

Teach Us to Pray: A Series Through the Lord's Prayer

Shut the Door and Pray (Matthew 6:1, 5-8)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on June 12, 2016

Introduction

- ❖ Last week we started a new summer sermon series through the Lord's Prayer called *Teach Us to Pray*. In Luke 11, Jesus' disciples see him return from one of his regular times of private prayer, and their burning question is, "How do you pray? Teach us how to pray."
 - ▶ His answer is what we call the Lord's Prayer. It's a model prayer. The prayers of Jesus' followers are to be patterned off this prayer. Now last week we looked at the context surrounding Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer and considered the motives given to fuel and encourage our prayer lives. But as I said last week, we're going to spend our time in this series in Matthew 6, in the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, and look at Matthew's version since it's more familiar and more comprehensive.

- ❖ But like we did last Sunday, I want us to consider the context first before jumping into the actual Prayer and its various petitions. **So let me offer a very brief overview of the Sermon on the Mount.** The theme verse of the sermon is found in chapter 5:20 where Jesus says, "*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*"
 - ▶ And what the Lord does in chapter 5:21-48 is to unpack the kind of righteous behavior that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day. The scribes and Pharisees taught not to murder but kingdom righteousness means not being angry with your brother. Kingdom righteousness goes beyond not committing adultery to not committing lust, which is adultery of the heart.
 - And now in chapter 6:1-18, Jesus digs deeper – **beyond righteous behavior to righteous motives.** You can be a nice guy who never gets angry and a moral guy who doesn't look at porn or indulge lustful thoughts – and yet you're trying to live that way in order to gain the applause and approval of others. **If your motives are still self-centered and self-serving, then you've yet to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.**

- ❖ Motives matter tremendously. **What's driving you to your knees in prayer?** What's behind your actions? Jesus goes on in chapter 6 to mention three acts of righteousness: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Our focus is on vv5-8 and the act of prayer. **And Jesus' point is that we're often tempted to pray for the wrong reasons. For self-serving reasons.**
 - ▶ Notice how he warns us in v1 to beware. "*Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.*" Be on guard against this tendency to practice our faith out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. If we're not vigilant, our prayers will be driven by self-serving motives. That's our default, if we're not careful.

- ❖ **And Jesus says the best way to test your motives is to consider your private prayer life.** If you can spend a couple hours in prayer and not tell a soul – where no one knows what you were doing, no one knows you were on your knees praying for them – then you have a clearer sense that your prayer life is not about you. But if your impulse is to immediately get on Facebook and post a status update, "Spent two hours in prayer. Didn't fall asleep! LOL", then your motives are definitely in question. That's essentially what Jesus is saying here.

- ❖ I was really convicted this week. ***How much of my faith is experienced in complete privacy?*** How much of my righteousness is being practiced because others are watching? Because I'm under a microscope as a Christian leader?
 - ▶ **I've heard it said that your true character and true convictions are most clearly seen when no one is looking.** How you carry yourself and exercise your faith in private defines your true character and convictions. And here Jesus is reinforcing that point. It's really convicting. Ask yourself: **How much of your prayer life is experienced in complete privacy?**

- ❖ Don't get me wrong. I don't think the answer should be 100%. The Bible affirms that our faith is a communal faith. Our Christianity can't be privatized where it's just about you, God, and your Bible. It needs to be lived out in public. **There is a sense in which our faith needs to be visible for all to see.** How else do we obey Jesus' own teaching a chapter earlier in **Matthew 5:16**, "*In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*"
 - ▶ Jesus is instructing us to let our light shine, to let others see our good works. To not hide it under a bushel. To be like a city on a hill. Be visible with your faith and practice. Those are clear instructions. But now here in chapter 6:1, we're warned and exhorted to be invisible. So which is it? **Should we let our faith and practice shine publicly or should we keep it secret and private with God?**
 - Again, I think it comes down to motivation. Let's go into our text and try to figure it out together.

Praying to be Seen by Others

- ❖ Look at again v1, "*Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.*" Then skip over to v5, "*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.*"
 - ▶ **So the motivation to pray in this scenario is in order to be seen by others.** The "hypocrites" that Jesus mentions is a veiled reference to the scribes and Pharisees of his day. They were known for their ostentatious displays of piety. Loved to be seen out in the open practicing their faith.

