

The Praying That God Rewards

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For our Scripture text that we'll be expounding this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew 6 and I invite you to turn to Matthew 6 and I'll read the text to set it in your minds. We sort of introduced this last week and now we'll get into it in more detail here this morning. Matthew 6:5-8. This is the beginning of Jesus' teaching on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. He says,

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. 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. 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.

The story is told of George Whitefield and John Wesley as follows. George Whitefield, the Calvinist evangelist, and John Wesley, the Arminian evangelist, were preaching together in the daytime and rooming together in the same boardinghouse each night. One evening after a particularly strenuous day, the two of them returned to the boardinghouse exhausted and prepared for bed. When they were ready, each knelt beside the bed to pray. Whitefield, the Calvinist, prayed like this, "Lord, we thank thee for all those with whom we spoke today and we rejoice that their lives and destinies are entirely in thy hand. Honor our efforts according to thy perfect will. Amen." He rose from his knees and got into bed. Wesley, who had hardly gotten past the invocation of his prayer in this length of time, looked up from his side of the bed and said, "Mr. Whitefield, is this where your Calvinism leads you?" Then Wesley put his head down and went on praying. Whitefield stayed in bed and went to sleep. About two hours later, Whitefield woke up and there was Wesley still on his knees beside his bed. Whitefield got up and went around to the bed where Wesley was kneeling. He found Wesley asleep. He shook him by the shoulder and said to him, "Mr. Wesley, is this where your Arminianism leads you?"

Last time, we opened a discussion about prayer and its role in the life of the believer and what we said there is presupposed and is very important for what we're going to say

today. We looked at the fact that the New Testament repeatedly exhorts believers to prayer and the prayer is expected to be an ongoing part of life in the true Christian. We saw the example of Christ and how Christ himself prayed. You wonder what did he have to pray about, in one sense, as the Son of God in human flesh, without sin, and yet prayer was a regular part of his life, morning, noon and evening throughout, as you look at his life of prayer. The early church was marked by prayer. Acts 2:42, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the breaking of bread and to prayer and to fellowship. We saw Paul in prayer and we said something that kind of launches us into today, we said that prayer is not about a length of time or a prescribed formula; that that is not the key to effective prayer, that is not the key to true prayer, that, beloved, that is not what you should aim yourself after is a particular time of prayer or a particular length of prayer or particular formulas in prayer. And it's very difficult, on one hand, for some people to receive that because that's been the nature of teaching on prayer that you've received over the years, but not only do I know this by pastoral and personal experience but also by multiple conversations that I had with some of you after that message, you know by experience that a lot of that just leads you into bondage and to frustration, doesn't it? It just leads you into a sense of discouragement that you do not measure up: that you don't get up early enough; that you're not faithful enough in prayer; that you don't pray long enough. And the whole weight of that just starts to press down on you and push you into quicksand that's very difficult to get out of for the vast majority of you, I would venture to say. I realize that there are some of you that find great delight in your prayer lives and we thank God for that, but we're really aiming this to establish a baseline of what true prayer should be based on the teaching of Christ himself.

Beloved, one of the texts that we alluded to last time was from Luke where the disciples very simply asked Jesus and they said, "Lord, teach us to pray." They had observed the Lord in prayer, they realized that they fell short, and they wanted to know what the secret of it was. "Lord, how do you have such an intimate communion with God in your prayer?" And they said, "Teach us." And what we have here today in the 21st century is we come before our God, we come before our Lord here this morning and we say, "Lord, teach us to pray." What we would say is, "Lord, clean off the blackboard. Erase everything." In a sense, what we mean by that is, "Help us to start with a clean slate and help us to start with what you really want in prayer," rather than continuing and building on, perhaps, bad traditions that have been given to us where prayer was a ritual, where prayer was, for those of you from liturgical backgrounds, simply repeating the same words over and over again maybe Sunday to Sunday and you can just go through and you can rehearse all of that without even thinking about it, those of you from fundamentalist backgrounds where you have been scolded and whipped because you did not pray as you should, we want to forget all of that and just with a fresh set of eyes, look on the teaching of Christ and say, "What do you want from me in prayer?"

