

## **PP How Not To Pray! *Becoming a People of Prayer* series**

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Illus A young man once asked God how long a million years was to him. God replied, "A million years to me is just like a single second to you." The young man asked God what a million dollars was to him. God replied, "A million dollars to me is just like a single penny to you." Then the young man got his courage up and asked, "God, could I have one of your pennies?" God smiled and replied, "Certainly, just a second."

How do we become a people of prayer, of intimate communion with our heavenly father? Before we look at Matthew 6:5-6, let's gird our minds with right understanding. It is the tendency, in reading the passage before us, to condemn the sin of the scribes and Pharisees without recognizing these same tendencies in our own hearts. Sin, we see here, is something that affects all of us and goes with us all the way, even into the very presence of God.

The sins of pride and self are devastating because they are like the man who is heading into a multi-million dollar sales meeting without realizing that he has cream cheese in his moustache.

Sin is always self-deceiving and the sin of pride enables us to come into the presence of God unaware that we are bringing detestable sacrifice of prayer to Him.

Jesus is teaching us that our hearts crave glory, evident even in the most intimate of times with God...our prayer life.

Even in our highest activity possible for us, prayer, sin is often unknowingly present.

D. Martyn Lloyd Jones wrote this about prayer and our great capacity of sinfulness: *"The highest picture that you can ever have of man is to look at him on his knees waiting upon God...man is never greater than when he is there in communion and contact with God...even at that point [sin] is with us and assailing us."*

The questions we must ask ourselves as we study this passage are:

Are we aware of the insatiable desire to worship ourselves when we are in communion with God?

Does this awareness drive us even deeper to the ocean of grace that is available for us and that we so continually and desperately need?

Now let's look at Matthew 6:5-6

### **PP 1-We Should Not Fix Attention On Ourselves (6:5)**

***"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward."***

The Jews had an incredibly high priority for prayer.

'Great is prayer' said the rabbi's, 'greater than all good works.'

But over time, rabbinic tradition had robbed prayer of its intimacy and power.

#### **PP a) Prayer had become ritualized**

Praying to God had become institutionalized prayers, which were memorized or read.

One could say prayers without even thinking.

Every Jew had to recite the *Shema* every morning and evening, before 9 am and before 9 pm.

The essence of the *Shema* was “*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.*”  
The second thing every Jew repeated daily was a collection of 18 prayers called the *Shemoneh esreh*, and was and still is an essential part of the synagogue service  
Rabbinical law demanded that it be recited three times daily, 9 am, noon, and 3 pm  
If time did not allow for all 18 prayers, a summary prayer was recited  
The devout Jews said these prayers with devotion, but many would mumble through them as fast as they could  
For many, this became just a superstitious incantation, not unlike what many of our thoughtless prayers before our meals have become

**PP b) Prayer had become rote**

Prayers for light, for rain, for darkness, traveling, for good news, before and after each meal, or after seeing a comet in the night sky  
The intention was that everything in life would be brought into the presence of God  
But formalism settled in so that these prayers were little more than afterthoughts that slipped off the tongue without thinking

**PP c) Prayer’s effectiveness had become relative to its length**

Despite many rabbis warnings to their people about long, babbling prayers, the tendency was that the longer the prayer, the more powerful the prayer  
One rabbi, Levy, said ‘Whoever is long in prayer is heard.’  
It was believed by some that if you talked long enough at God’s door, He would open

**PP d) Prayer had become repetitious**

This was a pagan practice of repeating a phrase or even a word to get God to act  
The priests of Baal ‘*called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, “O Baal, answer us!”*’  
Another way many of the Jews distorted this repetition was to pile up every possible title and adjective in their address of God  
One famous Jewish prayer goes: “*Blessed, praised, and glorified, exalted, extolled and honored, magnified and lauded be the name of the Holy One*”

