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Becoming Pray-ers
Matthew 6:5-15
May 18th, 2014, Jeff Germs

Last week we took a look at Jesus' teaching on becoming generous givers from Matthew 6:1-4. We saw that the whole passage was about the attitude of the heart. The Pharisees loved to do their good works and their giving for show. They weren't thinking about God or even about the recipients of their gifts. Their only concern was for their reputation. "Look at me. See how generous I am." Hence, Jesus called them hypocrites, or play actors. These religious people had the look of piety, or spirituality, but they were simply wearing masks. Inside their hearts were dark, and their motives were to manipulate both God and people. They did the good things they did in order to receive the applause of men.

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And they got it. But, Jesus said, that's all they got. They received no reward from God. They wanted applause as their reward and God complied. We also saw that it is God's desire to transform us into givers like he is a giver.

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When God gave he expected nothing in return. He gave everything. He gave his very life before we did anything to deserve it. **That is how God wants us to give.**

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Romans 5:8 (NLT)

^a But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.

So, God is in the process of changing our hearts so that we can love like he loves. Our problem though is that we will **do** on the outside what we **are** on the inside.

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And on the inside, in our sinful nature, we are not very pretty. We can put on a real show on the outside and people will think we are beautiful people when on the inside we are ugly as sin. And **unless we, through the power of the Holy Spirit, deal with that ugliness, we will act out of it, because that is what we are** (Matthew 12:33-37). That means that we are going to have to allow God to do an extreme makeover in our hearts and minds because we do not naturally love people we think don't deserve to be loved.

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In Matthew 6:3 in the passage we looked at last week, Jesus said, ***³ But when you give to someone in need, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.***

We don't think about which hand to brush our teeth with. The left hand doesn't argue with the right hand trying to vie for control. We just do it. It's as natural for us as breathing.

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God wants to get us to the place where the acts of righteousness or the good deeds that we do are just as natural as breathing, eating, and sleeping, so they become a regular part of who we are, so that we don't do these things because we are being watched. We do them because God has transformed our hearts so we think like he thinks, so we see people the way he sees them, so we act in ways that he would act. He has essentially given us the same character as Christ, the greatest giver who ever lived. We do acts of righteousness because that is what the gospel of Jesus does. That is where he wants to lead us as Christ-followers.

And that's where prayer comes in because the process that God is taking us through is a spiritual exercise. It is not merely an exercise of the will. It certainly is going to take an act of our will as we cooperate with him, but we will never be able to change who we are on our own strength to the point where we can love in the way that God wants us to love, because our heart motives are always self directed -- until we give up control to the Spirit of Jesus in us.

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That means that **we are going to have to learn to trust God, and become totally dependent on His Spirit, surrendering to him as he does his work in us. That is why prayer is so important.** And it's why we need to become pray-ers who recognize that if we are going to become the people that God intended us to be we are going to have to continually humble ourselves before God in prayer so that he can lift us up in due time.

Between today and next week we are going to take a look at this next section in which Jesus teaches his disciples how to **not** to pray and then how **to** pray. So, today, let's see what Jesus had to say about how not to pray. Next week we'll deal with how to pray.

So, if you're not there already, turn to Matthew 6:5-18. Now, Jesus says some similar things in this passage on prayer as he did in the first four verses on giving. His words are a warning for us to make sure that we do not posture ourselves with a superficial outward piety designed for the purpose of looking more spiritual than we really are, which is always a temptation when we pray or do anything publicly. I have to struggle with this every Sunday in my role as your Lead Pastor. It's a battle. And I have to surrender myself to the will of Jesus every Sunday.

The super religious people in Jesus day would go to great lengths to make sure that their prayers were long, flowery, and impressive to listen to. And, perhaps, those who were within earshot were impressed and put them on a pedestal because they did have the *appearance* of holiness in their prayers and in their other acts of righteousness. But, again, Jesus said that if that is the motivation behind their prayers then that is all the reward they will get. Their motive was to gain applause. And they got what they wanted.

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6 But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

Now, just as with giving, Jesus' point here is **not** that we should never pray in public. That is very obvious because both he and his disciples prayed often in public. His point again is the question of our heart attitude, or our motive for praying.

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We have to always remember that **Jesus sees through our actions, and sticks His probe into our hearts to find the motive of our actions.**

Jesus was saying that these people who looked so pious with their long-winded prayers were not, in fact, what they seemed. They were actually not even talking to God at all. They were talking to those whom they were trying to impress. Again, they were like play actors on a stage putting on a show, trying to get a round of applause for a great performance.

