



When You Pray

St. Matthew 6:5-8

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This morning I want to jump back to Matthew 6:5. Remember that here in Chapter 6 Jesus tells us about the externals of our religion by focusing on the three main outward acts of piety that the Jews were concerned with: giving, prayer, and fasting. We skipped over prayer. Now I want to take some time to look at in more detail, because I think that of these three prayer is the most important, but at the same time it's one of the least understood (or most misunderstood) aspects of the Christian life. One of the most frequent questions people as me as a minister is "How should I pray?" Or people ask me what they're doing wrong when they pray and don't receive an answer or don't feel the presence of God with them.

The fact is that we all have something to learn about prayer. None of us has a perfect understanding of God's ways and none of us has a perfect understanding of how to approach him. I don't think any Christian can boast of having a perfect prayer life. And this isn't a new problem. That's why Jesus taught his disciples about prayer and we can learn a lot from what he says here and especially from his sample prayer: the "Lord's Prayer." But he starts saying this. Follow along with me in Matthew 6:5-8:

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

I want to look at three main points that come out of what Jesus says in these

verses about prayer, and the first one of those points is that *true prayer is that which is offered to God, our heavenly Father.*

That might seem obvious, but look at what Jesus says here. He reminds us of the hypocrites, like the Pharisees, who would stand in the front of the synagogue and pray loud and elaborate prayers, not with God as their audience, but only really caring that the other people there noticed them and thought they were extra holy. The Jews were supposed to pray three times a day and Jesus is addressing those who chose to stop what they were doing and make a show of their prayers. If their work required their attention, some men might quietly pause to pray. Others would keep going about their business while praying, but the hypocrite would see the time and stop on the street corner, kneel down, and put on a show for everyone around to see.

You see, all prayers are *not* offered to God. In fact, I'd venture to say that very few prayers are really offered to God. And I'm not just talking about pagan prayers offered to false gods. Even in our churches, I think that maybe one in a hundred prayers might truly be offered to Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We're often just like the Pharisees. Lots of our prayers are done to be seen by others. I find that I often have to check myself at the pulpit and at the altar and ask, "Is this being offered to God or to men?"

Each of us needs to ask if our prayers bring us into the presence of God or if they're done for the sake of our audience. If we're honest with ourselves, when we pray we're more often thinking about other things. Maybe you're praying in a group and you spend most of the time thinking not about what is being prayed by someone else, but thinking about what you're going to pray and making sure you've composed it just right. Even when we are focused on prayer, we're often thinking more about what we're asking for than about the great God we are approaching when we ask. R.A. Torrey said, "We should never utter one syllable of prayer, either in public or in private, until we are definitely conscious that we have come into the presence of God and are actually praying to him."

That's a hard thing to do. Torrey's experience is probably something that a

lot of us can identify with. He says, "I can remember when that thought transformed my prayer life. I was brought up to pray. I was taught to pray so early in life that I have not the slightest recollection of who taught me to pray.... Nevertheless, prayer was largely a matter of form. There was little real thought of God, and no real approach to God. And even after I was converted, yes, even after I had entered the ministry prayer was largely a matter of form."

"But," he says, "the day came when I realised what real prayer meant, realised that prayer was having an audience with God, actually coming into the presence of God and asking and getting things from him. And the realisation of that fact transformed my prayer life. Before that, prayer had been mere duty, and sometimes a very irksome duty, but from that time on prayer has been not merely a duty but a privilege, one of the most highly esteemed privileges of life. Before that the thought that I had was, 'How much time must I spend in prayer?' The thought that now possesses me is, 'How much time may I spend in prayer without neglecting the other privileges and duties of life?'"

Some of us are like R.A. Torrey and it takes us a long time to figure that out. Lots of Christians never figure out what it means to pray to God. If we're an average evangelical church, statistically only about 15% of you are spending time in regular prayer with God on at least a daily basis. And a big part of that is that we never grasp what real prayer is – because we never learn what it means to enter the presence of God. Psychiatrists say that a lot of our prayer is nothing more than wish-fulfilment – we just recite over and over what we want to see happen. They're probably right. Because when Jesus tells us about real prayer he says that we are to pray conscious of being in God's presence and when we are in real communion with him. And that's why I frequently say, if you're prayer life isn't what it should be – if you aren't finding communion with God, if coming to his Table isn't providing you a sense of his presence – you need to deal with the sin in your life. You need to confess it and repent of it and allow that broken communion with God to be restored.

