

HOW SHOULD WE PRAY? PRAY LIKE JESUS

Matthew 6:1–15

In the SU LIGHT material which we use on Sunday mornings the topic for the next few weeks will be “How should we pray?” and the first answer to that question is, “Pray like Jesus.” That would normally have been our subject this Sunday but as we have a baptismal service we’re going to look at it today.

Prayer had a vital place in Jesus’ own life. Early on Mark describes a sabbath day in Capernaum when Jesus taught with authority, when he cast an evil spirit out of a man who was demon-possessed, when he healed Peter’s mother-in-law, and performed many other miracles of healing and exorcism. The next day the disciples were very excited and began looking for Jesus but he was nowhere to be found. Where could he be? Mark 1:35 has the answer. ‘Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.’

At every important stage of his life and ministry Jesus prayed: when he was baptised, before he chose the 12 apostles, before that all-important question at Caesarea Philippi, ‘Who do you say I am?’, at the transfiguration, and before the cross in the Garden of Gethsemane. Luke tells us (5:16) that ‘Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed’.

Jesus demonstrated the power of prayer in his own life and he taught the principles of prayer to his disciples. In Matthew chapter 6, in the sermon on the mount, Jesus taught them about three aspects of righteousness, or what we might call religious activities. Verse 1 is a general introduction. In verses 2–4 he talks about giving; in verses 5–6 about prayer, and in verses 16–18 about fasting. It all fits neatly into 9 verses but into the middle of this neat structure come verses 7–15, a supplement. Jesus says, ‘Wait, we can’t just leave it like that. There’s more you need to know.’ And what is it we need to know more about? Prayer. The structure of this passage itself indicates just how important prayer was to Jesus and how important it is for us.

Notice first of all that Jesus makes an assumption. Verses 5, 6 and 7: ‘when you pray’. The assumption is that we will pray. In fact it means ‘whenever you pray’. Prayer is not an optional extra but a vital necessity. Jesus himself prayed regularly and fervently. Just as the body needs food the soul needs prayer.

In these verses Jesus gives us some do’s and don’ts of prayer.

1. Don’t pray like the hypocrites.

Verse 5. When Jesus condemned the Pharisees for their hypocrisy in Matthew 23:5 he said, ‘Everything they do is done for men to see.’ The word hypocrite meant originally actor. Jesus says, ‘Are you praying or play-acting? The word order of verse 5 is interesting: *they love in the synagogues and on the street corners standing to pray.* Ostentatious prayers, showy prayers, praying in the wrong way for the wrong reasons.

Jesus said, ‘I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.’ *Received in full* was a commercial term used on receipts. Pray like that and you’ve had all the reward you’re going to get.

After the don’t comes a do.

2. Pray in secret.

Verse 6. The word for room here indicates a store room, the only room in the house with a lock on the door and with no windows, a place of complete privacy. If you’re familiar with the KJV you may feel there’s something missing here, and in verses 4 and 18, the word ‘openly’. It was added fairly early in the transmission of the New

Testament by zealous scribes who liked everything neat and balanced. But that's not what Jesus was saying. In fact it rather blunts the point of what Jesus was saying. Your prayer is between you and God, no one else. Pray in secret. Now another don't.

3. Don't pray like the pagans.

Verse 7. If the hypocrites were guilty of ostentatious praying the pagans were guilty of superstitious praying. They thought God would take more notice of them the more they said. 'Babbling' is a word that was invented to describe this kind of prayer. It's baby talk, but it's much more serious than that. Keep your prayers simple. There's no need for special prayer language.

4. A pattern prayer

Verse 9. 'This is how you should pray.' Jesus didn't say, 'This is what you should pray,' as if it was something to be repeated parrot-fashion. Unfortunately that's the way it has often been used.

If you look at verses 9 and 10 the key word is 'your', i.e. God's. In verses 11–13 the key word is 'our'. The pattern is God first, his name, his kingdom, his will, and then us, our needs. That is God's formula for happiness and holiness: God first, then us. It's the same with the Ten Commandments. Jesus reminds us here of

THE GOD TO WHOM WE PRAY

'Our Father in heaven'. All sorts of people are saying prayers, many much more conscientiously than us, but the key question is who we are praying to. When we pray in Jesus' name we are praying to our Father in heaven.

He is *a gracious God*. He is our Father. Verse 8 reminds us that 'your Father knows what you need before you ask him'. The word 'father' occurs no less than 6 times in verses 5 to 15. He is a gracious God, our loving father.

But Jesus also reminds us that he is *a great God* – our Father in heaven. . He is the everlasting God, the creator of heaven and earth. Heaven is his throne and the earth his footstool. He is the sovereign Lord, King of the Ages, enthroned in majesty on high. Nothing is too difficult for him. We need to keep this balance in our approach to him, not too fearful, not too familiar.

THE PEOPLE WITH WHOM WE PRAY

Our Father. Because God is our Father we are brothers and sisters. We are family and we must pray in that context. How does this tie in with the command to pray in secret? A feature of Jesus' teaching in the sermon on the mount is the way he alternates between talking to us as individuals and as a group. The English language doesn't distinguish 'you' singular from 'you' plural but many languages do, and Greek is one of them. Verse 5 is plural. Verse 6 is singular. Verse 7 is plural again. Is Jesus implying that the way we pray when we're on our own will influence our prayers when we're together?

Jesus clearly envisaged both private prayer and public prayer. When we pray together we need to be aware of those with whom we pray, praying audibly and with sensitivity.

THE THINGS FOR WHICH WE PRAY

Our prayers should focus on two things: God's glory and our needs, and in that order.

Praying for God's glory

'Hallowed be your name, on earth as it is in heaven.' 'Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.' 'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' The priorities of God's

kingdom come first, and we will never know power in prayer until his priorities become ours.

Praying for our needs

Two types of needs are covered: physical needs and spiritual needs, food for the body and forgiveness for the soul. True spirituality contains both these elements. It is not honouring to the Lord to neglect our physical needs: eating, sleeping, exercise, fresh air, work, recreation, home, family – all these can be made the subject of prayer.

And just as important are our spiritual needs. Verse 12 begins with the word 'and' (omitted in the NIV). Verse 12 looks to the past, forgiveness of sin. Verse 13 looks to the future, deliverance from temptation.

In verse 12 'we have forgiven' means 'we have forgiven and they stay forgiven'. Now Jesus underlines the importance of that, verses 14, 15. If you have been forgiven you must forgive.

Prayer changes things not because it changes God. It doesn't make him more gracious, more loving, more compassionate. Prayer changes things not because it changes God but because it changes us. It makes us more humble, more gentle, more forgiving. When we pray we're not bringing God into line with our will; we're bringing ourselves into line with God's will.

This, then, is how you should pray.