

Matthew 6:5-8

The Way to Pray

There are certain debates that rage on between how to do things the right way and the wrong way. Let's just try a few as an example:

- Do you put salt on watermelon or not?
- When eating a slice of pizza, do you fold the slice?
- Is it pronounced Senōa, Senoi-a, or Senoia?
- Pee-can or Pecan?
- Slice a sandwich diagonal or horizontal?
- Coke or Pepsi?
- Do you break the Oreo in half before you eat it, or just bite it?

There are some who are pretty passionate about those things, but in reality, if you fold your pizza slice before eating it really doesn't matter. Today we get to talk about something that matters and maybe something that we may not think an awful lot about, we just do it without much thought. Today we are talking about Prayer and are in Matthew 6. Turn there with me please.

It is commonplace to hear people say things like, "Our thoughts and prayers are with you." Have you ever been told that? What do people mean when they say that? More importantly, do people mean what Jesus meant when they reference prayer? The more I read the Bible, the more I listen to God's Word, the more I question how much praying the way that Jesus commands here is actually done. Let's read the Bible together to see if we see the same thing this morning, and then let's pray to ask the Holy Spirit to help us see what He wants us to see.

READ TEXT

We are in the Sermon on the Mount, those instructions for life in the Kingdom of God, and in chapter 6 we get instructions about the deep internal life that Jesus is giving us, an inner life that expresses itself outwardly through things like giving, prayer, and fasting. Today we get to being to look at prayer. We will be looking at prayer together on Sunday mornings for a little while. God is calling Oxford to think about prayer and I want to do my diligence from every angle to have you listen as we consider prayer together. Over the next weeks we are going to turn our attention to prayer, I am going to be

working with our prayer team to get the most out of what our Lord is having us consider in his word. (Stay tuned)

Notice the way that chapter 6 begins, *Beware*. How many lessons on prayer have you heard that begin with *Beware*? We spend so much time urging prayer, but what about warning about prayer? What is it about prayer that we need to beware of? And, of all the things that you could guess we would get right just by doing it, it would be prayer, right? Something is better than nothing, right? Wrong! The fact that the Lord is teaching us to pray should show us how far we have fallen from him and just how pervasive sin is. Not even prayer is safe from the perversion of sin.

Prayer is one of those areas where self can take center stage. Don't believe me, try to pray without saying, "I". At the center of sin is self: self-worship, being in awe of self. If we aren't careful, we can even turn the purpose and plan of God into an enterprise of self. Think about how self-centered and concerned we are. Listen, not that self is of no concern, but sin puts self at the center, and self can never be at the center if we are true worshipers of God.

Here is an example: We refer to Heaven's Gates and Hell's Flames. Heaven is great because of good stuff, we judge good stuff based upon what we like. Hell is horrible because of terrible and terrifying stuff, but again what is bad is determined by our desires. There is a thin line here but that is the way idolatry is. If we are not careful we can make heaven and hell whatever we want it to be.

You say, Pastor if this is such a thin line why are we walking it this morning? One reason: We thought prayer was alright until we read Matthew 6 and then we learn how little we know about prayer. Nothing is safe, we are sinful, we need saving. Jesus has come to be our all in all. The worst thing we should do is say, how dare he teach us to pray. The best thing we can do is order our lives around all that he says.

Jesus has come to be our Lord and Savior, our absolute delight, the joy of our desiring. This is what Bach meant when he wrote his classical masterpiece for Church, *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*. Listen to the words in English.

*Jesus, joy of man's desiring
Holy wisdom, love most bright;*

*Drawn by Thee, our soul aspiring
Soar to uncreated light.*

*Word of God, our flesh that fashioned,
With the fire of life impassioned,
Striving still to truth unknown
Soaring, dying round thy throne.*

*Through the way where hope is guiding,
Hark, what peaceful music rings;
Where the flock in Thee confiding, Drink
of joy from deathless springs.*

*Theirs is beauty's fairest pleasure;
Theirs is wisdom's holiest treasure.
Thou dost ever lead Thine own in
the love of joys unknown.*

(J.S. Bach, English text by Robert Bridges)

The Christian faith never begins with man nor man's pursuit of God. The Christian faith begins with God and tells a wonderful story of his pursuit of us. We are pursuing a God who is pursuing us - this is the beauty of Christianity. We are always the benefactors, he forever the benevolent, kind, and loving God; we the recipients of his love, He the giver of his love. Don't you love him? You know why you love him? He loved you first. I was an unexpected child, not an uh-oh baby, but a surprise. I was not a surprise to God, he has loved me since before he laid the foundations of the earth, and he has loved you too for that long.

Is our faith about us? Sure, but never with us at the center. Our faith is never *just* about us. This is the confession that has marked Christianity. The fact that a benevolent God would create and then come and die for his creatures is the subject of our awe-filled reflection - we can't get over the gospel and nor should we. In the very beginning of Christian reflection on Scripture, the early church set out a Creed not to replace our Bible but to teach us how to read our Bible. In 325 and later in 381 the Nicene Creed was the fruit of Christian reflection and there was a certain phrase that captivated the framers, it is a gospel phrase - *pro nobis* and it means for our sake. Listen to it:

For us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and on the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of the Father.