You see, it doesn't really matter what men in the past have taught us about prayer if they went beyond Scripture. We don't need to satisfy the extra-biblical rules and regulations that perhaps well intended men laid upon us. We've all heard the sermons about those men from church history who would pray for three or four hours and that's held up as a standard and none of us meet that. Isn't it time for us to set those things aside that we

don't attain to anyway, those things that go beyond Scripture, and just ask the simplest of questions, "My dear Lord Jesus, what would you want from me in prayer?" And let that be the standard by which we measure prayer, to let that be the goal which we attain to, because what we really want if we're thinking rightly, what we really want is not to impress men who have taught us on prayer in the past and to satisfy their expectations, the only person whose opinion matters is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our Master. He is our teacher. He is our Lord. And what he says is the only thing that matters to us in this realm. Nothing else matters. Everything else is, at best, secondary by comparison.

So if you have been whipped in the past over prayer and felt that you fell short, beloved, I think what this text has to say to us from our Lord Jesus will be a very refreshing drink of cool water in a hot and desert land where there is no refreshment. Prayer does not have to be that complicated. Prayer is not about you writing out a long list of things and devoting yourself to it day after day after day, which reminds me of something that I didn't have in my notes but I wanted to mention to you and maybe you can identify with this.

When I was a young believer, I was a student at Indiana University doing my things and I had a heavy class load but I was a new Christian, I wanted to do whatever the Lord would have me to do, and there was a group that was committed to prayer and I said, "Okay, I'll be a part of that of group of prayer," not really knowing what I was getting myself into. These were dear believers. I love them to this day although they are not a part of my life now so I'm not being critical of them in what I'm about to say. This is just where misguided thinking can lead you.

So it was a decent sized church, maybe a little larger than ours, and the word went out that, "We have a prayer group and whatever your prayer request is, we will pray for it every single day. We'll commit ourselves to pray for you that way." That sounds really high and noble. And of course, as you might expect, the prayer requests start coming in and the list gets longer and longer and longer, you know, until there were dozens, scores, I don't know, 100 things on that list that we had committed ourselves to pray for every single day.

Well, you don't have to be much of a student of human nature to realize that eventually that burden just wears you out and you're really not able to do that. Not able to do it in the sense that the time constraints of that superficially are too difficult, especially in the midst of life and you've got other things that you have got to do, other responsibilities that God has brought into your life, but more importantly than that, the spirit of prayer is sucked out under those times because you go through that list one day and you're pretty engaged and you're passionate in prayer about it, and then the second day and the third day, and by the fourth day you start to say, "This is getting kinda old," and it starts to become mechanical and you're doing it simply to get through the list at this point, rather than any other kind of sincere desire of intercession or desire to please God, and prayer just becomes about getting through this mechanical list and it wears you out. It becomes an anvil around your neck.

Perhaps some of you know what that is like and I realized what I needed to do was to repent of a foolish commitment that I wasn't able to keep and get on with life and with a different spirit of prayer. You see, those kinds of open-ended commitments and foolish things, well-intentioned but foolish commitments, eventually just lead you into bondage and I want to, by the grace of God working in your heart by the power of the Holy Spirit today, show you a more excellent way and that more excellent way is nothing from my wisdom, it's nothing that I came up with, it comes simply straight from the words of Jesus. And I want to tell you that while we have three or four more messages on prayer as we'll go through what's known as the Lord's Prayer in verses 9 through 15 in the coming weeks, but I want to tell you that this passage has revolutionized my whole life and the whole sense of guilt and condemnation that I carried with me over inadequate prayer was blown away by that. The Lord has relieved me of that sense of guilt and condemnation that prayer became. You know how it is, a lot of you, some of you anyway, it becomes a point where your prevailing prayer is, "Lord, forgive me for my prayerlessness. I need to pray better." Well, that cycle is just destructive and it is not even healthy.

