

“The Practice of Prayer”
The Way of Jesus
Downtown & Lexington
October 25, 2020

Good morning. I'm Brandon, one of the pastors at Lexington. **Go ahead and open up your Bibles to Matthew 6.** Here we're going to find Jesus' most famous teaching about prayer, often called The Lord's Prayer.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of prayer, seeing as how it's the means through which we humans interact with God. **It's essential that we know why and how we should pray.** It's also one of those subjects that needs a bit of definition because out of ten people, **you may have ten different ideas of what prayer is and what your experience with it is.** So as we've been doing throughout this series, I'd like to **start by considering what ideas Jesus' original listeners would have had** as they listened to His teaching.

So just to reset the context, **we have a crowd of 1st Century citizens of the Middleeast gathered around Jesus** here in the Sermon on the Mount. Their culture was a premodern society that would feel like an alien world compared to ours. **It was an agrarian society, where crops and animals were an important part of survival.** Rain or the lack thereof could produce serious issues of food insecurity. Most people worked with their hands...**jobs like being a fisherman, blacksmith, tentmaker, shopkeeper, innkeeper, farmer, and the like.**

They lived at a very militarized and tribal time in history. Democracy--at least as we know it--was not even a twinkle in a great-great-great grandchild's eye at this point. **The idea of the common people having an actual voice, much less a vote in their government was laughable.** Kings with unlimited power sat atop most all nations and made happen whatever they wanted.

They were also a patriarchal society, and one thing that meant was that fathers were **very respected and revered.** Fathers weren't known as clueless buffoons like many of our sitcoms portray them, but as towering figures who protected their family in a dangerous world and provided for their family's needs in a harsh environment. **Men, and fathers in particular, were often the means through which provision and protection came.** Society, generally speaking, was not cynical if not downright antagonistic towards its men and its fathers.

That's some of the cultural backdrop, so now let's think about the religious setting. At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, it says that Jesus' disciples and a crowd are within earshot. **No matter the particular makeup of that crowd, they would have been familiar with the two groups mentioned throughout the New Testament: Jews, and Gentiles (or pagans).**

Jews were followers of the Old Testament, and at this time this truly meant something. Nowadays when someone says they are Jewish, it could mean an awful lot, or it could summarize their family background. **Very similar to when someone says they are a Christian in the South--that doesn't tell me a whole lot at all** and does not remotely mean they are what the Bible calls a Christian.

The Jewish people of this time had a deep reverence for Yahweh, the God of Israel who continually revealed Himself through the OT. They knew of the many rituals and sacrifices necessary to atone for sins. **They picked out spotless animals to symbolically cover their many spots.** They knew the smell of burning carcasses. And all of that happened far outside of the inner layers of the Temple, where God's presence dwelt in the Holy of Holies behind veils no normal mortal dared to cross. **The whole feeling**

around approaching God was quite serious, and they had a preexisting reverence that would be hard for us to fathom.

Their thoughts about prayer tended to reflect all of that. So their prayers tended to be more on the formal, rote, repetitive side. Orthodox Jewish prayer, **at times referred to as the Eighteen Benedictions, were impressive but long** and had to be recited more than once daily by the devout. **The Gentiles thought about prayer much differently, because they thought of God, or the gods, far differently.** We'll get there in a second. **Just know that what Jesus is going to do today is blow both of their minds and invite them into something incredible.**

With that as our setting, go to Matthew 6:5-15.

Matthew 6:5-15

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites.

Pause there. Here He's speaking to the Jewish, religious crowd. Like Bailey mentioned last week, Jesus looked at some of the professional religious types, the Pharisees and experts of Jewish law, and he came up with a piercing term for them. **He said, look at them, they are just actors. They are putting on a show.**

For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

Jesus says their motive in prayer is actually to gain standing in front of others. They don't have God in mind as they pray, they have people in mind. **Jesus simply says they already have what they are after.** For simplicity's sake, we'll skip verse 6 for a second and come right back to it.

