
Foundations for Praying

Matthew 6:5-15

Russ Kennedy

Introduction Listen to these startling words challenging us today, “I would be the first to acknowledge that [many] can devote thousands of hours to the diligent study of the Scripture and yet still somehow display an extraordinarily shallow knowledge of God. Biblical knowledge can be merely academic and rigorous, but somehow not edifying, not life-giving, not devout, not guileless.” [Carson, *Spiritual Reformation*, p.15] This is not what we want. We want our deep concern for Biblical accuracy to inform deep Biblical spirituality. This is no more important than when it comes to teaching on praying. While we aim to instruct, we desire to inform and inspire Biblically spiritual, God focused, devoutly pious, heavenly minded praying.

There is no greater place to begin this than with Jesus’ teaching on prayer as recorded for us in Matthew. Here we will be transformed in your praying by a great change in what shapes our petitions.

Problems in Prayer

(v.5-8)

Jesus is very concerned for authenticity. He despises hypocrisy where people pretend to be what they are not. So, He challenges the external practice of piety in giving, praying and fasting. Here are three categories of religious practice to which we do well to do lots of self-examination. Prayer where we ought to be the most humble, the most real, the most focused on God so often becomes a tool to focus attention on ourselves.

Praying to be Admired

(v.5-6)

First, we must not pray like hypocrites. Jesus points to people in Jewish synagogue and streets whose praying is a result of their own desires and craving for attention. They are praying to be admired.

What is its *OUTWARD EXPRESSION*? Here is what that praying looked like. It was prayer in public for public consumption. It is a praying for the ears of the congregation. One writer says, “The acceptable clichés, the appropriate sentiments, the sonorous tones, the well-pitched fervency, all become tools to win approval [and to be admired]... The opportunities for a little ostentatious piety can be quite gratifying.” [D.A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p.58]

Matthew is showing what kingdom praying is like. Not all praying in public is wrong; but all praying for approval of the public is. Kingdom praying will be authentically in the presence of people but before the face of God.

Why do we sometimes pray like this? What is the heart root of this sort of audience oriented praying? We are praying with *WRONG MOTIVATION*. We are praying to be seen. We have turned our approaching to God into the approval of man. We love to have our spirituality out where people can see it and where they can make much of us over it. This is where we rehearse our prayer in our heads before we pray out loud. Do you pray more fervently alone or in public? Is your public praying at worship or at Flock an overflow of your private praying?

Sadly, this kind of praying and the approval of man is *ITS ONLY REWARD*. All our passion and petitions are not answered because the aim to be admired has pointed the prayer at the wrong audience. Is this why so much of our praying appears to be unanswered?

What does the Lord commend instead? (v.6) We are to prize and *CRAVE PRIVATE PRAYER*. Here is our very great struggle. This entering the closet and praying in secret here is what I call private praying. Here is praying where the only audience is God. Here is praying where God sees through me and my words. My heart ought to be bared before God. Here I just say my prayers knowing that God hears me and that is all that matters.

Praying to be Heard

(v.7-8)

Second, we must not pray like pagans. We must have right thinking about how we are heard. Jesus points to people who are praying out of wrong beliefs. They are praying so as to be heard.

Wrong ideas, wrong beliefs are the roots of wrong practice. Jesus exposes wrong beliefs by starting with what is visible, what can be seen. Here is *THE WRONG PRACTICE*. It is long prayers using empty repetition. D.A. Carson points out, “Prayer should not consist of heaped-up phrases, idle repetitions and the ridiculous assumption that the probability of an answer is in proportion to the total number of words in the prayer.” [Carson., p.59]

What does this look like in our own praying? Without intending to embarrass any of you, we will all find ourselves doing these sort of things. Almost every sentence in our prayer has “Father” in it. We repeat prayer phrases like, “we come to you...” We have a different vocabulary, a different cadence, a different tone for praying. We pray long prayers – often narrating back to God the situation of our request with the effect we sometimes don’t even make a request.

