

HOW NOT TO PRAY
(Matt. 6: 5-8)

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. There are two kinds of learning, positive and negative. Often it is necessary to tell what something is not before the full impact of what it really is hits home. In Luke 11:1, the disciples asked Christ, “*Lord, teach us to pray.*” So our Lord begins by showing them how not to pray before He tells them how to pray.

NOTE: Prayer is such a dynamic thing, so wonderful, satisfying and needed that Christ wants us to see the importance of having genuine motives for every prayer offered to God. Christ warns us about externalism.

- B. Prayer can become hypocritical, external and mechanical for the Christian and, when it does, he is no better than the hypocritical Pharisees. There is nothing that tells the truth about us as Christians as our prayer life. Have you ever noticed how much easier anything else is than prayer? When we begin to slip spiritually, it is prayer that first is affected. Have you ever noticed how much easier it is to speak to others than God? We often share more of our spiritual problems with others than with God. Have you ever noticed how much easier it is to pray in a group than to pray alone? These are things that Christ will bring to our attention this morning, for Christian externalism does not impress God. The real test of a person’s spiritual life and condition is the genuineness and sincerity of his prayer life.

NOTE: All the great Christian men of history have been men of prayer. If, therefore, we want to be used of God, we want to have an effective prayer life and avoid the things about prayer or that are displeasing to God.

II. PRAYING TO IMPRESS MEN -- 6: 5, 6

- A. “*And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men.*”

1. A hypocrite is one who assumes a character that does not belong to him. He is a person who acts outwardly what he actually is not inwardly. In context, it is a man who pretends to be a man of prayer by praying publicly but he does it only to be seen by men. His heart is far from God.

NOTE: He is speaking directly about the Pharisees who wanted men to think they were spiritual and they gave an air of super-piousness.

2. Our Lord is not condemning one’s posture in prayer or the act of public prayer. There are many public prayers in both Testaments and Christ himself blessed the food before the multitudes. No, he is speaking about motives behind prayer, whether public or private.

NOTE: The Lord is speaking about men who are anxious and ambitious to have a reputation as a man of prayer.

3. There are a great many applications which could be made to our present situation as Christians but I will give only a few:
 - a. Christians, especially preachers, who pray to impress people with their eloquence. Beware of the man who has beautiful and suave pulpit prayers, eloquently spoken to the congregation, not God.

NOTE: God is not impressed with big words. We do not approach one we love in a perfect, polished manner, paying attention to phrasing, vocabulary and tonal inflection. We speak of our love in simple terms.

- b. Sometimes we pray at people rather than to the Lord.
- c. Praying piously before people.

ILLUSTRATION: I remember a story about a very great preacher who, one day when walking down the street in London, dropped to his knees, took off his hat, mumbled a few words in prayer and went on. Those who saw it were very impressed, and tabbed this preacher to be a very spiritual man. When I first heard this story, I too was impressed but in light of this verse it was quite fair to ask if he did it for men or for God? Could he have prayed without making a public display? Did he pray when he arrived at home? Only God knows this man's real motive.

- B. *"Verily I say unto you, they have their reward."* --These hypocrites will be rewarded by men but never by God. As far as God is concerned they have been paid in full by men, so there is no need for God to reward them.
 - C. *"But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret;"* -- This verse does not forbid public prayer but is dealing with motive in prayer. Literally this means learning to get privately before God and not men in prayer. This is also figurative meaning that when one is praying publicly, he should shut his mind to the audience and speak only to God.
1. This verse tells us three important things about prayer: 1) the primary place of prayer should be secret away from men; 2) there should be privacy of prayer alone with God, shutting the world out; 3) The great privilege of prayer which is the believer-priest approaching his God by himself.

APPLICATION

- a. It is quite possible to pray in secret in such a way that everybody knows you are praying in secret. Without saying a word, a Christian can make others think he is spiritual.
- b. A believer sometimes tries to catch up on his lack of private prayer in public by giving long public prayer.
NOTE: A good rule is short prayers in public and long prayers in private.

