



Bible Study by Vincent Gannon.

Scripture: Matthew 6: 5-8

Subject: Praying without hypocrisy

*“And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 6 But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. 7 And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.*

Prayer is man’s job as well as privilege. Every one of us has a cheque made out in the bank of heaven but many fail to cash it at the window of prayer. The only obligation the Lord has given to man is to pray. He did not say that man should always work, or play or study but God has said that man should always pray. As S.M Lockridge said

*‘Pray when you are successful, lest you become selfish, Pray when you are in sorrow, lest you become cynical, pray when you are in prosperity, lest you become proud, pray when you are in material poverty, lest you should become spiritual poor which is the worst kind of poverty. In sin, man declares his independence of God. In prayer, man declares his dependence upon God.’*

Prayer is perplexedly paradoxical, that is, you have to pray in order to pray. The Lord Jesus is the only teacher of prayer. His disciples didn’t ask the Lord to teach them to do miracles or preach but to pray. If one was to count up the number of books on this subject it would be without end. The same with sermons and songs, but the greatest challenge still remains, is to engage “believers” to do it. No matter who you speak to within Christian circle’s, they will tell you two things. One - prayer meetings are only attended by the few, and Two - wherever and whenever the prayer meetings are attended by all the church members, then the church comes into great blessing. There is of course a big difference between attending a meeting and participating in that same meeting.

Some think that prayer is a monolog, where we do all the talking, and we all like to talk. Some talk to the Lord like He doesn't know what's going on, like they need to inform God with the details of the situation. Some talk like they are picketing the throne of Grace, trying to get God to change His mind, like God is reluctant to hear, hesitant to answer or hard of hearing. Some order God, telling Him to come here, what to do and how to do that. However, Prayer is not a monolog, but a dialogue. Not only must you talk to God, but you must wait for Him to talk to you. It is far better for us to hear God, than for God to hear us, sure we often don't know how to pray. Personal prayer, personal worship is due from man. The redeemed have access to the throne of Grace 24/7/52 and can come to God, where they should worship God with a true and sincere heart. Prayer and worship is such a blessing to us, but also, prayer is a weapon in the moment of conflict and a defense in a time of danger and it is a retreat in the seasons of exhaustion. No one apart from the Lord knows exactly how prayer works; and whether or not we can fathom the mystery of how it works isn't the issue. Ours is not to reason why, simply to obey.

Prayer affords us an audience with the King of kings, our heavenly Father. Throughout the bible, we find those who prayed sincerely, with a heart of obedience and expectation were never the same and never disappointed. Prayer lines us up with the sovereign purposes of God. Throughout Scripture we find that God permits us, encourages us, and exhorts us to come before Him in prayer, so that we can draw close to Him. He wants us to be continually found in prayer. The Bible is clear about God's absolute sovereignty while it equally and unequivocally declares that God calls on His people to beseech Him in prayer, to implore His help in guidance, provision, protection, mercy, forgiveness, for everything small and big, and countless other needs. God instructs us to obey the principles of prayer that He gives in His Word and our Lord's teaching in the present passage contains some of those principles.

Jesus has already told them so far in this sermon that their theology was inadequate in chapter 5. Now in chapter 6, He tells them that their approach to the material things of life is inadequate. And here in our passage, He tells them their religious life is inadequate. Ch. 6:1 to 4 exposes their hypocritical giving and verses 16 to 18 their hypocritical fasting, but here in verses 5 to 8, Jesus exposes their equally hypocritical praying.

No people has ever had a higher standard and priority for prayer than the Jewish people. As God's chosen people the Jews were "*entrusted with the oracles of God*" (Romans 3:2).

Because of this they really had a priority place for prayer. The rabbis said, ***“Great is prayer greater than all good works.”*** The rabbis also said, ***“He who prays within his house surrounds it with a wall that is stronger than iron.”*** The rabbis wrote that they regretted that they couldn’t pray all day long. God spoke directly to Abraham and to many of his descendants, and they had spoken directly to Him. No other people, as a race or as a nation, had ever been so favoured and blessed by God or had such direct communication with Him. Of all people, they should have known how to pray. But they did not. *Why?* Because like every other aspect of their religious life, their praying had been corrupted and perverted by rabbinic tradition; and so confusion of what God wanted had set in.