Matthew is not decrying long prayers in and of themselves. After all, Matthew and Luke both record all night praying by the Lord Himself. Partially what he is after is needlessly long praying in public and long praying in private *for the wrong reasons*.

What is the heart root of this? If what we want (the approval of man) can cause wrong praying, then *WRONG BELIEF* can also be the root of wrong praying. Notice that Jesus indicates this. People pray needlessly long prayers because they believe that “they will be heard for their many words.” (v.7) Fundamentally, they believe that God can be manipulated by praying a certain way. Jesus identifies this as pagan. Pagan idols, false gods, can be manipulated by their worshippers. The God of heaven cannot. It is easy to point the finger of this text to the practice

of repeating written prayers, the saying of the rosary and other praying that we think we don't do.

But Jesus is telling us something vital about praying. Notice that He provides a correction to our beliefs. Praying *KNOWING GOD ALREADY KNOWS*. Now, you think about this very much and your praying will be very different. We do not pray to tell God what He does not know, nor to ask Him to do what we think He ought to do. I am afraid that this is too often what we are doing. We are trying to get God to see our desires and needs from our own perspective. We do not pray simply and briefly as though God already knows what we need. We are not informing Him nor are we manipulating Him. We do not pray like the pagans. We pray like Christians. Don't we?

Pattern for Prayer

(v.9-13)

So, Jesus gives us the pattern for prayer. Not craving approval and not trying to inform or manipulate God, but rather following a pattern of praying along the trajectory of God's agendas.

Now, I want to address a couple of things up front. First, this is not a prayer that is to be repeated. Jesus did not say, "Pray this prayer." He said, "Pray like this." He has just told us NOT to pray repetitious, formulaic prayers. This is why we do not in our public praying repeat this prayer as is the practice of some. Second, this is not an outline to praying. We are not to following this as a structure or even a necessary order to praying. How can I say that? Because, not once in the rest of the Bible is anyone's recorded prayer following this as a formula or a structure, not even Jesus' long public prayer in John 17.

So, when we are to pray like this, we are being shaped by the aims and agendas that this prayer represents. In here, we find what it is we are to focus on in our praying. In this series, we are intending to shape the way we pray as a church. This is where we will start. We notice right away that, apart from the address of the prayer, "Our heavenly Father", the whole prayer consists of six petitions. Those six petitions can be clustered into two groups, God's concerns and man's concerns.

God's Concerns

(v. 9-10)

Our praying is first to be shaped by God's concerns. He sets the agenda for praying. When our praying is rightly shaped by God's concerns then we are *EXPRESSING OUR DELIGHT IN GOD*.

God's Relationship

The prayer opens with establishing the relationship through which we pray. I believe that Jesus is setting a precedent here that we should not move away from. It is Trinitarian praying. When we come in prayer, we should generally pray to the Father through the Son in the Spirit. The focus here is "Our Father". So we come in prayer asking as sons. He is not just God in our praying. He is Father. Thus our praying has a sense of intimacy and nearness.

He is also our in heaven Father. So we may have respectful familiarity. We are not coming to a peer. We are not coming to someone here on earth.

Prayer is addressed to a transcendent God who is our father. This is a much needed correction for our modern evangelicalism. We are way too down slope on this side of things. So, in prayer, speak to the Father, respectfully.

God's Reputation

Our praying must be shaped by a desire to further the reputation of God. This phrase “Hallowed be Your Name,” is a request for something in me and in the world. God’s name, His fame and reputation, His person and His position, must be acknowledged in my own heart in accordance with how God has revealed Himself. Biblical praying comes from a heart that sees God as magnified and large.

The aim of our praying is shaped by a hunger for God to be known and honored by all everywhere. This is the worship portion of our praying. It has its private aspect where we for ourselves and with our God, acknowledge Him as great and glorious. But then it moves quickly through our hunger for His greatness for His glory to be bowed to and rejoiced over by all.

God's Rule

Biblical praying will be very concerned over the Kingdom of God and its rule on earth. We will pray earnestly for God’s kingdom to come. We understand that it will not reach its full expression until the King Himself comes. We are living in an already, not yet. The kingdom has been inaugurated or begun. But the kingdom has not been consummated or completed. So we come with requests and petitions that are follow the trajectory of the coming of God’s kingdom.

