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SERIES: REWRITING JESUS

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TITLE: The Problem of Prayer Pt. 1

Have you ever received one of those oversized postcards from a car dealership, and glued to that postcard is a key? On that postcard, it says, “This key may be THE key that starts a brand-new car on our lot. So if it fits the ignition, the car is *yours* free and clear!” When you get these, if you’re like me, you think “Yeah, right. This will never work”. Think about all those keys that are mailed out all around the city. The fake keys aren’t worth the postage they were shipped with. But then you begin to think, “But what if this is the key?” How sweet would it be, to drive across town in your used rust-bucket, pull up to the new car; you sit down in the nice leather seats; take in a deep whiff of the new car smell; you stick the key into the ignition, and wham, it starts up? What a sweet experience that would be.

You know, prayer is a lot like a key. We, as Christians, have this key, that when used properly, can do amazing things. But so often, it seems like we are either at the wrong dealership or sticking the key into the wrong car. When it comes to prayer, none of us have it mastered, and all of us probably feel like our prayer life should be different and more effective. It’s my prayer and goal to help us all develop a more intimate and effective prayer life.

In case you're listening for the first time, or you haven't listened for a while, we are in a series called, “Rewriting Jesus”. Many people get Jesus wrong. They mold him in the image *they* like! Or they take what He said, and twist it to fit their lifestyle. That's why here at Back to the Bible, we're taking this month to see what Jesus *actually said*, and what He *actually did*. And Jesus knew a thing or two about prayer. Jesus had a robust and intimate prayer life with God the Father. This is why He'll be our guide.

In Luke, Chapter 11, the disciples make a request of Jesus. They say, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Luke 11 is not where we’ll be spending our time in our series, but I believe this is what we are asking God to do for us: “Lord, teach us how to pray”. So let’s go back to the Bible and look at Matthew, Chapter 6:

In Matthew 6, Jesus is discussing the importance of sincere religious activity. In Matthew’s account, Jesus’ teaching on prayer is sandwiched between two similarly themed passages. The first is on giving to the needy as a sincere act, and done with the right motives. Knowing this about the surrounding text helps us understand why He begins His teaching on prayer the way He does. Today, Jesus will help us see and correct two ineffective prayer habits. Then in the next

few days, we'll see and adopt the model of prayer He taught His disciples. So let's begin and read Matthew, Chapter 6, verses 5 through 8 (NASB):

“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. ⁶ 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.

⁷And 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. ⁸ So do not be like them; for your, Father knows what you need before you ask Him.”

In each of the 3 teachings in Matthew 6, Jesus begins with the problem or what *not* to do - the reason why their actions are hypocritical. And then He provides the *right way* of engaging in sincere religious activity. So Jesus in verse 5 begins, “When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites.” What does he mean by hypocrites? A hypocrite was someone who was in a play wearing a mask. They would parade around as a character, but that's all it was. It was an act, with no real-life connection to the actor. It was all a performance.

In my early 20's, I attended a humorist and a hypnotist's act. During his hour-long routine, he got people to do all sorts of crazy stunts, which many wouldn't normally perform. But at the end of the show, he would ask each participant, what is one thing they wanted to achieve? He told the audience that through the power of suggestion, he was able to overcome his smoking addiction. People thought this was amazing. He went down the line, whispering into people's ears their suggestion. People got up and went away. I hung around after the show to talk with my buddy. When we finally left the comedy club, we passed by a door marked “Janitor.” It then opened, and there was the hypnotist puffing away on his cigarette. The room was full of smoke. He was a hypocrite. He wore a mask on stage, but there was nothing real about his act. It was a performance.

But what's the hypocrisy for these people who are praying? Jesus says they stand in the synagogues and on the street corners praying. Why does this matter? Is posture the issue? No. The Bible talks about people praying standing up, lying down, on their knees, on their faces, hands in the air. There are all sorts of postures in prayer. So posture isn't the problem.

What about location? Is the synagogue the problem? I mean today, would Jesus say “they stand in the churches”? He might, but the issue isn't the location. Our churches are places where people should pray. Public prayer was embraced by the apostles in the Book of Acts. Public prayer has been a practice of Christians since the early church.

So the issue must be on the street corner then. The answer is yes, and no. No, because the Bible says we are to pray without ceasing. To assume prayer must only happen in one place would restrict continuous prayer. The Greek word here for street implies a large street – a place where a lot of people would be at one time: A Time's Square experience; on the corner right next to Memorial Stadium on Husker game day; a large place with a lot of possible spectators.