*So what was wrong with their praying?* Again we will see that the motive of their heart was wrong and something else had crept in. William Barclay, in a most helpful discussion of this passage in The Gospel of Matthew, pointed out that over the years a number of faults had crept into Jewish prayer life, and in no particular order....

The First thing was that **prayer had become ritualized**. Prayer became a form of ceremony without meaning, No alterations, no variations, the wording and forms of prayers were set, then simply read or repeated from memory. Such prayers could be said with almost no attention to what was said, never mind what was meant. They were a routine, semiconscious religious exercise which can still be found in most religions today, repetition of formulated prayer, almost mantras.

A faithful Jew would repeat the Shema early in the morning and again at night. That prayer, which began, ***“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord,”*** was a composite of selected phrases from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41. Often an abbreviated version which is Deut. 6:4 only was used. Another formalized prayer Barclay refers to was the Shemoneh 'esrei, (“The Eighteen”), which embodied eighteen prayers for various occasions.

For example, Prayer 5 went like this, ***“Bring us back to thy law oh our Father. Bring us back oh king to thy service. Bring us back to thee by true repentance,”*** et cetera.

Prayer 12. ***“Let thy mercy oh Lord be shown upon the upright, the humble, the elders of thy people Israel and the rest of its teachers. Be favorable to the pious strangers amongst us and to us all. Give thou a good reward to those who sincerely trust in thy name,”*** et.c.

Faithful Jews prayed ritualistically all eighteen; morning, afternoon, and evening. It, too, had abbreviated versions. Isalm which came about the 7th Century AD, copied a great deal from Judaism as you know they also pray 3 times a day.

The ritual prayers could be given with three basic attitudes: sincerity, indifference, or pride. Those Jews whose hearts were right used the times of prayer to worship and glorify God. They thought about the words and sincerely believed what they prayed. Others went through the words routinely, ritualistically, mumbling the syllables as fast as possible in order to finish. *I am sure that brings back memories to many of you?* Others, such as the scribes and Pharisees recited the prayers meticulously, making sure to enunciate every word and syllable properly, and out loud. Three times a day they had a ready-made opportunity to parade their piety. But the ritual approach to prayer replaced the reality of a poured out heart.

A second fault that had crept in was the development of **prescribed prayers for every object and every occasion**. Not only had it become ritualistic but prescribed. There were prayers for light, darkness, fire, rain, the new moon, harvest, traveling, good news, bad news, and so on. No doubt the original intent was to bring every aspect of life into the presence of God; but making the prayers prescribed and formalized, the purpose of prayer was undermined.

A third fault was the practice of **limiting prayer to specific times and occasions**. Prayer was offered when the given time came or situation arose, with no relation to genuine desire or need. As with prescribed wording, for prescribed occasions, came also prescribed times. Both the Shema and the Shemoneh 'esrei were to be said every day, regardless of where one might be or what one was doing. Wherever one was— whether at home, in the field, at work, on a journey, in the synagogue, or visiting friends—at the appointed time, the devout Jew stopped what he was doing and offered the appropriate prayer. The most common times were at the third, sixth, and ninth hours (9:00 a.m., 12:00 noon, and 3:00 p.m., according to the Jewish mode of time).

But regardless of all these prescribed praying patterns, it did not prevent those who had a sincere heart for God. Many faithful Jews, for example Daniel (Dan. 6:10), used those times as reminders to open their hearts to the Lord. Even in the early church, because most

Christians were Jews and still worshiped at the Temple and in the synagogues, and the traditional hours of prayer were often observed (see Acts 3:1; 10:3, 30).

A fourth fault that crept in was **esteeming long prayers**, believing that a prayer's sanctity and effectiveness were in direct proportion to its length. Jesus warned of the scribes who, *"for appearance's sake offer long prayers"* (Mark 12:40). A long prayer, of course, is not necessarily an insincere prayer but can lend itself to pretence, repetition, habit, and many other such dangers if one is not careful. The fault is in praying *"for appearance's sake,"* to impress others with our religiosity. Ancient rabbis maintained that the longer the prayer, the more likely it would be heard and heeded by God. Verbosity was confused with meaning, and length was confused with sincerity.