This is where our praying will be evangelistic. We will be praying that people bow to the King. Where people bow the King, the kingdom is going. Where He is prized and worshipped, trusted and obeyed, there the kingdom is. So we pray this for our own hearts, for our own church, for our neighborhoods and for the nations.

God’s righteousness

We will also pray for our hearts, our motivations. This is what is in view in the “may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This is not praying that God’s will be done on earth. Asking for God’s kingdom to come is primarily that. God’s decreed will is being done and our prayer should be that our hearts will align and accept God’s plans, purposes and providences.

What we are praying for is that our own hearts will do God’s will *in the same way* as it is done in heaven. Yes, it is asking for God’s righteousness to be worked out on earth. Therefore, we are praying for ethics, for justice. But we are not merely praying for an external morality without an internal transformation. Our praying for ourselves and others should be that they will do God’s will like, in the same way, with the same attitudes and aims, as all those who behold the face of God, do His will. This has to affect what we ask for as we pray over our lives. I am convinced that this is the greatest deficit in Christian praying. We are trying too much to get heaven to our earthly will

our earthly way. May we bend our knees and our hearts to pray that we will be like heaven here on earth in all our works and all our ways.

Man's Concerns

(v.11-13)

Our praying also is to consider man's concerns. Here, what we need most is defined for us so that our praying will be on our true needs, not our felt needs. When our praying is rightly shaped by man's concerns then we are *EXPRESSING OUR DEPENDANCE ON GOD*.

Practical Provision

Our first need is for our physical sustenance. This is expressed in dependence on God for our food. If the most basic physical need is met through humble dependence on God, then so are all our other needs. Thus, the work we do to provide for our sustenance is never done independent of God, but in humble acknowledgment of our need of Him and His provision. While the expression of this prayer is culturally shaped by the daily trip to the market, we ought to carefully consider how often our praying presumes on God.

How much we miss when we fail to see in our work the work of God. Every paycheck, every dollar, every meal, every auto, every house payment comes by the gracious provision of God. I will consciously and choosingly ask and give thanks for the abundance or not, of God's giving of our daily bread.

Relational Purity

Our second great need is for pardon, for relational purity. I am stuck by the fact that Jesus sees our own need to grant forgiveness as a prayer shaping necessity. Our willingness to grant forgiveness arises from our understanding our own forgiveness. Here, Jesus calls our sins and offenses, debts. They incur an obligation and a payment. Those obligations and charges against us are relieved. And so, we ought also to forgive others.

Notice that there is a condition attached to seeking pardon from God. We will have His forgiveness, the relief of our debt of sin, when we are willing to relieve others of their debt of sin and offense to us. I refuse to soften this. If, upon the confession of another, you are unwilling to grant Biblical forgiveness, then two things are evident. First, you will not be forgiven by God of the sin and offenses you have caused in that relationship. Second, if you continue to be unforgiving, then you may well have no relationship with God at all.

We do not believe that spiritual purity even in forgiveness is that important. How do I know that? Because I counsel many of you and I hear many of you pray. Relational righteousness is not much on our agendas for praying. We do not ask God much for ourselves and others for spiritual growth and change. We are spending most of our prayer time taken up with daily bread. God's concern for spiritual change will be highlighted through the rest of this series.