And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

The Gentiles had gods and goddesses of all kinds, and pagan rituals to appease them, and the general belief was that the gods and goddesses were busy and distracted. **They were not concerned with mere mortals.** So if you needed their help, you had to act out to get it. This could range from wordy, repetitive, dramatic prayers to public displays of a dire need. **Putting on a show through screaming at the heavens or tearing their clothes.**

The belief was that if you wanted their help, you had to first prove your sincerity and your worthiness. And Jesus says, they are wrong too. They only think a sovereign being will hear them if they act crazy to get attention. **But God is not distracted and busy. He's already paying attention.** In fact, He even knows what you need before you ask Him. **You do not have to flag Him down, because, like a Father, He's already there beside you.**

Let's go back to verse 6:

Matthew 6:6

But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Depending on your translation, there is some variance on what is meant by “go in your room.” **When I was growing up, I always read where it said “go in your closet,” and I always thought that was a bit odd.** Like, why would I go in my closet to pray? **We have a baby that still sleeps in our closet now, so how would that even work, Jesus?**

Scholar Frederick Dale Bruner makes an interesting point here. In this culture, privacy was far more difficult to come by than for us. **They lived in more close-knit villages, and there was not always the densest construction.** Especially for poorer Palestinian families, it was likely that there was only one room in their house that had a lock on it, and that was their supply closet.

The supply closet was kind of like a combination of a pantry and a storage room. In one way, this was the least sanctified room in the house. It was used to store feed, tools, small animals, tools, and other supplies that you didn't want to be stolen. **Unlike other areas, you could close the door and lock it and find some privacy.** It was somewhere you could truly be yourself before God, with everything else stripped away.

So zooming out, Jesus says: *“See those guys over there in the robes, praying elaborate prayers in front of others so they think they are super righteous? Don't be like them. And those people over there acting a fool because they think they have to wear out the goddess of rain to bless them with crops? Don't be like them either. Instead, go home, to your supply room. Knock the animal feed out of the way, lock the door, and quiet yourself before God. Strip away all of your pretenses and humbly, genuinely bring yourself to God as your Father.”*

This scholar also believes there would have been a connection for the Jewish listeners here between the closet and the Holy of Holies at the temple. As if this is a foreshadowing of Jesus teaching that through His atoning work on our behalf, in the future the Holy of Holies in the temple--the most special meeting place between God and humanity--would actually be your closet.

According to Jesus, the ability to draw near to God's radiant glory, in your very own supply room of all places, is a reward too great to fathom. You will find life and peace and power there, when you get everything else out of the way and encounter God's presence in the closet. **And starting in verse 9, He's gonna give His hearers a model for how to approach God rightly in prayer in said closet.**

Matthew 6:9-13

Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

We'll cover verses 14-15 in the midweek podcast, but stopping here we have the most famous Christian prayer. **Jesus says this is how we appropriately come to God in prayer.** And it tells us an awful lot about the God we are told to pray to.

If I were to summarize the picture of God painted here, it would be this: **[A supremely powerful king who loves us like a father.]**

This God is hallowed, or revered, because of His supreme power. As one of the Psalms says, “God is in heaven, and He does whatever He pleases.” His kingdom is much bigger than Israel or Rome or Great

Britain. **He's King of the realms we can't see or even perceive.** He knows whether aliens exist or not and if they do He's King of them too.

Because He is King, we are to revere His name. We are to ask His kingdom and rule and reign to come to invade earth, to fix everything that sin has broken. **Because He is King, we are to ask Him for forgiveness for our sins of rebellion against His authority.**

But He's not just a King, He's a Father King. Jesus teaching about God being our Father in the Sermon on the Mount likely would have struck His hearers. **The King part they got. They knew kings.** But the idea that God would be our Father? **To the Gentiles, that would have sounded like lunacy.** They thought the gods and goddesses were selfish teenagers in the sky you had to flag down for help. To the Jews, this would have been a twist as well. **The word Father was used at times in the Old Testament to describe God, but not usually in individual terms** encouraging us to approach God as a Father.

But because He's Father, we can come straight to Him, with no preparation. No nervousness. Just like my kids come to me. **And when we come before Him, He already knows what we need,** because He loves us and is paying close attention to our lives.

