

The Different Prayer of Jesus' Disciples. Matt. 6:1-18

Lots of People Pray

In our secular society you may sometimes miss what is obvious – that lots of people pray. Buddhists pray, Hindus pray, Muslims pray, Jews pray, and I am told even in foxholes atheists pray – although I have no confirmation of that.

Prayer is not just a Christian thing. It is still near universal as it was in the first century when our Lord first taught His disciples how to pray – as His disciples, those who came to God as Jesus revealed Him to be.

And as a near universal thing, like driving, there is lots of opportunity for people to get it wrong. So Jesus starts His teaching on prayer by contrasting the way His disciples are to pray with wrong practices of prayer in the world around them, where people can

Pray for the wrong reason vv. 5-6

Pray to the wrong God, ignorant of the true God vv. 7-8

Pray for wrong things vv. 9-13

Pray with the wrong heart, the wrong attitude – as people who are not in relationship with the true God by His grace vv. 14-15

A larger section

As you heard this teaching is part of a larger section where Jesus continues to teach His followers what the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and pharisees, the righteousness of citizens of the Kingdom He preaches, looks like. [5:20]

In this section the focus is on what we might call religious duties – giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting. In our society these may not play a big role as formal practices but Jesus' society was a religious society – like many Muslim or Buddhist countries today, and your participation in these acts was an important part of establishing a person's reputation in the community as righteous – as someone who conformed their life to God's covenant with the Jewish people.

I am going to focus on prayer today – because it continues to play such a big part of our day to day Christian lives

But two observations:

The big point of the big section is clear

Jesus states it at the beginning, before illustrating it through the practices of giving to the poor, prayer and fasting

Matthew 6: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."

What we do, the practice of our religious duties, must be done for God, our Father, trusting Him to keep us; not motivated by a desire to impress people, done to win their approval. We will look at this more in vv. 5-6.

Secondly, for Jesus and his contemporaries giving to the poor was an aspect of your duty to God. A piety without generosity to the poor was unimaginable. I think we have lost that.

Today the appeal to give to the poor is made exclusively on the horizontal plane – their rights or their need, tugging at our heartstrings – not on the vertical – this is what God requires.

But giving to the poor is about what God requires. The poor don't have to demonstrate their worthiness, or the extremity of their need. If they are poor we should know that God expects us to give to them as part of our love for Him.

That is important – for we might make judgments about the poor – not needy or worthy enough, and use that to harden our hearts to them and minimise our giving.

But you cannot make judgments about what God expects, and He commands us to give to the poor, to respect Him by respecting those made in His image.

Our motivation to give is to please Him, not to impress others,

In fact Jesus says it should be about pleasing Him alone.

*Matthew 6:*² “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing is not talking about being ignorant of your own actions, thoughtless or unplanned in your giving.

It is about not publicising, not advertising, your giving in contrast to the hypocrites who draw everyone's attention to what they are doing.

You can and should be thoughtful and intentional about your giving – make the plan, but then keep it between yourself and God

And Parents – giving is not to be so secret that you do not teach your children the duty of giving to the poor, or modelling that to them, as well as modelling that it is done for God by the way you do it without fanfare or fuss.

You don't need to share all your giving – just a sample as an example

[And giving to the poor can be personal, not institutional. It doesn't always need to go through a third party. You don't have to keep your giving a secret from the recipients, though there may be times when that is wise. It is not the poor hypocrites look to for their reward, but their peers, those whose opinion matters to them.

So reliant and removed, don't know how to give to those we know in need, fearful of demeaning them or creating dependency]

But let's think about prayer – our prayers

Why? Our motive vv. 5-6

*Matthew 6:*⁵ “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.⁶ 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.

Just as you can give with the wrong motive, so you can pray with wrong motive.

Most praying in the first century, like reading, was out loud. Whether or not people did pray on street corners or not – Jesus make His point. The motive in their praying was to impress other people, to improve their position in life by enhancing their reputation in a religious community.

They are hypocrites because they are, knowing or unknowing, play acting. Pretending to speak to God while the real audience is people.

Jesus' followers, by contrast, must pray in such a way that it is clear that the only audience of our prayers is God, that the only reason to pray is to be heard by God.

The room Jesus speaks of was probably a storeroom, the only lockable room in a Palestinian house, where the disciple could be alone, unseen, with God. Here we pray to our Father who is in secret.

True prayer is always an act of faith, speaking to the God who is in secret – the unseen God, the God who is in all places, in the hidden places.

But Jesus assures His followers that their Father hears their prayer, sees what happens in the secret place. Praying, when no one else knows, will not go unnoticed by the living God. He will reward us – hear and answer our prayers

Jesus' followers pray to be heard by God, and we look to the reward of our praying from God alone. All the value of our praying, its only motivation, is being heard by God.