Spiritual Protection

Finally, we need the protecting hand of God over us. Now to many, this request seems unnecessary, even specious. Why would we have to ask God not to lead us into temptation, when in fact He never would nor does? I think D.A. Carson has it right. Listen to his wise insight. “It appears to me,” he writes, “That [this] is a litotes... ‘Into temptation’ is [actually] being negated: Lead us, not into temptation, but away from it, into righteousness, into situations where, far from being tempted, we will be protected and therefore kept righteous. As the second clause of this petition expresses it, we will then be delivered from the evil one.” [Carson, p.70]

So we are deeply reminded that we are dependent on God for our moral triumph and our spiritual victories. If we do not recognize this, then we already have, in a sense, fallen short. We need ever more to recognize our inherent sinfulness, the left over remnants of the old person we were in the new creation God is making. We must ever more “recognize the deceptive subtleties of [our] own hearts, and the malicious cunning of the evil one and fervently request of our heavenly Father, ‘Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.’” [Carson, p.71 for the whole paragraph]

So, is this how we pray? Do we pray that God will keep us far away from temptation and sin? Do we ask much to be delivered from the deceptive and destructive designs of the enemy of our souls? Do we plead for holiness and righteousness and purity? Do we pray as much for our spiritual wellbeing as we do for our physical wellbeing? I think not. It is no wonder then that we are sinful and shallow. Pray, O brothers and sisters, pray for what God believes you need.

Just a note: some versions of the Bible insert a quote from the Old Testament here in order to close the prayer. This was not done in any manuscript we have until the third century. It is a part of the Word of God, just not in this text. Inserting here makes it more suitable for public praying, but destroys Jesus’ purpose and argument.

Prerequisite for Prayer

(v.14-15)

Finally, Jesus repeats for emphasis what He has said in the prayer. The wording is a bit different, but the intent is the same. Positioning the petition for holiness between the petition for forgiveness and the priority of forgiveness indicates that the greatest temptations we face may be in bitterness and unforgiveness over being sinned against.

Required, not Optional

Its repetition here is for emphasis. Do not miss this. Here is the deepest hypocrisy and impiety yet, that you would come to pray as a forgiven person, with an unforgiving heart. God is more concerned here, in this teaching on prayer, with your willingness or unwillingness to forgive those who sin against you. Too often, we are quick to emphasize where we have offended and sin against others, where we are culprits. Jesus challenges us where it is actually more difficult. Beloved, it is easier to ask for forgiveness when we are wrong than to grant forgiveness when we are wronged.

Relational, not Judicial

The emphasis here is also on the relational aspect. In both clauses, even when there is unforgiveness, there is still a heavenly Father. So what is being contemplated here is not our standing before God, but our relationship and fellowship with God. Our forgiving others does not cut us off from being children of God. It cuts us off from fellowship with God. If you will not forgive others who wrong you, that does not make not brothers and sisters in the Lord. But it will destroy your fellowship.

Reciprocal, not Unilateral

Briefly, it strikes me that our relationship with God is reciprocal. If you will not grant forgiveness, then your transgressions will also not be forgiven. You cannot sin without consequence. You cannot be an unforgiving person without results. The result that ought to weigh most heavily on us is that we will be unforgiven by God and thus, cut off from fellowship, even the communion of our praying.

So much to learn and so many powerful lessons for us. Let me follow the flow of this **Lessons** text with sentences of exhortation over your praying.

Pray so as to have God's approval, not man's. May you always keep God as your audience.

Pray briefly and simply, believing that God already knows your needs. Watch for those religious phrases and prayer lingo that fill space, but not ought not fill our prayers.

Pray to your heavenly Father with His concerns preeminent in your mind.

Ask for things that will spread His reputation and fame in your own heart and in the hearts of others.

Ask for things that will cause His rule to be ever more manifest in this world until He comes to set all things right.

Ask for a heart, a belief and motivation that hungers to do God's will here with the same attitudes and aims, as all those who behold the face of God, do His will.

Pray to your heavenly Father expressing your dependence on Him for your concerns.

Ask for your physical sustenance in all the areas of life. Ask that you will both see His hand and will know what is vital and essential.

Ask for relational purity, for a forgiving heart. Pray that God will grant you all you need to release the debt owed you by those who have sinned against you. Ask for real, inner awareness of being a forgiven person.

Ask for spiritual protection. Love holiness and righteousness so much that you will pray over it a lot.

May we be shaped by this kind of praying. This will require repentance and real effort on our part. We do not pray like this. We just don't. So we need the grace of God to pray as God requires.

So, O Lord, teach us to pray as You would have us pray. Amen.