Because He's our Father, we ask Him for provision. For food. It literally says ask God for "daily bread." And there were likely a lot of people listening to Jesus whose bread for tomorrow was not yet secured. So this was quite a real request. **Because He's Father, we pray for Him to protect us from evil like any good father is called to do for his kids.** To be on the lookout for people and things that would hurt them. And we ask Him to keep us away from temptation, **to wisely point us away from troublesome areas, as any good father of a teenager does.**

So just to recap: **Jesus says those people over there are all wrong about prayer, and those people over there are too.** And then He paints a picture that God is like the biggest and best king ever. **He runs the stuff that the people who run stuff are made of.** But he's not like politicians here, because He's inherently good and pure and well-intentioned. **And not only that, but He's also chosen to feel the way about you that the best of Fathers feel about their own kids.**

This cosmic king wants you to call Him Father, and approach Him like you would if you desperately loved and trusted your own dad. So just get by yourself, where you can be honest, and simply come to Him. Ask Him for what you need. Don't feel pressure to go on and on or perform for Him, because that's not necessary and He already knows what you need anyway.

Now, if all of this is actually true, this is an absolutely stunning reality Jesus invites us into. So for us as Christians, it begs a question: **are you operating like this is true?** Notice I didn't ask if you *know* this is true. Many of us get it on a cognitive level. **I'm asking if you *pray* like this is all true.**

If you would say you are not operating as if all this is true, that's something we need to diagnose. And I think what we've already covered here gives us helpful categories to diagnose why. **Here are 3 reasons why we don't pray as Jesus taught:**

Reasons We Don't Pray Like Jesus Taught:

1. **You don't truly think God is a supreme King.**

This one is so simple to prove it's kind of silly. If the year 2020 has taught us anything, it's that anything can happen, right? **I mean, at this point the alien invasion has to be the next chapter of the movie we're living in.** So in the spirit of this year, imagine that America turns into a monarchy with a

capital M. **We no longer have a constitutional republic, but a King who calls literally every shot.** He has the power to make anything happen. And here's the kicker: **He's a good king.** He is a foundationally benevolent person with unprecedented power.

And let's say that by some crazy circumstance, you have a preexisting relationship with the king of America. So you have a freestanding appointment available with him every day at 12 pm. He's got you on his calendar. **He'll turn down Putin or Queen Elizabeth for you.** And you can ask Him about anything, for anything. He's infinitely wise, so it doesn't mean He'll grant every single wish, but He wants to hear them all.

In my pretend scenario, just let me ask...You gonna make the meeting tomorrow? Of course, you are. Are you ever going to miss that meeting? **Would you ever skip it to watch The Bachelor?** Would you ever be like, *"You know, I'm a little tired today King America, you just do you today."* Of course, you wouldn't. **You'd be there every day with your list.** Because He can make things happen that you could never ever make happen, try as you might.

So what do your current prayer habits reveal about how you perceive God's power? If someone was able to listen to every prayer you prayed, silently or out loud for the last month, **what would they think of the God you prayed to?** Would they think, **"Man, this God must be able to do *anything*!..."** or would they think, **"Why do you even pray to this God? He doesn't seem very powerful..."**

If you don't think God is the supreme ruler of the heavens and whatever is beyond them, then you won't find yourself bothering Him. Likewise, **if you believe yourself to quite secure thank-you-very-much, financially, and otherwise,** maybe you won't see your need for a king, because you fancy yourself doing a pretty good job on your own. **If you mistakenly believe you run stuff, you'll find little use for a heavenly ruler who does,** until one day when the bottom drops out of your life and suddenly you do.

2. You don't believe God is a trustworthy Father.

There are not many words that are more meaningful, powerful, or emotionally-freighted than the word "Father." There are as many different reactions to that word as there are types of fathers in the world. **And depending on what kind of father you had,** your response to this may fall somewhere between **"No way, this is amazing"** and **"No thanks."**

So it's an intriguing choice God makes, to reveal Himself as Father. **It appears that God is not afraid of being overshadowed by bad earthly dads, but is so confident in His eternal goodness** and protection that no other term will better help us understand.

