

SI: Back on March 22 when we started having our online services and worshipping at home because of the lockdown, I decided we would pray the Lord’s Prayer every Sunday.

That hasn’t been our practice as a church.

We pray the Lord’s Prayer together often, but not every Sunday.

But my thought was that the familiarity of these words would be comforting during this trying time and an expression of our unity as a body of believers.

Praying the Lord’s Prayer every Sunday for eight weeks reminded me how important it is for the Christian life, so this morning I’m going to start a summer sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer.

Some of you may remember that I preached on the Lord’s Prayer ten years ago.

But it seems like enough time has passed, and this is such an important passage of Scripture, that it will be good for us to meditate on it again.

INTRO: Little children love to color.

Give them a box of crayons and a coloring book and they go to town.
But learning to color has two challenges.

The first challenge is choosing the right colors.

It doesn't matter if they color the face of the princess' blue or the fire truck green.
But when they get a little older, and start to learn their colors, you help them.

You say: What color is an apple? Red. Now find the red crayon.

What color is the sun? Yellow. Good, now find the yellow.

And then, their second challenge is to color in the lines. It's all over the place.

As they get older you say, Try to stay in the lines.

And when they are able to do that, then they are very proud of themselves,
and look at what they have done with a new satisfaction.

That's what most of us are like in the life of prayer.

When you are born again you have a new instinct to pray—you have to pray.

It's as natural as breathing for a Christian.

But you also learn to pray.

The Lord's Prayer is mentioned twice in the New Testament—

here in Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount and also in Luke 11.

In Luke, the setting is different. The disciples have been watching Jesus.

They've heard him pray, seen him go away and pray—sometimes all night.

They must have noticed the peace and confidence he had in prayer.

So they said: Lord, teach us to pray. Jesus said, When you pray, pray like this:

And he gave them the Lord's Prayer.

So it's clear, as it is in this Matthew passage, the Lord's Prayer is a model prayer.

Jesus is saying, Here are the colors, here are the lines for you to follow.

Do this, and it will give you a deeper satisfaction and experience in prayer.

But that doesn't mean that the Lord's Prayer is just for children in the faith,

or for Christians who have barely learned to pray. It's also for the most mature.

Church father Tertullian called the Lord's Prayer "a compendium of the Gospel."

All the Gospel summarized in the Lord's Prayer.

Thomas Watson, one of the great English Puritans called it "a body of divinity."

Divinity in those days meant all of Christian theology.

Saying much the same thing as Tertullian—all we need to know is here.

And Martin Luther's relationship with the Lord's Prayer is most interesting.

He had an intense prayer life, known to pray for two or three hours a day.

Got to a point where he felt that he could not accomplish anything if he didn't

spend that much time with God. How did he do it? By using the Lord's Prayer as his model. He did it his whole life. Later in this series I'll tell you some of the things Luther taught about praying the Lord's prayer. It's fascinating.

So for 2,000 years, Christians around the world, babes in Christ and fathers in the faith have prayed this prayer. It's been prayed in great cathedrals and in little thatched roof churches on the mission fields.

It's been prayed in hundreds of languages.

So as we study it, and pray it ourselves, we need to take off our shoes, because we are standing on holy ground.

Right before the Lord Jesus gave his disciples this prayer—right before—he gave them two negatives, two “do not's.”

I'm going to tell you how to pray, but first do not pray like the hypocrites, and second, do not pray like the pagans.

When the Bible speaks of hypocrites, it always means people inside the church.

The Bible never calls people outside the church hypocrites.

Hypocrites are always professing believers in the true God.

When the Bible speaks of pagans, our your Bible might translate it Gentiles, it means people outside the church. People who don't know the true God.

So Christ is saying: Before you pray, know that there are two bad influences, two false ways of praying. One comes from inside the church and one comes from outside the church—don't pray like that.

And, of course, this is not about mechanics, it's about the heart.

The Lord is saying: Before you pray, give yourself a heart check.

You're going to be pulled in two bad directions in prayer.

Know it and resist it.

Here's what we're going to do.

Spend this Sunday looking at the Lord's first “do not.”

Do not pray like the hypocrites.” Next Sunday, “Do not pray like the pagans.”

That will get our hearts ready for the opening words of the Lord's Prayer:

“Our Father in heaven.” So let's look at this under three questions:

1. What is hypocritical prayer?
2. Why are you inclined to pray that way?
3. Where do you get the power to pray rightly?

MP#1 What is hypocritical prayer?

Jesus says: “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray

standing in the synagogues on and the street corners to be seen by men.”
That’s pretty clear, isn’t it? Praying so other people will see you or hear you
and be impressed. So they’ll think you are a really spiritual person.
So they’ll say: He’s such a sincere, mature Christian.
She has such a close walk with Christ. Listen to her prayers!

The example Jesus gives is so exaggerated it’s intended to be funny.
He says hypocrites love to pray on street corners.
In the Old Testament church there was a practice of praying three times
a day, morning, noon, and night. It mirrored the practice of the priests in Temple.
So three times a day, at home, or at work, or in the local synagogue,
many Jews would face Jerusalem and pray.

