

Our Father: The Necessity and Wonder of Prayer
Part One – Motive Matters

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Matthew 6:5-13

“True prayer is struggle with God, in which one triumphs through the victory of God.”

– Soren Kierkegaard

Barry Jones comments:

“I have certainly always found prayer a struggle. I’ve struggled with how to pray...which questions about the efficacy of prayer...with the ways God has answered (or apparently not answered) my prayers. But most of all I’ve simply struggled to pray.” – Barry Jones, *Dwell: Life with God for the World*

Learning to Relate to the Father Like Jesus Does

“One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” – Luke 11:1

“Lord, teach us to pray.” I understand the disciples request to mean more than, “Jesus, teach us some new spiritual techniques that will help us stay awake when we pray and make us feel that our prayers matter.” I take the request to mean, “Jesus, will you teach us how to relate to the one you call ‘Father’ the way you do?” – Darrell Johnson, *Fifty-Seven Words That Changed the World: A Journey Through the Lord’s Prayer*.

That’s what this series is about. It’s our collective: “Jesus, will you teach us how to relate to the one you call ‘Father’ the way you do?”

“When Jesus gave his disciples this prayer, he was giving them part of his own breath, his own life, his own prayer.” – N.T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*

The Lord’s Prayer – Matthew 6:9-13

⁹ “This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,

¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

I. The Gift of This Prayer

1) This prayer relieves us of the *anxiety* of wondering, “Am I doing this right?”

Jesus leads in by simply saying: “This, then, is how you should pray:” – Matthew 6:9a.

And no one would know how to instruct us in prayer like Jesus – God the Son – the second member of the Trinity, who has forever been in closest union with the Father and the Spirit. This prayer gives us a clear *model* for our praying.

The shape of this prayer as a *model* matters, since it provides us with a starting place to address God; the right orientation of heart and mind.

The structure is a gift that helps us to come into communion with the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Spirit.

2) This prayer *reveals* the heart of the Living God.

Because it is Jesus – God the Son – who instructs us in this, we find out what God the Father is up to in our hearts, and in the world. It tells us *what is on the heart of God*.

On it is the hallowing of his name. On it is the coming of his kingdom and his will. On it is our daily sustenance, our forgiveness, our relationships to be whole and healed, and our protection from the great Enemy of our souls. Praying this draws us near to the heart, the concerns, of the Living God.

3) Jesus grants us this unspeakably beautiful honour of partnering with God in his *transformation of the world*.

A) Prayer is described in the Bible as the starting place for dealing with our anxieties and worries. Like, “Cast all your anxiety on him, for he cares for you.” – 1 Peter 5:7.

Philippians 4:7 says that as we bringing ever situation to God in prayer, with thanksgiving, “...the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

B) God does transform us as we get in contact with him. In the first half of the prayer the pronouns help “recentre” ourselves around God. It all begins with him: “*Your name, your kingdom, your will.*”

Praying, especially praying as Jesus teaches in this moment, is partnering with God in the transformation of the world. Yes, we hold on to the reality of God’s sovereignty – that God knows everything and is working toward his goals for history. Yes. True.

And yet, in a mysterious way, our prayers matter. Things change when we pray. Things happen. Somehow, our prayers are joined up with God’s sovereign work to actually change the world.

II. The Context of the Prayer – Motive Matters

Jesus introduces this section of his sermon with these words in Matthew 6:16:

“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven...So when you give to the needy (Matt 6:2a) ...And when you pray (Matt 6:5a)...When you fast (Matt 6:16a)...”

Jesus introduces his concern for motives. Jesus brings up the three core spiritual practices within the Jewish Faith: giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting. And one of his big concerns with these important practices is to protect us from false motives – or, actually, only *one*. **From using these practices for *showing off*.**

Not This:

⁵ “And when you pray, **do not be like the hypocrites**, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners **to be seen by others**. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.” – Matthew 6:5

Just as the language of “hypocrite” suggests, these people are not what they seem. They seem to love God, but their motivation is to be seen.