So could it possibly be, beloved, let's go back to first principles, could it possibly be that a good and loving and gracious God who intends our good, who gave himself over on the cross for our sins, who bled and died for all of our sins and failures and our inability to meet the mark, could it possibly be that the God who did that, intended our experience of spiritual life on this earth to become one of utter defeat and discouragement and mechanical repetition when we talk with him? Could that possibly be what a good God intended spiritual life to be, I ask you? I ask you? That can't possibly be correct, could it? This is inconsistent with the character of God, the experience that so many of us have known in prayer in the past and what is laid upon our conscience by – I give them the benefit of the doubt – well-intentioned men, perhaps uninformed men.

Well, what we want to do is set all of that aside and just come and say, "Lord, teach us to pray." That's our simple prayer here this morning, "Lord, teach us to pray," and in verses 5 through 8 our Lord is going to answer that prayer for us here today. Look, we can trust what Jesus said about prayer to be sufficient to know that our prayer lives modeled after this is pleasing to him. He gave us everything that we needed as he spoke to us in his word.

So what does he say? Well, first of all, what we're going to see in verses 5 and 6 is that he calls us to purify our motives in prayer. Purify our motives in prayer, and let's look at verses 5 and 6. I'll read them again to reset the context. You can never look at the text often enough when you are studying God's word and when you're preaching on it. So in verse 5, Jesus says, "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. 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." These two verses are about the motives that you bring to prayer, why it is that you pray, what is it that motivates you in prayer, what are you hoping to accomplish in prayer is what Jesus starts in addressing. So he goes right to the very heart of the matter. He goes right to our inner man, to our

thoughts, to our aspirations. What is it most that you want out of prayer, Jesus is teaching you, and he opens up with this simple phrase, "When you pray."

Now, beloved, I want you to notice something, that that statement is very broad and it is very general. It is consistent with an expectation that prayer will somehow be the mark of a life of a believer. There is no such thing as a true Christian who is entirely prayerless and every word is important there: who is entirely prayerless. There may be some among us who are weak in prayer, that we struggle in prayer. We get all of that but the idea of someone who never prays is foreign to the spirit of biblical Christianity. So there is an expectation in Scripture and on the lips of Jesus that you will be someone who prays. But notice that it's broad. It's general. It just says, "When you pray. Whenever you pray, I'm assuming that you're going to pray. When you do that, here's what I want you to do."

Notice, my friends, my beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, notice something really important: Jesus does not proceed from that point and say, "When you pray you must be up at 5 AM and you must pray for a minimum of 45 minutes if you wish to please me in prayer. And you must pray daily for everyone that you have known and ever will know." He doesn't do that. That is not the spirit of prayer as he gives it to us. He just talks in general terms and he starts with a corrective to what they were seeing at that time in the first century. What they were seeing at the time were their religious leaders who made a public display of themselves when they prayed. They would go to a prominent place where they would be sure to be seen by men and they would pray on the street corners, or they would stand up and they would pray in the synagogues and they would have these loud and flowery prayers that would call attention to what they were saying.

So for example, if you look over in Luke 18:9, you can get a little bit of a flavor of this. Luke 18:9, we won't stay here long, but Jesus drawing upon common experience to teach a parable said in verse 9, "He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt." Verse 10, "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.'" Notice how he's aware of his human audience here. "I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." So he's praying this prayer that magnifies himself in prayer, he diminishes others in his audience, and his prayer is really not a prayer to God at all, it's rather an exercise in self-congratulation. "God, I thank you that I am so righteous and I thank you that there are people in the audience who can hear how righteous I am." The whole idea, the whole motivation being that he's praying for a human audience. He's calling attention to himself.

Verse 13, by contrast, "the tax collector, standing some distance away," standing off by himself, "was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'" Notice the brevity of it. Notice the confession of it. Notice the trusting in the mercy of God in it and Christ says, "I tell you, this man," the tax collector, "went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

What can we say about the motive as Jesus applies a corrective in Matthew 6? He starts with this corrective, "Do not pray to please men. Do not pray to please men. Do not pray in a way that invites others to watch you pray." "What a godly man that must be! Did you hear the golden lips with which he prayed?" The very thought of that, of getting that kind of human praise and affirmation to us, should be abhorrent to us in light of what Christ says. You know, maybe you're in a small group and you're praying and we all know what it's like, someone in there is going to launch the verbal fireworks and pray in a way that goes on and on and inevitably calls attention to themselves.

