

“Pray Tell”

Matthew 6: 5-15

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Last week we looked at the opening words of Matthew, chapter six. Jesus wants us to be concerned with the inner attitudes, not just outer form. He says, don't act just so others can see, looking for reward from them. Instead, he says, look for God's reward.

Be careful not to do your “acts of righteousness” before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. (Matthew 6:1)

Jesus mentions three things: giving (Matthew 6:2-4), prayer (6:5-15), and fasting (6:16-18). If you have only the outward form or if the outward form focuses attention on you, public applause is all the benefit you'll get.

Of course, a visible spiritual life isn't bad in itself. The Apostle Paul told the Christians in Corinth,

“Therefore I urge you to imitate me” (1 Corinthians 4:16),

In saying that, he makes it clear it's not wrong to have a public example of doing good. And again he said,

“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

That's in line with what Jesus already told his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount,

Let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

Godly people serve as models of what being a Christ-follower looks like. When Jesus tells us not to make a show of the spiritual life, he's concerned about *why* we pray, or give, or fast like we do. Without the right motive and perspective, we undo the benefit of these practices.

So today, we want to look at Jesus' teaching about prayer. In doing that, I want to look at our posture in prayer, our perspective in prayer, and then our priority in prayer.

First, Our Posture in Prayer Should Be Toward God, Not Others. (Matthew 6:5-6)

Jesus' starts his teaching on prayer this way:

“Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners so that they may be seen by others. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward.

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door, and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:5-6).

Jesus is talking about two basic postures for prayer. We can pray to get attention, because want to be known as spiritual. Sometimes that's a way to gain status in a Christian community. But authentic prayer is only concerned with enjoying a relationship with God. Why would a child of God be concerned with impressing others? Instead of looking at others, the son or daughter of God looks to the Heavenly Father. They want to connect with him. Nothing else is as valuable, because like the writer of Hebrews says, God “rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6), and the reward is himself.

So, the outcome of those postures is very different, as Jesus demonstrated with a parable in Luke 18:9-14. He told about a religious leader and a tax collector, a despised and very public sinner who both went to the temple to pray. The religious leader pompously thanked God he was better than the tax collector and bragged about his good works, but the tax collector just cried out for mercy. His conclusion was,

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 18:14)

If we use impressive words in our prayer life, or if we put on a special “talking to God voice,” that might be an indication we're not yet being authentic with God. If we pray publically but don't have an inner life of prayer, it might be telling us our prayer life is not very deep. Jesus says to go into a private space and shut the door. Whatever the architecture of our surroundings, to go into that space is to intentionally entering into communion with Jesus in our own heart, the space that Theresa of Avila called the “interior castle.”

Sometimes people look good publicly, but the inside is very different. If we believe that God exists and rewards those who seek him, it will affect our private lives, because we will know that he's there. In fact, there is no private life. And unlike showy prayer, the rewards are real and lasting. Instead of someone else's good opinion, which can be gone in a flash, authentic prayer helps of grow a

heart of faith. It builds our confidence in God; it helps us hear his voice and understand his will; and it brings about real results as God answers our petitions.

Jesus says, get your posture in prayer right. It's about looking to God, not looking at others.

Our Perspective in Prayer Should Be Trust. (Matthew 6:7-8)

Jesus contrasts prayer to the Father with the prayers of the pagans, or like the *New Living Translation* has it, "prayers of other religions." What might this mean, and how do we relate this to our prayers?

In verse 7 Jesus says, "Babbling like pagans." That is praying to God in name, but without understanding. It's like Paul said about Jews who didn't yet know Jesus as Savior,

For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. (Romans 10:2).

To think, like pagans, that you will "be heard because of many words" is when you pray with the attitude that God might not be listening and that he has to be manipulated into giving us what we want.

Jesus says our Father knows what we need even before we ask. It's all about being in a relationship with him. That becomes even more clear with Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer. Luke includes Jesus' words,

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 the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:13)

We're connected with Jesus, and he knows what we need. This means we can be real, and we can pray simply and directly. We can come to him when we're joyful, or hurting, or angry, and he understands. We don't have pile on words or sound super spiritual, and we don't have to manipulate.

If our Father knows what we need before we ask, why should we pray? I think the Bible teaches we pray for at least a couple reasons. We pray because prayer changes us and makes us better. And we pray because that's *how* God meets our needs, by bringing us into the process of answering prayer. Our prayers make a difference. We don't have to pile up our words or try to coerce God. That's putting prayer in perspective.

Our Priority in Prayer Should Be That God Be Glorified. (Matthew 6:9-10)

So, what really makes the difference in prayer? Is it just learning to do it better? No, I think the critical difference is our focus. It's where we put our priority in prayer.