And that naturally brings up the second point. If prayer is communion with God, how can sinful men and women enter into the presence of our God who is perfectly

holy? Can we do it? If we can, what does that mean for the way that we approach God? And the answer is our second principle. *True prayer is prayer offered to God the Father on the basis of the death of Jesus Christ, his Son.* The writer of the book of Hebrews puts it this way:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:19, 22)

Jesus teaches us the same principle when he says in St. John's Gospel:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

What does that mean? Well, this is what we celebrated a few minutes ago when we baptised Ginger into the Church – into the Body of Christ. It means that as sinful men and women God would have to turn us out of his presence. He's holy – perfectly holy – and we're not. We and God are kind of like oil and water or like magnetic opposites. Holiness and unholiness don't mix. You can't have darkness in the presence of light. God's very being and character mean that despite his love for us, he must turn away from everything that is unholy and imperfect if he is to be true to his Word and true to his very nature. If Jesus had not come to pay the penalty for our sin, we would have no access to the holy throne of God. Every prayer would be rejected. The Good News is that every sinful man and woman *can* come into the presence of our holy God. Through Jesus Christ we can be cleansed and purified and, covered by his perfect righteousness, we are accepted into God's presence. In fact, through Jesus Christ we are not only allowed into God's presence – we're encouraged and exhorted to come. He expects us!

But this also means that prayer is only for those who come to God through Jesus Christ – for those who realise that they can't come to God on their own merits. Prayer is not for atheists. It's not for people who are morally "good," but think of Jesus as just another good man or great teacher. The best of us, the holiest man or

woman who has ever lived, can never compare to the perfect holiness of God. Prayer is for Christians and for Christians alone. None of us can approach God on our own merit and expect him to hear us, let alone give us anything. But it is by the shed blood of Jesus Christ that the worst sinner in the world can come any time and with boldness before the throne of God to pour out the deepest desires of his heart and receive what he asks for. All we have to do is humble ourselves and acknowledge that we merit nothing and then turn to Jesus Christ and let him be the righteousness we don't and never will have.

That's an awesome thing and it's possible because of the death of Jesus Christ. God loved us enough to send us his only Son to pay the penalty we deserved. You see, true prayer is prayer to God the Father *through* our Lord Jesus Christ.

But there's another important point Jesus makes here. Prayer is offered to God and it's made through Jesus Christ, but it's also *in the Holy Spirit*. St. Paul stresses this to the Ephesian Christians. In 2:18 he says, "Through him [that is, through Jesus Christ] we both have access in one *Spirit* to the Father." Paul tells us, again, that when we pray, we approach the Father through Jesus Christ, but he also says here that when we do so, we make our prayers *in the Holy Spirit*. Jesus opens the way to the Father, but it's the Holy Spirit dwelling in us that leads us through the door into the throne room. The work of the Spirit is to lead us to God, to show us where God is, and basically to make us aware of God as we pray. It's the indwelling Holy Spirit, given to us by Jesus Christ, that "tunes" us into God. Without the Spirit we wouldn't know where to go. The Greek word that St. Paul uses actually refers to an "introduction." And that's what the Spirit does: he *introduces* us to God and makes him real to us. And at the same time he shows us *how* to pray. St. Paul wrote to the Romans:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit

intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27)

This is why I have a problem with those who say that you can be a Christian, but not be filled with the Holy Spirit. You might as well say that you can be a Christian and not have Jesus Christ or not have access to the Father. All three persons of the Holy Trinity are with us as Christians. Prayer is being in the presence of the Father, but we can't get there without Jesus Christ *and* the indwelling Holy Spirit.

But even with the Spirit indwelling us, there are times when we pray and feel far from God or we feel like our prayers are just bouncing off the ceiling. When we feel that way one of two things is probably wrong. The first thing is that we may be hindered by sin in our lives. David says in Psalm 66:18, "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." Sin pushes us out of God's holy presence. If God doesn't seem near, ask the Spirit to show where you have missed the mark and then confess that sin to God openly.