It is amazing how learning something so great done for you has the tendency to make you forget about yourself. The gospel leaves us saying, "For me?" And God says to us, with nail pierced hands, "Yes!" If such a thought leaves us thinking anything other than "How great is our God", then we have never known him.

I wonder if these high thoughts of God are the way that you pray? I love the words of Chrysostom here:

When you pray, it is as if you were entering into a palace - not a palace on earth, but far more awesome, a place in heaven, when you enter there, you do so with complete attentiveness and fitting respect. For in the houses of kings all turmoil is set aside, and silence reigns. Yet here you are being joined by choirs of angels. You are in communion with archangels and singing with the seraphim, who sing with great awe their spiritual hymns and sacred songs to God, the Lord of all. So, when you are praying, mingle with these voices, patterning yourself according to their mystical order, it is not to human beings that you are praying but to God, who is present everywhere, who hears even before you speak and who knows already the secret of the heart. If you pray to this One, you shall receive a great reward. "For your Father who sees in secret shall reward you openly." (The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 19.3)

Jesus is pretty clear, there are two ways to pray, the right way and the wrong way, so really just one way to pray. So that's what I us to see from this text: The Way to Pray.

1. The Wrong Way to Pray

Two components:

- A. Centered on Self
- B. Minimal Reward

Remember, Jesus is warning us about our attitude of worship. Hypocrisy, those stage actors, those who like to put on a show, may fool a crowd but God sees the heart. God

sees that the heart of a hypocrite is consumed with self and as a result has their selves as the consolation prize.

The problem the hypocrite has when they pray is the blindness they have by their own greatness, so they do what they do to be seen by others. We may not have gone to the lengths that Jesus is saying here, but how many times have we done something noble just to be seen and heard so that people would think better of us? I can't think of anyone who is more vulnerable than this than a man in my position. People often want me to pray for them. I am glad to do it. Sometimes after I pray people say "thank you", or they say "what an amazing prayer", or, "I love the way you pray." People are just being kind but God forbid that I ever pray to receive the praise of men. You may enjoy my praying, but I pray that I enjoy praying more than I enjoy you approving of my praying.

The hypocrite is too easily impressed, but we who know the glory of God and are amazed by him know better. What impresses the hypocrite should be unimpressive to we who know God. The hypocrite is to be pitied in many ways because they lack any real confidence. They do all that they do before others because in reality they are people with zero confidence. Why do they have no confidence? All their confidence depends on their efforts. But how much is enough? What does it take to get God to listen? They are heaping up phrases because prayer depends on them, but what happens in those situations when you don't know what to pray? (The hypocrite would probably never have those situations, but let's just say that it happened. Then what, where is your confidence?)

These poor people are living in a cul-de-sac in a small neighborhood, on the edge of their own world. They have their reward and my what a pathetic reward it is - the empty praise of fickle men, and their own happy thoughts of themselves.

Jesus says, don't be like them Here is the right way to pray.

2. The Right Way to Pray

Two components:

- A. Centered on Christ
- B. Great Reward

Come in awe of a transcendent God whose image you are made in. Not an image that you have made, but One in whose image you are made in. Be overwhelmed by the presence of God. Prayer is worship, not self worship but the worship of the God of Scripture. Psalm 86:11 says, *Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name.*

That is exactly what Jesus has come to do, to take our wandering hearts and bind them to himself. Jesus has come to unite our hearts with his. What did he say? *Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.* How is he able to say that? Because he has united himself with us in the Incarnation. Without ceasing to be what he was, he became what he was not and has united our hearts to his in the ministry of redemption through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Before Jesus we were incapable of praying, but now that Jesus has come and accomplished redemption through the Cross, we can experience God like never before. No wonder he teaches us to pray. He is inviting us to do what has never been done before - enjoy the presence of God through ministry of the Son through the Spirit as we pray.

This is how we pray, even when we are fearful, we are overwhelmed by the presence of God. Who needs the empty approval of man when you have the approval of God? Who needs to drum up some empty phrases when the Father knows what we need even before we ask? Who needs to worry about what to say when the Spirit is interceding for us with groanings too deep for words?

This is why we go into our chambers to pray. This is not a call for no public praying, some of us don't like to pray in public, some of us shouldn't pray in public if we are not praying the way Jesus commands, lest we be a hypocrite. But, this is not a call for the removal of the Wednesday night prayer meeting or any other public praying.

The Greek word here is beautiful, *ταμειον*, and it is a word used for the place where you keep your treasure. When we pray the Jesus way we are not trying to get treasure, we are praying already in possession of everything that we need. A treasure already awaiting us when we pray, marked with the crimson blood of Jesus.

The choice is yours, and its pretty clear in the text, you can either pray in hypocrisy and spend your time restlessly heaping up empty phrases, or you can be praying as a worshipper and rest in the arms of your heavenly Father who loves you. Choose wisely.

O Father, help us to pray the way that Jesus has taught us to pray. Not as a hypocrite but as a worshipper. We love you we trust you, we are yours, in Jesus name, Amen.