Jesus says: Here’s the hypocrite, he’s on his way to the synagogue for noon prayer.
But he plans his route, he makes sure he gets “held up”, then what do you know?!
It’s noon and he’s not at the synagogue. Where is he?
He just happens to be at the corner of 2nd Ave and 278, right in downtown.
So right then and there he drops on his knees and starts praying.
And everybody passing by says: Wow. Look at him. That’s dedication!
There’s a man who really knows God. There’s a man not ashamed of his faith.
I sure couldn’t do that. I’m not nearly that serious about being a Christian.
Or he gets to synagogue to pray and he plans what to say and where to stand
based on what will impress other people the most.
That sounds like such a far-fetched example you can’t imagine anybody doing it,
But Jesus is using these over-the-top examples to make a point.

Actually, this is part of a bigger lesson Jesus is teaching in this chapter.
He says in verse 2 of this chapter:

“When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets,
as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets to be honored by men.”
Another funny example. You’re about to give some money to a homeless person,
but first you blow a trumpet so everybody turns and looks, then you hand money.
Everybody is impressed and says what a generous person you are.

Then he says in verse 16:

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do,
for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting.”
You’re fasting, which is between you and God, but you put on this really tragic face
so you look like you’re in pain, then people will ask, What’s wrong? You ok.
No, nothing is wrong. I’m just fasting.

Sometime when I tell people I missed them on Sunday, they get flustered and start to make excuses for why they weren't in church, justifying their absence to me, as if I'm the one they go to church for instead of God.

Have you ever told someone: I'll pray for you, and maybe part of why you told them that was to make them feel good, but part was to sound spiritual.

And if you were truly moved to pray for them, isn't that between you and God?

That's Jesus' point in all these examples. Who is your focus?

Are you doing your acts of religion for God or for other people?

If it's for other people, then Jesus says you've missed the point and you're praying hypocritically.

So should we avoid praying in front of people?

Earlier in the Sermon on Mount Jesus says: Let your light shine before men.

Which means, don't hide your faith.

Remember the story of Daniel in the lions' den?

Daniel followed this Jewish custom of praying three times a day.

He would go to his home, open windows toward Jerusalem and pray.

When the Persian king passed a law outlawing prayer, the way Daniel's enemies caught him was that he kept up his custom.

Why didn't he keep praying but just not pray in a place he could be seen?

Hide in a locked room to pray instead of on his balcony?

Here's the rule of thumb.

When you are fearful and want to hide your prayer then you should let light shine.

When you want to impress people, you should pray in secret.

You're in a restaurant, maybe with your family. Maybe a business lunch.

You think, I don't want to pray. Embarrassing. Awkward for these other men.

Don't hide the practice of your faith. Let your light shine.

But if you say: I'm going to let them know I'm a good Christian.

I'm going to show them dedication.

Then who are you really praying for? Jesus says, it's better to say a sincere silent prayer in your heart to your Father in heaven.

This may seem to be basic, but let's go a little deeper and ask the second question:

MP#2 Why are we inclined to pray in a hypocritical way?

Why are we inclined to hypocrisy in all the acts of religion whether it's giving or going to church or living a moral life?

Why are we driven to get the approval of the people who matter to us?

Here's the reason:

It's because we fail to really understand how we relate to God in Christ.

What's the relationship you have to God through Christ? Jesus says:

“When you pray, go into your room, shut the door and pray to your . . . Father.

Then your Father who sees will reward you.

When you read all of chapter six, Jesus pushes this home over and over.

Your Father, your Father, your Father. Twelve times he says it.

And when he gets to the Lord's Prayer itself, he says,

This is the way you are to address God: “Our Father in heaven . . .”

And so what is the cause of hypocrisy? Why are we as believers inclined to pray and give and even live moral lives to impress other people?

It's because we've failed to understand that through Christ,

God is our Father, and we are his beloved sons and daughters.

The root cause of hypocrisy in prayer and everything else is insecurity in your relationship with God.

If you don't really know that God is your Father in heaven,

if your faith is not strong enough to grasp that intellectually and experientially,

then you will seek your security, affirmation and acceptance from other people.

You'll look for the eyes of other people to assure yourself you are right with God.

Someone must notice my morality and my sacrifices.

Someone must notice and my hard work and my religious disciplines.

Because when they see how good I am, or how hard I'm trying,

when they affirm me, then I will know that I'm ok.

When you first read this passage about hypocrites praying on street corners, so they can be seen, and blowing trumpets when they give money to the poor, that sounds so over the top that you say—that's not me. That's other people.

But the Sermon on the Mount is a sermon to believers.

Jesus is teaching his disciples. He's talking to men who know God,

and who know they owe God certain obligations,

and desire to be in a relationship with him. He's talking to us.

He's saying that it's easy for a person with real faith to have a radical insecurity in

his or her relationship with God. And when you don't have a deep and

real sense of the fatherhood of God, you try to get approval through religion.