Well, beloved, here's what Jesus says about that, look at verse 5 with me again. He says, "When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites," and the hypocrite, as we've said in the past, is a word that was used for stage actors who put a mask on their face and they performed for an audience. This is the way that they acted back then. They put on a performance for the audience. What Jesus is saying is, "When you pray, don't be thinking about who your human audience is. Don't be praying in a way, don't put yourself in a position where you are seeking out opportunity to pray in front of other people and you pray these long eloquent prayers that are full of seemingly spiritual stuff in a way that men will look and say, 'Oh, there's a praying man. There's a praying woman.'" Jesus says, "Don't do that." That's not pleasing to God. We are not to use prayer as a means to elevate our status before men. You are to use prayer as a means to lower your status before God, is the idea.

So these Pharisees chose their religious gatherings on public streets so that the most people possible would see them praying and what Jesus does here is he's exposing the motives here. This is all about motives at this point, and Jesus says, "They are praying simply to be congratulated on their religiosity. They want a response from men to their praying." And Jesus said, "Don't do that. Don't do that. Put the thought of the way men view you in prayer out of your mind."

There is a simple human illustration in a different realm that would help you see what we're talking about here. Imagine a man with a wife and he goes out of his way to give displays of public affection to his wife: he hugs her, he kisses her, he does different things when people are around, but in private he ignores her, he belittles her, perhaps he even physically beats her in private and the public display is betrayed by a private reality. You and I would all be rightly appalled at that kind of hypocrisy. We would realize that the display of public affection, not only was not loving, it was a further treasonous act in the middle of that marriage. Not only is this not the reality, the reality is the opposite of what you're doing, what you're showing in public. We would all understand that and get that. Well, imagine multiply it geometrically by infinity and imagine God who sees all and knows the motives of the human heart, finding a man who loves to be known as a godly man but in private his reality is much different. There is not a private reality to the public show that he puts on things.

Well, beloved, if you and I in our fallen, sinful states can be appalled by hypocrisy on a human level, imagine how great the offense is to God, imagine how great the offense is to

God who sees his name being used to promote human ambition totally apart from a true reality in the heart of the man who is praying this way. That prayer is not bringing glory to God, it is heaping judgment upon the head of the one who's doing it. Scripture says, doesn't it, that God is not deceived? Do not be deceived, God is not mocked. Well, what we want to be careful of as we go through Christian life in prayer is that we're not pretending to be someone who we're not; that we're not looking for human applause.

I've said this before and I'll say it again because it's relevant to the age in which we live, this is a place where it applies, honestly, those of you that are on social media that have posted pictures of you and your devotions and your steaming hot cup of coffee with your Bible open, "Looking forward to my time with the Lord today," I ask you, go back and delete all of those. Honor this Scripture and go back and delete it. Why would you parade your devotion like that in light of the teaching of Christ in Matthew 6:5? Why would you do that? There is no excuse for it. You say, "But I get a lot of likes and that's a really cute picture that I put up." That's not the point. The point is that we do not use our devotion to God, we do not use our prayer to God as a means to get likes and follows on social media. We really need to stop that and not be like that anymore as the first place that we would go to honor this Scripture where Jesus says, "Don't pray so that it will be seen by men." Right?

We need to stop doing that and we need to realize the other aspect of the motivation for which we pray and that's found in verse 6. We said, "Don't pray to please men." There's only one true motive for prayer. I should point out this before I move on: Jesus says when men pray like that, look at the end of verse 5, when men pray like that, "Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full." As we said a couple of weeks ago, they have their reward in full, it's like a paid receipt. You gave what you wanted and you got it. Here's your receipt to show that you got what you wanted.