This does not rule our public prayer. Jesus prayed in public as well as in private. In Acts we see the apostles and other believers often gathering for prayer [e.g. Matt. 11:25, 14:19, John 11:41-42; Acts 4:24, 12:12]. But our motive in prayer is to be heard by the living God, we are always praying to Him, not to impress or inform others of our needs or piety.

You see the prayer of the hypocrites is basically an atheistic prayer, praying where it does not matter if God is real or not. Their thoughts and desires are all focused on people, and on the benefits they can get from people.

In a community like ours, that remains a danger.

This is a reminder that if we want to be safe in praying in public, we must be diligent in praying in private. Our habit should be bringing our needs and requests to our Father in secret, so that when we do pray in public we know our hearts are looking to Him alone, that our prayers flow from a conviction that He is living and active, that He hears and answers, prayers that honour Him by conforming to the truth He has revealed about Himself.

There are other ways of being an atheist in prayer.

People who advocate prayer because of its effect on you – you pray because of its calming effect, or that sense of inner peace it brings.

Those who liken prayer to meditation, where its benefit is emptying your mind of the stresses of the day

Those are basically atheistic attitudes to prayer, prayer done where God's involvement is irrelevant, and people who pray for those reasons have their reward – that calming or peace and that is all.

And at least in my experience they are out of touch with the reality of the experience of praying. Sometimes it is just exhausting, something that you have to work at, that takes energy. You come in desperate and needy, and you leave desperate and needy, but knowing you have been heard by your heavenly Father, and trusting Him to answer.

But your experience might be different

Jesus' followers pray to be heard by God our Father – and that is why the prayer Jesus teaches is both simple, direct, and full of requests

The living God doesn't need flattery, or information, or direction

But some people pray wrongly because they are ignorant of the true god and are praying to false gods, gods who are dead, who neither see nor hear nor act in the world.

So just as the prayers of Jesus' people are to differ from the hypocrites, so they are to differ from those of Gentiles, idolaters.

How? Praying to the true God vv. 7-8

*Matthew 6:*⁷ “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. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

The pagans thought they needed to get their gods attention. Remember the antics of the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel when they were doing battle with Elijah? [1 Kings 18]

So they would string together the names of god, have long prayers full of flattery of the gods, to gain their attention and interest. They were trying to impress by the volume of their devotion.

And they thought they needed to inform their gods of the circumstances, and what they specifically wanted the gods to do.

But Jesus' followers pray to the living and true God. He knows what we need before we ask Him.

Calling God Father, as Jesus teaches His followers to do, should not make us forgetful of His awesome reality. You heard something of God's greatness in Psalm 139

Listen to Psalm 139

Psalm 139: O LORD, you have searched me and known me!

² *You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.*

³ *You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.*

⁴ *Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.*

⁵ *You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.*

⁶ *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high; I cannot attain it.*

⁷ *Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?*

⁸ *If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!*
⁹ *If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.
¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,"
¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.*

He knows us through and through, for He made us.

Before a word is on our tongue – before we have formulated our request, He knows it.

Our Father is almighty and all knowing, He is of infinite wisdom and power, present everywhere and over all

And He knows what we need – He knows what is best for us, and as a good Father will give it to us even when that is not what we are asking for.

Our prayers are not about informing God of our circumstances, as if He didn't know.

And they are not about directing God about what He should do for us.

Both dishonour the living God.

Our prayers, as we will see, are about asking God for help,

Don't confuse informing people of what is going on with praying to the Almighty God

Our prayers are about asking God, bringing our need to Him, trusting Him to know best how to answer

Some will say – if He knows already, why are we asking Him, why pray at all?

We are His creatures and His children, and HE wills that we receive and know His goodness through prayer, through asking Him

That we should come to Him for what He promises to receive it from His hand.

That we treat Him as He is – a person, not an almighty vending machine.

Prayer is the expression of a relationship, a relationship of humble dependence on our Father

It is not about getting what you want out of the universe, just another way of you being in charge, the centre of your world.

Parents often know what their children need before they ask, but they still want to be asked. Few parents, when their children come asking for food are taken by surprise and have to race out to the shops.

But expecting and making the children ask strengthens the relationship – the child grows in knowledge of his or her parents reliability and trustworthiness

And asking reinforces the parameters of the relationship – the authority as well as the responsibility of the parent, in this case to ensure a healthy diet and teach self-control

God wills His children ask Him for what He knows they need, and He wills they ask in ways that show they know He is the almighty, all knowing God

Who cares for His people

They don't have to pile on the words to get His attention

Jesus says the living God is known as, and can be called upon by His followers, as our Father.

