

Sermon on the Mount - Prayer Life (Part 1)

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[0 : 0 0] We are going to carry on our study on the Sermon on the Mount which of course is entitled Disciples Trained by King Jesus. And as we say every week, the reason we call it that is because that's what the Sermon on the Mount is, training for discipleship.

And of course that is also what we want to be. We want to be disciples of Jesus Christ. We want to be taught by Him, trained by Him. We want to follow Him and to live the way He wants us to live.

We've gone through almost half of the blocks on this diagram. Tonight we come to the one at the bottom, prayer life.

And we are going to focus in particular on the words we have here in verses 7 to 15. 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.

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Pray then like this, our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

[1 : 0 1] Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtor. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you or your trespasses. Now, a fortnight ago we moved into chapter 6 and we noted the fact that the main point that Jesus is highlighting in the first half of chapter 6 is in regard to a motivation.

He says in verse 1, 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.

And it's a statement that shapes the examples that he then gives throughout the first half of the chapter. Discipleship that is aiming to impress other people is not discipleship at all.

It's hypocrisy. And the point that Jesus is making is that our motivation as disciples must always be shaped by a desire not to please man but to please our Father in heaven.

[2 : 1 7] And that affects every part of life whether it's in public or whether it's in secret because God sees every part of our lives. And as disciples it's what God can see that matters, not what other people can see.

It's what God can see. And in teaching this lesson Jesus gives three examples, the example of giving, the example of praying and the example of fasting.

But when he comes to refer to prayer, here he also gives us some additional and some wonderful teaching about our prayer lives as disciples.

Indeed, this is the point in scripture where the Lord gives us the model prayer for the disciple, what we call the Lord's prayer.

And we're going to look at this together and see what it teaches us about our prayer lives as disciples. Now we're going to do it over two weeks because I ran out of time with what I wanted to say.

[3 : 17] So we'll look at it a bit tonight and we'll look at it a bit more next week I think, Bob Inwell. Prayer is obviously one of the most basic and fundamental aspects of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Prayer is essential for becoming a Christian. You all prayed during your conversion and prayer is also essential for living as a Christian.

And it's a huge topic because it's a huge part of the Christian life and even though we're going to spend two weeks and it will only be scratching the surface. Prayer is a wonderful topic, a wonderful topic, but I am sure that if you are like me and if we are honest, we will find ourselves acknowledging that prayer is often something that we find hard.

And sometimes a title like prayer life there can instantly make us feel like failures.

It can make us feel that we're a long way from what we should be. And the wonderful thing about the Sermon on the Mount is that Jesus is giving you and me training in order to help us be disciples.

[4 : 41] That means that when we look at Jesus as teaching on prayer, we're going to find information that is going to equip us, help us and encourage us as we seek to grow in terms of our prayer life.

So I want us to just spend a week while looking at these verses. And when you come to this passage, it's so, so easy to be tempted to jump straight in at verse nine where Jesus begins the Lord's preface, as pray then like this.

However, there is vital teaching in verses five to eight, especially in verse eight. And that's what I want us to focus on tonight.

In verses five to eight, Jesus warns disciples like us and those who are with him against two things that must be avoided in terms of our prayer lives.

He says, first of all, avoid the hypocrisy of the Jews. He says, 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.

[5 : 46] Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. 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.

These hypocrites, which is no doubt the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders, yes, in mind in particular, they love to make a big outward show of their prayer lives.

They love to draw attention to what they were doing. And Jesus is warning us against that. And he is reminding us that really, although at times we pray in public, fundamentally our prayer life is a secret part of our discipleship.

It's something that we maybe do in the privacy of our home as couples, as families, and it's something that we will even do by ourselves between us and the Lord.

Prayer life is not about a show. It's a secret thing. And really, as we were saying before last time, that's where our prayer life and where all of our discipleship is ultimately tested in secret.

[7 : 00] And whatever we are in public should just be a natural extension of what we are in secret. And our great desire is that we will be noted not for our celebrity, our fame as people who can pray, but for our sincerity and for our genuine devotion to God.

