

Teach Me to Pray – Part 1
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I. INTRODUCTION

Imagine what it must have been like to be one of the 12 disciples of Jesus. Throngs of people were constantly trying to get to Jesus and touch him and hear his words of wisdom, yet you get to spend every moment of every day with him and learn from the greatest teacher and the wisest man that ever lived. You get to hang out with the One who created you and learn how he intended life to be lived. You get to see his incredible healing power firsthand day after day. You get to experience his tender care and love and his ability to see right into the core of who you are and put his finger on the things you've worked so hard to hide from others throughout your life. You get to have a front row seat to what it really looks like in practical everyday life to walk in complete dependence on God, allowing his power and wisdom to guide and direct every decision and priority of life.

As these disciples walked with Jesus, one of the things they noticed was that prayer and communication with the Father was of extreme importance to him. Even after a full day of healing and teaching and endless demands, he would often slip away by himself just to pray and talk with his Father. In Luke 6:12 we read that one time he went to the mountains and spent an entire night in prayer. This was the night before he chose his 12 disciples...a pretty important decision, wouldn't you say? He was prepared to choose the right men because he had fervently sought the will of the Father in prayer all through the night.

Well one of these times after Jesus had just finished spending time in prayer, one of his disciples, having observed how important prayer was to Jesus, decided that he wanted to learn how to do it. When Jesus had finished praying, this disciple said to Jesus, "...Lord, teach us to pray..." (Luke 11:1). And what better person to do it than Jesus! In fact, we're going to let him teach us as well today and in the coming weeks as we study the Word together as his modern day disciples. I've called today's message, "Teach Us to Pray." Having considered last week how God responds to prayer and takes powerful action as a result of our prayers, we're

going to begin looking at today what Scripture teaches us about HOW to pray. We're going to make the same request of Jesus today: "Lord, teach us to pray."

Now I know prayer can be a terrifying thing to many people, especially when we have to do it out loud in front of other people. I can still remember the first time I had to pray out loud in an elder meeting at First Baptist Church of La Grande and how completely terrified I was. I recall having this spinning sensation where it seemed like I was getting sucked into a black whirlpool as I prayed. I was so overwhelmed with the pressure to say just the right words that it was affecting both my body and mind in strange ways. So if you feel overwhelmed or intimidated by prayer, take heart! I've been there. But the good news is that by God's design the vast majority of our praying is to take place quietly in our minds or in a private place where we can be alone with God and pour out our hearts to him without worrying about what other people think.

Well, as I was preparing for this message I quickly came to the realization that Scripture has a lot of guidance about how to pray, so we're probably going to spend at least a few weeks on the how to's. But as we do this, I really want to encourage you not to view this as a checklist of things to do whenever you pray or a 15-step process to being able to get what you want from God or feel like you've done your duty towards him. It just seems to be a natural human tendency, doesn't it, to reduce God's guidance to a checklist or a collection of rules and regulations we should try to do? Instead of that, please constantly keep in mind throughout this study what we've already learned about prayer: that it's simply talking to and listening to God.

The most important thing is that in prayer we're learning to take our eyes off ourselves and look to God for everything we need...that we're having a relationship with him and allowing him to lead and guide and empower us. These how-to's are simply meant to serve as guidelines to help us talk to and listen to him better and more often...to teach us to pray in step with who he is and what he's accomplishing in us and in the world, rather than just spending all our time on what we think we want.

II. HOW NOT TO PRAY

We're going to begin today by getting the negative out of the way first. We're going to look first at how NOT to pray, according to Jesus. Jesus gave his disciples and us two clear instructions about what NOT to do as we pray in Matthew 6, verses 5 to 9. And out of all the things he could have said not to do, these are the two he chose.

A. Don't pray to impress others

First, Jesus warns us to avoid praying to impress others. In Matthew 6, verse 5, he says this:

"When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full."

Jesus was well aware of the rampant religiosity that had taken root among the religious leaders of the day. The Pharisees and Saducees loved being thought of as spiritual giants who had achieved a higher level of spirituality than the common person. Prayer to them wasn't about a real relationship with God, but was rather just another duty they performed to give themselves value and get honor and glory for themselves. Though their hearts were far from God and there was no real communication going on, they performed the ritual and did it in the public eye so that people would give them the glory that should have been given only to God. Their concern in prayer had nothing to do with knowing God and had everything to do with impressing other people and hiding the darkness within their own hearts.

So as we learn how to pray, we also need to guard against praying to impress others. You may have come across people in your life journey who have learned all the appropriate terminology and sound very spiritual when they pray in public, but when you look at their private life things just don't add up. These people are using their eloquent praying abilities not to seek and know God, but to appear spiritual in the eyes of others. And Jesus issues a bold statement that when prayer is conducted this way, it will do nothing to grow our relationship with our

God. The only reward we'll get is the emptiness of being honored by people whom we've tricked into thinking we're something we're not.