I am giving you this background for *two reasons*: that we would understand how important prayer was/is to the Jews, and that we would see how far prayer had moved away from the intimacy and beauty that Christ demonstrated

**PP e) Prayer had become a way to reap praise**

Jews traditionally prayed standing, hands out, palms turned up, and heads bowed  
Prayers had to be said at specific times wherever they might be, and it was easy to time oneself to be at a street corner or busy market square in order for the length and beauty of their prayers to be seen and heard

The rabbis condemned this, saying, *“A man in whom is hypocrisy brings wrath upon the world, and his prayer is not heard”*

But the Jewish system of prayer led many prideful men to showy prayer lives

So the words of Christ are especially powerful, illuminating this distorted prayer system

***“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others.” 6:5***

C.S. Lewis wrote that the *“prayer preceding all prayers is ‘May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to.’”*

**PP** A *‘hypocrite’* was originally a stage actor who used large masks to portray the roles they were playing

To change the character, you changed the mask allowing one actor to play multiple roles

Jesus is not here condemning praying in public

He is condemning the motive of those who use prayer to bring themselves honor and attention

The trumpets sounded for the daily afternoon sacrifice, signifying it was time to pray

Rabbinical law compelled the Jews to face the temple, right where they were, and pray

Many would seize the opportunity to impress, and receive honor was there at that

Moment

The word *‘street’* in this verse is different than the one used in verse 2

In verse 2 it signified a narrow way or alley

Here in verse 5, it was a wide street, a plat or open square

The hypocrites wanted as wide an audience as possible to demonstrate their piety and gather praise

Have you ever been asked to pray in front of others, and up to the moment that you pray, you are planning out your prayer?

Perhaps a memory of another person who prayed so powerfully drives you to prepare

You can impress, people can come to you later and tell you how wonderful your prayer was

We are not immune to this condition

The one who bows his head longer before eating in public than when eating at home

This love for praise and attention runs deeply in all of our hearts

This is self-adulation, what the Bible calls the worship of self

Jesus says that these people *‘love’* to pray, but what they love is the praise of others

Their love of praise was empowering their worship...of themselves

The hypocrite is obsessed with his image, the perception of others, and his reputation as a godly person

In short, he is in love with his own self

I remember one time when I was praying in a group, and I could feel that my words were powerfully registering in those who were with me, and so I began to speak more passionately and eloquently to receive the ‘Amen’s’ and ‘Yes Lord’s’

I was praying at that point for my own glory

Friends, love for self, worship of self, corrupts prayer  
Praying in such a way that will garner us respect and admiration is obviously terrible  
But much less obvious is the self-worship that surfaces as we pray in our will, for our  
way, and out of our own selfish motives

***“Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.”*** 6:5c

They may manage to receive the praise and adulation and honor of others, but Jesus says,  
that is all they will get  
They will not receive God’s honor and blessings  
They will not experience God’s pleasure  
Prayer is the fixing of attention of God, hypocrisy is the fixing of attention on self  
And it can worm its way into the motives of each of us

While we just saw Christ clearly condemn prayer that fixes its attention on ourselves, He  
now shows a better way  
He had been doing this throughout His great sermon on this mountain-side  
***“You have heard it said...but I say to you...”***  
He has been teaching in contrasts  
Almost as if Christ is holding a coin, he flips it over now and shows us the better way to  
pray than praying for own praise and gratification

## **PP 2-We should fix our total attention on God (6:6)**

Illus In one region of Africa, the first converts to Christianity were very diligent about praying.  
In fact, the believers each had their own special place outside the village where they went to pray  
in solitude. The villagers reached these “prayer rooms” by using their own private footpaths  
through the brush. When grass began to grow over one of these trails, it was evident that the  
person to whom it belonged was not praying very much.  
Because these new Christians were concerned for each other’s spiritual welfare, a unique custom  
sprang up. When ever anyone noticed an overgrown “Prayer path,” he or she would go to the  
person and lovingly warn, “Friend, there’s grass on your path!” - RWD

