

## “When You Pray” — Matthew 6:5-8

As a college student I had more than my share of interesting jobs. One of those jobs was operating a commercial floor polisher. You know the type. It had a big round spinning brush on the bottom, an electric motor that sat on top of that and a long t-shaped handle with a power switch right under grips that looked like they had been borrowed from a bicycle. In addition to that there was a long thick power cord that you had to try to keep out of the way.

It all seemed simple enough. Just turn it on and polish the floor. I didn't need any instructions! So I turned the switch on and it polished me right across the room into the wall! It was obvious that I needed a stronger grip. I dragged it back to the middle of the room, tensed my muscles, stood firm, grabbed tight and started it up. Right across the room again — only faster! I kept trying harder. The harder I tried, the harder (and faster!) I hit the wall.

Then someone who understood commercial floor polishers far better than I took the controls. He operated that polisher with one finger and made it go wherever he chose! He looked like a superman and I looked like a wimp. He explained to me that there's a way to operate a polisher and a way not to operate a polisher. “Don't fight it,” he said. “The harder you try, the less control you will have. Just tilt it up or down when you want it to go right or left and the power of the polisher will do everything for you.” I tried it his way. And it worked!

It was somewhat the same idea in a conversation that Jesus had with his disciples in Matthew 6:5-8, only here the topic is praying, not polishing. My guess is that some of Jesus' followers had tried praying the wrong way and they had hit the wall many times. The more they hit the wall, the harder they tried until they were bruised and disgusted. They wanted to give up on prayer because it was either too hard or just didn't work.

Probably many of us understand how they felt

because we've hit the same wall ourselves more than a few times. That's why we're especially interested in what Jesus had to say in Matthew 6:5-8:

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Jesus was teaching his disciples how to pray the right way. He told them not only what to do, but he told them what not to do as well. And the first thing he told them was, “Don't love to pray.” They must have thought Jesus was kidding. Prayer is supposed to be a good thing. What could be better than loving to pray? But Jesus said, “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street . . . .”

Hypocrites are phonies. They pretend to be something they are not. The good news is that hypocrites are one of the best proofs of the real thing. Nobody counterfeits a thirteen-dollar bill. Instead they counterfeit twenties because there are real twenties and because

they are valuable. So it is with religious hypocrites. There are such things, and they prove that the real thing is valuable.

The emphasis here is not on where they stood. That misses the whole point of prayer. The emphasis is that they were phonies. They were pretending to be something that they were not. They

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weren't in love with God. They were in love with praying. They delighted in the activity more than they delighted in the one whom they addressed.

Imagine being engaged to someone who every day says to you, "I love weddings!" After the first couple hundred days you want to ask, "But do you love me?" Or worse yet, suppose you go to a surgeon who tells you with a gleam in his eye, "I love to operate!" You may think, "Now hold on a minute. Before you start cutting, I want to know that you are primarily concerned about me and not just the activities that relate to me."

The point of prayer is never whether we like it or not. The point of prayer is that it is with the God whom we love. The day we fall in love with prayer itself is the day we become phonies.

But Jesus also says that we are not to pray to others.

Awhile back our family attended a Christian conference center. One noontime the dining room host concluded his public prayer with words about the afternoon activities and getting tickets for the evening concert. After he was finished another guest at our table said, "Was he talking to God or to us?"

Let's face it: most prayers are not to God. Pastors pray for the congregation to hear. Table grace in restaurants is more often for public display or private tradition than it is a conversation with the maker of heaven and earth.

Worse yet, the number one target of most prayers is ourselves. The words we pray are centered more in our need than they are centered in God.

How do you feel when someone is supposed to be talking to you but never looks in your eyes? Especially if he is far more concerned if others in the room are listening to what he has to say. We don't like that. And God doesn't like that, either.

One day I was on the phone with someone who had been talking non-stop for a long time. Our doorbell rang. I tried to interrupt to excuse myself for a moment but literally couldn't get a word in. So, I laid the phone on the bed, went downstairs, answered the door, had a conversation and then went back upstairs and picked up the phone — and the caller was still talking! I was never missed. That caller wasn't talking to

me. He was talking to himself.

Jesus said, "Do not be like the hypocrites, for they love . . . to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full."

Jesus adds a third word on what not to do: "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans." Literally, Jesus was saying, "Don't pile up empty phrases the way they do in pagan religions." There are lots of religions where saying the right words in the right way at the right time is more important than the attitude or the relationship to God. But the truth is that we all may be guilty of this mistake. It may be the rote repetition of the Lord's Prayer or Hail Mary or some other familiar prayer that we recite but we never give much thought at all to what the content is. We could recite it in our sleep. The words are always the same.

Twice recently I have had the same encounter with two different telephone solicitors. After saying, "No, thank you," and hanging up the phone, it immediately rang again and the same person started the same pitch all over again. It sounded canned. Not too convincing. I wanted to hang up.

Jesus explained that God doesn't like that either. He not only listens to our lips, he listens to our hearts as well. God is not impressed with empty repetitious prayers.

Jesus adds a fourth and final "what not to do" when he says, "Don't pray long!" His exact words were, ". . . for they think they will be heard because of their many words."

Some Christians don't agree with Jesus at this particular point. They think that the longer you talk, the more likely it is that God will listen. So, if we pray 10,000 words, God is far more likely to listen and answer than if we pray 1,000 words. Not according to Jesus.