So taking this on the social media aspect, you get multiple likes to your cute picture or, "What a refreshing time I had with the Lord," you get multiple likes on that, look, that's all that you got. All that you got out of that was your social media likes. There is no reward from God waiting for that when you're just putting that on display, looking for people, inviting people, asking people in the world to congratulate you on what you did. There is no reward for that. This is not pleasing to God and we need to repent of that and put it away because the precious inner reality of walking with Christ was never designed for us to take and use to get applause and praise from men. That is not the point and Jesus says people who do that, when you get the likes, when people approve of you for what you've done, he says that's all there is.

Now, why would you want to do that? Why would you want to live life that way? All of a sudden it's just very shallow. You mean, I go through life and that's all that I get is just that temporary applause, knowing that people have forgotten about it three minutes after they scrolled down further in their feed? What's the point of that? Have we lost all sense of the reality of the presence of God, the surpassing greatness of who he is and living to please him? I realize not all of you are on social media, a fact of which you're probably very happy right now in the midst of where I'm at right now in the sermon. We've got to

look at our hearts and say, "What am I doing here? Who am I trying to please? Why do I want men to applaud me for my prayer time?" Something is really out of whack and the thing that's out of whack is that that's an entirely wrong motive to pray.

Jesus starts his teaching on prayer that way to cleanse our minds so that we would be open to receive what the true motive for prayer is in this second part, and he teaches us to pray to please God instead. Look at verse 6. He says, "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." There is a very sharp and pointed contrast here. In verse 5 he was talking about the hypocrites, here in verse 6 he says, "But you." He's turned the corner. He's changing the subject. He says, "This is what the hypocrites are like, but you as my disciple, here is the kind of prayer that I call you to." It's a different motive. He says, "Different aspirations guide you, direct you in prayer and therefore a different kind of praying comes out from you."

And Jesus here in this verse, in verse 6, nine times, beloved, nine times uses the singular form "you" in order to emphasize the privacy and also to emphasize the particular point that he is making to you as a follower, as a disciple of Christ. He's pointing the finger at you and says, "This is what I want from you." And he says, "In contrast to finding the most public venue for your praying," he says, "find the most private venue in praying." And the point of that is that that takes away the human eyes that are watching you and makes it impossible for you in private to be seeking the applause of men, and by doing that, all of a sudden you are in a position where your focus is entirely vertical because there are no men to see, there are no men to watch. So when you keep things off of your social media, no one is going to like the way that you pray because they're not even going to know about it and that's the whole point. That's the whole point, beloved.

And what Jesus is teaching us here, something so profoundly important and so profoundly counter-cultural in the 21st century, he is saying, "Do not make a display of yourself. Don't put yourself out with the intention that other people would see. And when you are praying, get out of the public eye, get out of the way people watch you as much as you are able to do that, and there cultivate your prayer before God." And when you've prayed, don't go out and announce that you've prayed. Just go on with life.

You see, it is enough that God is present to see and to bless. It is enough for us and it's not just enough, this is our joy, that when we would pray in private, that we could pray to the one true God, coming to him through the one true way, the Lord Jesus Christ, and to realize and to be overwhelmed by the majesty of the realization that we have an audience of one with the one true God who is the Maker of heaven and earth, who is the one who came in Christ in order to save our souls. And that the richness of that is so exquisite, the richness of that is so profound that we want to exclude men from it so that it would not be sullied, that it would not be diminished by prideful human motives in the midst of it. You see, Jesus is calling you to love God more than you love men here, and he's calling you to love the approval of God and to seek that more, to the exclusion of the approval of men. Not both/and, it's either/or.

And notice as we pointed out last time, notice the sweet motivation that he gives in the midst of this. Look at the end of verse 6. He says, "your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." You enter into that private place, whatever your private place is, and pray to God and you do so with a mindset, "God, not only do I love you and I'm glad to be here, I am trusting you, I am believing that you will reward me as I seek to pray in this manner. And Lord, this is just between you and me. There is a private intimacy here. I'm not going to make a report of this to somebody else. This is just between you and me. God, here's my heart. God, here's my request. God, my focus is on you and you alone and I hope no one ever finds out about what we're doing here right now."