Deep down, we all know there's just something about a Father. And when you look at all kinds of issues we have as humans, you can draw a straight line to the physical and emotional presence or absence of a father. Statisticians have found **concrete connections between fatherlessness and poverty and crime.** While on the other side you can often draw a straight line **from a warm and engaging father to many positive traits like self-confidence and leadership.**

One pastor said that he can cut his pastoral counseling time with someone in half simply by starting with the question, "So...tell me about your dad." That is just incredibly telling. We are complex beings and this is not always 1 to 1, but wise outside observers can often find many insightful connections between the type of father you had and the issues you have today.

So, if you are a Christian who isn't operating as Jesus describes in your prayers to God, it very well could be because you simply don't believe it's true. Maybe in your experience, "Father" means absent,

harmful, detached, uncaring, selfish. **Maybe it gives you a picture of someone who doesn't have the desire or the capability to meet your needs.** You've grown accustomed to not asking for things from a father, for a very long time.

We find out in chapter 7 that Jesus is confident that the heavenly Father will overshadow any experience you've had. Here's what He says:

Matthew 7:7-11

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Think about how this would have landed for his original audience. They were a culture that in many ways were defined by their fathers, by their ancestors. **They took enormous pride in being children of Abraham. Being descendants of Moses or David.** They had enormous affection and warmth towards these towering patriarchs, even through their many missteps.

And Jesus says, even the best earthy fathers--the ones men should aspire to live up to--even they are evil. They are corrupt in heart. They fall and make mistakes. *And if even they know how to give good gifts to their children...how much *more* will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him?*

Think about the best father figure you have had in your life. Maybe it's your dad, your grandfather, an uncle, a teacher, or just a man who stood in a gap for you. Who looked out for you. **A man who would make you smile if he walked into the room. A man who you would call if you had a genuine problem.** Think of the gratitude and joy you feel toward him, and what his actions have proven he feels toward you.

How much more...how much more...must this heavenly Father Jesus speaks of a feel for you?

How much more protective must this heavenly Father be over you? To keep you from wrecking your life in rebellion and sin. How much more does this heavenly Father want you to flourish and come alive into the mature follower of Jesus He designed you to be?

However wonderful that father figure has been in your life, what Jesus says is he doesn't compare to this Father. None of us can or do. This Father in heaven means to forgive every fiber of rebellion you've had against Him, heal every wound on your soul, and shore up everything that is lacking within you with a love so stable it cannot come from Earth. **We cannot fathom how much more He loves us than even the best of fathers we know.**

3. You don't have a "closet."

Jesus seems to teach here that in order to have this kind of vibrant and fruitful prayer life with the Father King of the universe, you are going to need some time and a place to focus on praying to Him. **We probably have, in general, different problems accomplishing this than the original hearers.** Odds are you could find a space to get by yourself and quiet before God that isn't the supply room with animal food. **So you may not be wondering, "Where could I actually be by myself?" like they may have. Instead, you're probably wondering, "When would I do that?"**

On an off day, you could be tempted with some chronological snobbery toward people of this time. Like, of course, they had time for this, because they didn't have electricity. **What was there to do after the sun went down? Stare at a candle?** That's not how life works now though, right?

So when talking about prayer, I often hear people say that they “pray as they go.” Meaning that they try to pray on their drive to work. Or at the gym. Or while they are doing some other task. **And please hear me say that we wholeheartedly affirm all of that.** That is something we'd like to increase in your life, not decrease.

But if that is you, I would argue that Jesus in these verses calls you into something far more rewarding. What Jesus teaches here is that there is no replacement for protected, single-minded, solitary time alone before God in prayer. There is a power and a reward there that cannot be found anywhere else.