What is the issue then? Jesus tells us at the end of verse 5. They do it so they might be seen by other people. That's the issue. It's not the posture. It's not the location. **It's the motivation.** The motivation is for the celebration and the feeling of superiority from other people.

You see, there's no problem praying in the church. There's no problem praying on the public street corner. There's no problem praying out loud in public gatherings. The problem is motivation. They were praying for recognition from the people around them. The motivation was all wrong.

Who cares about motivation? What's the big deal? Isn't a little recognition something to be desired? Here's what the Bible says about our motives:

Proverbs 21:2 (ESV) says, "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the heart."

Think about that. Does that not describe us perfectly? So often we do what we want for our own reasons. We seek out people who will endorse our beliefs or our desires or our actions. But that doesn't make it right.

DISCUSSION:

N: So Arnie [Cole] and Cara [Whitney], what lessons have you learned about running your actions through the "motive filter", and why is this so important?

C: Well, I think we should check our motives for almost everything we do. When we post on social media; if we like something on social media, we know people are going to see that. Why do we want them to see that? When we speak about people, or to people, it's always a heart issue. I think, it's like, what is the difference between gossiping, or warning someone about another person, or telling something? Why are you saying it; what is your motive? And I think it's a reveal of the heart, right? So if it's gossip, then we are digging for something juicier, or to make ourselves look better, or to, you know, divulge something about that person. That's gossip. If we have a true concern for somebody and it's heartfelt, then I think it could be legitimate, right?

A: Yeah, you know, I have lots of motive filters that I run all the time on myself. And my favorite one is if I get real snarky, I'm not going to get credit for that good deed I just did, because it's a heart thing. So yeah, I think filters are critical, and the more you're out there, the more it's better to really guard what you have to say.

In my years as a pastor, I found it amazing how many people would knock on my door and seek counsel, or at least, so they said. They would tell me their story; they would tell me the reasons for the situation they're in; and then they would let me know their real intent. What would inevitably happen, is they would ask for my blessing or affirmation from Scripture for their actions: "I'm going to leave my family because I'm unhappy, and God wants me to be happy, right?" "I'm \$20,000 in debt, but I don't want to give up my entertainment or my hobbies, but God wants me to be happy, right?" So what would they do, when I tell them, "Actually no, God is not primarily concerned with your happiness, especially when you are looking to make yourself feel better"? So what would they do when I disappoint them? They would say, "Well I'll

just go to another church” or “Well, my friend said I should be happy, so I’m going to do what they told me to do.”

Now, this probably doesn't describe you. Validating sinful behavior with the approval of others is not where you are at. And to that I say, Amen! I celebrate that. But we can even do the noblest things without the right motive. You can donate \$1,000,000 to Back to the Bible, and would that help us? Absolutely!! But God says, “Why are you doing it? Is it for a tax write off? Is it because you feel pressured by a loved one?” You can go and serve at the local hospital, food kitchen, church, or pregnancy center, but if the motive is wrong, then there is a problem.

According to God, why we do what we do matters more than the action itself.

But it's not just the sinful issues that we look for validation or justification. It's not just seemingly positive things we can do for our own esteem. You see, so often we do things for the affirmation and the recognition of *others*.

Listen to what Paul says in Galatians 1:10 (ESV). “For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

Now I want you to really think for a moment about what Paul just said, because it is deeply troubling. He says, why are you doing what you are doing? Are you seeking the approval of God or of man? OK, fair enough, that seems like a reasonable question. It's a question we should ask ourselves every day. We should ask ourselves this question every time we make a decision. But then think about what he says at the end of that verse. He says, *if I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.*

Paul had done the people-pleasing thing. He had spent his earlier life as a Jewish Pharisee. He was zealous in his career. He *also* tried to please his fellow Jewish brothers and sisters by persecuting Christians! *But now ...* he had given ALL of that up, ALL for the sake of Christ! By turning his back on works-based righteousness -- by turning his back on pleasing men - he turned to follow Christ, *no matter the cost*. In Galatians 6:17, he says, “for I bear on my body the brand marks of Jesus.”

Paul experienced great persecution because of his choice to follow Christ. And he didn't do it for the approval of man. He did it for the approval of Christ. People pleasers *never* make faithful followers of Christ. And people-pleasers surely don't end up as martyrs. As we know from Scripture and history, the most faithful members of the early church, the apostles, were focused on pleasing God and *not* man. This is why they would *die* for their faith.

God *cares* about our motivations in ALL areas of life. And going back to our passage today, God cares about our motives when talking to Him through prayer. Why? Talking to God is an intimate experience. It's a special experience. It's a privilege. It's not about being known, or being seen with the King of Kings.

