



Pray Give Fast

Matthew 6:1-18

Text

Matthew 6:1&5-8

Topic

Jesus tells us that when we pray we should desire to be heard by our Father in Heaven rather than to be seen by men

Title

"Children Should Be Heard and Not Seen"

Introduction

The three hottest trends to encourage prayer among Christians are Prayer Labyrinths, Contemplative Prayer, and Soaking Prayer.

- A Prayer Labyrinth is a path which leads, via a circuitous route, to the center of an intricate design and back out again. A Labyrinth is not a maze. It has a single path that leads you to the center. The contemporary version includes music, meditations, art, media and symbolic activities at intervals along the path. Expectation builds until you arrive at the center.
- Contemplative Prayer, also known as "centering prayer," is a meditative practice where the practitioner focuses on a word and repeats that word over and over for the duration of the exercise. You choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action

within. Contemplative Prayer usually includes sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settling briefly and silently, introducing the sacred word. When a Contemplative Pray-er becomes aware of thoughts, he is to return ever so gently to the sacred word.

- Soaking Prayer is described as resting in God's presence. This is accomplished by playing some gentle worship songs, either sitting or lying down, and praying short, simple prayers for an extended period of time, but otherwise keeping your mind free of other thoughts. At the point when you sense God's presence through some type of manifestation like tingling skin, a sensation of heat or cold, or even a gentle wind seemingly blowing through your body, you are to just "soak" in that presence.

Think about those trends in light of the teaching of Jesus on prayer in Matthew 6:5-8.

Matthew 6:5 "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

Matthew 6:6 But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Matthew 6:7 And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

Matthew 6:8 "Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

Even a very preliminary understanding of the Lord's words tells us that a Prayer Labyrinth is wrong because it is ritualistic and Contemplative Prayer is wrong because it is based on vain repetition. Soaking Prayer is wrong because, among other things, it demands that God, Who is a Spirit, manifest Himself via some physical phenomena.

If any of these were commendable the Lord would have told us as He was teaching on prayer in His Sermon on the Mount. He didn't. And He didn't anywhere else, either.

Prayer is the second of three behaviors Jesus assumed we would pursue and perform. The other two are giving and fasting. When we give, when we pray, and when we fast, we want to do it the right way.

I'll organize my thoughts on prayer around two points: #1 You Will Be Rewarded For 'Right' Or 'Wrong' Righteousness, and #2 You Want To Be Rewarded For The 'Right' Righteousness With Regard To Your Praying.

#1 You Will Be Rewarded For 'Right' Or 'Wrong' Righteousness (v1&5)

Most of the competent Bible commentators point out that verse one is an introduction to the subjects of giving, praying, and fasting.

Matthew 6:1 "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

They say that the best translation of verse one, from the best manuscripts, is something like this: "take heed that you do not do your righteousness before men, to be seen of them: else you have no reward with your Father which is in Heaven."

The word "righteousness," then, is a general term that describes your behaviors as a Christian. Giving, praying, and fasting are the three particular behaviors that Jesus discussed in verses one through eighteen.

In each case there is a 'right' and a 'wrong' way to perform these behaviors. The wrong way is to do them "before men, to be seen by them."

In first century Israel, much praying was done to be seen by others. Look at verse five.

Matthew 6:5 "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

“When you pray...” We mentioned last time we were together that although Jesus assumed we would be doing these three things, giving, praying, and fasting are perhaps the least practiced Christian disciplines.

- Average giving is far below a tithe, around 2%.
- Fasting is actually discouraged by some popular Bible teachers.
- As for praying, if asked most believers will say they do not pray as often as they would like.

Our intention in this series is to encourage us all to return to a solid footing in all three disciplines.

A “hypocrite” was a stage actor who wore a mask while performing his part. The manner in which these individuals prayed made them actors playing the part of being spiritual.

Among the Jews there were three set times for daily prayers - morning, afternoon, and evening.

- In the Old Testament you see Daniel praying at those prescribed times.
- In the New Testament Book of Acts Peter and John were “going to the Temple at the hour of prayer” when they paused to heal the blind beggar.

There was nothing wrong with having set times for prayer, or for having prayer meetings. There was nothing wrong with offering prayers in public.

What was and is wrong has to do with the motive to be seen by others. These whom Jesus called hypocrites would leave their homes late, I think at least sometimes on purpose. They couldn’t get to the synagogue on time so, at the appointed times, they would simply (but loudly) stop on the streets and offer their prayers for all to see. Passersby would see how spiritual they were.

If they did get to the synagogue they prayed in such a way as to draw attention to themselves. Let’s make a short list of ways we might draw attention to ourselves.

- We can pray but our words are really a message intended for our fellow believers to hear rather than a conversation with God.
- We can totally change our manner of speaking when praying. We might suddenly get loud and start repeating some phrase. Or we might adopt a formality we would never use in ordinary conversation.
- We might make sure others see us as we pray or that they know we are going to pray.
- We might, for example, let slip how early or how often or for how long we pray.

I think we get the point. **We should not pray to be seen of men.** We might sometimes be seen of men, but that should never be our motive or our desire - not even to encourage others to pray.

Jesus closes-out His comments about hypocritical praying by saying that those who pray that way “have their reward.” They have the paltry reward of earthly recognition. What they forfeit is being rewarded in Heaven.

