

# When You Pray

MATTHEW 6:5-8

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**T**HE CENTERPIECE OF THE DEVOTIONAL LIFE IS prayer, and today we will begin to consider our Lord's teaching on the subject of prayer taken from the sixth chapter of MATTHEW. We will look specifically at the instruction given in MATTHEW 6:5-8. and will wait until another Sunday to consider what we usually refer to as the Lord's Prayer. The instruction about prayer, recorded in MATTHEW 6:5-8, teaches us both how to and how not to pray. Today I want to deal first with the negative instruction of how not to pray, and then go on to the positive instruction of how to pray.

Before we look at the negative instruction, please try for a moment to empathize with the Pharisees. Instead of standing back and looking at the Pharisees as the bad guys and saying to ourselves, "We don't want to be like them;" let's try to put ourselves in the shoes of the Pharisees and admit that we are like them, at least to some extent.

The sin of the Pharisees is a sin that is sometimes part of our personal experience whether we admit it or not. The fundamental problem of the Pharisees was their lack of an intimate love-relationship with God. They did not have an appreciation for all God did for to save them from sin. When we read the PSALMS that King David wrote, we find that he was able to sing about his salvation and express from his heart his love for his heavenly Father. The Pharisees, for the most part, were unable to do this. They had religion, but they lacked relationship.

A love relationship with God causes a person to feel bad when he does wrong, even if no one else around him knows that he has done wrong. A certain person who has a love relationship with God suffers emotionally at the thought of offending the God who is deserving of all that person's love.

Now a person who practices religion also suffers emotionally, but only when he fails to meet the standards set up by his peers. He suffers embarrassment at the thought being rejected by his peers, and he suffers fear at the thought of being punished by God. The person who practices religion has a concept of God as One who rewards those who keep the religious standards and punishes those who don't. In contrast, a person who has a love relationship with God looks at reward and punishment from a different point of view. God's Spirit has given testimony to his own spirit that he does not have to fear

being abandoned by God even if he does sin. His sin does cause him to feel bad, but not because he fears being rejected or abandoned; rather, because he knows his behavior is out of sync with the bond of love that exists between him and God.

Now I know some of you may have a difficult time understanding what I am saying. It could be that someone here has never really experienced a true love relationship on a human level, let alone a true love relationship with God. I am told that some children grow up without ever having the assurance that their father and mother love them to the point that they will never abandon them. In our society fathers and mothers frequently walk out on their spouses and their children when they are offended. As a result, many children grow up without ever having experienced a feeling of security between themselves and their parents who are supposed to love them.

For the past couple of weeks I have had to play the role of a single parent while Janiene was in Pennsylvania attending to her father who had open-heart surgery. On Wednesday night of last week I had to discipline my six-year-old daughter because she disobeyed me. After I disciplined her, she got under her covers and told me to stay away from her. But then, after about a half-hour had passed, she came into my bedroom and wanted to talk to me. She said, "Daddy I'm sorry for the things I did." After telling her that I forgave her and loved her, I offered a prayer of thanksgiving to God in my heart.

I don't think Shannon is afraid that I will abandon her. But it did hurt her to know that she had offended me. And it is precisely this kind of relationship we need to have with God. I believe the bond of love parents build between themselves and their children is the best teaching tool possible to help children understand what they so desperately need with God on a spiritual level. For those of you who have never experienced such love on a human level, you will have trouble understanding this, but it is not impossible for you to understand. God has given you the capacity for love, even if you have never experienced it on a human level. And He wants to develop an intimate love relationship with you.

**L**AST WEEK PASTOR TIM EMPHASIZED OUR NEED TO have a kind respect or fear for God that will cause us to want to honor him in all that we do. Right now I

am basically trying to say the same thing. It is not your Christian religion that God wants. It is your respect for him that grows out of an intimate love relationship. My heart grieves over the fact that so many people have grown up in a church environment without ever having experienced such a love relationship with God. In this regard, many people who profess to be Christian are no different from the Pharisees.