What we're reminded again through this instruction from Jesus is that prayer is not a religious duty we perform to feel good about ourselves or impress others. Instead, it's simply about building relationship with God and learning to let him guide and direct all that we do. If we ever find that motivation in praying is to feel good about ourselves or impress others, we've gone off track and need to come to repentance and a revamping of our view of prayer.

B. Don't use meaningless repetition

The second thing Jesus warns us against as we learn to pray is using meaningless repetition. In Matthew 6, verses 7 and 8, he says this:

"And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."

That phrase, "do not use meaningless repetition," based on the original Greek, can also be stated: "do not keep on babbling." Have you ever known someone who just seems to keep on babbling and babbling? The idea here is that as we pray we should do it thoughtfully and carefully with our minds, not just thoughtlessly babbling on and on or thinking the more we talk the more likely God is to hear us and be impressed with our prayers.

Pagan religions are known for this type of mindless praying and repetition and incantations, and the way we approach God should have no similarities to that. Instead we approach God in prayer recognizing that he already knows all about us and understands our true and deepest needs. We come with humility and reverence into his awesome presence and thoughtfully communicate and fellowship with him.

We'll spend a little more time next week on praying with our minds fully engaged, but for now I think this warning from Jesus against using meaningless repetition is summed up well by what's expressed in Ecclesiastes 5, verses 1 to 3. Listen closely:

Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few. For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words.

I love what these verses tell us about the importance of listening in prayer, quieting our minds in the awesome presence of God, beholding him and then thoughtfully choosing our words. This is not to say that we always need to stop and quiet our minds for 5 minutes before we speak to God. As we've already learned, praying is to be continual and sometimes we just need to pour out our hearts and words in desperation in the heat of challenges we're facing or emotional distress. Praying occurs at all times and in all places and it's more important that we communicate with God than that we always say things perfectly. God mostly just wants to hear from us and see that we're looking to him instead of relying on ourselves.

But what I do think we can glean from these verses is that as we learn to pray as God intends, we will spend more time asking God for wisdom and less time babbling on and on about what we think the solutions to our problems are. We will spend less time telling God what to do and more time seeking his will and his solution. We will more and more learn to come in humility, thoughtfully asking him for guidance, and keeping our eyes open for his response and miraculous working. We will learn to come to him as the awesome, all-knowing, all-powerful God of the universe who is the source of everything we need and can do all things.

III. HOW TO PRAY

So let's move on now from what NOT to do and look at two positive guidelines we're given in Scripture about how to pray. We'll tackle more of these in the coming weeks as we look at the Lord's Prayer and other teachings and examples of what praying looks like.

A. Pray primarily in secret (Matthew 6:6; Luke 5:15-16)

I'd like to begin first with the alternative Jesus gives us to some people's habit of praying to impress others. This will be an encouragement to those of you who struggle with praying in public. After telling us not to be like the religious leaders who pray in public to impress others, Jesus provides us with a much better way to pray that protects us from the temptation to impress others and invites us into one-on-one, uninterrupted fellowship with our God. In Matthew 6, verse 6, he says this:

"But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

Jesus instructs us here that the bulk of our praying should be done in secret...in quiet, private places where we can have uninterrupted fellowship with the Father and avoid the temptation and stress of trying to impress others with our eloquent words. This could be a quiet room or closet as described here where you focus solely on seeking God or it could be the quiet conversation you have in your mind with God throughout each day. But the message is clear: prayer is primarily meant to be done in secret, where we can have a quiet, honest, continual conversation with God meant to connect us with him and grow our relationship with and dependence on him. And when we do learn to pray in this way, giving up our efforts to impress others, he rewards us. And I would argue that the best reward he gives us when we pray this way is the gift of himself...a deeper and closer fellowship with him.

This does not mean that we're never to pray in public. There are many places in Scripture where public prayers are given and where believers are praying together as a group. But it does mean that most of our praying will be in private

as we have that continual conversation with God throughout each day, and as we set aside specific times and places where we can just focus on seeking him in prayer and doing battle in prayer with the spiritual forces of wickedness. It also means that we do need to guard against praying to impress others when we pray in public or participate in group prayer meetings.

B. Pray in Jesus' name (John 14:12-14; John 16:23-24)

A second clear instruction that Jesus gives us as we learn how to pray is that we are to pray in his name. In his final instruction to his disciples in John chapters 14 through 17, this directive to pray in his name was repeated 4 times. In chapter 14, verses 12 to 14, Jesus says it twice:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do, because I go to the Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.”

Then in John chapter 16, verses 23 through 24, he repeats the directive to ask in his name two more times:

“And in that day you will ask Me no question. Truly, truly, I say to you, if you shall ask the Father for anything, He will give it to you in My name. Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be made full.”

