

**Tuesday, August 18, 2020**

**SERIES: REWRITING JESUS**

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**TITLE: The Problem of Prayer Pt. 2**

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 in Matthew 6. Jesus was calling out the hypocrites for their prayers. **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 with their prayers is that this was the only kind of praying they did.** 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 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 are not impressing God.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:4 (ESV), Paul says, [“But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.”](#)

This is kind of the combination of Proverbs 21 and Galatians 1. As Christ-followers, we are no longer slaves to the world and to sin. We are slaves to Christ. Therefore, the only audience we aim to honor and please is God. And He knows our heart! If you are only praying in public, you need to stop. You are a hypocrite, because you do not relish and embrace the opportunity to talk with God in private. If you do pray in private, but you save your best prayer for the prayer meeting, stop it. Your motive is wrong, and God won't buy it.

So what's the solution to our hypocrisy? Jesus tells us in Matthew 6, verse 6:

[“6 But when 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.”](#)

The solution lies in understanding what prayer is. **Prayer is simply communion with God.** It's a fellowship with Him. It's an intimate conversation and worship session with the King of Kings.

So the point Jesus makes here is, prayer is intimate, special, and not meant for the pleasure of recognition of other people. It is *to* God and *for* God. It's not a show. It's about being alone with God in intimate conversation.

Jesus says when you pray, *go into your room* – a Greek word referring to an inner room or closet: A place that is private and free from distraction. This is intimacy with the God of the Universe, and He wants to spend quality time with you!

When I was working on my Master's at Biola University, we'd have residency in the summers. We'd have renowned authors and speakers at our disposal. Yes, we loved being in their presence in class, but what we really desired was being alone with them at a meal or coffee. The chance to have one-on-one time in conversation is what we desired and was beyond a blessing. Who is the person, that if they knocked on your door today and asked for an hour to talk, you'd drop everything to give them that time??? Who is that celebrity, that author, that speaker, the singer, that if they knocked on the door, you'd move Heaven and Earth to get that one-on-one hour with them in conversation?

Friends, the most famous creator, author, celebrity, for all time, wants to be with you. The God of the Universe is *waiting at the door*, waiting for you to spend one-on-one time with Him! If He's not at the top of your list of priorities, something is terribly wrong. If that's the case, Jesus would give you the same rebuke that He gave the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2. He would say, you have forgotten your first love! But you don't have to remain there! Repent and come back to Him! Remember Who came into this world and gave His life for you. Jesus did this because He loved YOU that much, and He waits at the door.

Your TV, your tablet, your Netflix binge-worthy show, your golfing, your car collection, your addiction, whatever has dethroned God as your first love – *repent of it and come back to Him!* Spend intimate and focused time with Him in prayer. Jesus says we are to go into the inner room and shut the door. So should you try to have a prayer closet? A "war room", as some of you might call it? If that's what it takes for you to talk with God, in private, without distraction – then sure! Remove the idols, the distractions, the excuses, and commune with Him.

Susanna Wesley, the mother of famed theologian and minister, John Wesley, had 11 children. There was nowhere to escape the chaos for her to pray. She simply took her apron and covered her head with it as she went about her day, and prayed in private there.

Until you have that intimacy with God in private, you shouldn't be putting on a show out here in public. And Jesus tells us that God will reward you for attention and intimacy with Him. Jesus doesn't say how, but we can be sure He will reward us. So we need to stop the prayer performance, and return to our first love, with intimate communion with Him.

## **DISCUSSION:**

N: So Arnie [Cole] and Cara [Whitney], we're talking again about prayer – conversation with God. But just think – you'll have conversations with the Lord FACE to FACE in the not too distant future. How does that thought change up how you talk with Him now?

C: Well, I have access to Him now, 24/7, and I certainly use that time; I talk to Him in the shower. So probably face-to-face, I mean, I know I get to cash in this mom bod for something a little bit better, but so, my times will look different. But I'm telling you, it's 24/7 with Him all the time; if only to say I'm worried, or I don't even know how to pray, or help me out here. [Yeah]. I mean, sometimes there's just like two, three lines. I'm a mess. Nat - He's - I have Him on speed dial.

N: Yeah. Well you and me both, you and me both. But you know, I've often thought about this. It's almost like doing a phone call with somebody, versus seeing them face-to-face and having that coffee conversation; both are precious. I mean, you love talking to that person, but I just - I can't imagine what it's going to be like to actually sit down across from my Lord and Savior, and physically see Him and have that conversation. That is a precious thought. And I can only imagine what it's going to be like.