I want to focus on the phrase, "Hallowed be your name," because it's the most essential phrase in the whole prayer. What does it mean to hallow God's name? What are we asking him to do when we ask him to see to it that his name be hallowed?

The word "hallow" means sanctify. It can mean make holy, or treat as holy. When God sanctifies us, it means that he makes us holy. But when we sanctify God, it means that we treat him as holy.

So, Jesus is teaching us to pray that God would cause his name to be treated as holy. What are we asking God to do when we pray that he cause his name to be treated as holy?

When Israel was making its way across the desert, God told Moses to trust him to provide what the people needed. He told him to speak to a rock, and that he would make water come out. But Moses hit the rock with his rod instead. Water poured out, but God was displeased. He told Moses,

But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them." (Numbers 20:12)

We treat God as holy is to trust what he says. God wanted to reveal himself as God to the people, but instead Moses made it look like Moses was powerful. God isn't hallowed when we don't respect his word. When we pray for God to make his name holy, we're asking him to cause people to believe in him. "Hallowed be thy name" means, "May your word be trusted."

One time when our daughter Magalie was little, she leaped off a six-foot wall when I was looking the other way. I caught her, but she almost killed me—and scared the daylights out of me. I said, "Whoa, Mag, why did you do that?" And she said, "Cause you're my dad!" That's trust. And God says, trust in my word. You can count on me.

One of the ways we fear God is to count on him, to take him at his word, and to refuse to fear anything else. The remarkable thing is that when we fear God, in the sense we honor and respect him, we really don't have to be afraid of anything else.

We don't have to be afraid of floods or of terrorist attacks or of losing your retirement or of anything else in this world. We should fear saying no to God. God is the one to whom we all have to make answer one day, and to step outside his will is to move away from the care and blessing and guidance he wants to give us.

It's like in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, when two girls, Susan and Lucy, getting ready to meet Aslan the great lion, who is a picture of Christ. Two talking animals, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, tell the girls about him.

"Ooh," said Susan, "I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie," said Mrs. Beaver. "And make no mistake, if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then isn't he safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you!"

It's serious business to come to the king!

So when we pray, "Hallowed be thy name," we mean, "Father, let your name be revered, taken seriously, weighed heavily." Or, "Father, cause people to have such a high view of you that it is a much more dreadful thing to lose your approval than to lose anything the world can offer."

We hallow the name of God when we keep his commandments. We profane the name of God when we break his commandments. So when we pray, "Father, let your name be hallowed," we mean, "Father, let your will be done on earth. Let it be done in my life." Cause your commandments to be obeyed. "Hallowed be your name" means, "May your commandments be obeyed." God's name is hallowed, it's lifted up in the world as holy, when his will is done. And wherever that happens, his kingdom is coming on earth just like in heaven.

It's like the guy who told his teenage son to clean his room, and the kid said, "Sure, okay," but kept on playing on his computer. An hour later the dad told him again, and the kid said, "Okay, Dad," but still didn't get up. It seemed like it was always like that, the son agreeing and not following through. One day the kid graduated from high school and joined the Marines. When he came home after boot camp, his dad asked what he had learned so far in the service. The young man answered, "Dad, I learned what 'now' means."

So when we pray, "Hallowed be thy name," it's a request, not a declaration. We're not saying, "Lord, your name *is* hallowed!" We are saying, "Lord, make your name be hallowed."

Now, the text makes two parallel statements that are essentially saying the same thing, and each one helps us understand the meaning of the others. The statements are really requests, and they are,

"Hallowed be your name,"

"Your kingdom come," and

"Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

That is, make your word to be believed, make your commandments to be *obeyed*, make yourself to be glorified. So, the Lord's Prayer shows us what's most important to Jesus. If praying for the honor of God's name is important to him, it should be to us, too—that God's name be honored and lifted up as holy in all the earth.

It also teaches us that God accomplishes his great work of saving the world through prayer. That's why he tells us to ask him to glorify his name. The honoring of God's name is linked to his will being done, and that is the meaning of the coming kingdom, the establishing of his will. I think Jesus is saying he wants us to pray the kingdom into reality. God hasn't yet fulfilled his purpose of bringing of saving a people and building the church ,

which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.
(Ephesians 1:23)

But you know what? He's doing that work in our time, and he's called us to be a part of it right here in Northeast Ohio. That's why I want us to be a church that Chesterland can't live without. I want us to pray this petition that is so close to our Lord's heart. When the "up there" comes down here, then the prayer will come true, "Hallowed be your name on earth."