So Jesus has to avoid the Jews and their hypocrisy. The second thing he tells us to avoid is a practice followed by the Gentiles. He says, avoid the babbling of the Gentiles.

He says, and when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they'll be heard for their many words. Do not be like them. Here Jesus is talking not about Jews, but about Gentiles and their prayer life.

And he is indicating that that prayer life of the Gentiles seems to be characterised by saying the same things over and over and over again. That's what this phrase here, do not heap up empty phrases. The idea of repetition to the point where it's just meaningless babble.

People are just going through the motions, saying things, repeating things, and it seems to be, it seems to ultimately be empty.

[8 : 18] And so Jesus is saying, don't be like them either. Donnie, carry on. The Gentiles have been praying too. Well, I suppose at that time the main influence would have been what we call Hellenistic and culture, like Greek gods.

So, I wish I had my pen. I'm so lost without my pen. The area there around Judea, although it was under Roman rule, the main cultural influence was the Greeks.

And that's why you've got the decapolis around the sea of Galilee, that's 10 cities, again Greek name. The Greek gymnasium, Greek sports, Greek kind of things were very, very, very influential.

And no doubt Greek religions. And when Paul tabled around, he would be at these temples and Ephesus, or lower Ephesus, as much further north and west.

But I would imagine primarily that the pagan gods, but of course, back in the Old Testament, it was all the Canaanite gods and Baal and all that kind of stuff. Could that be applied nowadays to things like repeating the rosary and the Catholics doing stuff like that?

[9 : 30] Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. And, Quest, I don't want to kind of make sweeping comments because I shouldn't do that. I do wonder whether there's a bit of this in Islam as well, because one of the...

Islam has what you call five pillars, five things that you must do. I always forget what they all are. But one of them is to pray. You have to pray four times a day or five times a day.

The other one is you have to give alms. The other one is to go to Mecca. I can't remember the other two. But one of them is to pray.

So that's why they'd pray. They'd pray the same thing. They would say the same thing over and over again. I think, obviously, something we'll say that with great devotion, other people, I should probably say that with just...

Same as if you see a footballer go into the pitch and crossing himself and all that kind of stuff. They think that... So ritual. Ritual, just repetitive. Ritual, see the same thing today. What do you just have referred to what they were doing in the book? How would you call it, if there were two false gods?

[10 : 41] Well, what he's talking about is the technique. The interesting thing is that when you compare the two, you compare the synagogue, the Jews, they kind of make their prayers sound good because they're making a show.

But hypocrisy, it's not really prayer. Like you say, it's not really prayer because they're just doing it for show. But they're trying to be... They're focusing on the quality of their prayer.

You know, so stand up and make a big show, great quality. The Gentiles, it's not so much about quality, but about quantity. He's saying that in many words. So again, it's not real prayer, like you say.

But he's saying, don't follow their practices. Don't be like the hypocrites who make a show of it. Don't be like the Gentiles who think that by doing the loads, they'll get it.

It's an easy mistake to make. You can get very ritualistic in prayer thinking if I do this. Do you know of those who applied this now to the prayers of 50 or 50 years ago on churches here where the opening prayer was over, taping around in some cases?

[11 : 49] Yes, yeah, absolutely. Well, I'll come to that in a minute. I'll mention that because that is a point that we have to address. But I do actually have that in here. So we'll leave that question till the time comes.

Jesus is basically saying the Gentiles, the Jews like to make a big show of their prayer. The Gentiles might like to have a big, long quantity of prayer.

And in terms of both of them, his advice is very simple. Do not be like them. The Jewish hypocrites wanted to just to make a big show of their prayers.

The Gentiles were concerned about their quantity. Jesus does not want us to do that. And then he gives the reason why he says, do not be like them. And then here we have the word for, which is giving us a reason.

Your father knows what you need before you ask him. That's why we don't want to be like the Jews.

[12 : 52] That's why we don't want to be like the Gentiles in terms of prayer. And Jesus is presenting us with a theological truth that must lie at the heart of my prayer life and yours.

We must always, always hold on to the fact that your father knows what you need before you ask him.