That's what Jesus calls us to and notice, beloved, that he's doing this with the tender hand of promise, not the sharp hand of discipline. He's saying, "I promise you that your God will reward you as you pray this way." Well, you know, don't you want to know what that reward is like? If this is singular "you" and this is private and it's between you and God, over the course of time, over the course of the remainder of your life, don't you want to know what that reward is? How God has appointed to bless you as you respond to his word in this way? Oh, my friends, I want you to know that reward. Christ promises the reward to you. So what is so difficult about aiming our hearts in that direction? And all of a sudden the idea of seeking the applause of men just becomes abhorrent. "I don't even want that. What, you caught me in my prayer room? Oh, I wish you hadn't done that." It's about pleasing God, not pleasing men and trusting him to bless you. That's the motive which guides your praying.

Jesus goes on and helps us to purify our practice of prayer. Here is a second point. Purify our practice of prayer, and this is going to get really personal, I bet, for most of us. You say, "This wasn't personal already?" Well, yeah. But, look, my friends, part of the reason that we do this Sunday after Sunday, part of what God has appointed in the preaching of his word, is that his word would sift us; that his word would convict us where we're wrong; that it would rebuke us and correct us and at the same time lead us and train us in which the righteous way to go is. So there is a purification, maybe some of us are repenting now in light of what we've just said and we realize that, but we want that. Beloved, if you're a true Christian you want that. Even if you don't really know and understand, the truth of the matter is a true Christian desires the correction of the word because they want to be conformed to what God would have them to be. So this isn't a matter of anything human, this is the way that God deals with his people. He deals with us in our hearts through his word and that's a blessed place to be.

So let's see what Christ has to say about purifying your practice of prayer, and here in verse 7, he again starts with the corrective and he says, this is a subpoint, he says to avoid meaningless repetition. Oh my. Oh my. Oh my. Oh my. Verse 7, he says, "And when you are praying," so now he's going in and he's addressing the time when you are actually speaking with God and he says, "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."

Notice as we go through this, when Jesus says, "Do not use meaningless repetition," that's a word that means "to babble; to just talk and talk and talk; to speak without thinking," is the idea of this word, and it's just idle talk that has no meaning; that there is no purpose or there is no thought behind it. Jesus says, "When you're praying, don't pray that way. Don't just gab on and on and on. Don't simply repeat the same formulas that you've been taught over and over again." And what he is doing here is Jesus, my friends, Jesus is rebuking, he is condemning, he is forbidding a mechanical approach to prayer that is characterized by thoughtless speech and mindless repetition. This verse alone rebukes, in my judgment, I would say my humble judgment but then I'm just calling attention to myself and that's not a good thing to do. In my judgment, this totally rebukes and forbids the idea of a private prayer language that isn't known human speech. If you're just babbling something that you don't understand, where is the meaning in that? Where is your mind engaged if thoughtless, meaningless repetition and babble is forbidden?

What Jesus is saying, what he's rebuking is this: it's that approach to prayer that thinks length is the key to blessing; that thinks that God's favor can be attained with a lot of words; and that somehow a lot of praying forces God's hand to bless you. Jesus says, "Don't think about prayer in that way." God's favor is not bought with a lot of words from your lips. God's favor was purchased with finality at the cross of Christ. That's where God's favor is found. His favor is found in his Son.

Now, repetition and praying for the same thing over and over is not bad, per se. It is not bad in itself. Jesus repeated some of his prayers. Remember in Gethsemane he prayed three times, "Father, if it's possible, let this cup pass from me." Paul repeated prayers, "Three times I asked that that thorn would be removed from me." So Jesus and Paul modeled repetition for us. To give you an illustration, I would expect that Christian parents would repeatedly beg God for the salvation of their children until they see an answer to that prayer. I would assume that because that is a deep ongoing burden of your heart.

So it's not that repetition is bad, it's that meaningless repetition is bad, and the idea is this, we can think about it this way: what Jesus is warning us against, what he is cautioning us against, you could look at it from a couple of different ways, is something that is very, this is just real life where we all live, speaking words of prayer while your mind is thinking about something else; when your mind and where your thoughts really are and what your words are saying are disconnected. That's not the way prayer is supposed to be. Your mind is supposed to be joined with your words in a way that makes it meaningful, that is coming from your inner man.