Arnie, just curious. What do you imagine when you think about talking with Jesus face-to-face?

A: Peaceful, a peace that passes all understanding. I think sometimes we get a little bit of glimpse of that here on Earth. And I just know it's going to be a hundred times better.

N: You know, something Cara said made me wonder, for you guys, knowing that we do have access to God anytime we want – 24/7 - in the shower, in the car, in the grocery store, in the pantry, or wherever it is, why do we not do it more often? Why is it not more natural for us just to talk to Him like we would anyone else, when He's available all the time? What is it?

C: Well, for me it's becoming more natural. I mean, when I first became a Christian, I came to know the Lord. And of course I said the prayer, and invited Him into my life and just handed it over. But I had a hard time talking to Him, I think, because He had given me so much; I just felt greedy. Now, you know, when you understand the magnitude of the gift that He gives you, plus, you know, I mean, my life is really great. So I mean, I'm not in Syria right now, hiding, trying to love Jesus in a cave, you know, with the threat of getting my head cut off, because I love Him. So you just feel like you just keep asking for stuff or, you know, but over time He just wants to hear from us. It's like my kids - when they're having a good time, I want to hear from them; when they're not, I want to make sure I hear from them then too. So I don't know. I've just gotten better at talking to Him about it. You know, I feel like I can be myself, whereas before, I felt like I needed to have all these beautiful well versed prayers, and that's not true. He just wants me.

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Jesus then continues His teaching on infective prayer habits in our last 2 verses from Matthew 6. Now let's continue on to Verse 7. And Jesus said:

<sup>7</sup>“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. <sup>8</sup>So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.”

If we weren't convicted from the past two verses about not having an authentic, intimate prayer life, this one would get us all.

The Gentiles were engaged in these lengthy and religious prayers, void of head and heart. It was meaningless babble. Today, virtually all religions have this kind of prayer. The goal for these lengthy, empty, repetitious prayers is to hopefully get the attention of a god, many gods, or theoretically, God.

I saw this very practice a number of years ago when I was in India for some work. It was an amazing trip, but it ended on such a sad note. We all wanted to visit a Hindu temple before we left. I had studied Hinduism, but never observed worship firsthand. What I saw broke my heart. There was one man in particular who would run from god to god, falling down and praying the same words over and over again. He'd get up and move to the next god, repeating the same words. I talked to someone at the temple, who said people will do this all day long, with hopes that the gods might hear. It broke my heart: So sad, because it was truly meaningless repetition. And no one was listening.

Jesus says, *when you pray, don't use meaningless repetition or babble*. Don't just say the same prayer over and over again, like some witch's incantation. Don't say the same prayer, day in and day out, void of head and heart. Surely, we can't relate to this meaningless repetitive prayer, right? Wrong. We've all been guilty of turning on the "ol' go-to" supper time prayers. Sometimes they are the thoughtless babble of "Rub a dub dub; thanks for the grub." That one bugs me a lot, so I can only assume it really irks God. Or there's the ever-popular "God is great. God is good. And we thank You for our food".

If this is our prayer life, there's likely no head and heart behind it. It's a religious check off. Even in the prayers you can offer throughout the day, you can unintentionally go into auto-pilot, and offer up the same generic prayers, but fail to actually commune with God. It becomes meaningless babble. I mean, can you imagine what you would think, if I came up to you after service and said, "Hey Bob. I like you. You're cool. Hey Bob. I like you. You're cool. Hey Bob. I like you. You're cool." You'd quickly lose interest, disregard my words, and call the cops!

Jesus says, don't offer up meaningless and repetitive phrases. He doesn't mean, don't ever have repetition in your prayers. Repetition in your worship of God, if it's connected to your head and heart, is fine. Praying daily, "I love you, God" is awesome. Praying daily by name for the lost is awesome. Praying daily for God to create a revival in this church is awesome! Each meal, thanking God sincerely for His provision, is awesome. All of these are awesome, if done with your mind and heart behind it.

I think one of the best examples of prayer is Tevye from *Fiddler on the Roof*. Now I know this is a musical and a movie now. I know it's not based on Scripture or a real-life story. But Tevye talks to God like He is his best friend. He holds *nothing* back. It's not scripted. It's not polished. *It is raw, intimate, and honest*. Tevye says what we think in our heads. He is like many of us, when he tries to quote Scripture and misquotes it. When he talks to those around him, he's raw. Likewise, he puts on *no* pretenses when he talks to God. He doesn't do it for the recognition of others. He does it because he knows that God is there. He knows that God cares, and he knows that He is his closest friend.