The Pharisees didn't have an intimate love relationship with God, and that was their basic problem. Some here in this auditorium have never experienced this kind of relationship with God. Others have experienced it, but the relationship has grown cold and is in desperate need of renewal.

How do we measure the health of our relationship with God? Where do we go to find out how we are doing? We must go to the private place of our lives. We must examine the motives behind our efforts to fast and to pray and to reach out to help other people. Don't focus on your public life to see how you are doing. That is not how you measure the health of your relationship with God. Look at what you do in an effort to approach God and examine your motives. Do you fast or abstain in any way at all? And if you do fast, then why do you fast? Is it because you are driven by a felt need that you must grow deeper in your communication with God? Then look at what takes place when you do find yourself alone with God. What goes through your mind as you are praying? And when you are praying and other people come to your mind, in what way do you think about them? Are you interceding for them because you are driven by a desire to help them grow in their relationship with God? And does that desire move you to take practical steps to help the people for whom you are praying.

If you examine your private devotional life, you may conclude that you have no devotional life at all which really means you have no intimate love relationship with God. This should drive you to seek salvation with all your heart. Your greatest need has always been a love relationship with your Creator. You need love, and you must find it in Him and in Him alone. Don't continue to hide behind your religion. Come to the arms of your Savior. He waits for you.

And if you have come to Jesus, then you must know that there is only one way the relationship you now have with him is going to grow. It is through the devotional life only that you will grow closer to God. What you do in your public life might help you grow in your skills to serve God, but you will only grow to know God more in your private devotional life.

And there is a flip side to this truth. If your personal relationship with God can only be developed through the devotional life, then it is also true that your personal relationship with God can only be harmed when you allow Satan to enter into your devotional life and destroy the quality of your private life.

I've heard it said that Satan cannot touch a person who is on their knees in prayer, but nothing could be further from the truth. Our text and other passages from the Bible make it clear that the most severe attacks from the enemy come while we are on our knees attempting to communicate with God. Satan knows that our devotional life is absolutely foundational to our relationship with God. For that reason, he will try extra hard to attack and defeat us in our devotional lives.

We tend to think of murders taking place in dark alleys or people committing adultery as terrible sins. We have feelings of disgust or remorse toward people we see who are enslaved to drugs and alcohol. We say, "Look and see how awful sin is!" But there is a picture of sin that is much worse than this. It is the picture of a person on his knees in the very presence of God giving into the temptation to think about himself instead of God. It is the picture of a person worshiping himself instead of God. That is the most terrible picture of sin, and it happens more than most people can imagine.

The greatest temptations our Lord faced during His earthly ministry came in the context of fasting and prayer. Nowhere is the activity of Satan more revealed than the time when Jesus was attacked by the devil while he was in the desert fasting and praying for forty days. Likewise, the greatest temptations we will face will also come in the context of our devotional lives. One of the worse mistakes we can make is to conclude that our church is healthy because we have so much activity and so much quantitative growth. If you want to really know the qualitative health of a church, try to understand the devotional lives of its people. Satan has tricked us into using the wrong standards to measure the qualitative health of a church.

I feel it is important for me to emphasize these things before I speak in more detail on the subject of how and how not to pray, because I observe that there are too many of us just going through the motions. And I am concerned that the instructions you receive about fasting and praying and giving to those in need will just become more items that you add to your list of other religious things that you do to help you feel better about yourself and to keep God from punishing you. I don't want that to happen. We don't become Christians (in the true sense Christianity) by working to become good enough to be accepted by God. We become Christians by longing for an intimate love relationship with God. God has already demonstrated His love toward us, and He now waits for us to love Him in return. He will wait for us to want to love Him in return before He will use the blood of His Son to save us and unite us to Him in a bond of love. Our devotional lives should be a reflection of that love relationship and not a means of trying to win God's favor.