Or to go back to the self-example that I used in a negative way at the beginning, simply running through your prayer list when your heart is not engaged, is not meaningful prayer. You say, "But I'm just trying to be faithful." Okay, I get that but don't you see that the spirit of that is lacking? That if it's just mechanical, "God, bless So-and-so and, God, help So-and-so with their medical issues," and all of that and you're just kind of going through it in a rote way, that this is not the kind of prayer that God requires, that Jesus calls you to?

You see, beloved, what Jesus is saying here if you look at verse 8, he says, "do not be like them," don't be like those Gentiles who just babble on and on and who just repetitively say the same things over and over again without their heart being engaged. He says, "do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." You don't have to give God new information. There is no new information with God. He already has it all and so this frees you immensely. You don't need to rehearse the circumstances. You don't need to rehearse the facts with God. He's already way ahead of you on that and so save yourself the time. Prayer involves thoughtful words addressed to God, not the same words time after time, day after day, in a mechanical way.

I've illustrated it this way in the past. Suppose you had a human relationship with someone and that person spoke to you in the exact same way and in the exact same monotone approach every single time you came across him and he says to you, "Hello, Paul. How are you?" "Fine day we are having, isn't it? God bless you. Good-bye." You run into Paul the next day. "Hello, Paul. How are you?" "Fine day we're having, isn't it? God bless you. Good-bye." Day three, "Hello, Paul. How are you?" "Fine day we're having, isn't it? God bless you. Good-bye." You would get pretty sick of that pretty quick, wouldn't you? You would run to avoid that. You'd say, "There's something wrong with you. This is not human relationship. What's this mechanical approach to social intercourse? Why are you talking to me this way? You're a nut! You need help!"

Well, do you think the omniscient God of the universe who is of infinite wisdom and majesty finds any satisfaction in those who approach him in that mechanical way? If you as a fallen human being would find that not only weird but repulsive, what should we think of the way that God will look upon us when we approach him in such a mechanical way? This is not pleasing to him any more than it would be pleasing to you to have someone interact with you on that basis.

Now, look, I get the fact that this leaves us, in one sense, you can think about it this way: you say, "Well, then what is prayer to be?" And in that Christ will answer us in the verses that follow in 9 through 15, we'll spend some time, we'll spend a good measure of time to do that. What I want you to see here for today, beloved, is this and I'm going to say it one more time. I realize I'm repeating myself. I really don't care at this point. So much teaching on prayer, so many books on prayer, are calling you to simply pray longer and to be more committed to prayer and you feel guilty because you don't measure up and you haven't prayed enough time and all of that. Beloved, what I want you to see is that this is going to change your world if it has the same effect on you that it's had on me in the past, is that Jesus holds up many words – watch this, this is the heart of everything we're saying here this morning, everything hinges on this – Jesus is holding up many words as a bad example not to be followed. Do you realize that? Look at verse 7, look with me again, "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." What did Jesus say? Don't be like them. What did they do? They prayed meaningless many words and Jesus says, "That's a bad example. That's not what I want."

And it's not the first time that Scripture has said similar things. Turn back in your Bible to Ecclesiastes 5. Ecclesiastes is a book just after the book of Proverbs in your Bible. Ecclesiastes 5 and in verse 1, Solomon says, "Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil." He says, "Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few." This is astonishing and yet this is just the clear teaching of Scripture.

You see, God doesn't want long prayers simply for the sake of length, simply for the sake of you talking a lot, as if long prayers in themselves carried power with God. So we don't aim for many words, we don't aim for meaningless repetition. Sometimes maybe your prayers will be long and your heart is especially burdened and you pray for 20-30 minutes, 50 minutes, 1 ½ hours and you've lost all sense of time. Great. And you're just engaged with God that way. The difference is – here's the thing, I have to explain this so many different ways to help you get it – the point is that that 90 minutes is borne out of a sincere reality in your heart rather than holding up your watch and saying, "Let's see, I started at 9 AM, therefore I have to go to 10:30 to hit 90 minutes. Hm, it's 10:15, I need to crank out about another 15 minutes to hit the target." That's the idea. I exaggerate to make the point.

