

Praying in the Presence of the Father

Matthew 6:5-8

Introduction – Our motivation for everything we do matters. We saw in vv 1-4 that if we do good deeds to be seen by men, we have our reward. God sees our hearts in our acts of charity, and He sees our hearts when we pray. Many people like ‘being religious’ especially when others notice and approve. But this is just another form of idolatry, and God hates it. Sin is not simply found in the actions. Sin is a state of heart. Because of this, sin can follow us into the very presence of God.

Here is the first teaching on prayer recorded by Matthew. And the first topic on prayer Jesus addresses is a warning against hypocrisy. We should pay close attention.

“When”, not “If” – Jesus assumes that His disciples will be praying. “Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving;”- Col 4:2. “Pray without ceasing”-1 Thess 5:17. Jesus Himself “...often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.”- Luke 5:16. Martin Luther said, “As it is the business of tailors to make clothes, and of cobblers to mend shoes, so it is the business of Christians to pray.” This is the purpose for putting on the whole armor of God (Eph 6:10-20). We must grow in our understanding and belief that prayer is a work, like pushing a rock up a hill, or like taking the next hill.

The Secret Place of Prayer (vv5-6) – Like so much of the Sermon on the Mount, we must guard against rash application.

Public Praying – The broader teaching of Scripture shows us that Jesus was not condemning all public prayers. He prayed in public (John 11:41), as did the disciples (Acts 1:14, 3:1).

Hypocritical Praying – A hypocrite is one who assumes a character which does not belong to him. Our temptation is to forget the One we are addressing and start speaking to those around us. This can happen when we pray in the worship service, or at restaurants. ‘Prayer’ is especially suspect when it takes place in the end-zone on TV or on the steps of the Capitol in front of CNN cameras.

‘Secret Praying’ – Our lives should be filled with secret praying, when and where no one else knows. And in public, our prayers should be times when we are speaking, and others are praying silently, but our conscious thoughts are upon the very presence of God. As we practice ‘written prayers’, we are standing against the lie that the spontaneous is superior. But we must carefully guard against motivations to ‘showboat’ or be ‘heart-warming’ to all listening. In addition, we must not hide our prayers for fear of what men might say or do (Dan 6:10).

Vain Repetition (v7) – All over the world, there are examples of vain repetition, from prayer wheels, prayer beads, and prayer journeys, to mindless mantras and ‘Hail Mary’s’. But this is not to say that all repetition is bad. Psalm 136 is an example, as is Psalm 119, where David says “teach me Thy statutes” seven times.

Mathematical Praying – The repetition is vain when it is focused on the length, the form, or the number, rather on to Whom you are praying.

Battalgeo – This greek word also means babbling, or chattering. We must not be rash in our speech to God (Ecc 5:2 – “Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few”), and we should learn to be careful what we say.

‘Speaking in Tongues’ – With all due respect to our charismatic brothers and sisters, what is today called speaking in tongues is not the extraordinary gift of languages given to the first-century Church. This was the fulfillment of a prophecy of judgment upon unbelieving Israel when the Holy Spirit was to be poured out upon all nations (1 Cor 14:20-22, Is 28:11-12). What occurs today is much closer to this word, battalgeo. The problem with ‘tongue-speakers’ today is not that they speak in tongues, but that they do not.

Your Father Knows (v8) - God sees your heart when you pray. Not only that, He knew what your need was before you ever brought it to Him. Prayer is not a method of informing God of anything.

‘So why bother?’ – First, because our Father *commands* us. Second, because it is *our Father* who commands this, and if we understand this passage, we will understand this not only as a divine command, but as a royal invitation. This is God’s appointed means to bring blessing to us, honor and glory to Him, and to constantly acknowledge our complete dependence upon Him for everything – something we so quickly forget.