“Because they had not involved God in what they were doing, he does not intrude on their project. They are at the level of pharisaical righteousness, which never “enters the kingdom.” Again, the ego swells, and the soul shrivels.” – Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*

But This:

⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Those who want to live in the “kingdom way”, in the Jesus-way, they have dropped any concern for being “seen” by others. The audience of prayer is always and only the Father.

Two Questions:

1) Does this mean Jesus is forbidding public prayer?

Jesus himself prayed in front of others. But he did a lot of ‘getting away’ to pray in solitude as well. The early church leaders prayed regularly in public prayers, and we know they prayed in private too. Even the Lord’s Prayer itself starts with “Our Father” not “My Father.” It has a corporate nature. Something we would pray *together*.

Jesus’ emphasis is on integrity. That who I am in public is who I am in private. It’s to be clear that using the pretense of prayer as a means to boost my ego isn’t prayer at all. Because God isn’t actually in the picture.

2) What's the reward?

- a) The most significant reward is that you get God! You get nearness to the Father!
- b) We get the reward of seeing God at work.

There is a direct line: the greatest joys in my life are all connected to sincere prayers where I've met God, or seen him God answering specific prayers – often, maybe usually in unusual or unexpected ways.

Knowing God as Father as the Key to Motive

"Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? ¹¹ If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will **your Father in heaven** give good gifts to those who ask him!" – Matthew 7:9-11

III. Prayer Practice: Just Start Praying!

First, I would encourage you to simply recite the Lord's Prayer. Maybe you start by just reading it daily, and through that, commit it to memory. But just pray it sincerely to God. Even just word for word. I do that regularly.

And you may end up just "dwelling" on one aspect of it. Wonderful! Or maybe one line will help you bring one concern to God. Maybe you're in need, and you do end up pouring your need for God's provision – "Give us, today, our daily bread."

Second, this prayer covers every area of our lives, every area of existence. Your Father wants to hear from you about it. Prayer is often as simple as: "Help! Sorry. Thanks. Wow!" Maybe it just begins with you saying something like, "Father...I need your help in this area," and then bring that thing you're anxious about to him. Because he's your Father, he just wants you to come to him – without pretense. Just "come."

Third, maybe as you notice a big feeling creeping up in your heart. Like, maybe just take some time to pay attention to those places where you're feeling gratitude – then turn it back to God, "Father, thank you for... [fill in the blank]." Or, "O God, this hurts." Or "I'm concerned, Father, be near me." Or, "Father, I'm feeling angry about this."

If you've trusted in Jesus, then he's your Father. And he wants you to come to him. So come to him.

Life Group Discussion and Reflection

Open Up

“True prayer is struggle with God, in which one triumphs through the victory of God.”

– Soren Kierkegaard

Commenting on Kierkegaard, Barry Jones says:

“I have certainly always found prayer a struggle. I’ve struggled with how to pray...which questions about the efficacy of prayer...with the ways God has answered (or apparently not answered) my prayers. But most of all I’ve simply struggled to pray.”

– Barry Jones, *Dwell: Life With God for the World*

What do you think of Kierkegaard’s idea that prayer is “struggle with God”? Do you, like Jones, struggle with prayer? What are the biggest challenges for you?

Dig In

1. Read **Matthew 6:5-13**. In the message, we saw a number of reasons why this prayer is a “gift” to us. Discuss how you have experienced this as a gift – or how you would like to:
 - a. It relieves us of the anxiety of wondering “are we doing this right?”
 - b. It reveals the heart of the Living God.
 - c. In praying this prayer we partner with God in transforming the world.
2. **Look again at v.5-6**. How does Jesus’ concern over hypocrisy encourage or challenge you? How does the instruction to ‘secret prayer’ encourage or challenge you?
3. In the message, we talked about the reward as “getting God” – of nearness to the Father, and the joy of seeing God answer prayer. Have you experienced those ‘rewards’ personally? Share what that was like.
4. How might approaching God as “Father” shift how we think of our motivations for prayer? How would you like to see that deepen your own prayer experience?
5. What small steps might you like to take this week in terms of prayer?

Prayer

Take some time to thank Jesus for helping us learn to connect with the Father in the way he does. Bring the needs of your group before Jesus and ask for his help to deepen habits that help us experience the Father more deeply.