

Pray Then Like This

Matthew 6:7-15

By [Wiley Lowry](#)

If you would, turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 6. I have been teaching through the Sermon on the Mount in the Young Seekers Sunday School class this quarter, and I didn't feel like I spent an appropriate amount of time on the Lord's Prayer this past Sunday, so I wanted to double back around and spend some more time focused in on this passage from Matthew chapter 6 thinking about how Jesus teaches us to pray. In fact, over the next several weeks we're going to begin a study on prayer in our prayer meeting. We're going to look at particularly Paul's prayers or the priorities of prayer that's found in Paul's letters. And it's a reminder to us as we study those prayers, as we study Jesus' prayer that He teaches to us, it's a reminder of how gracious God is to us to give us help in prayer. If it's true, as Martin Lloyd-Jones says, that "everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer," then we need help in prayer. And God is so gracious to us. He's so loving and kind that He teaches us how to pray and He models prayer for us in His Scriptures. We're going to spend time thinking about that tonight and the next several weeks. Before we do so, let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we do give You thanks that we can come before You and before we study Your Word and pray to You and after we study Your Word that we can pray to You, that You hear us and You love us and You provide for us in un-measurable ways. Would You give us Your Spirit tonight to open our hearts and our minds and our eyes to hear Your Word and to apply them to our lives that we would serve You with joy and that we would love one another as we love ourselves. And we pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.

Matthew 6; we'll start in verse 7:

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. 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.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

This is the Word of God. We give thanks to Him for His Word.

Not Praying Like the Gentiles

I think as we study these verses tonight briefly, we could organize them under two headings, organize them in two instructions that are given by Jesus. Number one, He says, "Do not pray like the Gentiles," and then secondly, He says, "Pray then like this." So let's first look at verses 7 and 8 where He says, "Do not pray like the Gentiles." Verse 7 He says, if you look there, "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." In this section of Jesus' teaching He's been addressing prayer and He's instructing His disciples on sincere worship or sincere religion before our heavenly Father and He's just said not to pray like the hypocrites. The hypocrites would stand up in public, they would draw attention to themselves, they would seek the attention and praise and adoration of man by their prayers. And here He shifts and He goes and takes up the act of prayer as it was commonly practiced by the Gentiles. Jesus denounces the Gentile prayers for their empty phrases and for their empty words, their meaningless words. One commentator says that "the prayers in the non-Jewish world were often characterized particularly by formal invocations and magical incantations in which the correct repetition counted rather than the worshipers attitude or intention."

The Prayers to Pagan Deities

It's not hard to imagine how this would be the case. Think about the pantheon of gods and goddesses in the Greco-Roman world. They had almost a different god or goddess for each sphere of life. As many ways as you could compartmentalize life, there was a different god or goddess to address and to appease for those spheres of life - a god for the weather, a god for family, a god for marriage, a god for love, a god for commerce, a god for agriculture, and on and on and on it would go. As many ways as you could compartmentalize life, there was a different designated deity for each one of those. And oftentimes those different deities would compete with one another, and so you would see how it would be almost natural for them to create a proper formula or collection of prayers to the multiple deities in order to have the desired effect that they were looking for.

Mindless Prayer

That was true in Jesus' day; it's been true ever since. It's always true that this sort of superstition has existed in various forms in different religious traditions.

There's prayer wheels, there's mantras in yoga, there's prayer beads. I was looking at the website for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops today and there was a page they had there - "How to Pray the Rosary." There were eight different steps to go through - making the sign of the cross, saying the Apostle's Creed, saying the Lord's Prayer multiple times, saying over thirteen hail Marys - and on and on it would go, saying these sorts of rote, formalized prayers. There was a sad irony about it, that even the Lord's Prayer, even the prayer that Jesus gives us here in this passage can be turned into these empty phrases and many words that He's denouncing here. Jesus says, "Do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words."

We can fall into the same trap though, can't we - looking for shortcuts; trying to take a shortcut in the hard work of prayer; giving thanks before a meal without ever really thinking about what we're saying or speaking or giving thanks to God our Father. How often can we let our children fall into rote and memorized prayers without stopping and reminding them of the great and awesome privilege it is of speaking to God? Sometimes do we let our prayer meeting devolve into what Derek Thomas would call an "organ recital" - a prayer for Sue's kidney or for Tom's colon instead of really dealing with the more other serious matters that are called for in prayer. How often times do we use words like "OMG" or other titles for God in a flippant way just to express something mildly amusing or surprising? Our prayer is not to be a thoughtless ritual in which we attempt to persuade God to hear us, in which we try to cover all our bases. Instead, it's what Jesus says in verse 8. "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." I love what John Calvin says about this passage, and I'm going to read a quote from him. It's a little long but he says this:

"Believers do not pray with the view of informing God about things unknown to Him or of exciting Him to do His duty or of urging Him as though He were reluctant. On the contrary, they pray in order that they may arouse themselves to seek Him, that they may exercise their faith in meditating on His promises, that they may relieve themselves from their anxieties by pouring them into His bosom in a word that they may declare that from Him alone they hope and expect, both for themselves and for others, all good things."

Pray Like This

That's what we're doing when we pray to God, when we come before Him in prayer. And those features stand out in the way Jesus teaches us to pray in the rest of this passage. Look at verses 9 through 15. He says, "Pray then like this..." And instead of going through the different petitions that He lists for us there, I want to just really look at a few features, main features of this prayer that He gives to us. One is that it's a prayer to our Father, secondly, it's a prayer of complete dependence and faith, and third, it's a prayer which leads to obedience; it's a transforming prayer.

