

Finding God through Prayer *Matthew 6:5-15*

In 2016 I decided to read through the entire Bible and record in a journal every prayer and every reference to prayer. It was fascinating to see how ordinary people talked with God, bargained with God, complained to God, made their requests made known to God, and asked God to do for them what they couldn't do for themselves. The Bible doesn't tell us everything we might like to know about prayer, but that shouldn't surprise us too much because prayer involves finite, sinful humans interacting with an infinite, perfectly-holy God. If we're wise, we'll make peace with the fact that we don't understand everything we'd like to know about prayer. But we'll also tenaciously cling to what we do know about prayer.

As I read through the Bible, one of the things that was crystal clear is that petitionary prayer (making requests of God) is very much "conditional." Certain conditions that must be met if we expect to receive what we're asking. But these conditions aren't arbitrary or unreasonable. These conditions are very reasonable and sensible in light of who God is, what is doing within us, and what He is doing in the world.

For example, we read this in 2 Chronicles 7:14.

14 and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

God says ***if My people do these four things*** (humble themselves, pray, seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways) ***then I will act*** (hear, forgive, and heal). This Scripture illustrates that if we really want God to hear our prayers favorably, we should pay very close attention to these conditional statement about prayer. Today we will do just that as we consider Jesus' teaching on prayer in Matthew 6 (Sermon on the Mount).

Today we are talking about prayer in the context of our current sermon series, "Finding God." In Matthew 7 Jesus said that those who ask receive, those who seek find, and those who knock have the door opened. Prayer is one of the core ways we seek and find God. Last week we talked about seeking God through fasting; next week we'll talk about seeking God through the Word. Today we'll talk about seeking and finding God through prayer. If we want God to hear our prayers favorably, Jesus says:

Pray secretly to your Father who sees and rewards. (Matthew 6:5-6)

In Matthew 6:5–15 Jesus instructs His disciples how they should and shouldn't pray. In verses 5 and 6 Jesus instructs us how to avoid hypocritical praying.

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 with giving to the poor and fasting, Jesus says, “**When** you pray. . .” not “**If** you pray. . .” Praying is one of those core habits of Jesus’ followers; if God is your heavenly Father, it’s unthinkable that you wouldn’t talk with Him and ask Him for the things you need. Jesus tells us, “When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites” - those who give the outward appearance of being close to God while in reality their heart is far from Him. [Interestingly, the term “hypocrite” occurs 18x in the New Testament. Fourteen of those occurrences are in the gospel of Matthew.]

How did their hypocrisy manifest itself? “. . . they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men.” Jesus wasn’t condemning them for praying in public. His concern was their motives: they prayed publicly (in synagogues and on the street corners) **so that they may be seen by men**. They wanted other people to notice them and be impressed. Jesus says that if you want the notice and admiration of other people, don’t expect any reward from God.

By contrast, notice what Jesus teaches in verse 6.

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.

He’s painting the picture of someone who does the opposite of the hypocrites. Instead of praying to be seen, you pray so that you **won’t** be seen. You go into your inner room - one in the interior part of your house; nobody walking by your house is going to look in your picture window and see you praying. You close your door; even the members of your household won’t see you praying. You “pray to your Father who is in secret.” But if you want His notice of approval and His reward, meet with Him in secret - just the two of you.

As we mentioned last week, Jesus doesn’t specify the exact reward the Father will give those who seek Him through prayer. The main thing we need to keep in mind is that we need to view both praying and rewards in the context of the larger context of Jesus’ teachings. Next week we’ll consider John 15:7 where Jesus says, “If you abide in Me and **My word abides in you**, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you.” Jesus’ words will shape our desires and therefore our requests. Jesus’ words will set our expectations concerning the types of rewards God gives.

An example might be helpful. Let’s say that someone is giving you a hard time because you’re a follower of Christ. It could be a family member or a coworker or a friend. How do you pray? And if you pray, what type of reward should you expect from God? Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:11–12 could give you some insight to those questions.

11 “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Among other things, you learn that from God's point of view, when persecuted you are experiencing something that is well within His will. Actually, you're in good company (Jesus, the prophets, Paul, etc.). You also learn that "your reward **in heaven** is great"; your reward may or may not show up on earth also. That knowledge will inform **what** you pray and will inform your **expectations** after you've prayed.

My point is that we need to view our praying and our rewards in light of the larger context of Jesus' teachings. Seeking first (and foremost) His kingdom and His righteousness will shape our praying and will shape our expectations after we've prayed. Next week we'll discuss this further when we talk about seeking God through the Word.

Having said all of that, let's not miss the simple command to **enter into secret times of prayer with our heavenly Father**. This command is easy enough to understand, right? But what type of person actually goes into their inner room, closes the door, and prays secretly to their heavenly Father? The person who actually believes that God sees/hears our prayers prayed in secret and rewards.

For most of us, the reason we don't have a vibrant life of prayer isn't because we don't have time; we make time for the things that are important to us. The reason we don't pray is because we aren't convinced that being alone with God and cultivating a rich, conversational relationship with Him is worth it. We aren't convinced that those who ask receive, that those who seek find, and that those who knock have the door opened to them. Consequently, it doesn't seem worth it to spend any significant time alone with God.

What's the remedy? We need to receive and believe Jesus' teaching on prayer. Jesus is telling us that our heavenly Father longs for us to meet with Him in secret so He can reward us in ways that will be more satisfying than we can imagine - in this life and in the next. More than a command, this is an invitation from God Himself for one-on-one, personal time with Him.

You're probably aware how essential human touch and affection is to infants. Parents spend hours and hours day after day, week after week holding an infant, making eye contact, talking with them in soothing tones, giving them undivided attention. It's an expression of pure love. The benefit for the child is rather intangible, but it's undeniable. Infants who don't receive that type of human touch and affection suffer short-term and long-term consequences.