- ❖ Before we dig in just step back and consider, Jesus is calling out sinners for doing what? For getting drunk? For sleeping around? For our acts of unrighteousness? No, for praying. Let that sink in. **Sin is so destructive, so pervasive, so pernicious that it's present even in our acts of righteousness.**
 - ▶ Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it this way. **He says sin is so terrible that it follows us all the way into the very presence of God.**¹ When we think of sin we tend to picture a drunkard or addict in the gutter, in the back alley. There's sin. That's what sin looks like. And everyone recognizes that.

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Eerdmans, 1976), pg. 300.

- ❖ But Lloyd-Jones says if you want to see sin's true nature, then you have to look in the church, in the prayer meeting, at a devout saint on his knees with his eyes closed – **and there you'll see sin tempting him to be thinking about himself as he's praying for someone else.**
 - ▶ That's the true nature of sin. Sin is not just those things you do when you're far from God. Sin can show up and corrupt while you're performing the noblest of activities in God's presence. It's there even in your acts of righteousness.

- ❖ That's why Christians need the gospel. It's not just a message for non-Christians. We need to preach the gospel to ourselves all the time. Because we need to apply the truth of Jesus dying for our sins the more and more we become aware of the depths of sin in our hearts.
 - ▶ **The great irony in the Christian life is that as we grow in the our faith, the more we grow in our awareness of how sinful we still are.** We become more sensitive to sin's presence even in our acts of righteousness, as we're on our knees in prayer.

- ❖ Or standing in prayer. Now there's nothing wrong with standing to pray or praying in the synagogue or on the street corners. That's not the Lord's concern. **His concern is not that they love to pray in public.** There were times when Jesus would pray in public, purposely in ear shot of others (cf. Jn. 11:41-42). There's nothing wrong with that.
 - ▶ I had a discipler who would conclude our times together by praying for me right there no matter if we were in a crowded restaurant or coffee shop or just standing on the street. There were no pretenses. There was nothing showy. He didn't want to leave just promising to pray for me. He wanted to actually pray for me right then and there.

- ❖ **And I don't think Jesus is even concerned that they want to be seen in prayer.** The fact is we all want to be seen. Everyone has an innate desire to be noticed. Even the shyest, most reclusive person in the room wants to be noticed. And that desire is not a result of sin. We were made that way. We were made to be images (Gen. 1:27). **We were created to be mirrors. There's nothing wrong with a mirror that wants to be seen.** That's what it's for.
 - ▶ So there's nothing wrong with wanting to be seen in prayer. The only question is: ***Who do you want to be seen by?*** Three times in this section Jesus speaks of "*your Father who sees in secret*" (6:4, 6, 18). So God sees you in prayer, even secret prayer. He sees your daily faithfulness to set aside time with him alone. He sees the tears you've shed as you've prayed and pleaded over those long-term requests.
 - Is that enough? Are his eyes enough for you? Or do you want more?

- ❖ That's Jesus' concern in v5. These hypocrites who love to pray in public are praying "*that they may be seen by others.*" It's those two words "by others" that are the problem. If you're praying to be seen by God, if he's your sole audience, that's right and good. That's God-glorifying. **But if your audience consists of other people, then that's just self-serving.**
 - ▶ That's why Jesus calls this hypocrisy. The word hypocrite in Greek (*hupokrites*) refers to an actor performing before an audience. In those days, they didn't have makeup artists or special effects, so to play different parts in a play, the same actor – the hypocrite – would don different masks.

- ❖ **So for Jesus to speak of religious hypocrites, he's talking about people who take some religious practice (like prayer) and put it on for theatrical display.** For the sake of an audience, for their applause and approval. We want others to see and know that we pray.
 - ▶ This happens so naturally we usually don't even realize we're doing it. That's why we're told to beware. I think living in this social media saturated age doesn't help. We're always chronicling everything we do online. **There's this tension of trying to enjoying an activity for itself but also wanting everyone on Facebook to see me enjoying it.** Why can't I just enjoy the meal without sharing a picture of me enjoying it? Why can't I just go for a run without posting a selfie while drenched in sweat? That same impulse to show all my friends what I do in the day to day of life is what drives me to want to pray with an audience in mind.