Prayer to the Father

Look at, first, it's a prayer to our Father. Verse 9 He says, "Our Father in heaven." He's teaching us to pray to God by addressing Him as our Father. The very first word of Jesus' prayer is a radical reorientation of prayer. We have an intimate and a close relationship with God that He's not distant, He's not uncaring, but He invites us in. He is tender and He is loving and He is committed to us. It could not be any more distinct from the prayers of the pagans that He was just talking about. We pray to our Father. Paul tells us in Romans chapter 8 that we have not received a spirit of bondage again to fear but we have received a spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." Because of what Jesus did for us on the cross, because of what Jesus did in His death and His resurrection, we have this unimaginable privilege that we can approach the One who dwells and reigns in heaven and address Him as our Father. That's staggeringly humbling and yet it's also amazingly encouraging. It's encouraging for us that we can be bold and honest and open and committed to coming before Him over and over and over again, calling out to our Father who loves us, that we can be grateful to Him for all that He has done for us.

He is an all-sufficient Father. Some of you know, I served in ministry in Memphis for a few years before coming to seminary as a ministry to immigrants and refugees. And one day, one of the kids, he was a high school student named Luis, he said, "You know it's really like I have three dads." He said, "I have my first dad, my real dad teaches me by what he did not to leave my family, to not be like him." He said, "My other dad, my step-dad, he teaches me how to work hard." He said, "You're kind of like my other dad; you teach me about God." And while that was a touching thing that he said, it was really a picture of his incomplete experience of a Father. And yet the Father that we have in Scripture, our heavenly Father, is perfect and He is all that we need. He is all-sufficient.

Prayer of Complete Dependence and Faith

And that's what we see Jesus coming out and pointing out in the next few verses. That's the second thing to notice about His prayer - it's a prayer of complete dependence. Each petition of this prayer we see an expression of utter reliance and complete commitment and faith in our heavenly Father. That was one of the things I was pointing out to the Young Seekers class this past week is that what comes out over and over again in this prayer in each of these petitions is the fear of the Lord. That's really the foundational principle in this prayer - the fear of the Lord. It's that awareness of God's holiness and His glory and His majesty and His power combined with a knowledge of His love and His mercy and His grace, all which produces a right reverence and adoration for Him. It's everywhere in this prayer. He says, "Our Father, hallowed be your name." It is His kingdom to be sought; His will to be done. He alone provides bread; He alone forgives sins. He alone delivers us from temptation. Over and over again there is a fear of the

Lord that comes through in this prayer that Jesus teaches us and this fear of the Lord produces a dependence upon God, a complete dependence upon Him. You see when we come before God as our Father we do so in complete reliance, humble reliance. The plans that we make, the things that we need, our growth in grace - it all comes from Him alone. We are helpless apart from the grace of God for giving us these things.

I heard recently one of the football coaches at Belhaven - he was a running back coach. He was talking to some of the players and he was kind of teaching them about how to respond or how to react when they make a good play and not to stand up and overly celebrate and bring attention to themselves. He says it's not about that person. When you get up and do that kind of celebration you're not thinking about the one who through you the ball or the line that blocked for you or your parents who took you to practice and to games growing up or the help that you've been given as a good gift. He's saying that they have to be aware of the many ways in which they are dependent on others to play the game that they play.

We're the same way - we are oftentimes totally unaware of the many ways in which we are dependent on God for everything. I was struck by this reading John Owen's book this week. The title is "Of Temptation," and he's talking about the multitude of ways in which we can be drawn into temptation and be completely unaware of it. He's saying that we're not unaware of sin but he's saying that we're even unaware of temptation oftentimes. And you think about that. It could be a job change; it could be a raise or retirement. It could be a new baby and a change in your schedule. It could be sickness or a loss or a trial; something so simple as checking your email or getting on Facebook. We can be tempted in ways we're completely unaware of and drawn out into sin and Jesus is teaching us to plead before Him, begging for His deliverance from temptation, not to lead us into temptation but to deliver us from evil. We could say the same thing about our daily bread, couldn't we - that the things that we need, the things that God has provided for us, how often or how quickly could a change in our circumstances, a health crisis cause those very things that we take for granted to see vulnerable all of a sudden? We need to plead before God in faith, trusting in Him and resting in Him for all that we need and seeking His will in everything.

Prayer Which Leads to Obedience

And that leads us to the last thing - this is a prayer which leads to obedience. It says that in verse 14; actually if you go back up to verse 12 - "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." And then down in verse 14, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." What Jesus is saying there is that the grace which is at work in His disciples will be evident in the way that we love and forgive others. It's very similar to the parable of the unforgiving servant that we see in Matthew chapter

18. Remember that servant who had a great debt and he begged forgiveness and it was granted to him, and yet when someone else came to him with a smaller debt he held him to that debt and threw him into prison. He had not experience forgiveness and that was evident because he did not forgive others. And that's what Jesus is saying here. The forgiveness, the love of God our Father as Christ's disciples that we know and we have, will then be evident in the way that we go out and obey His Word, love others and forgive others. That prayer, the prayer that Jesus is teaching us here, changes us; it transforms us. It gives us a boldness before God our Father. It teaches us to have a dependence on Him and that leads to a delight in serving Him and a love for one another.

We need that in the church, don't we? A delight to serve God and a love for one another? Would our prayer time tonight and in the coming weeks work to produce that in our hearts - a delight for serving God and for loving one another and would the presence of that in our church then draw others here to want to be with us and to want to serve Christ as we serve Him as well. Let me close in prayer.

Father God, we give You thanks for drawing us and calling us here to be Your disciples and to come before You in prayer. And we ask that You would lead us in this time of prayer that we're about to have and that You would give us encouragement to call out to You as our Father, that You would give us a boldness, that You would give us a dependence upon You and that You would change us and that we would leave here to serve You and love one another. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.

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