But the other problem we have is distraction. Other things can fill our attention and crowd out or obscure a sense of God's presence. Those are times when we simply need to be still. We need to stop and ask God to work through his Holy Spirit to lead us back into his presence. I know from my own experience, from what other Christians have told me, and from many the great saints of the past have written, that some of our best time of prayer are the ones that start out without a sense of God's presence, but come into it fully by praying.

But so far in these three things, we've really only looked at our end of prayer – the us talking to God part. Jesus addresses the other half too. He reminds us that God is more willing to answer our prayers than we are to pray and that, because of that, the Christian who prays according to God's will, can pray with the greatest of confidence. He said, "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." John Newton probably had this in mind when we wrote:

Come, my soul, thy suit prepare:
Jesus loves to answer prayer;
He, himself has bid thee pray,
Therefore will not say thee nay.

That doesn't mean that God's like a genie who has to grant whatever thing we ask him for. God is willing, yes. But if we expect to receive the things we ask for, we have to ask according to his will and according to his ways. This seems to be where a lot of Christians get into trouble. They come to God with confidence and ask for all sorts of things, but then they get frustrated when they don't get them. The problem is that they aren't asking according to God's will. And the only place we're going to learn God's will is by reading the book he left for us – the book that he gave us specifically so we could know him and know his will and his ways.

St. John understood this. In his first, 3:22, he writes something really profound about prayer. He says, "Whatever we ask we receive from him, *because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.*" Those are amazing words and they echo exactly what Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount. The Apostle John saw his prayers answered and he had confidence that they would continue to be answered. We look at that and scratch out heads. "John, how can you say that? My prayers aren't always answered!" And John says, "God answers my prayers *because* I keep his commandments and because I do the things that please him." John understood just what we've been talking about: sin hinders our prayers, and for them to be answered, we need to pray what is pleasing to him and what is according to his will.

I mentioned R.A. Torrey earlier. Let me close with a story he tells about a woman from his first pastorate. She attended his church regularly, but she wasn't a member. One day he approached her about this and her response was that she simply didn't believe the Bible. He asked her why. And she said, "Because I have tried its promises and found them untrue." So he asked her to give him an example of one promise that she had found untrue. She said, "The promise that says that whatever things you desire when you pray, believe that you shall receive them and you shall have them. Once I prayed for something very earnestly, but I did not

receive it. Isn't it true that this promise failed?"

He told her, "Not at all."

"But doesn't it say that you shall receive whatever you ask for if you believe?" Torrey agreed that she wasn't too far off on that one. But he also said, "You first have to ask yourself if you are one of the 'you's.'" She didn't understand him so he asked again, "Are you one of the people to whom the promise is made?"

She was a little indignant. "Isn't it made to every professing Christian?" Torrey said, "Certainly not! God defines very clearly in his Word just to whom his promises to answer prayer are made." She said, "It does?" When she asked to see the verse, he took her to this last verse we read from 1 John: "Whatever we ask we receive from him, *because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.*" The prayers that God answers are made by those believers in Jesus Christ *who keep his commandments and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.* Torrey told her, "Those are the 'you's.'" Then he asked her, "Do you keep his commandments?" She had to admit that she didn't. And she came back to God and eventually became one of the most active and useful members of his congregation.

But you see, I know for a fact that this woman wasn't alone. There are lots and lots of Christians, even many in our church, who are just like her. It's sad and there's no reason for this to be true of anyone. But you need to ask yourself: are you one of the "you's?" Are you someone who knows the Word of God and who desires God and seeks to follow his ways and keep his commandments. Are you one who desires to please God? If you are, then you can pray with great confidence – to God the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit.

Please pray with me: Almighty God and Father, give you thanks that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us so that the doorway to your throne would be opened to those who put their trust in him. Move in us by your Spirit to purify our hearts and to draw us closer to your throne, through your Son, and give us a desire to do that which is pleasing to you.

And drive us to the study of your Word we might grow to know your will and make our petitions in full accord with it. We ask this, coming to you now through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.