- ❖ **If that's your motive, then you're really just praying to yourself.** It doesn't matter who you're addressing or who you're interceding for. In the end you're praying for yourself, for others to see you as someone who's committed in prayer.
 - ▶ **Now I'm not saying you can never let others know you're praying for them.** To say, "Hey I'm praying for you." But what are your motives? If you want them to know they're loved and cared for – that's God-glorifying. But if it's because you want to build or maintain this reputation of being a loving, caring person who prays a lot – then that's self-serving. It's such a subtle thing. You've got to be aware.

- ❖ So go back to our tension. **In chapter 5:16, the motive for being visible and public with your faith is to display God's glory.** Jesus' concern there is that a fear of persecution might lead us to be invisible with our faith, to conceal it from public view.
 - ▶ But here in our passage, Jesus is addressing a different problem. It's where pride is driving us to be visible with our faith. **The troubling motive here is the desire to display our own glory.** For people to see our glory shine.

- ❖ Jesus says if that's the reward you seek, you'll get it. Look at the end of v5, "*Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.*" The word "received" (*apecho*) is a technical term used in commercial transactions. It was stamped on an account to say it's been paid in full.
 - ▶ **The point is if you want people to see you as spiritual, then they probably will.** Do your acts of righteousness for all to see, and they'll call you spiritual. **You'll get their approval and applause, but that'll be it.** You've received all the reward you're going to get. There's nothing coming on judgment day.

Praying to Turn a Divine Hand

- ❖ We'll get back to that thought, but for now let's skip v6 and look at another motive to pray found in v7. **It's praying with the hope of turning God's hand to do your will.** Look at v7, "*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.*"

- ❖ So earlier Jesus was confronting our desire to be seen by others praying, **but now he's confronting our desire to be heard.** And he warns against heaping up empty phrases. By that I don't think he's against repeated prayers. He's not against praying for the same thing, even using the same words, over and over again. That's not the issue.
 - ▶ **The problem is mindless prayers. He's calling out verbose, lengthy prayers that are all fluff.** They might sound good but they're empty. That phrase "heap up empty phrases" (*battalogo*) can also be translated as "meaningless repetition" (NASB) or "babbling" (NIV).

- ❖ That's how the Gentiles prayed, the pagans of Jesus' day. **They treated prayer like a form of magic. It's all about saying the right incantations to get what you want.** That's what you do if you're practicing magic.
 - ▶ Be honest with yourself. **For some of us, our prayer lives amount to little more than magic.** I remember when I was much younger I thought you had to close every prayer with "In Jesus' name, Amen" or else it wouldn't work. It wasn't a real prayer.

- ❖ Now of course I've grown up and now I know better. As adults, we know there aren't magic words you have to say to make prayer work. **Yet we're still tempted to focus on words, especially the eloquence of our prayers.** So-and-so prays so beautifully. We wish we could pray like her. But don't you see, that's still treating it like magic. Being able to use evocative language, or quote Scripture, or turn a phrase – that has no power in itself. **Prayer doesn't need many words. It doesn't need beautiful words. You just need to pray heartfelt, meaningful words.**

- ❖ I know some of you don't like praying out loud. **You're not comfortable praying in front of others. But you should ask yourself why.** Do you feel like you sound silly? Do you think you're not articulate enough? Okay I understand, but who are you speaking to when you pray? To your neighbor? Or to God?

- ❖ That's the fine line we need to draw in corporate prayer. **On one hand you want others to hear you pray, otherwise what's the point of praying together?** If you're going to sit in a circle and everyone prays to themselves, then you're better off going into your room and shutting the door like Jesus says. There's value in praying together in the unity of the Spirit.
 - ▶ **But at the same time, you can't focus too much on what you're going to say.** If your turn is coming up in the prayer circle, you shouldn't be so distracted that you're no longer listening to the prayers being spoken because you're preoccupied with what you're going to say. "How should I intro? How can I tie in tonight's lesson? Is there a verse I can reference? How can include the gospel?"
 - You can probably tell that those are usually my thoughts in my head while the guy next to me is earnestly praying. This is my problem. **I tend to focus too much on my words because I often confuse who I'm praying *with* and who I'm praying *to*.**