You see, the issue truly isn't the words. The issue isn't the length of your prayers. You can go on for 5 minutes, 30 minutes, an hour. The issue again is *motive*. It's *intent*. Are you trying to impress God? It won't work. Are you trying to manipulate God by your lengthy prayers, or big, theological words? It won't work. God cares about your heart - about spending intimate time with you. He wants to meet you face-to-face, in the privacy of your heart, and maybe, if necessary, in a private room. And as Jesus says, He knows our needs before you ask for them. God is a good, good Father. He simply wants to be with you, and have real communion with you - not a scripted talk.

Jesus reminds us that religious activity is not the way to God, nor connecting with God. Putting on a prayer show is *ineffective* prayer. Prayer in public when divorced from consistent, private communion with God is ineffective and hypocritical. Prayer *divorced from your mind and heart* is ineffective. Prayer done for the sake of checking of a religious box is ineffective. It's hypocritical. One thing can be sure: True prayer – effective prayer - is intimate, personal, heartfelt, and mind-engaged communication with God. He is there waiting. *Won't you open the door and enter in, shut the door behind, and just be with Him?*

So where do we go from here? If you're listening today, and you really don't know much about prayer, and surely you don't know much about this Jesus Christ, I cannot think of a better prayer, than the prayer of repentance. What is that? It begins by recognizing who you are – a sinner in need of a Savior. It's then turning from your sin, and turning to Jesus Christ, as your only hope. This prayer of repentance means asking Jesus to forgive you of your sins. There wouldn't be a more celebratory prayer than the prayer of belief in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, God-in the flesh, came and died for your sin and for mine. He was buried and rose again, so you may have communion with Him forever. I pray, if this is you, you'll make this decision today. Don't wait!

If you are a follower of Christ, perhaps you need to confess your vain and hollow prayers. Confess your neglect of quality time with God in prayer. But let us all who are His children, recognize King Jesus, as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and just be with Him. Declare why you love Him, and just be with Him.

God longs to be with you. God longs to hear you declare your praise for Him. God desires to know from your own lips what is going on in your life. Like any good father or parent, we may know exactly what's going on with our children, but there is a great sense of pleasure to know that they trust us enough, to come and lay it at our feet. So whether you're listening at home, driving in the car, or typing away at work, let us *all* pause now – turn to our God and friend, and offer Him intimate personal heartfelt and mind-engaged conversation.

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N: I'm going to bring in Arnie and Cara now, not for discussion, but for prayer. Arnie, would you open us up right here and now, and pray for the hearts of our listeners? Cara, I'd love for you to join in, and I'll follow suit.

A: Our dear heavenly Father, we thank you for this day, Lord. We thank you for the many blessings that you've given us. We pray especially, for each listener that is listening, whether on radio or podcast, Lord, that you will be with them, that you will direct them. You will help them

move closer to you today than even they were yesterday, Lord. We just pray for renewal. We pray for us all to be intentional in our evangelism, and how we relate to people, and most importantly, how we communicate with you, Lord. So we thank you for giving us the gift of being able to pray and talk to you, the Savior of the Universe.

C: Lord, what Arnie said. I mean, the fact that we can talk to you, Lord - such a big God and the Creator of all of this - that we have access to you; it's just incredible. And we just all thank you for it, and let's not take it for granted. And we just want to bring glory to you Lord, through this program, through Back to the Bible. For people that are listening, I want them to find peace in all of this mess that's going on in the world - that they find you Lord, more than anything. They just find you and have that relationship with you, Lord, and that this would bring value also to their prayer lives.

N: Father, thank you so much for this ministry of Back to the Bible, for the impact it's had on my life and for the lives of the people on staff. And God, thank you for those who have been faithfully supporting our ministry, and who have been listening and growing through it. God, I know that every Wednesday, we receive these prayer requests from people who love Back to the Bible. And God, when I read through those, I see there is so much blessing that is happening, and there's also so much pain and suffering as well. I pray for our listeners, that you will minister to them, that you would surround them with people who love you, and who are pursuing you, and moving closer to Jesus today. I pray that you will meet their needs, that you will give them what they need for today. I pray that you will give them the emotional support, the spiritual support, whatever it is. Whatever is burdening their hearts, I ask that you would meet those needs today, remind them that they can reach out to you any time. Any time you are available as their Heavenly Father, as their Daddy. So Father, we thank you for creating an open door to approach you whenever we want, and whenever we need. May we not forget this. We ask this in your Son's name. Amen.