What? The prayer of the poor in spirit vv. 9-13

Matthew 6: ⁹ Pray then like this:

*“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.*

*¹⁰ Your kingdom come,
your will be done,*

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread,

*¹² and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

*¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.*

He is committed to Jesus' disciples, those who have responded to Jesus summons to repent and believe that God's reign has come with Him, God's King

Believer, do you let yourself reflect on the wonder of calling the living, almighty, holy and just God, 'Our Father'

Speaks of affection and authority

Source and sustainer of our life, the one whose word, like first century fathers, rules His household. But it is not the rule of a distant tyrant.

We can approach our God with confidence, knowing we can rely in His interest in us and affection towards us.

Hard to find a comparison to bring home the greatness of this privilege

His greatness to ours – a speck of dust to Mt Everest

His power to ours – a spark to the sun

His holiness to our sinfulness – no comparison, like light and dark – one excludes the other

When Isaiah was brought into the presence of the holy God, saw the train of His robe filling the temple he said Woe is me, for I am lost

Yet we trusting the Lord Jesus, believing He has died for our sins and risen again, we can call this true and living holy God – our Father

Reminder this is a prayer only for believers, only for those adopted as God's children through faith in Jesus [John 1:12, Gal. 4:4-7, Romans 8:14-17]

And it is for all believers

Communal – our. It is not a prayer pre-occupied with self, but prayed conscious that we are each of us part of a family of believers, and bringing the needs of our brothers and sisters to God along with our own.

Think about the **Prayer as a whole**

Direct

Simple

All requests – six, carefully structured – the first three looking for God to fulfill His purposes in the world, the next three bringing before God what we need to keep living as His children, as Jesus' followers, in the world

Comprehensive – all our longings and all our needs can find a place in this prayer

Jesus does not teach here all there is about prayer – no confession, no thanks

But it is the core that embodies and expresses what Jesus has just taught – prayer as looking to God for what we need, that only makes sense where God is, where God hears, and where God is active in the world to save and keep His people

These requests tell us this is a prayer for the poor in Spirit – for the desperate and dependent, those who know the world is not as it should be and only God can set it right, and who know they depend on Him for life, for relationship, and for living as a disciple of Jesus and coming to the realisation of their hope.

It is both a Model, and a prayer that can be prayed in its own right alone and together, for it expresses all the Jesus' people long for and need as we wait now the revealing of the Son in glory.

Look at each of the phrases – danger is always that I will say too much

Danger is real, For this is a prayer I have prayed every day for forty years now.

The Lord here gave me the words to find my way back to relating to our heavenly Father after a really dry patch

And then it became the structure of my praying

Hallowed be your name [Ezekiel 36:23, 38:16, 39:7]

Hallow means sanctify, and we are asking God to sanctify His name, to cause people to treat His revelation of Himself as holy – distinct, separate

What does that look like – Ezekiel shows us

Ezekiel 36:²³ And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.

ESV 'vindicate the holiness' – LXX sanctify, make holy

God to act to show His reality in the world, that He is the God He has revealed Himself to be, the only God. In Ezekiel 36 God promises to do that – by saving His people and making them a holy people who do His will from the heart through the new life He gives them by His Spirit [36:23-27]. And in Ezekiel 38-39 God says He will show the holiness of His name through defeating the proud, those who would oppress His people.

That is what we are asking God to do in the world – to save and judge

But we are also asking the Lord to sanctify His name in our hearts

To move us to believe all He says of Himself, to rely on His promises and tremble at His warnings, and to cause us to live as His holy people.

And notice – this is the first request, the first desire, of Jesus' followers – the honour, the glory of our Father

Your Kingdom come

We long now for the full revelation of the Kingdom, the reign of God, being preached by Jesus

That Kingdom Jesus teaches in his parables [Matthew 13:31-33 Parable of leaven, of mustard seed] is growing and spreading now in the world, and will be one day revealed in glory with the revealing of the glory of Jesus at His return.

So this is a prayer that Jesus – reign now through His word, but especially that our Father would bring the day when the Lord Jesus returns and every knee bow to Him.

To be a disciple is to be always longing for and looking for the future fulfillment of all that God has promised, to be longing for the establishment of justice and righteousness in the world

Not content with the way the world is now

Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven

There is a sense in which God's will is always done, but there is also a sense that at the moment His will, His righteous and holy law, is ignored, rejected and despised

Jesus disciples confess that God's will is best – for all, and we want it perfectly obeyed as it is in heaven, that the time will come when disobedience and rebellion is no more

And we want the granting of this prayer to start with us.

When you are praying this you are saying like Jesus in the garden – not my will, but yours be done – now, in my life

This is a prayer for grace to each day deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus

That God would so work in you that you would willingly do those things you know He commands you to and which you don't want to do.

