

Heart of Prayer

January 1st, 2023

Today I want to talk to you about **The Heart of Prayer**. It's January, which means that we are entering into our month of Prayer & Fasting. In the next few weeks we are going to put added emphasis on these two very important practices.

If you have your Bibles with you (which I hope you do), open them up to Matthew 6.

Read Matthew 6:5-13 & Pray!

Big Point: *Jesus assumes his disciples will establish and grow their prayer life. This is not a "have-to"... this is a GET TO! Jesus is inviting you and I back into the secret place. A place of limitless joy, strength, hope and wisdom!*

I believe this short little passage on prayer in Matthew 6 gives us the clearest overview for prayer (communion with God) in the life of a disciple. I'd like to suggest this this passage offers

4 simple qualities of prayer:

1. **When** we pray (the assumption is that we will)
2. **Why** we pray (the perceived challenges we will face)
3. **Where** we pray (invitation to secret place)
4. **What** we pray (The wisdom and heart posture of prayer)

A. **When You Pray... Learning From Jesus**

- To be a disciple (follower, student, apprentice) of Jesus WILL include a prayer life.
- Jesus assumes you and I will embrace a lifestyle of prayer. This is not optional (not just for introverts or certain personality types). **PRAYER IS ESSENTIAL for ALL disciples.**
 - o Prayer can be simply defined to the act of communicating with God (*communing with God, i.e. unity!*), which involves both speaking and listening, as well as time spent with God in adoration, reflection, worship, and thanksgiving.

Jesus' CORRECTIONS on Prayer: Notice here that **Jesus is critiquing** some of the ways in which people prayed (*mainly, the religious leaders of his day*), but he doesn't diminish prayer! In fact, the opposite!! **Jesus ELEVATES prayer!**

- **Jesus LOVED prayer** – Jesus himself lived a prayer centered life, and Jesus actually appreciated many of the practices of the religious leaders (such as giving, prayer, fasting, worship, etc). However, he took issue with their *MOTIVES behind their practices!*
 - o **In fact, from an external viewpoint, Jesus' lifestyle actually mirrored the religious leaders in many ways (in regard to his practices). And remember, we learn from the LIFESTYLE of Jesus, not only his teaching. BOTH!**

- There is a **false assumption** among some Christians that adherence to disciplines is bad or forming spiritual habits is bad. The misconception is that anything “structured” is religious and legalistic. NOT so!
 - o **Example: 1) Scripture Reading John 5:39-40**, “*You study the scripture diligently because in them you think you have eternal life... yet you refuse to come to me.*”, **2) Attending “Church” (community) Matthew 4:23, Luke 4:16**
 - o **Spiritual Practices are GOOD**; they help us become like Jesus, but they must be submitted to his Lordship, and understand that they don’t “earn” us salvation!
- ***How does our passage start? “And when you pray...”*** Jesus expects us to center our lives on him, and one chief way we will do that as an apprentice is through prayer.

We hardly need to defend that Jesus had an extraordinary prayer life, but because of the importance of this topic, and because regular reminding is good, let's look at some examples:

Jesus Prayed: (*just a sampling!!*)

- **Mt 6:9-13, Lk 3:21, Lk 4:42, Mk 1:35, Luke 5:16, Lk 6:12, Lk 9:29, Lk 11:1, Lk 18:1, Lk 21:37-38, Lk 22:39-46, Lk 23:24,46, John 5:19, John 17, Heb 5:7-10**
 - o “*The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is **fully trained** will be like their teacher.*” **Luke 6:40**
- Dallas Willard said, “*We do not try to be like Jesus, we TRAIN to be like Jesus.*” If prayer was central to the life of Jesus, ought it be for us too? If prayer was how Jesus chose to fight his battles, shouldn't we do the same?
 - o **Jesus did not say IF you pray, he said WHEN you pray.**

B. Why you pray...

- I don't think that it takes us long to establish that prayer is important. For the most part Christians would agree on that point. But Jesus doesn't leave it there, nor should we. The goal today is not to prove that we should pray, but rather, for each one of us to take the next step(s) towards establishing and growing our prayer lives.
 - o For this reason, we need to talk a little further about motives.
 - o **In our passage, Jesus presents two false motives in prayer**; the first is the motive to be seen by others, and the second is to treat prayer as a way to get what *we want* from God by the number of words (*or perhaps their choice of words... using elegance, word formulas, etc*).
- When these things get in the way, we cease to commune with God through prayer, and our “prayers” become a performance... reducing them to self-elevation or manipulation.

False Motive #1: To be seen by others...

- “*And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners **to be seen by others**. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.*” **Matthew 6:5**

- The nature of prayer is to **see God** and **be seen by Him**. Prayer is dead when we make it about ourselves!

False Motive #2: To get what we want out of God...

