

Week of January 31, 2021

Matthew 6:1-18

¹“Be careful that you don’t practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

²“Whenever you give to the poor, don’t blow your trumpet as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may get praise from people. I assure you, that’s the only reward they’ll get. ³ But when you give to the poor, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing ⁴ so that you may give to the poor in secret. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

⁵“When you pray, don’t be like hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them. I assure you, that’s the only reward they’ll get. ⁶ But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.

⁷“When you pray, don’t pour out a flood of empty words, as the Gentiles do. They think that by saying many words they’ll be heard. ⁸ Don’t be like them, because your Father knows what you need before you ask. ⁹ Pray like this:

Our Father who is in heaven,
uphold the holiness of your name.
¹⁰ Bring in your kingdom
so that your will is done on earth as it’s done in heaven.
¹¹ Give us the bread we need for today.
¹² Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you,
just as we also forgive those who have wronged us.
¹³ And don’t lead us into temptation,
but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴ “If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you don’t forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your sins.

¹⁶ “And when you fast, don’t put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They distort their faces so people will know they are fasting. I assure you that they have their reward. ¹⁷ When you fast, brush your hair and wash your face. ¹⁸ Then you won’t look like you are fasting to people, but only to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

How to Pray

I don’t know about you, but my prayer life isn’t as strong as I’d like it to be. I’m really only speaking of a certain kind of prayer, though, the practice we generally imagine when we think of prayer - physically sitting down and invoking the name of God through cries of help, thanksgiving, and/or awe. Finding time, outside of meals, to intentionally communicate with God can be really hard, with innumerable distractions competing for our time and attention. But prayer is more than clasping your hands and closing your eyes to talk to God. Prayer is also physical, in how you live and act. It’s being intentional about using your God given gifts for good. It’s in sharing time with loved ones. Prayer is much more than what we tend to think of it as; so long as we engage in the world with the Holy Spirit guiding our lives, anything we do can be a form of prayer. Even so, there’s something special about spoken prayer. Just like seeing a loved one face-to-face is better than talking to them by phone, spoken prayer feels more intimate and real. Despite that intimacy, it’s something most Christians struggle with. Jesus has provided us with a means by which we can get stronger and better, a prayer that is quintessential to our lives and provides a framework to base all future prayer off of.

If someone knows nothing else about the Christian faith, they will likely know the Lord’s Prayer - even if we say it differently, depending on our tradition. And no matter the words we

use, the meaning remains the same. It is a great example of prayer because it does everything prayer is meant to - offering God praise and thanks and seeking God's guidance - in a simple format. It begins with proclaiming the holiness of God's name and seeking the fulfillment of God's kingdom. In this act we simultaneously praise God and commit ourselves to working for God's aims, because saying "thy will be done" means we're making sure God's will is done through our own actions. Then there's an ask for bread, which doesn't literally mean a loaf of honeywheat, but food in general. It's an acknowledgement that all we have that gives us life comes from God. Next is seeking forgiveness, but it's not just God forgiving us, it's God offering us forgiveness in the same way we forgive others. This is yet another way to commit ourselves to doing God's work. Jesus even reiterates that God forgiving us is dependent on our ability to forgive others - we can't expect God to give us something we're unwilling to give others. Finally comes the ask for help - a general "may we not be led into temptation" which covers a myriad of needs and will be understood differently depending on the one offering the prayer. Our traditional format adds in "for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever, amen," but it's missing in the prayer Jesus actually taught. The addition, though, is nice, because it bookends the prayer with another proclamation of praise, acknowledging God's eternal rule.

When we offer God our own spoken prayers there's no need for complex words or flowery language. So often I hear people say they can't pray aloud, but Jesus shows us that it's really simple. All we need to do is tell God thank you, you're great, and help us. That's it. Prayer can be really simple, if only we let it be. The prayer below is my own take on the Lord's Prayer. Feel free to create your own. Let Christ's example guide you in a practice that is relevant to your own life and your own needs. It can become your go-to prayer, a mantra to say again and again, so that we no longer need to feel badly about our prayer life lacking. Jesus gave us the guide, let's put it to use.

Creator God - you are holy and awesome! Your name is glorious because it has brought us life - and not just life, but life eternal. May your will be done among us, and may it begin with us. Provide for us the nourishment we need to work for your peace and justice. Show us mercy when we wrong others, and may we be humble enough to offer the same mercy to those who wrong us. May your Spirit guide our lives so that we do not easily give into temptation, but stay on the path your love has shown us. Your word reigns supreme, its glory cannot be surpassed. Amen.