A fifth fault, singled out by Jesus in Matthew 6:7, was that of **meaningless repetitions, patterned after those of pagan religions**. In their contest with Elijah on Mt. Carmel, the pagan prophets *"called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, 'O Baal, answer us,'" and they "raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice"* (1 Kings 18:26, 29). Hour after hour they repeated the same phrase, trying by the very quantity of their words to make their god hear and respond. Through the centuries the Jews had been influenced by such pagan practices. They often added adjective after adjective before God's name in their prayers, apparently trying to outdo one another in mentioning His divine attributes.

By far the worst fault, was that they wanted an audience when they prayed, to be seen and heard especially their fellow Jews. Most of the other faults were not necessarily wrong in themselves, but were carried to extremes and used in meaningless ways. But this fault was intrinsically evil, because it intended to satisfy pride. Whatever form the prayer may have taken, the motive was sinful prideful self-glory, the ultimate perversion of this sacred means of communion and glorifying God (John 14:13).

It's so despicable that Jesus focuses on it, *saying 'And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites'*. Prayer that focuses solely on self is always hypocritical, because, by definition, the focus of every prayer should be on God. We should be worshipping God. Instead of counting our bruises, we should be counting our blessings, instead of spending time lamenting on what we've lost, we should be thanking God for what we have left,

instead of numbering our enemies, we should be thanking God for the few friends that we have, and especially when we have a friend who is Jesus, a friend like no other and above all others.

The hypocritical scribes and Pharisees prayed for the same purpose they did everything else, to attract attention and bring honour to themselves. That was the essence of their “righteousness,” which Jesus said had no part in His kingdom (5:20). *But can we be like them?*

An old commentator observed that the greatest danger to religion is that the old self simply becomes religious with the passing of time when we become less attentive to what we are doing and why we are doing it. We can fall into ritual and become religious. We should always be in awe that we can come before a Holy God and make known our needs.

The hypocrites of whom Jesus speaks had convinced themselves that by performing certain religious acts, including various types of prayer, they became acceptable to God. People today still deceive themselves into thinking they are Christians, when all they have done is dress their old nature in religious trappings.

Nothing is so sacred that Satan will not invade it. In fact, the more sacred something is, the more he desires to profane it. Surely few things please him more than to come between believers and their Lord in the sacred intimacy of prayer. Sin will follow us into the very presence of God; and no sin is more powerful or destructive than pride. In those moments when we would come before the Lord in worship and purity of heart, we may be tempted to worship ourselves.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote,

*“We tend to think of sin as we see it in rags and in the gutters of life. We look at a drunkard, poor fellow, and we say, there is sin. But that is not the essence of sin. To have a real picture and a true understanding of sin, you must look at some great saint, some unusually devout and devoted man, look at him there on his knees in the very presence of God. Even their self is intruding itself, and the temptation is for him to think about himself, to think pleasantly and pleurably about himself and to really be worshipping himself rather than God. That, not the other, is the true picture of sin. The other is sin, of course,*

***but there you do not see it at its pinnacle, you do not see it in its essence. Or to put it in another form, if you really want to understand something about the nature of Satan and his activities, the thing to do is not to go to the dregs or the gutters of life. If you really want to know something about Satan, go away to that wilderness where our Lord spent forty days and forty nights. That's the true picture of Satan, where you see him tempting the very Son of God.***

(Lloyd-Jones M, 1977, Studies in the Sermon on the Mount. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Ch2:22-23)

Jesus' two most intense times of spiritual opposition were during His forty days of solitude in the wilderness and during His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night He was betrayed and arrested. On both occasions He was alone praying to His Father. It was in the most private and holy place of communion that Satan presented his strongest temptations before the Son of God.

When we look down at verse 5, Jesus tells them that when they pray they should not be like the hypocrites as they loved an audience, not with God but with men. To obtain their chosen audience, they would go to where they would be sure of such a crowd. Their motive was to demonstrate how spiritual they wanted people to think they were. It is just amazing that people, especially '*religious people*', would do that. The opportunity is still there today, *isn't it?* The Wailing Wall, Maciak, The Dome of the Rock, Fatima, Lourdes, The Vatican; TV channels, or YouTube channels. and even the local church.

Standing was a normal position for prayer among the Jews. In the Old Testament we see God's faithful praying while kneeling, lying prostrate, and even while standing. In New Testament times standing was the most common position and did not necessarily indicate a desire to be noticed. The synagogues were the most appropriate and likely places for public prayers to be offered. It was the place where Jews worshiped most often, especially those who lived great distances from the Temple. The synagogue was the local place of assembly, not only for worship but for various civic and social gatherings. If done sincerely, prayer at any of those functions was appropriate.

