



Why Pray? - January 19, 2020

OPEN

Why pray? Perhaps the more pressing question is *how* to pray. Deep down, we know already that we should reach out to God in prayer.

A sign states: “Prayer is the best way to meet the Lord. Trespassing is faster.”

Timothy Keller was impressed by the intense longing found in the prayer journal of American writer Flannery O’Conner. In his book [Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy With God](#) (Penguin, 2014) Keller writes, “At the end of one entry, she simply called out, ‘Can’t anyone teach me how to pray?’ Millions of people today are asking the same question. There is a sense of the necessity of prayer – we *have* to pray. But how?” (12-13)

In Luke 11:1 the desperate disciples implored Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Thankfully, in response we now have the “Lord’s Prayer”. This prayer is found in Luke 11 and Matthew 6. We are going to focus Matthew 6, which is set in the context of “The Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5,6,7).

With one exception, our series of sermons “Teach Us To Prayer” will use the outline found in the online resource, [The Prayer Course](#). This course comes out of 24-7 Prayer which started in 1999. Our local partnership in the same spirit of strategic prayerfulness is [Pray Ridge Meadows](#).

But before we get to strategies and partnerships, it is very important that we understand the essential nature of prayer. There is much to consider, even in the introduction to the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus gave us both alerts and advice concerning prayer in Matthew 6:5-9a.

DIG

At the start of the chapter Jesus warned those listening to His sermon to “be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others.” (Matthew 6:1) Human nature being what it is, the ritualism of the First Century Judaism had expanded to unfortunate extremes. And this applied to prayer, so Jesus presented **four alerts**.

- ***Be alert to your appearance - verse 5a***

The first caution concerns prayer as a performance. The religious leaders loved to put their praying on display in the synagogue and on the street corner.

Why? So that they might be seen by others or (lit.) “appear” (fanwsin). First Century Roman statesman Cicero said, *esse quam videri* – which means, “to be rather than to appear.”

- ***Be alert to your appeal - verse 5b***

Another alert concerns an appeal for immediate results to our prayers. When this happens we are not praying towards the big picture of God’s Kingdom. That the pharisees “have their reward in full” suggests that the demanding will not experience God’s long-term blessing. They got their desire – an impressive religious display.

- ***Be alert to your authenticity - verse 7***

Notice that “meaningless repetition” and “many words” do not increase the effectiveness of prayer. Jesus is not in any way discounting faithfulness and diligence in prayer. But our praying must be authentic – Jesus is not asking for meaningless quantity of prayer. Perhaps the disciples saw the hypocrisy and hungered for real prayer.

- ***Be alert to your agenda - verse 8***

If God already knows what we need already, why pray? This verse alerts us to the danger of thinking that God’s work is activated by our agenda. This does not mean we should not have a compelling expectation of God. But we are in danger if we think our information and directions prayed to God will elicit a greater response from Him.

Corrie Ten Boom said, “The wonderful thing about praying is that you leave a world of not being able to do something and enter God’s realm where everything is possible.” Does one or more of these alerts resonate with you? Obviously, we do not have a pharisaical system to navigate. But this does not mean that we are free from the dangers of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness.

Having shared these important prayer alerts, Jesus also offered specific advice for prayer. Imagine if Jesus jumped immediately to His prayer without any caution or instruction. His disciples could have defaulted to performance-based praying, just like the religious hypocrites of their day. Instead, Jesus provided some essential **prayer advice** that, if taken to heart, will transform our praying in two ways.

- ***From duty to delight - verse 6***

In this verse we are advised to make a change from performing prayer to an experience of being in God’s presence. When this is true, no spectators are required! This is like the girl who was mumbling while saying her bedtime prayer. When her mother said, “I can’t hear you” the girl replied, “I wasn’t talking to you!” We must move away from seeking to advance our spiritual

standing in front of others! Thus, we should “pray in secret” – this doesn’t rule out corporate prayer gatherings – but it does speak to our heart attitude.

God wants to move us away from *ritualism* to usher us into the deeper place of *relationship*. Notice the reward mentioned in verse 6. It is fundamentally the presence of God – even before His power is displayed in or to us.

I recommend [Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home](#) by Richard Foster (HarperOne, 1992). Foster writes that God “aches over our distance and preoccupation. He mourns that we do not draw near to Him. He grieves that we have forgotten Him....He is inviting you...to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created.” (1)

- ***From desperate to depending - verse 9a***

Do you ever feel like you are flailing – like those wacky inflatables? This a life of desperation and anxiety. But Philippians 4:5-7 commands confident dependence: *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

Obviously, verse 9a launches us into Jesus pattern for true prayer. Over the next eight sermons we are going to see a wonderful expression of moving from desperation to dependence. When our prayers are panicked, performance we miss the point of praying entirely. God invites us into a place that includes awe *and* intimacy!

As Timothy Keller wrote, “To fail to pray, then is not to merely break some religious rule – it is a failure to treat God as God.”

REFLECT

Why must we pray? In a word, to obey. But there is so much more in how God longs to relate to us, care for us, and show Himself sufficient for everything that we face. Why would we neglect prayer and forfeit His help?

Listen to [session one of the Prayer Course](#).