

“How You Should Pray”

Introduction: So, did you remember to do your exercises this past week?! Recall that last Sunday we began to explore some of the “core work,” some of the exercises or habits or disciplines that Jesus gives us to work out our salvation, strengthening our faith, helping us live more effectively as salt and light, and drawing nearer to God.

As we considered the exercises that Jesus highlights for us in the Sermon on the Mount – giving, praying, and fasting – we noted how Jesus, like a good physical therapist or athletic trainer, was concerned that we practice these exercises rightly. This, we saw, was not in terms of technique, but in terms of motive. That is, we’re to put these exercises into practice not to try and impress others, or demonstrate how spiritual we think we might be, or to attempt to gain favor with God. Rather, we are to approach them as ways to make space in our lives for God, through his Spirit, to work in us and through us.

This morning, we want to zero in on the practice of prayer, which some have noted falls right at the center of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins by highlighting a couple of red flags for us, ways we might approach prayer with wrong motives. Then, he gives us a wonderful framework for prayer that helps us to think about our relationship with him, about our desires, and about our needs. [READ]

I. Two Red Flags

A. What, then, are these red flags that Jesus raises regarding prayer?

1. The first is a caution about thinking of prayer as a performance. There were those Jews who prayed, unfortunately, standing where others would be sure to see and hear them, be it in the synagogue or on the street. Their goal, apparently, was to become known for their great eloquence and learning. For them, prayer had become a matter of spiritual pride. But Jesus called them hypocrites, a term used to refer to an actor on a stage who not only plays to the crowd but pretends to be someone s/he is not. Don’t worry about impressing who you can see, says Jesus, but just go into your room, shut the door, and have a conversation with the God who is unseen.

2. The second caution seems to be directed at the Greeks, those Jesus calls pagans. It is a caution against thoughtlessness in prayer. That is, these folks kept babbling on and on, repeating their requests over and over, in order to make sure whatever god they were praying to had heard them. Unlike our human parents, who can become so engrossed by their cell phones that they miss what their children are trying to tell them, our heavenly parent might say to these babblers, “I heard you the first time!”

B. In fact, Jesus makes the comment that our heavenly Father knows what we need before we ask him. Does that mean we don’t need to pray? Not at all. As with any relationship, communication is needed for it to grow. And, while our heavenly Father may know what we need, we often do not (even tho we may think we do). So, Jesus gives us an outline to help foster our communication with him. Of course the danger is that we can just repeat this outline without giving in much thought, thereby becoming not much different than the “babblers” Jesus was concerned about. However, later in his time with his disciples, as they came to observe the power of his life, and his trust in and guidance from the Father, and they also saw him praying frequently, they asked: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk. 11:1). Prayer

was obviously the wellspring of his life. And teach them he did, giving them the same prayer that he had given them early on in their time together in the Sermon on the Mount. So, in Jesus' mind, it is meant to be a significant and helpful outline for us if we approach it, and use it, thoughtfully. To that end, let me make 7 observations.

## II. Our Relationships – Our Father in heaven

1. Don't miss the first word – *our*. It's plural, and the plural continues throughout the prayer in *our* daily bread, *our* debts and *our* debtors, lead *us* not into temptation, and deliver *us* from evil. It's a note right from the start that we're not in this journey alone and were never meant to be. In our culture of hyper-individualism, this can be hard to take in. Statistics say that 90% of people believe in God but less than 45% attend church regularly. Which means that around half of those who say they believe in God don't believe that Christian community is all that important. But Jesus reminds us from the get go that even when we're praying alone in our room, we are praying as a member of a community, of a family.

We need one another to grow. Are we praying for one another? Are there others who are praying for us? What would it mean for your prayer life to understand that you are a part of a large family? It's a great gift, and a great responsibility.

2. In this family, there is one called Father. It's an intimate word, one which elicits good feelings for some and not so good feelings for others. Let me just say if you fall in the latter category, I'm so sorry! I would also encourage you not to let your difficult experience with your earthly father transfer onto how you might think about your heavenly Father. Rather, if you can, allow your heavenly Father to redefine your understanding of Father. In its biblical usage, Father reveals that God is not some distant entity but can be known intimately. God is personal and approachable and incredibly loving. Father also denotes the one who is the creator of the world, as well as its redeemer:

Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you? (Dt. 32:6)

There [in the wilderness] you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place. (Dt. 1:31)

As well, this Father is in heaven, which does not mean he is distant galaxies away but that he simply inhabits his dimension of reality. It's a dimension that is perfect and just, and from which he has a perspective that is far wider, and well beyond, our own.

Jesus has us begin to pray by focusing on our relationships, and on that fact that we are part of a family with a loving Father at the head of the table. What would it mean for your prayer life to begin there?

## III. Our Desires- Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come thy will be done.

Then, Jesus moves us on to consider our desires, or we should say, on what he desires our desires to be. He gives us two primary areas of focus.

3. God's name represents God's character as well as God's reputation. What we do and what we say, as those called by his name – Christians – reflects that character to the outside world. As Jesus put it:

Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Ma. 5:16)

And Peter was obviously listening:

Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Pe. 2:12)

4. God's kingdom is not a plot of land, like the Northeast Kingdom of VT (as beautiful as it is there!). God's kingdom is present wherever God is acknowledged as king, that is, wherever his will is done. As Jesus declared: "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news" (Mk. 1:15).

How might God's kingdom, and God's desire for more and more of heaven to break into earth, shape your life of prayer?

#### IV. Our Needs – Provision, Pardon, Protection

Then, after talking with God about who he is and what he desires, Jesus moves us (finally!) to talk to God about our needs.

5. There is our need for provision – daily bread. This might be food, or it might be some other need, like the grace to care for a loved one, even for just that day. Or it might be a call to help meet someone else's needs for that day.

6. There is our need for pardon – to be forgiven and to forgive as we have been forgiven. It is God's remedy for the healing of broken relationships, with one another, and also with God. It's telling God the truth about ourselves and where we've strayed from his path.

7. There is our need for protection – to not be led into temptation. As we travel through life, may God test us so that we grow, but not have us face the kind of temptation that we can't handle and that would bring us down. What might we be facing, even in the day ahead, from which we need protection?

How do these needs square with what you typically consider to be your needs? Could it be helpful to pray for the needs that Jesus highlights?

Helpful to remember throughout is that prayer is a relationship, and like any relationship, as it grows it will not always grow smoothly or without challenges. So, it shouldn't be surprising if we struggle from time to time in this relationship called prayer! But the framework Jesus gives us, if we pray thoughtfully, can provide us with the means to enjoy a personal and ongoing encounter with the living God.

We might pray in one of the following ways:

- Pray a different phrase of the prayer each day of the week.
- Take one need you might have and allow each phrase of the prayer to speak to that need.
- Pause after each phrase and talk to God about how it is intersecting with your life right now.
- Read the prayer through and wherever a word or phrase stops you, stop and pray there.

The prayer ends – For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, for ever and ever – which is taken from various biblical themes as well as an ancient catechism called the *Didache*. It serves to orient us as we finish praying and re-enter the world, whatever the day, reminding ourselves that we are dependent creatures on a marvelous, grand, and glorious God who, quite amazingly, desires to be in relationship with us. So may we take Jesus up on how he teaches us to pray, practicing this exercise, that our relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit might blossom and deepen.