***“But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in  
secret.”*** 6:6a

**PP** ***“You have said, “Seek My face.” My heart says to You, “Your face, LORD, do I  
seek.”*** Psalm 27:8

**PP** R.V.G. Tasker has pointed out that the Greek word for **‘room’** into which we are to  
withdraw to pray ‘was used for the store-room where treasures might be kept’  
It was a room that allowed for privacy  
Why does Jesus encourage us to go into our room and shut the door to pray?  
The one overarching importance when we pray is that we must realize that we are  
approaching God

**PP a)** ***In order to do this, we must exclude certain things***

Jesus tells us to pray *'to your Father'*, not to an audience, not to the praise of others, not to our own glory

We have to enter that closet, that place that is away from any temptation to try and impress others or seek their praise

Am I saying, or is Jesus saying that praying in front of others is wrong?

Some believers, overreacting to this passage, have banned public praying

Yet Jesus often prayed in public, the disciples prayed together

The point is that the hypocrites put their prayer mask on in public and were winning the applause of those around them while forfeiting it from the only One Who really mattered

Christ doesn't prescribe certain times or occasions for prayer, He is so simple and clear

Do what you can to get your attention away from yourself and others and onto God alone

**PP b) We must close off distractions**

When you go on a date with the one you love, a time that you are yearning for to reconnect after a time of busyness, do you want your children with you?

Do you want a group of friends with you?

There is a solitary intimacy with just the two of you

God desires this as well

He wants our attention, He wants our admiration, He wants our focus and He wants to commune with us

Illus Water spiders do something that I find amazingly applicable to my prayer life. Certain species of water spiders live the majority of their air-breathing lives under water. In a pond for example, a water spider will submerge underwater, and weave a cocoon of webbing to a reed near the bank until it takes the shape of a bell. Then it will go above the water, only to re-submerge so that air bubbles will form on their hairy legs, and it will take those air bubbles and collect them under their cocoon, until enough air has been trapped for it to stay under there to breathe.

This is similar to what we do in prayer

Prayer gives us the spiritual oxygen that our redeemed lungs need in order to breathe in this world and do the work of God's kingdom

Too many Christians are breathing on this world's oxygen and wondering why their emaciated souls are gasping like a fish out of water

It is said that Susanah Wesley, when she would pray in the afternoon, and with nowhere else to go, would pull her apron over head while she sat in the kitchen and her 19 children knew it was time to be silent and not interrupt

Jesus often withdrew from His disciples to pray

We must do whatever is necessary to get our attention on God and nothing else

The most intimate moments between a husband and a wife are the secret, private times that just the two of them share

Prayer is the most intimate moment a believer can have with God on this earth

***"And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."* 6:6b**

God searches our hearts and minds and sees the secret motives and desires that are there  
God greatly delights in and rewards prayer that is fixed on Him, without worship of  
self, without ulterior motives of personal gain for personal glory

His full *attention* and *intention* is given to His praying children

The implication of our rewarding heavenly Father is-according to theologian John Stott-  
there are treasures awaiting us when we pray

What are these treasures, these rewards when we pray?

**PP** Jesus doesn't tell us but Scripture itself teaches many. A few of them are:

**PP** The Holy Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are God's children

**PP** A strong assurance of His fatherhood and love

**PP** He lifts the light of His face upon us and gives us peace

**PP** He refreshes our souls, satisfies our hunger and quenches our thirst

Jesus has taught us this morning about how we ought not to pray

**PP** We should take great care when praying to not fix attention on ourselves with our  
own motives for our own pleasure and glory

And that instead, our whole attention should be fixed on God

To do this, we exclude ourselves and close off distractions

Friends, is there grass on your path?

Have you forgotten to regularly, and deeply go to your spiritual treasure room to  
commune with God?

Begin again, not next week, but today

God is desiring an intimate, close, relationship with us and prayer is that language

Pray