These times don't have to be extended and long, as Jesus says. **Reformer Martin Luther shared in a sermon on this text that many of our prayers, like the one Jesus prayed here, should be “brief, frequent, and intense.”** **Brief**, because we're not trying to impress God or anyone else. **Frequent**, because we know we need someone who can do all the things we can't. And **intense**, because we're bringing our true selves and true needs before the Father King, **and trusting that regardless of the outcome He cares, is for our good, and is working for our good.**

Our genuine prayers to God can be brief, frequent, and intense--but they need to happen. You need some set aside time that has only one purpose--**where you come before your Father King honestly and openly, open your heart and ask for what you need.**

We have different responsibilities, but time is a resource where we all get the exact same amount. We may have varying amounts of disposable time, but every single one of us--no matter if you are a college student or an exhausted parent with 3 young kids--have *some* amount of time you have control over. We have **moments where we can get alone in whatever the “closet” may be for you, get quiet, and bring the full reality of our day and our needs to God.**

And when you come to see how rewarding it is, any thoughts that you don't have time to draw near to God like this will start to feel kind of silly. **Because these closet meetings with a Father King start to feel like water for you. Like oxygen.** They become a holy space, where all of the swirling and chaos of life calms down and you find clarity.

Personally, my “closet” is outside, at night, looking at the stars. Or sometimes sitting at my desk, with a journal in hand. **And I know exactly the reward Jesus speaks of in this passage, because when I go outside on a clear night, it's like I can feel all of the jumbled mess of my waking thoughts, where my tunnel vision seems to stop right here a foot above my head, and I look up at the stars and it's like my soul instantly goes, “OH.”** **And as I quiet myself before God, I start to get a clarity that I don't find anywhere else.** A peace I don't find anywhere else. **If I pray out loud, or to write out prayers in my journal, it helps my focus tremendously.**

Whatever your situation is: you need to determine what your closet will be. You need **a place and a time** that you will designate for this purpose. **Otherwise, it won't happen.**

If we have any hope of following Jesus, walking in maturity, and relating to the Father as Jesus did, **then getting alone before God in prayer is an absolute necessity.** This is something we all need to grow in, and **we have so much working against us to keep us from this incredible invitation.**

And for some of us, to that list of things working against us I would add this year. Like many of you out there, this has been a tough year. **Certainly not the hardest year of my life, but without a doubt the hardest ministry year of my life.** And I know many of you have faced all kinds of challenges and hardships in this year that none of us will forget. **I mean, think about it: if someone in the future was like, “What happened in 2013?” I’d be like, “Ummm...I don’t know.”** But if they ask, “What happened in 2020?” I’d be like, “Sit down, child...”

I’ve learned a lot this year that has been difficult. In March I learned that I can’t ensure our church can gather on a Sunday, and that was just the first domino. **I also learned that I can’t keep horrible things happening to people I love, I can’t keep dear friendships from dissolving in tragic chaos, I can’t ensure that people I care for deeply won’t leave our church, I can’t make people I’ve poured blood, sweat, and tears into not forsake Jesus and walk confidently into sin.**

There are so many outcomes, both positive and negative, that I am completely unable to produce or prevent. I desperately need access to someone who can. I’ve learned that I can’t afford to miss my appointment with the King.

But I’ve also learned that sometimes when facing pain or disappointment, I don’t choose to access the Father King of the Universe that has freely made Himself available to me. But instead, I just choose to grow numb to the pain or disappointment. **Earlier this summer, I sensed God’s Spirit pressing me that I was numbing my pain and requests instead of taking them to God.** It almost felt like He pointed at me and said, *“You know, watching The Office is a fine way to decompress, but it won’t remotely fix the grief and disappointment swirling inside you.”*

So one night I walked out to my backyard and laid down on our trampoline and looked at the stars. **And then I proceeded to tell God every single thing I could think of that I was sad about.** The big things, all the way to the smaller things. I may have cried, a lot. **I simply came to God, as a child, with my many needs, and reminded myself that He is a Father King I should talk to about all of these things.** And He cares to hear about them all.

And let me tell you: Jesus is not a liar. Because it was indeed very rewarding. Far more rewarding than anything else I could have done with that time.

This is what is available to me, every day, because of Christ. This is what is available to you, every day, if you are a Christian covered in the blood of Christ. **God the Father has opened up His supreme power, eternal love, and warm presence to you and me.** We are invited to meet Him in whatever our closet may be, and bring Him all of our needs and requests.

He is the King of galaxies, who loves us so much He sacrificed His Son for us, so we could draw near to the throne of grace as His kids. Let’s not be foolish enough to forsake that mind-bending privilege, and deny the rewards that come with it.

Pray.