The street corners were also a normal place for prayer, because devout Jews would stop wherever they were at the appointed hour for prayer, even if they were walking down the street or visiting at the corner. The word used here for street in verse 5 is *plateia* which

refers to a wide, major street, and therefore to a major street corner, where a crowd was most likely to be. The implied fault here is that the hypocrites loved to pray where they would have the largest audience. There was nothing wrong with praying at a major intersection if that was where you happened to be at the time for prayer. But something was very much wrong, if you planned to be there at prayer time for the specific purpose of praying where the most people could see you.

The real evil of those hypocritical worshipers, whether in the synagogues or on the street corners, was the desire to display themselves in order to be seen by men. It was not wrong to pray in those places, but they happened to afford the largest audiences, and were therefore the places where the hypocrites preferred to pray. And Jesus said - they have gained their reward. Just what Jesus said about those who give, ensuring that everyone knows what they have done in verse 2.

Jesus does not leave us there, with just instruction of what not to do, but in Verse 6 He instructs us in the way of His Kingdom; how we ought to pray. Jesus does not say when or where, it's not about location, location, location but attitude, attitude, attitude. *Why does Jesus point to a 'secret' place?* It is where you will be least tempted to show off.

Much of our prayer life should be literally in secret. The Master himself, Jesus, regularly went away from His disciples to pray entirely alone. Our family members or friends may know that we are praying, but what we say is not meant for them to hear. One of the early church fathers commented that in his day (the 4th century a.d.), many Christians prayed so loud in their rooms that everyone down the hall heard what they said. If people sometimes happen to overhear our private prayers, it should not be by our intention.

Now let's just make it clear, Jesus is not telling us that we should not go to a prayer meeting and pray out, but he is speaking about our motives. When Jesus speaks about the Father being in secret, He does not mean that He is not present when we pray in public, or with our families or other small groups of believers. He is very much present whenever and wherever His children call on Him. Jesus' point has to do with the singleness of intention. True prayer is always intimate.

Even prayer in public, if the heart is right and concentrated on God, will in a real and profound way shut one up alone in the presence of God.

In the pattern of prayer Jesus taught His disciples, He begins with *“Our Father”* (Matt. 6:9), indicating that other believers may be present and that the prayer is corporate. But even when prayer represents the feelings and needs of others who are present, the supreme attention is to be on God. In that sense, even the most public prayer is in secret. Even if the whole world hears what we say, there is an intimacy and focus on God so that communion is unaffected.

God sees in secret in the sense that He never betrays confidence. Many things we share with God in our private prayers are for Him alone to know. Confidences we share even with our dearest loved ones or closest friends may sometimes be betrayed. But, we can be sure our secrets with God will forever be just that, and that one believer praying in secret with a pure heart has the full attention of the Father.

Furthermore, when our prayer is as it should be, our Father who sees in secret will repay us. The most important secret He sees is not the words we say in the privacy of our room, but the thoughts we have in the privacy of our heart. Those are the secrets about which He is supremely concerned, and about which only He can know with certainty which 1 Corinthians 4: 5 tells us:

*‘Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one’s praise will come from God.’*

When God is genuinely the audience of our prayer, we will have the reward only He can give. Jesus gives no idea in this passage as to what God’s reward will be. The important truth is that God will faithfully and unfailingly bless those who come to Him in sincerity. Those who pray insincerely and hypocritically will receive the world’s reward, and those who pray sincerely and humbly will receive God’s.

With this, Jesus gives them a warning in Verse 7 and keep in mind the stumbling blocks that we look at previously that had crept in, and one of them was meaningless repetition. *Why?* Because God does not want to hear learnt prayers, but he wants to hear your heart. He does not want us to either purposely or otherwise become distracted or attracted to anything that is not Christ centred or God centred.

***Use meaningless repetition*** is one word in the Greek and refers to idle, thoughtless chatter. It was probably mimicking the sounds of meaningless jabber. Those who used repetitious prayers were not necessarily hypocrites, at least not of the ostentatious type. The scribes and Pharisees used a great deal of repetition in their public displays of piety; but many other Jews used it even in private prayers. Some may have used repetition because their leaders had taught them to use it. Others, however, resorted to repetition because it was easy and demanded little concentration. To such people, prayer was simply a matter of required religious ceremony, and they could be entirely indifferent to its content. As long as it was officially approved, one pattern was as good as another.

