

Pray Like This (Week 1) - How Not to Pray Sermon Summary

We'll be spending time with The Lord's Prayer over the next month and a half, but before diving directly into it, we used the first Sunday of this new series talking through its other clear purpose when Jesus teaches it in Matthew 6: it is not just about how to pray, but also about how not to.



1. You find the deficient way to pray identified by Jesus in Matthew 6.5-6. Jesus calls this kind of prayer "hypocritical."

You could summarize what it's like as follows: "Jesus calls this kind of prayer 'hypocrisy.' In the language of the New Testament, ancient Greek, that word signifies something that is phony or hollow, something showy but superficial, something that feigns substance while being insubstantial. As noted by James Muholland, who has written one of the better books on The Lord's Prayer entitled, 'Praying Like Jesus – The Lord's Prayer in a Culture of Prosperity,' that word 'hypocrisy' literally means 'playacting,' that is, to be an actor in a work of fiction, when by willful choice or social constraint you pray that which is detached from or devoid of your true self. You are praying what sounds good or what you think you're expected to say, but that which amounts to no more than spiritual noise. This is prayer as make believe."

Which means Jesus wants to reflect on questions like the following regarding our prayer life: "Are our prayers as full and diverse as our lives? Or are we just pretending? Are they as disjointed and discombobulated, as joyous and frustrated, as thankful and downcast, as we are? Or are they curated and curtailed, and as such, at least a little bit counterfeit? This is Jesus' first warning about how not to pray."

2. Jesus' 2nd way not to pray focuses on how non-Jews in His day did it (but also reflects how we - even in churches - come at prayer). At root, this flawed form of prayer could be described as follows: "Ancient pagan prayer was a 'quid pro quo' activity: you do for your God so that your God would do for you. You made promises and took oaths so your God would find you on his or her divine radar screen and act on your behalf; you offered agricultural, animal, and/or monetary sacrifices so that your God would be persuaded, the bigger your need, the larger the necessary appeasement. To prove your worth or be assured of your God's swift and positive response you might spend hours in prayer or recite verbatim and repeatedly a mantra or incantation, perhaps one given to you by a local priest or one passed down generation to generation within your family. These are the 'many words' that Jesus is referencing in Mathew 6.7. Prayer was like a magic spell – say it just right or often enough or long enough, and, voila, you'd get what you wanted."

Our modern quid pro quo approach to prayer can show in ways like the following two examples: "Why it is that we often assume a direct correlation between the amount we pray about something and the likelihood that God will pay attention, give in, and answer favorably? Or why it is that we promise God we'll do "x" if He only does "y" for us first?"

Maybe most profoundly Jesus tells us in Matthew 6.8 that God already knows what we need or desire before we ever ask for it. This is a seismic idea, powerful enough to shape much of how we pray. Consider the following four paragraphs from yesterday's sermon:

"The well-known Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton writes in his book on The Lord's Prayer that this verse means that our prayers never inform God about anything, nor can they convince Him about anything. Just imagine how your prayer life might be completely overhauled if every time you spoke to God you began with the recognition that you weren't telling Him anything that He wasn't already aware of, or better said, more aware of, and in greater detail and depth, than you are? In short, we don't have to get God's attention because we already have it.

And it's not just that God already knows, but also that He doesn't need to be convinced to intervene on our behalf or give us what's best and most timely. Luke 11.9-13, read during yesterday's worship service, comes immediately after Jesus teaches the disciples The Lord's Prayer in that gospel. In that passage, Jesus assures His followers that God is a far better parent to us than the best human parents are to their own children: if we give our children food when asked, then God will most certainly give us exactly what we need when we need it too. And just like with the very best moms and dads here on earth, to do that brings God unparalleled joy and satisfaction.

As I (Pastor Chris) have lived with the clear message of Matthew 6.8 all week, I must now confess that I think I've bored God with a lot of my prayers over the years. Ok, maybe bored is too strong a way to put it...maybe it's more that I've all too frequently demonstrated that I really don't grasp what prayer is and what it's not. How often has God waited patiently for me to finish spewing out my many gripes, dissatisfactions, and requests, only to reply, 'I knew all that already. But thanks for being real with Me about it. The insight, wisdom, and help you need was already on the way – I sent it before you even thought to ask for it – just make sure your eyes are open to see it, and your heart is ready to embrace it.'

The good news is that prayer rightly conceived is based not on our character, but God's. God is more dedicated to us than we are to ourselves. God's provision and kindness toward me has no prerequisite; they don't wait in limbo till my prayers and petitions push their 'launch' button."

So, in sum, as offered Dr. Amy Jill-Levine in her book on the Sermon on the Mount, we do not pray to keep God in the loop, inform Him a need about He is unaware or unresponsive, or rally Him to our cause. She goes on to write that prayer, biblically informed, is more about a) having a safe space to get real about the totality of our lives, including all the stuff we try to run from or

hide from others, b) connecting with God relationally, c) rooting ourselves in the wider and historic Christian community, and d) opening ourselves to God's direction or prompted action, or, said differently, in prayer we are the responder and God is the initiator, not, as we often conceive of it, the other way around.

Praying this Week

So let's heed what we learned yesterday and allow it to shape our prayer lives this week...

- When you pray this week, keep it brief. Don't pile up a lot of words.
- When you pray, remind yourself not to hide anything from God. Don't try to put your best foot forward, don't fake it.
- If you're praying with other Christians, don't pray any differently than you would if you were praying alone.
- Before you pray, remind yourself that God already knows what you need and is more than willing to give you what's best and most timely (in fact, it may already be happening before you ever thought to pray about it). So spend more time in prayer asking for eyes to see and a heart ready to embrace God's help that's on the way instead of pleading for it.
- Pray less to inform or coerce God and more to connect with Him relationally.
- Go into every prayer, however short, assuming that God will want you to respond actively - with some specific change of heart, a concrete step, a willingness to love or forgive, a new endeavor, etc. Go into prayer with the notion that it is how God speaks to and directs us, not merely how we speak to Him.