Jesus says, "Don't follow the pagans' example in their repetitious prayers." So what do you aim for? We can start it this way and I'm almost done here this morning, not that I feel like I want to be done. I want to go another hour but long preaching and long praying kind of go...yeah, that's right. Here's the thing, beloved. We'll start this today, we'll carry it on in the weeks to come. The subpoint here: purify your practice in praying, don't use meaningless repetition. What do you do, then? Do this, beloved: aim for simplicity. Aim for simplicity.

Verse 8, Jesus says, "do not be like them," don't pray the many words, "for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." You pray with simplicity, you pray with direct standard speech and you trust God to bless you. "God, you know the whole situation. You are omniscient. I know that you love me. I know that you promised to reward me so I'm going to enter all of my hope not in my length of praying but in the character of God. You are who you are. You are my God. You love me. You care about me. You're going to reward me. Therefore I don't have to impress you with what I'm doing. You're impressed with Christ and I come to you through Christ."

So you just pray in simple words. State your case and be done with it and you say, "No way." You say, "No way. It cannot possibly be that simple, that five minutes of simple direct praying could be more pleasing to God than 60 minutes I've carried out." You say, "It can't be that simple." And I say, "No." You say, "No way." And I say, "Way." Scripture teaches us this, beloved. Many of the greatest prayers and most effective prayers in the Bible were short, a single sentence. So that, think about it this way, don't expect you to have done the math, there are 150 Psalms in the Psalter in the Old

Testament, 78 of those Psalms are 12 verses or less. You could recite them in 60 seconds. 78 Psalms. The book that most teaches us to pray is marked by brevity.

Moses in Exodus, had this profound prayer when he said, "Lord, I pray You, show me Your glory." Think about the dying thief on the cross, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." The Bible ends with a three word prayer in English, "Come, Lord Jesus." Can you match the profundity of that? You can't exceed that. "Come, Lord Jesus." What is embedded in that? "Lord, this wicked world aches me. This wicked world needs to come to an end. O Lord, I see your promise. I believe your promise that you're coming again and I long for that day. Lord, come, Lord Jesus." Three words, more profound than ten billion Hail Marys.

And think about it, beloved, think about you young moms that are out there. The reality of life is that for you to get 1 – 1 ½ hours of unbroken uninterrupted time to devote yourself to prayer is just not realistic and it is wrong for a man to impose an extra-biblical obligation upon you that you are expected to meet. That's not right. So what do you do? You pray throughout your day. You pray short prayers and you're just throughout the day praying these short prayers. Going on, you develop a lifestyle of prayer even if you're not able to cultivate the long block of prayer that you've so often been taught is essential. Get to the point and be done with it and expect God to bless you according to his word.

Now, this is the baseline, this is the foundation from which we start and we grow from there. And of course, as you grow in prayer, then the time will follow, but don't start, as we said last time, don't start with a nonbiblical standard of time and say, "That's what I've got to meet." No. No, that's an entirely wrong way to think that is destructive to your spiritual well-being. What you do is you start with your thinking about the character of God and who he is, you start with Christ saying, "This is how you pray to your Father, with simplicity and brevity," and then you build from there. Over time as a marathon runner starts with short runs and then builds up over time, you start here with purity, in accordance with what Christ actually taught, and you let that build over time.

If you will take care of meditating on the character of God and focus on simplicity in your praying, beloved, I promise you that over the course of your life, the time in prayer will take care of itself. Let's focus on what Christ focused on and make that primary, not the other stuff. If you accept this and practice it, beloved, it will change your entire Christian life. Don't make prayer so complicated. God is good. Christ has covered all of your sins. Christ was the perfect prayer and the merits of even his perfect praying are counted to you in the courts of heaven so trust him, trust his word, and God will bless you in that trusting simple prayer without fail.

Let's bow together in prayer.

God, help us to pray and teach us to pray in a manner that is worthy of Christ who loved us and gave himself up for us. Amen.

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