

And When You Pray

Matthew 6:5-15

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The Gospel of Matthew was written about 30 years after Jesus preached to a large group of people on hillside in Galilee. It's not likely Matthew remembered the exact sequence of Jesus' teachings. It's not likely Jesus left him a copy of sermon notes either. That means that the order of these teachings in Matthew's gospel is Matthew's work.

So it is not a coincidence that the prayer Jesus taught the people to pray is placed in the middle of chapters 5-7 which we call the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew wants us to see that prayer is center to Jesus' life and to his teaching.

In this chapter, Jesus mentions three disciplines which he believes every disciple should have: giving, praying, and fasting. Last week we learned that while each of these disciplines should help us in our relationship with God, none of them should be done in way as to call attention to ourselves.

Of these three, prayer takes the central position in this chapter and in Jesus' sermon. It appears that Matthew has done this intentionally to stress that prayer should take up a central place in our lives.

He makes the same point about prayer as he does about giving away our money and about fasting. Prayer is done to strengthen our relationship with God, not to show other people how religious we are. While there is an important place for corporate prayer and public prayer, Jesus emphasizes that prayer is very personal and private.

Apparently, the people praying in Jesus' day were not praying personal prayers. They were not even addressing God in a personal way. Jesus said they were babbling. Their babbling was doing more to bring attention to themselves than to communicate with God.

Jesus said that God already knows what we need. God isn't impressed with a bunch of flowery language. God is not impressed if we pray in the King James Version with a bunch of Thee's and Thou's. We are not going to be ushered into God's presence because we are silver-tongued.

In fact, it's not about the tongue at all. It's about the heart. When we pray, God wants us to pray to Him about what is on our hearts. He wants honesty and integrity.

If we are in relationship with God, who already knows what we need, that should change how we talk to God.

Jesus said that when we pray we should say,

“Our Father in heaven.”

This does not mean that God is a male. John 4:24 says that “God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.”

While God is assigned a masculine pronoun, this is done to emphasize that God is relational. God is not an “it.” God is personal, but God is not a male, nor is God a female, but within God’s image are aspects of personhood that give us our distinctive maleness and femaleness.

We know this because the creation story in Genesis tells us that we were created in the image of God, both male and female.

While the dominant language of the Bible is masculine, that language reflects a culture that is dominated by men and controlled by men. Don’t confuse that with God, who is Spirit.

Yet Jesus said we could call God “Abba,” which is like Daddy, or Father.

Keep in mind, not everyone’s image of a father is a good one. What Jesus wants us to know is that God is a personal God who knows us in an intimate, personal way.

We say this prayer a lot corporately, but Jesus said this is a model prayer to say in private. Still Jesus uses a plural pronoun, “our.” Even in private we are to remember we don’t possess God. God belongs to all who seek Him and worship him.

“Hallowed be your name.”

Jesus included these words of reverence to remind us that we are addressing holiness.

God might know us personally, but don’t forget that God is holy. Just as we wouldn’t come into the presence of the Queen of England or the President of a country with disrespect, we should honor God with our posture and give God our undivided attention when we pray. Our prayers should be a time we take seriously and they should be given thought and purpose.

Praying is a privilege, so we should treat it like a privilege. We are coming into the presence of the Almighty God.

When we pray for God’s kingdom to come and for His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, what is it that we are praying for?

St. Augustine, a Catholic theologian of the fourth century said, “Pray as if everything depends on God, and work as if everything depends on you.”

If God’s kingdom is going to come and if God will’s is to be done on earth, how much of that will be accomplished through God’s people?

Perhaps we should say it like this. If God’s will is to be accomplished, much will be accomplished through God’s people praying.

Part of our job is to discover and understand what God's kingdom is supposed to look like and be about. That happens as we pray and seek God.

Our prayers are often clouded with our own wishes and desires.

We often see God as the Great Santa Claus who is there to grant our wishes. We sometimes think that the better we are, the more God might give to us what we desire.

However, look closely. Jesus taught the disciples to pray
that the kingdom would come.

So, if we are going to learn to pray, we need to learn more about God's kingdom. We need to learn what the kingdom of God looks like.

If we are praying for it, doesn't that mean we have a responsibility to help bring it about? It would be disingenuous on our part to pray for something and then not do our part to bring it about.

If people were hungry and you prayed for food but did nothing to help alleviate hunger, wouldn't your prayer be disingenuous?

If you had poor health and prayed for better health but you did nothing to try to maintain it, your prayer would be disingenuous.

If you prayed for a job but you never looked for one, your prayer would be disingenuous.

So when we pray, we should be partners with God in our prayers.

So, why would you pray for God's kingdom to come, if you didn't do anything to help bring it about?

God's kingdom comes when people love and serve rather than judge and condemn their neighbors.

God's kingdom comes when believers share with others in pain, poverty, and grief, and not just health, wealth, and hope.

God's kingdom comes when believers are not anxious about the future and do not grieve like the rest of men who have no hope.

God's kingdom comes to us through baptism, preaching, teaching, the Lord's Supper, prayer, and fellowship.