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So, the point here is **when you pray, pray to an Audience of One.** Whether you are praying alone, or with your family, or in a church service, or in your Life Group, pray to the God who hears you. Just as in the act of giving, praying should be like breathing to us. It should be something that is so natural that we don't even know we are doing it sometimes. We become so aware of the presence of Jesus at all times that we break into a conversation with him just as naturally as we breathe. At times like that it doesn't matter who is there, we are in secret, with God, who knows our hearts. And because our hearts are postured towards God, he hears us and responds.

Some of the most refreshing prayers that I have heard are from new believers who are not trying to be pretentious. They have never prayed out loud before and so they just talk to God like they would talk to another person. "Hi...um, God, we've never formally met so let me introduce myself to you. My name is Jeff..." And then they go on to have a conversation. There is no pretence. That is how we should pray. Just talk to God. And learn to listen. As with any good conversation, by definition, it is a two-way discourse, not one-way.

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7 "When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again.

When we talk to God we don't have to sound all pious and verbose. Just talk to him like he is right beside you. There are a lot of misconceptions about what prayer really is. Sometimes we think that we need to pray to try and twist God's arm to do something that he doesn't want to do. There are some people who pray and think that they need to pray with a certain amount of intensity in their voice and say the right kinds of magic words in order for God to hear and answer.

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Let me read a quote from a commentary by Myron S. Augsburger:

"Prayer is opening one's life to God. It is inviting Him to act in our lives. Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance, it is being willing to accept His will in our lives. Prayer moves the hand of God by giving Him the moral freedom to do in our lives what He has been wanting to do. God, in His sovereign practice, does not impose His will upon us.

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Consequently, He can function in our lives in accordance with the degree of freedom we surrender to Him. Prayer is therefore relational; it is not merely a psychological exercise of self-fulfillment, nor is it a mental review of God's principles, nor is it coercing God; rather, it is a free personality inviting the Personage of heaven to share with us.¹

So, to put it simply, when we pray we are inviting God into our situation and asking Him to do what His will is for us. Prayer is getting to know God's heart, and then allowing him in to do what he wants to do. It's an exercise in trust. Too many times we go to God with our agenda. Our hearts are closed to any change he might want to make in us. Our minds are made up already and we are simply trying to twist his arm to do what we want. The problem with that kind of posture is that we aren't open to really listen to him. We think we know the answer already and we think that if we are forceful enough, or if we get enough people to beseech him, or if we pray long enough he can be swayed to our way of thinking. That is not prayer. It is coercion, manipulation, and idolatry. It's making God into our own image instead of letting him transform us into his.

¹ Augsburger, Myron S., *The Communicators Commentary*. Word Books, Publisher. Waco Texas. 1982, pg. 86

We pray in order to get to know God in similar ways that we would get to know a friend. We spend time with Him in honest, open communication (John 15).

David, in the Psalms was very practised at this kind of honest, open prayer.

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Psalm 139:23–24 (NLT)

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. 24 Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.

If we are serious about letting God change us we need to purposefully give God permission to do so.

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Matthew 6:5–18 (NLT)

5 “When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. 6 But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. 7 “When you pray, don’t babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. 8 Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!

We don’t have to coerce God, or try to get his attention. He is paying attention more than we are. It’s we who get distracted by all the busyness of life so we forget God. He never forgets us. He never puts us on the shelf. He is waiting for us to slow down enough to spend time with him so that we can get to know just how much he loves us and wants to be with us.

We can get so busy doing so many things, and many of those things can even be good things, but we forget God in the process.

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There’s a story in the book *Chicken Soup for the Soul* about a little girl named Schia. When Schia was 4 years old, her baby brother was born. “Little Schia began to ask her parents to leave her alone with the new baby. They worried that she might want to hit or shake him, so they said no.” Over time, though, since Schia wasn’t showing signs of jealousy, they changed their minds and decided to let Schia have her private conference with the baby. “Elated, Schia went into the baby’s room and shut the door, but it opened a crack—enough for her curious parents to peek in and listen.

They saw little Schia walk quietly up to her baby brother, put her face close to his, and say, ‘Baby, tell me what God feels like. I’m starting to forget.’”

Isn’t that great. Let’s remember to take the time to regularly spend with Jesus. Let’s develop a rhythm of turning our thoughts and hearts towards him so that our minds are open to hear from him.