ILLUSTRATION

- a. One time D.L. Moody was preaching and one of the brethren was asked to pray. He went on and on. Finally Moody could take no more and he interrupted the man's prayer and said, "And while brother Smith is catching up on his praying shall we sing hymn number ten."
 - b. It is very difficult to pray a long time in private, for we often find ourselves running out of words after a few minutes. Why? Because there is nobody to impress. There is no human glory in praying secretly.
- D. *"And thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."* -- The person who has learned the secret of private prayer shall be blessed by God in time and in eternity. God never forgets the faithful acts of His people (Heb. 11:6). The real prayer warriors are those who have learned the secret of private prayer.

IV. PRAYING TO IMPRESS GOD -- 6: 7 & 8

- A. *"But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking."* -- This section deals with the manner and form of prayer. The Pharisees thought that the length and numbers of prayers offered to God attract his attention. They would repeat the same prayers over and over again, thinking this would impress God with their spirituality.
1. When men pray, they are not to pray with vain (thoughtless) repetitions, for this is the practice of pagans. Prayer, not flowing from a heart of love, can become ritualistic and meaningless.

NOTE: Vain repetitions in themselves have no value, and that the mere bulk or quantity of prayer will produce no special benefit. God is not impressed with the numbers of prayers but prayer from the heart that loves Him.

APPLICATION

1. Eastern religions have their prayer wheels, and some Mohammedans spend six hours a day in prayer, and they repeat over and over, "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the prophet of God." This is pagan repetition.
2. The Roman Catholics count their beads and pray in thoughtless repetition.
3. We Protestants have our "hang-ups" in this area as well. They are more subtle but just as serious.
 - a. A person may stress a time of prayer rather than prayer itself. We become more concerned about the discipline of being a certain place every day for prayer and forget that real prayer is to be spontaneous.
 - b. A person may stress the time spent in prayer. All great men of God spent much time in prayer but none of them were "clock watchers." These men were so involved with God that prayer was as natural as breathing.
 - c. A person may not count beads but has the same basic prayer day in and day out. Prayer becomes mechanical.

ILLUSTRATION: Remember the old Christian farmer who prayed daily, "Lord, I pray for me, my wife, my son John, his wife -- us four and no more."

1. Our Lord does not say we should not ask our Father for things a number of times, but it is the thoughtless merit system He is opposing.

NOTE: God wants our hearts and if He gets that, we will spend time in prayer with Him.

B. *“Be not ye therefore like unto them:”* -- Christians are not to pick up pagan habits or the ways of the carnal church. They are to be different in their prayer life and have a heart that longs to commune with God.

C. *“For your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.”* -- The Christian can have a different kind of prayer life than the pagans because he has a Heavenly Father that knows his needs before he even asks.

NOTE: Christians are to commune with God, making their requests and anticipating God’s answer. Christians do not have to impress God with numbers of and lengthy prayers, for God is their Father. A Christian is not a beggar or an apple polisher; he is a Son of God and the Father longs to meet his needs.

NOTE: Beloved, God is our Father and He desires to bless us very much more than we desire to be blessed. God is more ready to give than we are to receive.

POINT: There is somewhat of a theological problem here. Why do we have to ask God for things He already knows we need? We do not pray to inform God because He is unaware, nor will our prayers in any way change the secret plan of God. Why pray? Because we have a Father-son relationship with our God. The value of prayer is that it keeps us in touch and contact with God. The Father loves our fellowship. Yet, He has conditioned our receiving of things from Him through prayer; for prayer is one of the main means that God uses to fellowship with His people.

NOTE: Prayer is essential to the Christian life and without it we shrivel up spiritually and the Father’s heart is broken. The promise of the Bible still stays true: *YE HAVE NOT BECAUSE YE ASK NOT!*

V. CONCLUSION

- A. Prayer works for those who know God as Father, and the Father can only be known through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ taught that for one to become a child of God he had to be “born again” or receive a new spiritual birth from God. The new birth comes when one trusts Christ as personal Lord and Saviour.

Have you been born again? Have you been adopted into the family of God? You can be if you will simply take Christ into your heart. “As many as received Christ, to them gave He the authority to become the sons of God” (John 1: 12).