Love that difficult person at work

Stay committed to that hurting spouse

Curtail your own freedoms to be there for your needy friend

Give us today our daily bread

Jesus first hearers were mainly day labourers. Jesus is teaching them that they can look to their Father for what they need to sustain their lives and can turn confidently to Him. That the almighty God cares for them, that the One who rules the universe can be bothered with what we need each day

Praying this prayer we are acknowledging our dependence on our Father for what we need, our recurring needs. He is not upset when we come and ask Him again the next day for that day's bread

And that we can have Confidence in Him for all our needs in an uncertain world in Him – whether that is for work, or a place to live,

But Jesus teaches us to pray for our needs, not greeds

And for us who have so much it is a reminder that all we have is From Him, and a place to pray that we would use it well, and that through His generosity to us we might be the means of providing for others

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors

This is a reminder that this is the prayer of those who are poor in spirit. Not praying this prayer because we are good, or deserve to belong to God's family

Debt a metaphor for sin, and here is an opportunity to both confess our sin, and remember that we are in God's family because of His mercy to the undeserving

We need God to keep us in relationship with Him by continuing always to us His grace

Debt is also a metaphor for sin that reminds us that there is a cost to forgiving. A forgiven debt is money forgone, that we will never see again.

A forgiven sin means that we have farewelled for ever the right to vindication, to exact punishment

And even in the prayer we are reminded that to rely on grace and mercy is to practice relationships of grace and mercy

It can't be grace for us, justice for them

Forgiveness for us, but they must pay the price of their wronging us

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from [the] evil [one]

Testing – an admission of our frailty. Those who are poor in spirit have no false confidence in their own strength. They know their weakness, and their need to be protected and preserved by their Father on their journey through life to our heavenly goal

Every day we turn to Him to keep us

To be the God of Psalm 103, who has compassion on His frail children

*Psalm 103: ¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.*

*¹⁴ For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.*

It is a prayer that asks for a positive through a negative, that the Lord would lead us in the path of obedience

That with testing He would show us the way of escape

And Jesus' followers are conscious that we are in a spiritual battle – the evil one, and that he is too strong for us on our own

When you are facing what seems overwhelming, when it just seems to hard

Whether it is that struggle with sexual temptation, or with envy, or with anger

Jesus teaches us to turn to our heavenly Father.

He won't rebuke us for our weakness, for our lack of internal resources.

We can rely on our Father to keep and protect us

At the end of the prayer Jesus emphasises what He has said about forgiveness in v. 12

As: Children of the Father vv. 14-15 [5:43-48, Matt. 18:21-33]

Matthew 6: ¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Jesus is emphasizing that this is only a prayer for the poor in Spirit, those who are in the family of God by His gracious mercy

To be in that family is to be forgiven and forgiving

It is be like our Father, to show the family character, desire and attitude

Our Father loves His enemies and does good to them.

He welcomes the spiritually bankrupt and forgives

You cannot be in His family unless you embrace His way of relating, a way of relating that expresses who He is – merciful and gracious

To not forgive is to repudiate Him, to despise His character, to say that your justice, your honour, matters more than His

People sometimes look at these verses and Debate precedence and conditionality. Can we only be forgiven if we have first forgiven? And have I remembered all the sins of others against me that I should forgive? It is a pathway to anxiety

This is not about earning forgiveness by forgiving

As Matthew 18 makes clear

It is about sharing the family attitude and values – which you must if you are going to pray ‘our Father’

And if you do, you will forgive the repentant

May be you know you are struggling with forgiveness, with forgiving someone who is unrepentant. Forgiveness is not the issue – pray instead for their repentance 5:44, repent of bitterness and a desire for revenge, and you will show the family likeness by asking for grace to love your enemy.

Pray the Lord’s Prayer

Be disciples of Jesus in your praying

Use it – believer in Jesus this is your prayer

Bring your desires and needs to your Father as Jesus has taught you – with these words or using the prayer as a model for your praying

Let it discipline your heart before God, and orient you to His glory and the fulfilment of His purposes in His Son – every day

To be given this gift – and neglect it

Be like being given the PM’s private number and then filling in contact forms at your local members website

Don’t be be too proud or lazy

Prayerless, dry, feel distanced by the consciousness of your sin – use it as the way back

Teach it

Making disciples of your children – realise that you are bringing them up as believers

Part of the catechism

Teaching them about God, about the wonder of the work of Jesus, about our privilege as believers

Honour God by conforming your public praying to this directness and simplicity, an expression of the truth about our God

Rejoice that in believing in Jesus, adopted as God’s child through faith in Him, you are heard by your heavenly Father, the eternal God