

***Introduction...***

**Matt 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. <sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

<sup>9</sup> Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

<sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

<sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread,

<sup>12</sup> and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

<sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

<sup>14</sup> For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

How many sermons have we heard on prayer? How many books have we read? How many seminars have we attended? How many prayer meetings, prayer services, prayer vigils have we attended? For all that, how many of us still struggle to make prayer a consistent and healthy part of our Christian life?

Why is this the case? Something is wrong. We were made to be in relationship with God, but sin now gets in the way and makes it hard for us to pray. Our biggest problem with prayer is a spiritual problem. But there are others...

Maybe you’ve prayed before for God to do something for you or for someone you love. But it never happened so you wonder if prayer even works. Maybe, you don’t think prayer makes much of a difference.

Maybe you’ve tried to pray many times, but you always get distracted. 30 seconds into prayer and you are already thinking about something you need to do, or someone you need to call, or that conversation you just had. Then you feel guilty for not being able to stay focused and before long you just give up.

Maybe you don’t think of prayer until the last minute as you are walking into a big meeting. you wanted to pray, you know you needed to pray; but the truth is that you were so busy that you never got around to it. But here you are filled with anxiety and insecurity. You whisper a quick short prayer asking God for help, but it just seems so selfish in the moment.

Maybe the problem is that you’re just so busy and what you really need is a vacation. you need to get away from all the work, the emails, the meetings, the responsibilities, the noise. So, you plan it out, pack it up and hit the road only to realize that you’ve taken all the noise with you and prayer eludes you once again.

***Transition...***

At the end of the day, many of us feel frustrated about prayer, confused, uncomfortable with the silence and the one-sided nature of something that is supposed to be conversation with God. We have more problems than patience, more questions than answers and so we simply don't pray. Can you identify with any of this?

In the book, *A Praying Life*, Paul Miller asks us to imagine a trip to a prayer therapist who is going to help us with our prayer struggles. The therapist begins the session by asking us to describe what it means to be a child of God.

You reply that it means you have complete access to your heavenly Father through Jesus. You have true intimacy, based not on how good you are but on the goodness of Jesus. Not only that, but Jesus is your brother. You are a fellow heir with him.

The therapist smiles and says, "That is right. You've done a wonderful job of describing the *doctrine* of Sonship. Now tell me what it is like for you to be with your Father? What is it like to *talk* with him?"

You cautiously tell the therapist how difficult it is to be in your Father's presence, even for a couple of minutes. Your mind wanders. You aren't sure what to say. You wonder, does prayer make any difference? Is God even there? Then you feel guilty for your doubts and just give up.

Your therapist tells you what you already suspect. "Your relationship with your heavenly Father is dysfunctional. You talk as if you have an intimate relationship, but you don't. Theoretically, it is close. Practically, it is distant. You need help."<sup>1</sup>

Friends, I don't know about you, but I do need help. So, before we go any further into God's Word let's pray and ask the Lord to come and help us to understand and love prayer.

***Sermon Focus...***

We are going to look at this passage over the next two weeks. Next week, we will go focus most of our attention on the Lord's Prayer and we'll go through it line by line. But this week, I want us to try to get to the bottom of our own struggles with prayer.

**I. Prayers that Fail (Matt 6:5, 7)**

**Matt 6:5** "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites.

This passage is Jesus' second example of the difference between hypocritical religious devotion and genuine life and relationship with God. Jesus gives us a picture of two men at prayer. The first one, the hypocrite, loves to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corner. But the thing he loves is not communion with God, it's the recognition he/she get from those who see and hear them praying.

These prayers are a failure because they are not actually prayers, they are skillfully disguised auditions. These prayers aren't aimed at God at all, they are aimed at impressing the people who are

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<sup>1</sup> Miller, Paul E.. *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World* (p. 5). NavPress. Kindle Edition.

present. These prayers look like piety, but they are nothing more than pride. **Jesus says, “Don’t be like this.” God doesn’t reward these prayers.**

**Don’t be like the hypocrites who love everything about prayer but the God they are praying to.** They love the posture of prayer, they love the respect that eloquent prayer gives them, they love the spiritual pride they feel when people say, “Amen” in agreement with their prayers. They love the fact that prayer makes them appear to be super godly and that people think they are varsity level in spirituality because of how they pray.

**Jesus warns us not to be like these men. He warns us not to approach prayer the way they do, as actors on a stage.** He wants us to approach prayer with sincerity and even secrecy. He wants us to find a private place where we can focus on God. Now, this does not mean that a prayer closet is the magic place where God hears us, that’s not the point. **The point is that Jesus wants us to pray with a singular focus on the Father and not to be distracted by the side-glances that are concerned with what others might think.**

Now, this may be a big problem for some of us. **But, I see a big difference between our struggles with prayer and the hypocrites struggle with prayer.** They love to pray because of the spiritual respect they gain from others but for us, I’m not sure that we love to pray. For many of us it’s not a matter of praying in the wrong ways, it’s a matter of not praying at all.