A friend of mine told me about a woman he knew who was brought up in a

church that taught godly women wear dresses and worldly women wear pants. She said, for years, when I put on a dress it made me feel accepted by God. The nods of approval she got from the members of her church validated it.

I'm sure she would have said that God was her Father, and even prayed to him in that way. But experientially, she was missing it. And as the years went by, she knew that she was missing something. She knew that the nods she got for her modest dress and her morality and her praying and all her religious exercises were not the same as the smile of God.

Ask yourself these questions:

Why are you moral and religious?

Why do you stay sober?

Why do you stay faithful to your marriage?

Why do you raise children right?

Why do you go to church?

Why do you give? Why do you pray?

Is it to get a nod of approval from the people who matter?

Is it so that you can hold your head up and say, I'm OK?

If so, you're missing something.

You don't really know, or haven't really experienced the Fatherhood of God.

And until you do, all your acts of religion will become increasingly unsatisfying.

How did Jesus put it?

He said that people who pray for the approval of other people, have already received their reward.

The nod you get from other people, your fleeting sense of self-assurance.

That's it. That's your reward.

How quickly it's gone. How disappointing.

But Jesus wants you to have much more when you pray.

That brings us to the third question:

MP#3 Where do you get the power to pray rightly?

By knowing your heavenly Father's love and affirmation.

When you know he loves you and is for you,

when you've enjoyed his acceptance and affection,

then prayer becomes what it ought to be—time with him.

Every boy and every man longs for the approval of his father.

He longs to hear good job, I love you.

I remember when Will was a little boy that he would sometimes make a muscle.

Dad, feel my muscle. And what's a father supposed to do when his son says that? You squeeze it and say, Wow. You're strong.

And he stands up a little bit taller and you see confidence in his eyes.

And when he gets older, you start to tell him about inner strength, and what it means to be brave and kind and to defend the helpless.

When you see your son show that kind of strength, you praise him.

And I remember when Adrienne and Eliza were little, it seems like it was a constant parade of dress up. They had a bin full of fancy clothes, and they would come out swathed in scarves and gloves and high heels—and what's a dad supposed to do?

Oh, my, you girls look lovely. And how lovely they feel.

And when they get older, you get to teach them that it's good be pretty on the outside, but it's more important to be pretty on the inside.

And when you see those demonstrations of inner beauty, you praise them.

Many of you got that from your fathers growing up.

You got that love and affirmation. Some of you didn't.

And to this day you carry that wound and bear that scar.

Part of being in a church family is that we get to re-parent each other.

We almost become surrogate fathers and mothers as we affirm one another, and express our love and confidence in each other and push each other to live the Christian life.

But more importantly, as a Christian, you have a heavenly Father.

He knows everything about you. Of course he sees your sins and failures.

But he also sees the strength and beauty you have through union with Christ.

And he loves you in Christ. He claims you as his own.

So you don't have to pray to get people to see how good you are—

God already sees you, and he knows how good you are not—

but he loves you anyway, in Christ.

If you ever doubt that, when you doubt it—look at the cross.

There's the proof of the love of God the Father.

And when you really try to pray to him and spend time in prayer with him, he squeezes your muscle and says, Good job.

I feel that and it feels strong to me.

That's what gives us the power to pray.

That's the reward Jesus speaks of when he says:

“Go into your room, shut the door and pray to your Father who is unseen.

Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

The reward is not answers to your prayers themselves.

Lord, please work out this problem in my job, help me with this or that concern I have for money or health or my children.

Of course God hears all those requests and answers them as he sees best.

Sometimes yes, sometimes no, sometimes wait.

But the real reward, the thing that motivates us and empowers us to pray rightly, is fellowship with God himself, the Father's love and affirmation.

Look again at what Jesus says: It's so incredible that it's easy to miss.

“Go into your room, go into your place of prayer—maybe it's your bedroom, maybe it's the couch or your porch swing, but go to that place and shut the door.

And when you shut the door, who is there? Your Father who is unseen.

Jesus says, When you pray rightly, you are walking into the throne room of God. If

If you had eyes that could pull back the curtain that separates this world from the invisible world, the world of angels, you would see that what looks like a bedroom, or a closet is really the throne room of heaven.

And what does God see? He sees you. He sees your heart.

He sees all of your cares and sorrows. He sees the things in you that are so deep you can't even articulate them.

And he comes to meet you and help you.

What a reward is ours when we turn to him for help. And how empty it seems to pray to impress other people, when we have the privilege of entering the throne room of our Father.

Isaac Newton said,

“I can take my telescope and look millions and millions of miles into space; but I can lay my telescope aside, go into my room and shut the door, get down on my knees in earnest prayer, and I see more of heaven and get closer to God than I can when assisted by all the telescopes and material agencies on earth.”

Do not pray like the hypocrites do. Do not pray for the eyes of men.

Don't look for the reward of their affirmation—or you will get it.

And you'll miss the really great reward of entering the presence of your heavenly Father, and knowing he is there, and that he loves you.