- ❖ **I have to remember – we have to remember – that you can't impress God with your words. And the good news of the gospel is that you don't have to.** He's already formed an impression of you – one that's rooted in love. He loves you, not because of who you are, but because of who he is and who his Son is. Because through your faith, Jesus' sin-atonement death has been substituted for yours and his righteous life has been counted as yours. If you've put your faith in Christ alone, then God already accepts you. He's already impressed.
- ❖ So it's foolish to treat prayer like magic where we think the right words can open doors. **We're simply fooling ourselves if we think we can somehow manipulate God with our words.** You can't turn God's hand. So don't pray to him like he's some genie who needs to be rubbed right. Don't pray to God like he's a machine whose lever you have to pull.
 - ▶ **Instead, Jesus tells us to pray to God like you would a Father who already knows what you need.** Pray trusting that he knows what you need even before you ask.
- ❖ That's the amazing statement Jesus makes in v8, "*Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*" Notice it says he already knows what you *need*. **He also knows what you want, but more importantly he knows what you need.** And we all know those two are often not the same thing. I realize some of you might be disappointed with God because he doesn't seem to be granting you what you want. **But could you imagine how terrible it would be if God gave us everything we wanted in prayer?**
- ❖ **Parents, what would be the outcome if you just gave your children everything they wanted?** They'd probably be in the hospital or worse and you'd be in jail. That's why we prioritize our kids' needs over their wants. That makes complete sense to us, but then when it comes to our relationship with God, we seem to forget. **But here we're reminded that we have an all-seeing, all-knowing Father in Heaven who will meet our every need – he'll give us our daily bread – according to his good and perfect will.**

Praying to Commune with your Father

- ❖ That leads to our final motive to pray. **It's the motive Jesus is endorsing, and that's to pray in order to commune with your Father who are in heaven.** That's his point in v6, "*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.*"
- ❖ Some of you are wondering what's the point of praying if God already knows what you need. But do you see how that question betrays a wrong view of prayer and what it's for. It's not about informing God of your needs or trying to persuade him to do your bidding. **Prayer is not a sacrifice you lay at the altar in order to appease God's wrath or curry his favor.**
 - ▶ **Jesus already took care of that on the cross.** He bore the wrath for you. He merited God's favor for you. Through Christ you're reconciled to God and adopted into his family as children. So if you're in Christ, then God is your Father, and prayer is our means of communion with him. **It's about being with him alone – to be with *him* and him alone.** It's not about showing up with a laundry list of requests.

- ❖ Again, parents get this. **It's the difference between a child, who's already grown and out of the house, who only calls occasionally and only because he needs something from you – versus the child who calls regularly just to chat and catch up.** We all want the second kid. We want to commune with our children. That brings us great joy and great honor.
 - ▶ That's how your Heavenly Father feels. You bring him great joy and honor when you frequently come to him simply to commune with him. Jesus says your Father who sees in secret – including the secret intentions of your heart – he will reward you.

- ❖ Now let me quickly touch on this idea of praying for reward. **Some think a reward seems to spoil the prayer. Isn't that a selfish, self-serving motive to pray?** Not if the reward you seek in performing an activity is the consummation of that very activity. If you get married for the sake of money, then you're completely selfish. If you get married for the sake of having that person in your life for the rest of your life, then you're completely sane. That's what marriage is for.
 - ▶ I get this idea from **C. S. Lewis** in his sermon, *The Weight of Glory*.² Listen to this, *“We must not be troubled by unbelievers when they say that this promise of reward makes the Christian life a mercenary affair. There are different kinds of reward. There is the reward which has no natural connection with the things you do to earn it, and is quite foreign to the desires that ought to accompany those things. Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man a mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not a mercenary for desiring it. . . . The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation.”*

- ❖ So it all depends on what reward you're expecting from the Father as he sees you in prayer. If the reward you're hoping for is some gift and not the Giver himself, then yes, you're a mercenary in prayer.
 - ▶ **But if your reward is more of God – one day perfect communion with God unbroken and unhindered by sin – then that's the activity of prayer in consummation.** To pursue that as a reward for prayer is the noblest of pursuits and is the most God-glorifying motive you can have.

- ❖ So what has been motivating you to pray? Are you trying to impress? To impress others? To impress God? Are you hoping to say the right words, the right number of times, in order to turn God's hand and finally convince him to give you what you want? Or do you actually want to sit at your Master's feet and just be with him?
 - ▶ **I encourage you to make the effort this week to set aside some extended time with the Lord in prayer and never tell a soul about it.** Don't give me or your small group an update. Don't tweet about it. Just do it in complete secret and let your Heavenly Father alone see you in prayer communing with him.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Harper Collins, 2001), pgs. 26-27.