- *And when you pray, do not **keep on babbling** like pagans, for they think they will be heard **because of their many words**.* **Matthew 6:7**
 - To be sure, Jesus taught on the value of persistent prayer (story of the **persistent widow** in Luke 18, as well as the **“Ask, Seek, Knock”** passage in Matthew 7).
- The motivation revealed in this warning is that we should not approach prayer to get what we want out of God, or to see our words, whether the length or substance of them, as a way to manipulate God into giving us what we want.
- First of all, as Jesus points out: God already knows (and cares) for our needs! Prayer is about trusting in GOD, not in ourselves.
 - Secondly, prayer is about learning what God wants/wills, and allowing him to transform our desires in line with his! I like how Richard Foster puts it:
 - **[PP]** *(Celebration of Discipline)* *“In prayer, real prayer, we begin to think God's thoughts after him to desire the things he desires, to love the things he loves, to will the things he wills.”*
- Remember, prayer is a GET-TO!

C. **[PP]** Where you pray...

- It was John Mark Comer who made this observation: *“Before Jesus teaches us **WHAT** to pray, he instructs us **WHERE** to pray.”*
 - **[PP]** Isn't that interesting!? *“But when you pray, **go into your room**, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.”* **Matthew 6:6**
- **Keep in mind, this is BEFORE we get to the Lords Prayer portion in which Jesus will outline what types of things we should pray about.** As in, **WHERE** comes before **WHAT!**
 - I had never considered the importance of order in this passage!
- Studying this concept of a “secret room” a little bit revealed that the space Jesus speaks about is likely an inner room within a home. According to one commentator: This room is most likely windowless, and possibly the only room in the house with a locking door.
 - The idea isn't that prayer **MUST** be done in secret (*as if praying in public or with others is wrong*), rather, Jesus is inviting us to intimate prayer with our Father.
 - Likewise, this doesn't mean that we must have a literal room to pray in, but that we have space, time and opportunity in our lives for regular alone time with God! Its an invitation to intimacy with God!!

Consider this: The Lords prayer is also recorded in Luke's gospel. Look at how it is presented.

[PP] *“One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.’ He said to them, ‘When you pray, say...’”* **Luke 11:1-2**

- Luke does not include the teachings about the secret room before his recording of the Lord's prayer, but he DOES include Jesus practicing the secret room principle!
 - o **Caught vs. Taught:** In Luke, the secret place principle is *caught*!

Why would this be so? Think of it this way. How many couples do we have here this morning? Dating couples? Engaged couples? Married couples?

- o Every couple knows the value of quality time together, right? As a couple, it is very important that you create time and space for you to connect, to have fun together, to eat good food together, etc.
- o And we all know, the space in which we spend time with someone has an impact on the connection we have. For example, if you are in a busy, loud environment it will be harder to talk. That is why when we go on dates, we usually try to pick a place that naturally lends to connection, conversation, etc.
- Couples with kids really understand this. When you have kids a new dynamic comes into play in your "dating life" – you now need to find a quiet place to date away from the noise of the kids, right? So, location matters!
 - o **So too with prayer.**

Is the "secret room" literal or figurative? I would suggest BOTH!

- I see value in having a physical space in which we regularly meet with God (i.e. kitchen table, chair in the living room, Susanna Wesley under her apron), as well as boundaries that guard this time (such as slowing down, getting to sleep early, turning off your phone).
 - o **For me, on my bike, running or at the kitchen table.**
- But the beautiful thing is, the secret place travels with us wherever we are! We can always retreat within our heart to speak with God at any point!
- **Question:** Do you have space/time in your life to be alone with God?
Side note: have you ever asked the Holy Spirit to teach you to pray?

D. *What you pray...*

Recap:

1. **When** we pray (the assumption is that we will)
2. **Why** we pray (the perceived challenges we will face, motives for prayer)
3. **Where** we pray (invitation to secret place)

So now we turn our attention to the final point, which is WHAT we pray!

Many people, including those in my generation, grew up reciting these words together at the start of the school day. That is, the Lords Prayer. Shall we read this section together? The words will go up on the screen behind me.

This, then, is **how you should pray**: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.” **Matthew 6:9-13**

Here are a couple of observations:

- **First**, Jesus actually said this is **HOW** you should pray, not **WHAT** you should pray. So I guess my section title is deceiving... because there is significance to that wording.
 - o The reason why this is important is because Jesus was not intending for this prayer to become a formula for us.
 - o We would almost like it if the lines from the Lords Prayer become a magic bullet for life’s problems, wouldn’t we? A simple incantation to ward away any bad days. Well, I am sorry to say but simply reciting these words won’t save you. That is NOT the point of the Lord’s prayer.
- This written prayer is not ridged, as in to dictate the specifics of what you pray each day. Perhaps you have an important decision to make regarding a career change, or you have a challenge to face in your marriage or with one of your kids. That is not highlighted in this prayer specifically, so I guess we shouldn’t pray about that? Again, that would be to miss the point!! Of course you can pray about that!
 - o **The heart behind the Lord’s Prayer**: Think of the Lord’s Prayer as a beautiful outline (or guide) for how to approach God in prayer. And as I would like to show you, this prayer follows the outline of the great command as well as the great commission.
- Think of the basic nutrients as outlined in a food groups chart. (i.e. you got your protein, fiber, calcium, iron, vitamins, etc).
 - o We need *protein*, but there are different ways we can get that. The best way is via a large *burger*... but you could also get protein through nuts or beans.
 - o In the same way, the Lords Prayer is a balanced outline of what a healthy prayer life looks like. We see worship, adoration, intercession, supplication, surrender, deliverance, etc. All in one beautifully crafted prayer.