## II. The Essence of Christian Prayer

The essence of Christian prayer is relational communion with our heavenly Father. Jesus wants us to approach God in prayer with love, as a son or daughter would approach their father. That’s why Jesus teaches us in verse 9 to begin our prayer with, “Our Father...” **How does a child talk with their father? Loudly, boldly, unashamedly, desperately, with no regard for decorum. They will interrupt you in a second if they have a need, or a want, or even an idea. Big words never enter that conversation, but feeling, and emotion almost always do.**

Most of us have a very clear picture in our minds of what a relationship between a young child and their father looks like, but our prayer life with God doesn’t look anything like that. **If there is a maturity arc to prayer, I think some of us have entered into the adolescent phase because rather than talking to God, many of us are more eager to talk to everyone else, or even to listen to ourselves talk. Here’s what I mean...**

When a new baby comes into a family everyone is filled with hope and anticipation...and exhaustion. But as a new parent you don’t want to miss anything, you want to see and remember all the milestones. The first time they smile. The first time they make a sound. The first time they recognize you.

**I remember the first time I looked at my daughter’s face,** she didn’t seem to recognize my face, but when I spoke to her she definitely recognized my voice. She knew that her daddy was talking, and, in that moment, I fell in love.

At about 3 months the milestones begin to come and go very fast. They coo and giggle, the blow raspberries, they baby talk, they crawl, they sit up, they start pulling up on things; but every parent is longing to hear that first word. In the case of my children, all three of them said “Dada.” I know that is common for babies because it is an easy sound but I’m going to claim it. **But the word itself is not the most important thing, the most important thing is that now they are learning to talk.**

They are learning to communicate. They are beginning to interact with their world and their family and that means relationship. Then for the next several years we teach them how to refine their words. We teach them new words, we teach them how to properly pronounce words, we teach them how to use their words rather than their emotions. Then we hit the sweet spot where they will not stop talking and we stay in that spot for a decade or so.

Then they reach the teen years. They're still talking, but they prefer to talk with their friends over the parents. They prefer to listen to others rather than to listen to mom and dad. They even like to hear their own voice more than that of their father and in these years, communication breaks down. In those critical years just before adulthood the lines of communication are often strained.

I wonder if there is a parallel between this and our own spiritual life. When we are born again everything begins to happen so fast. We are learning, growing, stumbling and getting back up, and we are learning to talk to God. Our first prayers are a mess but I'm guessing that God still wants to hear them. We learn more about Him, more about ourselves, more about the gospel and that helps our prayers, our conversations with God, become more mature and more meaningful. But then we hit adolescence and prayer stops.

We talk to our friends more than God. We talk to the pastor more than God. We talk to ourselves more than God. The problem is not that we don't know what prayer is, or that we don't know how to pray. We know that God hears us, we know that He wants us to pray, we even know that we should pray; but something keeps getting in the way.

Maybe its busy-ness. Maybe it's a series of painful experiences. Maybe it's bad theology. Maybe it's a misunderstanding of the gospel. Maybe its pride. Maybe its guilt. Maybe its hypocrisy or some combination of these things. **But something continually gets in the way of our prayer to God and Jesus is teaching us what prayer should be like within His kingdom. Jesus is inviting us to begin praying to God like a child.**

### III. Getting Back to the heart of Prayer

Jesus is telling us here to go back to that child-like time. Go back to that place of shameless intimacy with God. After all, being a Christian means that we have been fully forgiven and adopted into God's family. Being a Christian means that we came to the end of our ridiculous attempts to save ourselves and in our desperation, we saw that the only hope we had was Jesus...and Jesus welcomed us with open arms of love.

He brought us to His Father's table and gave us a seat. We belong in God's family because of Jesus and we have access to God because of Jesus. **But we still struggle with prayer.**

Much of the time, the most obvious hindrance to our communion with God is that we just don't believe the gospel is true today. Oh, we believe the gospel and we put our hope in its truth, but it just hasn't seeped down into our lives the way we need it to. We just don't believe that He truly cares about us, that He truly wants us to bother Him with our prayers. We just don't believe that we have earned the right to have God listen to us, much less to answer our prayers.

Many times, our problem is a gospel problem. In this world that we live in there was a glorious beginning when God created everything that is. **God created us to be like Him, to walk with Him and talk with Him, to be His children...and we betrayed Him.** It was a shocking betrayal where we stabbed Him in the back. But God, had already made a plan to love us and our betrayal didn't change His mind one bit.