God's kingdom comes surprisingly when we join with others in their suffering, providing strength for their journey, even if it means suffering ourselves for the sake of others.

God's kingdom comes when we love our neighbors as we love ourselves and it comes when our definition of neighbor has become so broad as to include anyone that God would love himself. God's kingdom comes when we are willing to forgive and to offer grace.

God's kingdom comes when we are able to set aside our agenda and become lost in the agenda of God, regardless of the cost.

To be honest, we cannot pray these words and fully understand and embrace all that they mean, but we need to make an effort.

We can pray them with enough knowledge of what they mean to realize that they are words of a disciple. We can pray with our eyes open, asking God to show us where He wants to use us to bring the kingdom about in our lives, in church, and in our community.

“Give us today our daily bread.”

Again notice that the personal pronoun is plural. Jesus' prayer is inclusive.

If we are not careful, our prayers will be dominated by the personal pronouns like “I,” “me,” and “my.”

When we pray, we must be aware of the needs of those around us and not just our own personal issues.

It's nice to have our bellies full and our bills paid. We live in community so we must be mindful of the needs of others and intercede on their behalf before God.

Jesus reminds us to be constantly aware that God is our daily source of blessings. Each day the provisions of the day have come from the hands of God.

There is an emphasis on the word “daily” in this prayer. We are a people that like to have security. We like to know we have a good police force and a strong national defense. We lock our doors at night. We like to have a pension, life insurance and health insurance, and insurance on our stuff because we like security.

While the Lord isn't against any of these, the emphasis here is that our prayer life should not be stymied because we believe our future is secure.

Jesus once told a parable about a man who put his bumper crop into new barns thinking he had enough to last a lifetime, not knowing that he would die that night. Jesus posed the question, “What does it profit a person to gain the whole world but lose his soul?”

Daily bread then is not just the physical nourishment we depend on God to supply us with each day, like He supplied the manna in the wilderness for the Hebrews. It is also the supplying of the spiritual manna God gives us to feed our souls.

This is why we need to pray.

“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

Jesus continues this model prayer by focusing on the relationships we have with the Heavenly Father, specifically in areas where we have sinned. He says that we should pray for God to forgive our sins.

This is similar to the request to provide our daily bread. The verb form is active. It asks God to keep on forgiving. It’s an ongoing request.

Jesus is saying that we should ask God often to do this.

1 John 1:8-10 says: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”

It is safe to say then, that without prayer, we cannot have our sins forgiven. Prayer is fundamental to salvation because we must voice and acknowledge to God that we are not perfect, that we make mistakes, and that we need God to forgive us of those times when we come up short of God’s standards.

“As we also have forgiven our debtors.”

Here to some degree, Jesus is linking our receiving forgiveness from God with our forgiveness of those who have sinned against us.

I believe it is true to say that the Lord forgave us before we forgave anyone or made amends with anyone that we might have sinned against. Otherwise, our salvation would be works based and not based on grace.

Paul said to the church of Ephesus: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (4:32).

Here it is clear that Christ forgave them before they forgave each other.

Yet it is still clear in the Lord’s Prayer model that forgiving each other is an expectation that Jesus has of us because we have been forgiven. Therefore, we must also forgive each other. We learn to forgive because Christ has forgiven us.

Finally, there is this puzzling petition:

And lead us not into temptation.

Jesus wants us to acknowledge our weaknesses. He wants us to be on guard against those areas where we are prone to wander, prone to fail, prone to slip, prone to move off the narrow way, and in our praying we are asking God to help build a hedge around our lives to help keep us out of trouble.

If we do not make these areas a part of our prayer lives, it's like allowing a wolf in the hen house. If you allow a wolf in the hen house, you are going to lose some chickens. If you are led enough times into temptation, eventually you will be overcome by sin. Evil is going to have its way with you.

Prayer is a hedge of protection and if we pray without ceasing as Paul suggested we do, we stand an even greater chance of standing strong against the evils of the day and being blessed because we made the best decisions for others and ourselves.

Jesus wants us to pray that we will not be led into temptation, but that we will be delivered from the evil one.

When we pray, we should acknowledge that there are evil forces working against us. This is the reason Jesus says we should pray to be delivered from evil.

Just as God is a spirit, there are spiritual forces, evil ones, that are working to make us failures and to lead us away from an abundant, joyful life. Jesus wants us to pray for God to protect us for there are evil forces that want to harm us.

One of the basic elements of the Christian faith is that God is a personal God. If God is a personal God, then God knows us and desires that we interact with him.

However you interact with God, you could call that prayer. If you have no prayer life, then you must question whether you have a personal relationship with God.

Through the Lord's Prayer, Jesus gave us one example of how we can pray to God.

If you don't pray, then you should question whether you have a personal relationship with God.

To have a personal relationship with God, it begins with a simple prayer.

God is listening. In your heart, simply express to God your desire to know him. God already knows you.

Express that you are dependent on him. Confess your love to Him for creating you, for providing for all your needs. Thank him for forgiving you of your sins. Invite God's Spirit to live and journey with you daily. Profess Jesus as your Savior. Ask God to help keep you away from the temptations in your life.

Pray any of these prayers during our invitation. God will be listening.

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