A brief breakdown of this prayer (as recorded in Matthew):

- There are two sections, each section containing THREE parts.
- **PART 1: The first section grounds the prayer on God, the Father.**
 - o **“Hallowed be your name...”** Meaning, for God’s name to be acknowledged for what it truly is; Holy! *“Hallowed be thy is asking for more than reverent speech. Hallow means ‘make holy, or better (yet) ‘treat as holy, reverence’... This clause may thus express both a desire to see God truly honoured as God in the world today, and an eschatological longing for the day when all men acknowledge God as Lord.” (R.T. France)*

- This line is not in here to make God feel good (almost as if in his insecurity God was looking for a compliment). Rather, this line is in here for OUR BENEFIT, to remind us of who we are speaking to when we pray.
 - ***“Your Kingdom come...”*** This again acknowledges who God is. **He is the King.** He has come to establish his kingdom, and one day he will bring it to completion by returning to earth to set up his Kingdom and rule from his throne in Jerusalem, the city of the Great King!
 - **Luke 14:31-33...**
 - **Do we really want his Kingdom to come? Really? Then we better stop playing games and acting as if we are in charge.**
 - ***“Your will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.”*** In light of *who God is*, this is the natural response – submission! That is why it is important that we start the Lord’s Prayer here. If the goal of prayer is transformation, meaning prayer changes US and aligns our will with God’s, then a big part of how we do that is by recognizing God as the Holy King of Heaven and Earth!
- **PART 2: The second section focuses on our need(s) and recognizes God as our provider/savior/deliverer.**
 - ***“Give us today our daily bread...”*** **God is our provider.** This request right away draws our attention back to the story of God’s people, the Israelites, wandering in the dessert. God fed them there with DAILY bread from heaven.
 - The importance of “daily”: When we say yes to following Jesus he doesn’t take away all our problems. He also doesn’t give us everything we need in one massive lump sum, and thankfully not! Consider the prodigal son.
 - ***“Two things I ask of you, Lord; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.”*** Proverbs 30:8-9
 - ***“Forgive us our debts...”*** **God is our saviour.** Before a Holy God all of us should cry out, “Lord, forgive me!”. Consider Isaiah in the temple: ***“Woe is me! I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips... and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”*** (Isaiah 6:5).
 - We all need continual forgiveness from God. And good news, there is NO LIMITS on his promise to forgive us and make us clean when we ask!
 - However, there is a sobering warning. If we refuse to extend forgiveness to others who have hurt us, God will do the same to us. We are closing the chapter on 2022, but are you carrying debts of unforgiveness into this new year?
 - ***“Lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil...”*** **God is our deliverer.** To be sure, God does not lead anyone into sin! Scripture is clear that God does not tempt us (James 1:13-15). Recall if you can what I spoke about in my last sermon,

“Jesus in the Wilderness”. Remember this, that God is not the only one interested in leading you – the devil (the evil one) will happily lead anyone he can!

- The word “temptation” here refers more to a season of testing. Suppose there are a few of us in here that have resolved to eat better in 2023. Our prayer would be – “Lead us not down the candy aisle!” It’s the candy that tempts, and we ask God to direct our steps.
- Each of us has an internal GPS that is naturally set towards guiding us into temptation. We need to continually ask God to lead us on a different path, one that is FAR from temptation. But when trials and temptations come (which sadly they will), what do we do? We say, “DELIVER US!”

CONCLUSION: Look at this prayer again with both its sections. Part 1 focuses on who God is. Part 2 focuses on who we are. Its almost like we could classify these sections as ... LOVE GOD, LOVE PEOPLE.

- *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” Matthew 12:30-31*
- What if the Lords Prayer shaped our month of prayer and fasting this year?
- What if we started each day, each prayer time, by acknowledging WHO we are praying to. What if our focus was on the gift giver above the gift, the provider more that the need?

I started this sermon off with by saying that prayer should not be viewed as a have to, but as a GET TO. Jesus is inviting us into the most intimate relationship possible. He is inviting us into the secret room, a place that people like George Muller (and many others) knew so well. A place of endless joy, strength, provision, and strength!

Closet Prayer Sustains:

1. A lifetime of following Jesus.
2. Getting through hard times.
3. Community prayer.