We said last time that rewards ought to be important to us because they are important to Jesus. Let me say something further about why rewards matter.

Rewards transport us to the future in such a way that we persevere and prosper in the present.

- We are told about Moses, in Hebrews 11:26, that he did what he did because he had his eyes on the “recompense of the reward.”
- The saints in the famous Hall of Faith in Hebrews eleven endured because they were seeing their reward afar off.
- We are told even of Jesus, in Hebrews 12:2, that it was for the joy set before Him that He endured the Cross, despising its shame. He saw the reward, and that reward was **you!**

Rewards matter now as well as in the future. To the extent I am looking forward, to the time I will stand before the Lord, I will defeat the world and persevere in my faith, not growing weary in well-doing.

What is the right way to be righteous in our praying? Instead of praying to be seen by others in the fellowship we ought to pray to be heard by our Father.

#2 You Want To Be Rewarded For The 'Right' Righteousness
With Regard To Your Praying
(v6-8)

I see two simple contrasts in these verses:

1. Jesus contrasted the hypocrisy of praying in public to be seen of men with the sincerity of praying in private to be heard by God.
2. Jesus contrasted the hypocrisy of formal rituals of prayer with the simplicity of informal conversation in prayer.

Let's talk first about the sincerity of praying in private to be heard by God.

Matthew 6:6 But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Survey the Bible, both testaments, and you'll find many public prayers. Jesus was talking about an attitude in these verses. Wherever you are, you should pray as if you are having a private talk with God and want to be heard by Him.

That's it. Pretty simple.

There is something else we might notice, something that might encourage us to pray. Jesus said, "Go into your room." This is sometimes translated "enter in to your closet." It has given rise to the concept of a special place or room where we can do our 'best' praying. There are even plans you can discover for 'building' a prayer closet.

That's OK, to an extent. Just remember this. Most of the people in Jesus' audience had one-room homes! And those who did have more than one room did not have the kind of room He was talking about.

According to scholar William Hendriksen,

[The] Greek [verb used was related to the nouns]... *treasurer, treasury room, storeroom*. Such rooms [were] where precious objects were kept...

The equivalent today might be a vault. My paraphrase of this might be, "Think about your prayers as if they were spoken in a vault that secures precious things."

I get from this is that prayer has value. It is precious.

To whom is it precious? I submit prayer is precious to God. There are indications in the Bible that **God stores our prayers!**

- Three times in the Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ we are told that the prayers of the saints, which rise before God as incense, are collected in Heaven (5:8, 8:3, 8:4).
- In the Old Testament we read in Psalm 56:8 that God puts the tears of the saints into His "bottle" and in His "book."

Our prayers are not stored because they are profound. They are stored because God is our Father.

You parents and grandparents, do you not have tons of memorabilia from your children? By itself it is junk, trash. But because it was handled by your child or grandchild, because it was drawn by them or molded by them, it is precious to you.

It puts a very different slant on prayer, does it not?

And that brings us to the second thing, to the simplicity of informal conversation in our prayers.

Matthew 6:7 And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

Matthew 6:8 "Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

The warning against “vain repetitions,” combined with the understanding that God is your Father, ought to put an end once-and-for-all to formalizing and ritualizing prayer. It cancels-out the kinds of techniques I mentioned in the introduction. Don’t get fooled by arguments that the so-called ‘church fathers’ practiced these things. If they did, *they were wrong to do so!*

Now that Jesus has made the way into the presence of God immediate, I do not wish to erect new obstacles to talking to my Father. Formal prayers, ritualistic techniques, and the like are an offense to the Cross.

The end of verse eight is a little odd. If my Father knows the things I have need of before I ask Him, doesn’t that discourage me from praying?

Not anymore than it discourages your children from coming to you as a parent and sharing their hearts, opening up their thoughts, asking for their wants.

- It begins with crying. You know what your baby needs. It needs to eat, or to have its diaper changed, or to sleep. It cries anyway and you do something about it. You meet the need - even if it is the ‘need’ to let it cry because nothing is really wrong.
- As your child grows, he or she continues to ask you to do things for it. Sometimes over and over and over again! You deal with it, knowing the real needs and not just the wants. Your decisions on what to provide and what to withhold shape their thinking and their future.
- As your kids mature all the asking can turn into a real conversation. Needs are not as important as the joy of relating to one another, of enjoying one another’s company.

I think Jesus captured all of that in saying, “your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.” What we call “prayer” is really talking to God as our Father that brings us gradually into maturity.

Harry Chapin’s *Cat’s in the Cradle* is a timeless folk classic about earthly fathers and sons. The son wants to spend time with the father but dad is always too busy and keeps putting him off. “We’ll get together soon, son, I know we’ll have a good time then.”

The years pass. The father in his old age wants to spend time with his son. The son is too busy and he puts his father off. “We’ll get together soon, dad, I know we’ll have a good time then.”

Distant father’s raise distant sons. But our heavenly Father is not distant. He wants to spend time with us. He’s ever-present and willing to do so.

To the extent we live in His presence, talking to him sincerely and simply, we will become like Him.

We ought to be encouraged to pray, to pray more, and even to pray publicly more with the right motive.

“When you pray” do it as a child to be heard and not seen.