Now you know why we usually end our prayers with, “in Jesus' name, amen.” The receiving of things asked for seems to be tied here with asking for them in Jesus' name. People have sometimes even looked at these passages and concluded they give us a blank check for anything if we just ask for it in Jesus name. I had a friend in college who tried to use these verses to spark a romantic relationship with a girl he was interested in. We had quite an interesting conversation as he tried to argue that just by praying in Jesus name and believing it was done, he was certain God would cause her to start liking him. As you might imagine, his plan didn't quite work out!

We need to keep in mind the context of these verses and how asking for something in Jesus' name should affect what we ask for. Jesus spoke these words to the disciples in the context of the new commandment he was giving them to love one another in the same way he had loved them. He spoke these words in the context of his teaching on abiding in him and how they could do nothing on their own, but only as they learned to abide in him.

Jesus also said that this promise of receiving whatever they asked for in his name was for those who believe in him and thereby do the works that he did. And finally, Jesus states that the reason why he will give them whatever they ask in his name is so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. Would the Father be glorified in the Son if he were to give bad things to people just because they asked for it in his name? Clearly we shouldn't take these verses as a promise to get whatever we want just by asking for it in Jesus' name and believing hard enough.

I recently read a book called "Praying Backwards," by Bryan Chapell and he digs deep into this concept of praying in Jesus' name. I won't go into all of it here, but in the book he challenges our beloved Christian tradition of tagging all of our prayers with "in Jesus name, amen," treating it like a magic phrase that somehow makes our prayers more effective. The truth is we've gotten into such a habit of tagging all our prayers this way that we usually hardly even realize we're saying them or what significance they have.

In the book he encourages us to think about starting our prayers "in Jesus name," rather than ending them that way. His suggestion is not that we necessarily use that phrase ever time, but rather that each time we begin praying we consciously remember that we're coming to the Father in and because of Jesus name, praying in his authority and hopefully in a way that is consistent with his character. He says that "by starting in Jesus' name, we will more easily keep our prayers from going astray of God's purposes...When we perceive the greatness and goodness of God, our prayers become not so much a seeking after God for our purposes, but an offering of ourselves for His purposes."

You see, there's a great responsibility that comes with praying in Jesus' name. If we remember that responsibility and consider Jesus' purposes and priorities as we come to the Father in prayer, we will be well on our way to learning how to pray according to God's will rather than our own...broadening our perspective on

what God might be accomplishing through the various challenges in our own lives or the lives of others, rather than just immediately praying for problems to be taken away and that we would be able to live a life of comfort and ease with all the toys we want.

In these verses from John chapters 14 and 16, we find a great encouragement and promise for those who learn to pray for God's purposes in the power of Jesus' name. When we learn to pray according to God's design, his great power we looked at last week rises up and we're empowered to do the works of Jesus' by his power and for his glory. As we abide in Jesus and find our strength and direction and sustenance in him alone, whatever we ask for in his name is done and the Father is glorified in the Son and our joy is made full! That's the power of praying in Jesus' name and according to his purposes! Lord, teach us to pray in the power of your name and with a longing for your purposes to prevail!

IV. CONCLUSION

So to sum up, today we've learned 4 important truths to guide us we learn to pray:

- 1) **Don't pray to impress others.** Pray to build your relationship with God, hear his wisdom and walk in his power.
- 2) **Don't use meaningless repetition.** Draw near to listen and worship, letting your words be few and well chosen. Focus on seeking God's will rather than telling him what he needs to do.
- 3) **Pray primarily in secret.** Let the bulk of your prayer life be a continual one-on-one conversation with God in the quiet of your mind or the privacy of a prayer closet or lonely mountain.
- 4) **Pray in Jesus' name.** Pray in his authority and in a way that is consistent with his character and his purposes.

And never forget that prayer is simply talking to and listening to God. We'll never do it perfectly and there is no one perfect way to do it. Just share your life with God and seek him in all that you do. Listen and follow his guidance.

And remember that even though we don't fully know how to pray as we should, God always knows what we really need and the Spirit is constantly interceding for us according to his will, translating our feeble words and requests into prayers for good in our lives. The most important thing is that we do come to God in prayer and seek him with all that we have.

I want to close today by sharing with you a prayer that's attributed to a civil war soldier. I think it speaks eloquently of our feeble attempts at prayer and God's ability and commitment to provide us with what we really need rather than what we may be requesting. Listen closely:

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve.
I was made weak, that I might humbly learn to obey.
I asked for health, that I might do greater things.
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.
I asked for riches, that I might be happy.
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men.
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life.
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I hoped for.
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am among all men most richly blessed.

Now that's powerful! We have a good God who is always, always, always working for our good and seeing through our spoken requests to our true heart needs. May this bring us great peace as we learn how to pray. But let's not give up learning how to pray more and more in step with God's purposes. A fruitful life lived in the very power of God awaits! Scripture gives us much guidance on how to pray effectively in Jesus' name and I look forward to continuing our journey through these truths in the coming weeks.