**P**LEASE LOOK NOW AT THE EXAMPLES GIVEN IN OUR text that teach us how not to pray. There are two pictures presented to us. *One* is a picture of people standing in synagogues and on street corners praying. Some speculate that these people, when walking to the temple to pray, were anxious to leave people with the impression that they were so devout that they could not even wait until they got to the temple. So, on their way to the temple, they would stop at the street corners to pray. And when they arrived at the temple, they would stand in the most prominent place possible. In the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector, recorded in LUKE 18, we see a clear picture of a person standing in a prominent place in the temple praying to God in a way that drew attention to himself. This is the first picture.

The *second* picture is found in verse 7 of our text. It is the picture of people babbling out their prayers. It is a picture of people repeating their requests over and over again.

What are the main errors we see happening in these two negative pictures? The first error is to make self the primary focus of prayer. The second is to feel that the result of our praying depends on how much we pray or upon the particular manner we use to pray.

I know that I have committed both of these errors in my prayer life, and the temptation to commit these errors continues to be something I must battle in my devotional life. Two and a half months ago several of us began to meet on Wednesday nights to pray. While making the decision to start that prayer meeting, I was tempted to commit the first error. I know that people in the church expect the pastors to attend Wednesday night prayer meetings and are critical of them when they don't. And I admit that the thought of starting and promoting an all English-speaking prayer meeting on Wednesdays for the purpose of looking good to these people entered my mind on more than one occasion. And I admit that, when I am engaged in public prayer, I am sometimes faced with the temptation to pray in such a way as to impress people or create a certain effect upon the people who hear the prayer. Public prayer should be such that the people who are praying silently and the one who is uttering the words should be no longer conscious of each other. A realization that we are in the presence of God should flood our minds when we are in prayer, but we are often tempted have other thoughts.

When we give into these other thoughts, then our prayer time becomes nothing more than a means of thinking about ourselves. We then use prayer to direct attention to ourselves. We use prayer to make an impression on our peers or to make an impression on God.

Those of us who are in leadership are especially vulnerable to attack. We begin our prayers with good intentions to bring church needs before the

throne. But one thought leads to another, and before we know it, we are using our private prayer times to think through how we will win a dispute we are having with another person. We will use the precious time to come up with arguments in our minds that prove how we are right and others are wrong.

It is important that we understand how human and natural it is to fall into the error of using our prayer times to focus all attention upon ourselves. And it is also important that we avoid the second error. We need to guard ourselves against the feeling that we can manipulate outcomes by the amount of time we spend in prayer or the manner in which we pray.

While serving at a church in California I attended conferences where the speaker would instruct the audience to shout or weep while praying in an attempt to make the prayer more effective. I wore holes in the knees of my pants, because the church staff was required to spend hours on their knees every day in prayer. I am not suggesting that it is wrong to shout or weep or spend time on your knees. But to do so with the feeling that God will be moved by the mere manner in which we pray is an error.

The same principle is true about the times we set aside to pray. People who practice Islam as a religion will stop what they are doing at certain times during the day, fall down on their knees, face a certain direction and pray. Many practicing Christians have set times during the day when they pray, and if anyone interferes they are apt to lose their tempers. And people are tempted to think that praying all night will somehow be more effective at producing certain outcomes. When I was serving as a youth pastor, the college students in our church would periodically stay up all night praying from Saturday to Sunday morning. They would then give testimony about the wonderful results that such an all-night prayer meeting had produced.

Again, we should not think that having regular set times for prayer or lengthy times of prayer are bad. The error is to think that outcomes will be affected by the frequency and length or repetition of our prayers. Last week I tried to emphasize the fact that it is good to have discipline, but that the disciplines themselves should never be considered the essence of the devotional life. Disciplines can serve us by preparing us for the devotional life, but they must never replace the devotional life.

During my own personal quiet times with God, I carry out disciplines. I am committed to reading the Bible every day. I practice reciting certain prayers and portions of scripture that I have memorized. These are examples of disciplines that you can also use. I believe we need such disciplines. But I need to constantly remind myself that I should not depend upon my disciplines to produce for myself specific results. That is the error Jesus is teaching us to avoid in today's

scripture lesson.