It may sound ridiculous, but have you ever taken a selfie with a celebrity or a public figure? I have. Did you immediately share it on social media? I have. Now that I'm studying the Bible on the topic of motive, I am beginning to regret it. But many of us do this. We get a photo-op with

someone famous, and we want to share it. We do it to be seen, and to increase our value with others based on that moment. That's what was happening here. They were praying so everyone could see, and to let others know how great they were.

But there's a second problem with these people and their prayers. The second problem - and what makes this prayer so hypocritical - is when *this is the only kind of praying you do*. There are many of us who pray at a public meal - at least bow our heads and fold hands. But that's all we ever do. We do so to be identified as religious, but in fact, it's only a performance. It's just a mask. We never commune or talk with God in private. It's all a public show.

Jesus, in essence, is saying this: Look, you may play at prayer. You may play religious. You can pray where everyone can see and hear you. The people around you will be pleased and impressed. You may get a pat on the back or wide recognition for such an inspiring prayer. But that's ALL you'll get. You aren't impressing God.

N: Arnie, you are a praying man. What is it about prayer that is so special to you?

A: You know, from an intellectual standpoint, it's very simply complex. You know, prayer seems very, very easy in concept, but it's also very complex, because you have to be careful that you're not just talking to yourself, or wishing for something good to happen to you. Lots of people pray; nonbelievers pray. But to me it's a very complex process.

N: Yeah. I think a lot of people get confused and often frustrated with it. But I think when people can just pause and remember, that what we're really doing is talking to God, and we're having a conversation with Him, and just talk to Him like we would anyone else, I think it begins to tear down a lot of the barriers. But there are still many moments of confusion, and even frustration, we can experience in that talking as well.

C: What used to get to me with prayer, is that sometimes I would pray and ask God for something or whatever. And I always felt like - not anymore - I've really had to, you know, this growth, personal growth - but I really had a problem with trusting God that He was going to do what was best. I felt like sometimes I would pray, and He'd be like that genie, where he tricks you like, "Oh, you think you want this? I'm going to give you this." You know? And I don't know, I was kind of fearful of how to ask, or what to ask for, you know, because I was afraid that He was going to try to trip me up with something.

A: Oh. And then there's the whole thing of praying in public, especially if you work for a ministry, or if you're like a pastor or something. I mean, I don't know. I'm sure Nat, he's totally like used to it, but Cara, does that bother you like it does me?

C: Well, for me personally, I try not to change anything from what I do in private to public. So I pray at home when I eat. I pray at restaurants when I eat, but I will say that I also do it as a way to evangelize. And I don't know if that is bad, or if it's not bad, is that my motive is there: I want people to ask me about Jesus. You know, I don't want to be bragging about it. So, you know, I've

always kind of questioned that, what my motive was?

N: Yeah. I've found that prayer is a great evangelistic tool. And depending on the context, in some restaurants, I pray with my eyes open, and sometimes I pray with my eyes closed, and there's various factors and motive and things like that. But I've found that when I'm at a restaurant, especially a restaurant I will frequent often, and I get the same waitress or servers, I'll just ask them, "Hey, I'm going to pray over dinner. Can I, is there anything you need prayer? You know, "Can I pray on your behalf?" And I think I've only had one person ever say no. And what's great about it is, when you go back to that restaurant, you can actually ask them, "Hey, remember when I was in here last, I was that weirdo who prayed for you - what's come about with that situation?" And it establishes credibility and integrity on your behalf, and creates open doors as well. So I think that's a great tool to use when trying to reach the lost. So obviously, you guys have been Christians for a while, and so I can see that there's growth in your prayer life. What has been instrumental in developing your prayer life?

C: Pain and suffering.

N: Why pain and suffering?

C: Oh, because, I don't know. That's the closest I've ever been to my friends, is when we're battling something together. God and I are battling something together - that's where the *whys* can sometimes be answered. I don't know. It's always in pain and suffering. I mean, I've literally got down on my knees for Arnie Cole. I mean, literally dropped to the floor and prayed for Arnie. And here he sits - prayer works. And, I mean, it's always in pain and suffering. I mean, there's thankfulness and appreciation. Don't get me wrong. I tell Him how thankful I am every day. I've said it today, several times to Him, but pain and suffering, period, was the closest I've ever grown to God. And to the part, where there was a period in my life where I wouldn't pray for a medical affliction to go away, because I was afraid I was going to lose a connection to God. So pain and suffering.

N: Well, I mean, I remember what C.S. Lewis said. He said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains". And I think those moments of pain and discomfort draw us near to Him and He speaks so loudly, if we're willing to listen.