He redeemed us through Jesus. He purchased eternal life for us, which means that He will love us and be with us forever. Right now, if you are a believer in Christ, your heavenly Father is looking at you and He loves you like His own child. He has said to each of us, "Hey buddy, my door is always open anytime you want to talk." We can approach His throne of grace with boldness, why? Because ***it's a throne of grace and He is our Father.***

**It is not our righteousness that causes the Father to listen to our prayers, or to answer our prayers. It is Christ's righteousness from start to finish.** It is the righteousness of Christ that saves us and restores our relationship to God. It is the righteousness of Christ that brings us into the family and gives us the right to be called a child of God. It is Jesus and His beautiful cross that brings us close to the Father and introduces us as a newly adopted child.

God hears our prayers because of Jesus. That's why we pray to God *in Jesus name*. Saying, "In Jesus name" at the end of our prayers is not just a formal conclusion to prayer, nor it is a magical formula ensuring that we will get what we want. To pray in Jesus name is to acknowledge our absolute dependence upon Jesus to make us fit to come to God with our needs.

We pray in Jesus name because we recognize that on our own we have no right to come before God in prayer. But, Jesus is our great High Priest who always lives to make intercession for us. He sits at the right hand of God and He whispers our prayers into His Father's ear.

Friends, let's not brood in an adolescent state. Let's come to our Father and talk to Him. Let's talk to Him about our struggles, our hopes, our fears, our failures. Let's remember, not our strength, but His strength, His promises, His care and His protection. Let's praise Him for His love and His power. Let's tell Him how thankful we are that He is our Father. Let's pray for His will to be done in our lives, in our families, in our homes, in our church, in our community group, in our relationships, in our hearts, in our world.

Paul Miller,

Being a child in prayer means to just come. Children are not tied up in all the details when they come to their parents. They just come.

Jesus invites those who are weary and heavy laden to come to him. He doesn't call the organized and fixed up but the broken. Why do we forget that when it comes to prayer? The dirty, imperfect and broken you is the real you. Don't try to put on the spiritual façade in prayer. You can talk to God about whatever is on your heart, so just come as you are. Be weak and open in prayer before God. In this way you are remembering and applying the gospel to your prayer life. We need to learn helplessness. That is what a child reflects.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Conclusion...***

What I want us to do now is to spend some time in prayer. I'd like us to spend the next 5-10 minutes in prayer and I want to give some direction on how to do that.

If you are here with your family I want to encourage mom and dad to huddle everyone up and lead the family in prayer. Put your arms around those close to you and pray for God to give you all a child-like love for Him. You may need to confess some things, you may just want to praise God for

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/helping-your-people-discover-the-praying-life>

some things, you may even have some things that are pressing in on your family right now. Just jump in together and pray. Don't worry about getting the formula right, just pray to your Father.

If you are here alone and you want to pray alone please feel free to do that. But if you want to gather up with one of your friends, or a family in the church that you are close to, then please feel free to join with someone else in a few minutes and pray with them.

If you are not a Christian and this whole thing just sounds awkward or silly, let me remind you that you came to a church full of Christians. We aren't perfect, by any means, but we are God's people and sometimes we simply need to be reminded what that looks like. So, we are going to pray, and I would even encourage you to join us. You must be here for a reason, maybe you're just checking Christianity out. Maybe you have a lot of questions or maybe you just want to know if God is real. I think you should pray and ask God to give you a heart for Him. Ask God to open the eyes of your heart so that you can know and love Him.

In your bulletin you will find a piece of paper outlining five ways that we can pray to God. You can ask for something, you can *praise* him for something, you can thank him for something, you can confess something to him, or you can even *cry out to the Lord* about something that is going on in your life that you just don't understand. Each of these has a scripture verse attached to it and what I want us to do is to choose one of those, turn to that verse, read the text and then go straight into our prayer.

I'm going to pray a brief prayer to kick this off, then I'm going to go and pray with my family. In about 10 minutes Cody is going to come up here and lead us in a closing song.

#### Five ways that we can pray to God

You can *ask* for something—this is the most basic meaning of prayer, and God delights for his children to ask him for help. “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7).

You can *praise* him or marvel at him or give expression to your adoration of him. “Every day I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable” (Psalm 145:2–3).

You can *thank* him for his gifts and his acts (which is not the same as praising him for his nature). “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign” (Revelation 11:17).

You can *confess* your sins and tell the Lord that you are sorry. “I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin” (Psalm 32:5).

And finally, you can *cry out to the Lord* about something. “With my voice I cry out to the Lord.... I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him” (Psalm 142:1–2).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Piper, J. (2014). [\*Sermons from John Piper \(2000–2014\)\*](#). Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God.