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For the remainder of the morning I would like us to have some silent corporate prayer following the acronym A.C.T.S. **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanksgiving, **S**upplication. I will lead you through each section and then we will all pray silently, putting out all distracting thoughts and simply spend time with Jesus. And this is a model that you can follow in your personal prayer time with Jesus as well.

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ADORATION

Sometimes the best way to do this is through the Psalms.

Psalm 100 (NLT)

1 Shout with joy to the Lord, all the earth! 2 Worship the Lord with gladness. Come before him, singing with joy. 3 Acknowledge that the Lord is God! He made us, and we are his. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture. 4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving; go into his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and praise his name. 5 For the Lord is good. His unfailing love continues forever, and his faithfulness continues to each generation.

In the quietness of your heart praise God for who he is.

CONFESSION

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Confession is something we don’t do enough of and yet the Bible tells us to confess our sins, not only to God, but to each other.

James 5:16 (NLT)

16 Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.

1 John 1:8–9 (NLT)

8 If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. 9 But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.

Psalm 139:23–24 (NLT)

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. 24 Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.

Take a minute or so and confess your sins and shortcomings quietly to God.

THANKSGIVING

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Psalm 92:1–5 (NLT)

1 It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to the Most High. 2 It is good to proclaim your unfailing love in the morning, your faithfulness in the evening, 3 accompanied by the ten-stringed harp and the melody of the lyre. 4 You thrill me, Lord, with all you have done for me! I sing for joy because of what you have done. 5 O Lord, what great works you do! And how deep are your thoughts.

Spend a minute or so thanking God for what he has done, what he is doing, and, in faith, what he is going to do.

SUPPLICATION

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Psalm 86:1–3 (NLT)

1 Bend down, O Lord, and hear my prayer; answer me, for I need your help. 2 Protect me, for I am devoted to you. Save me, for I serve you and trust you. You are my God. 3 Be merciful to me, O Lord, for I am calling on you constantly.

Take some time now and call out to God. Plead for your own needs. Plead on behalf of others. Pray for the church. Pray for whatever comes to your mind.

Let's pray the Lord's Prayer together before the worship team comes up.

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Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen



Objective of this study: To grow in our prayer life.

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Spend five minutes in silent prayer asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
2. After the five minutes of silence have someone interrupt the silence and read Psalm 62 meditatively to the group. (after each phrase pause and let the Lord speak to you before reading the next)
3. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Welcome (5 – 10 minutes)

What makes a good conversation?

Word (20 - 30 minutes)

1. What stood out for you from the sermon?
2. Read Matthew 6:5-13.
3. What things does Jesus warn us about? How do these things interfere with real communication with God?
4. What do you think Jesus' point is in verse 6 about praying in private?

Work (30 - 40 minutes)

For the remainder of the time pray together using the acronym A.C.T.S. Make sure that before each section you have a moment of silence in which you posture your heart to simply listen to the Spirit of Jesus. Have someone in the group read the scripture, have a moment of silence and then as you are led by the Spirit pray together.

Psalm 59:9 (NIV)

O my Strength, I watch for you; you O God, are my fortress, my loving God.

Adoration

Psalm 100 (NLT)

¹ Shout with joy to the Lord, all the earth! ² Worship the Lord with gladness. Come before him, singing with joy. ³ Acknowledge that the Lord is God! He made us, and we are his. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture. ⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving; go into his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and praise his name. ⁵ For the Lord is good. His unfailing love continues forever, and his faithfulness continues to each generation.

In the quietness of your heart praise God for who he is.

Confession

Confession is something we don't do enough of and yet the Bible tells us to confess our sins, not only to God, but to each other.

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Thanksgiving

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Spend a minute or so thanking God for what he has done, what he is doing, and, in faith, what he is going to do.

Supplication

Psalm 86:1–3 (NLT)

¹ Bend down, O Lord, and hear my prayer; answer me, for I need your help. ² Protect me, for I am devoted to you. Save me, for I serve you and trust you. You are my God. ³ Be merciful to me, O Lord, for I am calling on you constantly.

Psalm 62:8 (NIV)

Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.

Take some time now and call out to God. Plead for your own needs. Plead on behalf of others in your group. Pray for the church. Pray for whatever comes to your mind. If someone has a pressing need gather around them and lift them up in prayer.

Finally, pray the Lord's Prayer together to wrap up the evening.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory. forever and ever. Amen

HOMEWORK

1. Use ACTS in your devotional time this week as you spend time with Jesus.
2. Read the sermon and highlight things that hit your heart about prayer. Tell the group about it next week.
- 3.