Now, whenever you read a phrase like that, it's easy to think, well, why pray? Why do we need to ask him if your father knows? That's something that instantly pops into my head.

And I'm sure it pops into many people's head as well. Well, I hope that we will see that this truth, rather than making us not need to pray, is actually giving us immense encouragement and help in terms of our prayer lives.

Jesus is telling us one of the most precious and wonderful truths that we can ever hear in order to help with our prayer lives. He is reminding us of the fact that your father knows you and your father knows what you need.

[14 : 08] And we're going to think about this a wee bit together and I hope we will see that that is a wonderful motivation to pray.

And I'm going to say four things in particular regarding to this. First of all, this means that we can pray confidently.

Notice Jesus is not saying your father knows, therefore you don't need to ask. He is saying your father knows before you ask him, he's still giving us a command when he says ask him, we should still do it.

And he's reminding us of the fact that your father in heaven knows you, therefore you have this extraordinary privilege of being able to pray to the God of heaven freely and confidently.

And that means you don't need to make a show of it like the hypocrites. And you don't need to make a meal of it like the Gentiles, you can simply come to your father who knows you.

[15 : 08] And Jesus is reminding us of the fact that at the heart of discipleship is the glorious truth that you have a relationship with God as your heavenly father.

As disciples, you are abducted children of God with God the Father as our father and with God the Son as our brother.

And we must never forget the fact that this is really what lies at the very heart of Christianity. This is really the core of the Christian faith.

And this is something that must always, always, always govern how we think about God. Because if we ask an interesting question, if I ask the question, I can't write it down because my pen is not working, but if I ask the question, what is the first thing that comes into your mind when you hear the word God?

What is it? When I say it, you don't need to answer me, but if I say the word God, what pops into your mind? Words maybe like Lord or King or Holy or Righteous or Sovereign or Judge or Creator.

[16 : 15] These are all words that come to mind when we see or hear the word God. They are, of course, all true. They are all glorious attributes of God.

But as a disciple, the first word that should come into your mind when you think of God is Father.

Because that is what lies at the heart of the Gospel. It lies at the heart of theology. You are united to Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

That makes you a child of God as well. And there's a very famous quote from J.I. Packard. I've shared this quote before about two or three years ago, but I'm going to read it again.

J.I. Packard. I. J.I. Packard. I don't know what the I stands for, but it is I. Packard. The J is for Jim.

[17 : 14] This is a very striking quote. You sum up the whole of the New Testament teaching in a single phrase. If you speak of it as the revelation of the fatherhood of the Holy Creator.

In the same way, you sum up the whole of the New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one's Holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child and having God as his Father.

If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.

I have to say, when I first read that paragraph, I thought to myself, I'm exactly what he's talking about because I was not thinking of God as Father, anything like as much as I should.

And I felt like this person who doesn't understand Christianity very well at all. And sometimes you can say a bit harsh that, but I think it's deliberately strongly worded because it stops us and makes us think.

[18 : 25] Because he really is right. If you look at Jesus as teaching, well, when you look at the model prayer, what's the first thing we say in the Lord's prayer? Outlaw.

And all of this is reminding us that as a disciple, you can come to God in confidence because he is your Father and you are his beloved child.

And because he is your Father, he knows you and he cares so deeply for every aspect of your life and he loves you with a love that cannot be described and there is not one second or one aspect or one moment in your life when he is not listening out for your prayer.

And it's reminding us that your prayers are so precious to God. He knows you so well because you are his child. And that means you can come to God not with fear, but with confidence because he's your Father and he's ready for whatever you are going to say.

Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. So you can pray to God confidently. Second thing, the clock's going to pass.

[19 : 51] Second thing, we can pray to God with honesty. We can pray to God with honesty. I don't know about you, but one of the big hurdles I face in my prayer life is the feelings of shame and failure. You come before God and you feel that God will be disappointed with me, God will be frustrated with me and he probably wouldn't want to listen to my prayers because I let him down so much.

And the temptation can be that we have to try and put on our best in prayer. That when we come to God, we have to sort ourselves out.