Although this problem did not always involve hypocrisy, it always involved a wrong attitude, a wrong heart. The proud hypocrites tried to use God to glorify themselves, whereas those who used meaningless repetition were simply indifferent to real communion with God. Remember what God said in Isaiah 29:13 -

*And the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near Me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips but remove their hearts and minds far from Me, and their fear and reverence for Me are a commandment of men that is learned by repetition [without any thought as to the meaning],*

The Jews had picked up the practice from the Gentiles, who believed that the value of prayer was largely a matter of quantity, supposing they would be heard for their many words. Those who prayed to pagan gods thought their deities first had to be aroused, then cajoled, intimidated, and badgered into listening and answering. We see this in Acts 19 verses 24 to 34 when aroused against Paul and his companions by Demetrius and other silversmiths of Ephesus, a great crowd began chanting, "***Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!***" and continued incessantly for two hours.

Many Buddhists spin wheels containing written prayers, believing that each turn of the wheel sends that prayer to their god. Roman Catholics light prayer candles in the belief that their requests will continue to ascend repetitiously to God as long as the candle is lit. Rosaries are used to count off repeated prayers of Hail Mary and Our Father, the rosary itself coming to Catholicism from Buddhism by way of the Spanish Muslims during the Middle Ages.

Before we start looking down and tuting at those people, we too can become guilty of our prayers becoming ritualistic and repetitive, when we say them without really thinking about what we are saying and to whom we say it, for example, before meals; even in prayer meetings when our focus starts to be swayed by other things. Prayer that is thoughtless and indifferent is offensive to God, and should therefore, be offensive to us.

Again, we must not jump to wrong conclusions. Jesus did not forbid the repetition of genuine requests. In the parable about the midnight visit to his neighbour, the persistent man was praised by Jesus as a model of our persistence before God. In His parable of the importunate widow, Jesus praised her persistence before the ungodly judge, saying, ***“Now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them?”*** (Luke 18:2-7). Paul ***“entreated the Lord three times”*** that the thorn in his flesh might be removed (2 Corinthians 12:7-8). In the Garden of Gethsemane, as He faced the agony of the cross, Jesus cried out, ***“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt.”*** After rebuking the disciples for their sleep, He prayed the prayer again, and then, after a short while, He ***“prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more”*** (Matt. 26:39-44).

Honest and properly motivated repetition of needs or praise before God is right, but the mindless, indifferent recital of spiritual-sounding incantations or magical formulas over and over that is wrong. Our hearts and minds must be right before God will hear our prayer.

Thankfully Jesus does not stop there. He goes on to instruct us in verse 8 with the words that are very reassuring and encouraging as He says ***‘Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him.’***

Our God, the only one true and living God, does not have to be badgered and cajoled. Our Father knows what we need, before we ask Him. Martin Luther said,

***“By our praying ... we are instructing ourselves more than we are him.”***

John Stott said

***“The purpose of prayer is not to inform or persuade God, but to come before Him sincerely, purposely, consciously, and devotedly.”***

Prayer is sharing the needs, burdens, and hunger of our hearts before our heavenly Father, who already knows what we need but who wants us to ask Him. He wants to hear us, He wants to commune with us, more than we could ever want to commune with Him—because His love for us is so much greater than our love for Him. Prayer gives God the opportunity to manifest His power, majesty, love, and providence (John 14:13).

To pray rightly is to pray with a devout heart and with pure motives. It is to pray with single attention to God rather than to other men. And it is to pray with sincere confidence that our heavenly Father both hears and answers every request made to Him in faith. He always repays our sincere devotion with gracious responses. If our request is sincere but not according to His will, He will answer in a way better than we want or expect. But He will always answer.

It is reported that D. L. Moody once felt so overcome with God's blessings that he prayed, "**God, stop.**" That is what God will do with every faithful believer who comes to Him as an expectant child to his father—smother him in more blessings than can be counted or named. We must always remember that when we pray, we have an audience with the Most High and Majestic King of the universe. May we capture the meaning and significance of such an audience and make every word count as we speak to Him but also make every effort to listen to what He has to say to us. Remember prayer is a dialog, and God wants us to continually be in that dialog with Him.

*Amen.*