SO WHAT IS THE RIGHT WAY TO PRAY? THE POSITIVE picture Jesus gives us of praying is one of a person going into his room or closet, closing the door and praying privately to his Father who is unseen. It is one where that person is able to pray with confidence, believing that his Father knows every need even before the request is made. What truth does this picture convey? Simply stated, it is this: *the right way of praying is all in the approach*. It is not in the words that we use. Before anything even comes out of our mouths or the sentences form in our minds, we become aware that we are approaching God to talk to Him. This approach to God is one where we are keenly aware that we are coming to the One we call "Father." He is the one with whom we have an intimate love relationship, and we are going to spend time talking with Him.

The only way possible to achieve this kind of awareness is to practice the process of *exclusion*. "When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen." What does it mean to close the door?

Well, first of all, it doesn't mean boycotting prayer meetings. That is not how we practice exclusion. Some people think that going into your room and closing the door means that another person should never see you in the act of praying. But that is a ridiculous conclusion. Jesus prayed in public, and there are prayer meetings recorded in the Bible that are the very essence and life of the church.

The principle is that there are certain things that must be shut out or excluded from our prayer regardless of whether we are praying alone or in the presence of others. Here they are. *First*, we must shut out and forget other people. *Second*, we must shut out and exclude ourselves. This is what it means to enter our room and shut the door. The door shuts when we lose consciousness of the fact that others are aware that we are praying. And the door shuts when we stop thinking about ourselves in a self-exalting way. We can shut the door in the midst of a crowd or we can shut the door while walking down a busy street. The setting is not the important thing. The important thing is what's taking place in our minds.

How do we know when the door is shut? We know it when we are aware that we have an audience with God and nothing more. As long as we are paying attention to the fact that others know we are praying, then the door remains open. As long as we are paying attention to ourselves and feel proud about the fact that we are praying, then the door remains open even if we have physically locked ourselves inside a closet.

Once we have gone through the process of exclusion, we must then realize that we are in the presence of God. We become aware of God in two

ways. The *first* way creates in us a sense of awe and wonder and reverence. It requires that we realize something of who God is and what He has done. In PSALM 86:11 we can read the words of King David as he expressed his desire to go through the process of exclusion so that he could achieve this sense of reverence. He said, "Give me an undivided heart that I may fear your name. Help me to exclude others and myself from my consciousness so that I might realize that I have now entered into the audience chamber of the eternal, the almighty, the Creator of all things, the One who is a consuming fire, the absolute holy God." This is the first thing we must realize.

The *second* thing we must realize is that this almighty God is our Father, the One with whom we have a love relationship that cannot be broken. We must realize that we are His children. We come to Him as to a Father without fear of being abandoned. He has told us that nothing can happen to us apart from Him. We know that He desires the best for us and knows all about us.

It is this two-part realization that enables us to pray with confidence, believing that He knows all about it before we begin to speak. He knows about the sins we must confess and He waits for us to say, "I'm sorry. I promise, with the help of Your grace, not to do it again." He knows about the needs we will bring before Him. We must have confidence that our Father knows these things and that "He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think."

So we exclude, then we realize, then we, in confidence, make our requests known before God. This is how we are to pray.

OUT OF SUCH A COMMUNION WITH GOD FLOW blessings. God's promise to reward us openly is true.

Last week an elderly woman who lives in central Pennsylvania called me and began asking me how my father-in-law made it through his open-heart surgery. Even though she has never met you, she began mentioning some of you by name and asking about your relationship with God. When I told her, her voice became filled with excitement as she realized how God was answering her prayers. She has been praying for our ministry for over 25 years. That woman knows how to pray and God has rewarded her.

And what she has experienced can also be our experience. When it comes to prayer, too many of us our living like paupers when we should be living like princes. Our Father is the King of the universe.

You may have been deprived of experiencing human love, but don't use that as an excuse for your spiritual poverty. You still have the capacity to love. Turn to your heavenly Father for salvation. Become serious about your devotional life. God wants to bless you, and He has been waiting for you for a long time.