. 25)

It would never occur to most of us to go into an inner room, shut the door, and tell God, "Wow!" Or to simply tell Him, "I love you." But that's the type of thing that Jesus is advocating. Jesus is inviting you to let go of any pretense you might have about prayer, any complicated formulas you might have learned, and any expectations that others have put on you. Jesus is inviting us to become little children, find a quiet place, and spend time talking with our Father in heaven.

We've mentioned many times, the Sermon on the Mount is "good news" – it's the gospel of the kingdom. Jesus wasn't laying down burdensome regulations; He wasn't trying to be meaner than Moses. He was explaining what is possible in the Kingdom of God. He is saying to us here today who are His disciples: You can experience God in this way. Find a quiet place and your Father in heaven – who happens to be the most creative, interesting, powerful, captivating Being in the universe – will spend some quality time with you.

I believe that every follower of Christ longs to experience God in prayer in this way. We may *think* we're too busy or that our minds are too cluttered to focus for more than 30 seconds or that we'll be bored to tears. If God is your Father, you long in the deepest part of your being to share secret times in conversation with God. The Spirit that has been given to us prompts us to cry out "Abba Father!"

My encouragement is simply to begin making it your habit to find a quiet place to come to God as a little child. Talk with God about whatever is on your heart. This is secret prayer that nobody will find out about, so you can talk about whatever is on your heart. And you might even try listening to try to hear what is on God's heart. If secret prayer is new to you, you probably don't want to shoot for an hour a day. Maybe start with 2 minutes a day; if you keep that up, you will have prayed for an hour this month. Not bad.

The promise at the end of verse 6 is that, "your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." As we talked about last week, rewards typically have some connection with the activity for which the reward is given. We gave the example of love: marriage is an appropriate reward for love whereas money isn't. What type of reward might God give those who pray to Him in secret? We can't generalize too much here. . . But sometimes the reward is a peace that surpasses understanding (Philippians 4:7); sometimes when we pray about some issue the burden is lifted and peace and joy flood our hearts. Sometimes the reward will involve God doing what we're asking Him to do. I'd advocate paying attention and keeping your eyes open for the rewards that God gives secret prayer. We know that He is a Father who loves to give good gifts to His children.

Simply Asking (Matthew 6:7-8) In these verses Jesus says that in addition to praying in secret, we should pray with simplicity. Jesus specifically has in mind petition – asking God to meet our needs.

7 "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.

The term translated “meaningless repetition” is very rare, found only here in the Bible. Jesus isn’t warning against repetition; there are many examples in Scripture of people praying the same thing numerous times. And there are Scriptures that teach us to persevere in prayer (instead of praying something once and then forgetting about it). Jesus is warning against *meaningless* repetition. He says that it is essentially a pagan notion to think that God will give us what we want simply because we have asked for something using a lot of words (instead of a few words).

Biblical prayer isn’t magic; we don’t use incantations in which we say the right things the right number of times. Biblical prayer isn’t a matter of mastering a set of techniques and catch phrases. It’s simply a matter of asking our heavenly Father to do something for us. Verse 8 makes clear that we don’t have to inform God of our needs; and we certainly don’t have to butter Him up!

8 "So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

Jesus’ logic here is significant. Some people might reason, “Well, if God knows what I need before I ask, I don’t need to ask. Either God will supply my needs or He won’t.” But Jesus’ reasoning was that since God knows what I need before I ask, *I can simply ask*. I don’t have to bring Him up to speed on my circumstances; I don’t have to convince Him that I need help. I can simply ask.

This is something that small children do really well – ask for things. They realize that they are helpless, and they believe that their parents can do anything. A kid is likely to ask, “Mommy, can I have an elephant?” But as children grow older this mindset often flips; older children often think that they can do everything and that their parents have very little to offer them (besides food, clothing, a place to live, transportation, etc.). My point is that we often grow up with a mindset of self-sufficiency, reluctant to ask anybody else (including God) to do things for us. We’d often rather go without than ask somebody else to come through for us.

A conversation needs to take place: a conversion in which we become like children and realize our Father who knows what we need before we ask Him. As little children, we simply ask.

A question that I sometimes ask people in relation to prayer (petition) is, “What do you *really* want?” If you could ask God for anything, what would it be? That’s where we begin in prayer. As Lowell explained a couple weeks ago, what we want sometimes changes as we persevere in prayer. We may begin praying for God to remove some difficulty in our lives but eventually get to the place where we are praying for God to refine us in the midst of that difficulty. But we begin by praying for what we really want. God is a good Father who understands that we’re not always clear about what we need; so there’s no need to get anxious about asking the wrong thing in the wrong way. We simply need to ask, listen, and let God guide our praying.

Next week we are going to consider “the Lord’s Prayer” which gives us more direction for our praying. Jesus will give us a pattern for praying. But this week, I wonder if you would purpose in your heart to practice what we’ve been talking about this morning. Would you “taste and see that the Lord is good”? Each day this week – by God’s grace –find a quiet, private place and have conversation with your heavenly Father. And when needs come to your mind, ask God for what you really want. Simply ask God to act.