Actually, the quantitative idea of praying was rooted in the pagan religion of the first century, not in the New Testament. They believed that God was reluctant to answer prayer and required that those who prayed must wear themselves out with hours or more of praying to prove that they were sincere and worthy of God's ear and answer. Jesus severely criticized and debunked the idea that the longer the prayer the better God listens.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century English preacher, Charles Spurgeon, represented Jesus' idea well when he said, "Prayer is measured by weight, not by length." And it was Martin Luther who said that prayer should be "brief, frequent and intense."

Jesus' teaching was refreshing and liberating for many first century listeners whose religion required prayers in an exact repetition of their Eighteen Petition Prayer three times a day, plus two daily confessions, plus table prayers plus doxology prayers at other times. They were overloaded with prayer requirements. Jesus taught that God is not reluctant to listen. In fact, God wants to listen much more than we want to pray! Once we understand this we are freed to pray and pray often.

But Jesus not only tells us what not to do, he goes on to tell us what to do. In verse 6 Jesus is very practical. He says, "... when you pray, go into your room (and) close the door." Actually, Jesus used a technical term for the "supply room" of the typical first century poor Palestinian home.

Often it was the only room in a house that could be locked. It wasn't a fancy place. Usually there was stored food, feed for the animals and even some small animals. The point was privacy.

Whenever I'm away on a trip, I try to call home to Charleen every day. On a trip to Canada I was at a conference center in a lounge with others waiting to use the phone and walking by and listening. Friends told me, "Say hi to Charleen for me", or even shouted toward the phone. I think it impressed some wives who said, "Oh, you're such a thoughtful husband. I wish my husband would call me when he's away on a business trip."

But I don't call her to impress others nor for them to hear me talk to her. I much prefer to call home from a private room with a locked door where no one else can see or hear. That is the way two people in love, with a close relationship, want to talk. That is the only way we can speak freely to one another.

And so it is when we talk to God. In private, in secret, behind locked doors — we can pray in

ways and say things that no one else could really understand. Not that Jesus was condemning public prayer. It is as appropriate to pray publicly as it is for Charleen and me to talk publicly. But Jesus clearly taught that what happens publicly is based on what happens privately: "... your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Second, Jesus tells us that we are to pray to God. When we pray, the person is a thousand times more important than the place! "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen."

When we make telephone calls, the first thing we do is to make sure we are connected to the right person. It is more than embarrassing to have a conversation with your veterinarian when you thought you were talking to your pediatrician.

Jesus is giving powerful practical advice. When you pray, don't worry so much about what you are going to say or even what you want. Make sure you are connected

with God the Father. But sometimes that is not as simple as it sounds. It is based on a relationship, and relationships take time and experience. Spending time with God. Learning about God. Talking to him often so that he recognizes our voices and we know when the connection is clear.

Remember: God likes to give! The truth is clear: the Father will reward you! The reward is not for praying. The reward is simply God giving gifts and answers and other good things to those he loves as an expression of relationship. God is no tightwad. He loves to be generous. He delights in being asked. He enjoys giving us his best.

Actually, there is something crazy about the upside down way we mortals often think of prayer and God. We too often think he likes to hinder us more than help us when it is really just the opposite. We often neglect to talk to him and try to live our life on the poverty of our weakness when we could flourish with his strength. But then we expect to grab God in a crisis and act as if the relationship is already in place when it isn't.

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It's a little bit like the parent who hopes every day for a call from a son or daughter. Mom and Dad would love to talk and to give, but weeks and months and even years go by without a call. Then the phone rings at 2 a.m. and there is a call for help.

To my amazement, God, like many parents, says "yes" in the crisis. But wouldn't it be far better to call sooner to the God who wants to give?

Remember, God knows before we ask. The last of Jesus' principles of prayer is actually a mix of what not to do and what to do when we pray: "... do not be like (the phonies), for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

The hypocrites have a mistaken notion of God. They think that God gets his news from human prayers and that the more we talk the better God listens. Neither is true. God knows before we ask and it's okay to come to the point of prayer in few words.

Some people think that listening to Jesus' advice will mean never praying again. These seem like disincentives to prayer. "If you tell everyone that few words are okay, people won't spend time praying." "If you tell people God already knows what they are going to say, they won't bother praying at all."

Compare it to a judge on sentencing day. The judge knows the defendant wants leniency. He knows what the convicted man will say. He prefers that it just be said — not dragged out into a repetitious monologue that lasts for hours. There is no need for that. But there is certainly a need for the defendant to ask! And his asking may make a huge difference in how long he spends in jail.

Compare it to an employer at salary time. She knows the employee wants a raise. There is no need for excessive words. But the employee still should ask.

Or compare it to parents at bedtime. They know their children want to stay up late and prefer that the asking not last until morning. But they also love their kids and want to listen and to talk with them.

King David wrote in Psalm 139:4, "Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD." God is our judge, our employer, our heavenly parent. He knows what we will say.

There is no need to say the same things over and over. God loves us. He wants to hear us. He wants to give us his very best.

During the attempted Soviet coup to overthrow Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in the early 1990s, a news reporter asked then-President George Bush if he had tried the hotline to Moscow. He said, "No" . . . because he wasn't sure who would answer!

We have a hotline to heaven. It is for the worst crises of life, but it works wonderfully well for everyday communication as well. It is a wise and wonderful thing to practice calling before our crises come. Of one thing we can be absolutely sure — we know who will answer! For when we pray, our prayers are heard by "Our Father who art in heaven." Hallowed be his name!

And so, our Father, we thank you for the privilege of prayer and ask that through the lessons you have given to us we may do it right and often and with intensity of love for you.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

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