I'm convinced that there is a similar dynamic in our lives in relation to the secret prayer Jesus urges us to practice. If we never get alone with our heavenly Father, never make eye contact with Him, never allow Him to hold us close and let us know He will never abandon nor forsake us, never allow Him to whisper the truths of Scripture into our ears and into our souls, etc., we will never thrive spiritually. This spiritual failure to thrive syndrome manifests itself in any number of ways: some become legalistic and self-righteous; others become cynical and bitter; others continue with a few Christian habits but end up living their lives however they want (practical atheists).

By contrast, something intangible but undeniable happens to those spend unhurried, secret time alone with God in prayer. You notice a type of humble confidence about their lives; you notice a peace that transcends their circumstances; you notice the family resemblance - they actually resemble God.

This 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting is meant to help you establish the habit of spending time alone with your heavenly Father each day. We've heard from quite a few people that you're seeking God directly and personally in ways you haven't for a long time; that's just perfect. *Pray secretly to your Father who sees and rewards.*

Pray simply to your Father who knows your needs. (Matthew 6:7-8)

In these verses Jesus flags another issue that can influence whether or not God hears and rewards when we pray.

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

Jesus probably has in mind pagan religions which believe that getting what you want is a matter of wearing out "the gods" by repeating certain phrases over and over. The emphasis is upon the person praying saying the right things the right number of times.

To His disciples Jesus says, "So do not be like them." Don't think that repeating words meaninglessly will work with your heavenly Father. Why? "For your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." Instead of focusing on our prayers, Jesus tells us to focus on the One to whom we're praying. He is a good Father who happens to be omniscient; He is intimately acquainted with our needs before we even ask. And (as we learn in Matthew 7) He also knows how to give good gifts to His children.

Paul Miller (in *A Praying Life*, p. 20) says that one reason people struggle in learning to pray is "because they are focusing on praying, not on God." Focusing on the conversation is like "trying to drive while looking *at* the windshield instead of *through* it. It freezes us, making us unsure of where to go." Jesus tells us that when we pray, we should focus on God Himself, not on saying the right thing in the right way. If we remember that the God who knows our every need is our good heavenly Father who tells us that those who ask receive, those who seek find, and those who knock have the door opened to them. You can pray simply and honestly to a God like that.

In our Western logic, we tend to think that since God already knows our needs we don't need to ask Him anything. But Jesus' logic is "Since God knows our needs, we ***can and should ask Him to meet our needs!***" This is how healthy and mature relationships work. The person with the need asks for help from the person who can meet that need; that person can say "yes"; the person whose need is met can say "thank you."

If you have children or if you work with children, you intuitively understand this. For example, let's say that one of your children is a young adult who takes a job halfway across the country. Out of the generosity of your heart, you take time and expense to move this child there and get them settled in. A couple of years later, when they're ready to move again, you know that he needs help moving; he needs a truck and extra hands to load it up. He knows that you know he needs to move. But you want him to ask you anyway, "Mom and Dad, will you take three or four days to drive out here and help me move? That would mean a lot to me." You don't want him to assume that you're going to see the need and meet it. You could do that, but you would short-circuit some things that could happen relationally. You want him to be mature enough to ask you very simply and directly for help; you want the joy of saying, "Yes, I'd love to do that for you"; and you want the satisfaction of hearing him say, "Thank you."

There's a similar dynamic in prayer. Because we know that God knows what we need before we ask, we ask him very simply and directly, believing that He would gladly supply our need. God has the joy of saying to us, "Yes, you are My son/daughter; I'd love to meet your need." Filled with gratitude, we say "Thank You" to God. That's the way healthy, mature relationships work (and grow). *Pray simply to your Father who knows your needs.*

So that His disciples would know very specifically what types of things He had in mind, Jesus continues in verses 9-15 with instruction on praying simply and directly to our Father who knows our needs before we ask. He says. . .

Pray, then, in this way: (Matthew 6:9-15)

What is recorded in these verses is often called "the Lord's Prayer" (but is more accurately called "the disciples' prayer"). Interestingly, whereas earlier Jesus said to go into an inner room and pray in secret, this prayer is a corporate prayer. The pronouns are first person plural: *Our* Father. . . Give *us* this day our daily bread. . . Forgive *us* our debts. . . Jesus envisioned both private/secret prayer and corporate times of prayer.

We won't examine this prayer line by line. I'll simply read it and make a couple of comments. On Wednesday night when we gather for our church-wide prayer gathering, this prayer will provide the structure for our time together. The six petitions we find in this prayer will shape how we come to God as a body of believers.

The church has a long, rich tradition of praying the Lord's prayer in unison. That's certainly appropriate. But Jesus seems to be telling us **how** we should pray more than **what** we should pray. He begins with "Pray, then, in this way:" or "This, then, is how you should pray" (NIV):

9 "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. 10 'Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.

Bengel pointed out that the first three petitions are focused on God's glory (God's name, God's kingdom, God's will); the last three are focused on our good (give us our daily bread, forgive us our sins, deliver us from evil):

11 'Give us this day our daily bread. 12 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 'And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.' 14 "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 "But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."

When we gather for prayer on Wednesday night, we'll pray using these categories. We'll pray simply and directly to our Father who knows our needs before we ask. We'll also have some worship through song; and we'll celebrate the Lord's table. We wanted to have a church-wide prayer gathering as something of a wrap-up to our 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting.

When we think about this passage as a whole, our desire is that our times of secret, individual prayer with God would become so rich and meaningful, such a foundation of our lives that we love to gather with each other to have the same type of conversational relationship with God together. Our private, secret times of prayer fuel our corporate times of praying to "our Father who is in heaven."