But of course ultimately that's just another form of hypocrisy like Jesus was highlighting. Because God knows our needs, God knows our circumstances, and of course that means that God knows all the mistakes that we've made and all the failings that we have.

Hypocrisy is totally foolish because you can't hide anything from God. I can't hide anything from God. He sees everything. But Jesus is reminding us of the fact that because God knows everything about you, that should not intimidate you, that should liberate you in prayer.

Because it means that you can come to God in total honesty with all your failings, all your weakness, all your insecurity and you will never shock him. You will never take him by surprise because he knows what we need before we even ask.

[21 : 23] And the glorious truth of discipleship is that even though God knows every single thing about you, he remains absolutely committed to you. And you think why? Why would God remain committed to people like you and me despite all of our failings?

Is it because our prayers are up to a certain standard? No. Is it because our obedience is at a level that it should be? No. Is it because our achievements in life?

No. Why does God stay absolutely, totally, permanently committed to you? Because he's your father.

Because he's your father. And that means you can pray to God in total honesty, honest about your worries. God says, cast all your cares on me because I care for you.

Honest about your circumstances. Paul says in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let the requests be made known to God. Honest even about our sins as we are reminded by John. Confession is part of daily life as a disciple. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Now that word confess is really interesting. The Greek word for confess is humo logeo, which basically means the same thing, humo and logeo to speak or to say. So confess in Greek literally means to say the same thing. So I think that's a wonderful way of understanding confession because when we confess our sins we are actually acknowledging to God what he already knows.

[23 : 16] And we are finally acknowledging the fact that we are on the same page, that we are confessing sins and he is able to forgive us because we are acknowledging what he has seen, the fact that we have fallen short. And so it's reminding us that as disciples our prayer lives can be totally honest because that is how we can come to our Father.

And if we are honest it means that we will be praying about the things that really matter, which is of course how we want to be.

The third thing that this verse teaches us is that we can pray with simplicity. Jesus rebukes the Gentiles because they're making prayer complicated. Their prayers were all about keeping them phrases and getting God to listen because they had many words.

And Jesus is saying that that level of complexity in prayer is totally unnecessary. Why? Because your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. And that's a reminder as disciples our prayer lives should be marked not with intricate complexity but with humble simplicity. Sometimes I hear people say, I don't know what to say in prayer. Sometimes people might feel that they're feeble in their attempts and we can fall into the type of thinking that the more elaborate and complicated and detailed and intricate our prayers are the more likely God is to hear them. But if we think like that then we're just being like the Gentiles.

Because it does not matter if your prayers are the most simple and basic prayers that you've ever heard because your Father knows what you need before you even ask. So as disciples you can pray in simplicity. Sometimes that might be a very short prayer. Sometimes it might be a longer prayer where you are pouring out your heart to God which is something that Scripture tells us to do as well.

[25 : 28] But the amazing privilege of discipleship is that you can pray very simple terms to God and He will take care of everything else.

And as we are reminded later on in the New Testament God Himself by the Holy Spirit is always interceding for you.

And the vital truth is this, your prayers will not be heard on the basis of their length or their eloquence or their wisdom or their theological content. Your prayers will be heard because when God hears your voice, He hears the voice of His beloved child.

Now this comes back to Donnie's question. Doesn't mean that our prayer should never be long because remember Jesus sometimes spent all night in prayer. So we can by all means follow that example of a time. It doesn't mean that our prayers shouldn't be long nor does it mean that we should never repeat the same phrase in prayer.

Remember to get so many, Jesus prayed the same prayer three times. So it's not saying never repeat a phrase. It's not saying never pray a long prayer but it's saying don't do it in the way that the Gentiles or the hypocrites are doing it.

[26 : 50] But of course neither does the simplicity of prayer give us an excuse to be casual. Some people might be in danger of thinking, oh well a quick prayer is just as good. The Holy Spirit's interceding for me, God knows what I need. I don't need to put any effort in.

But again that attitude is just another form of hypocrisy because it's showing that you don't take prayer seriously at all and nor is it showing appreciation for the privileges that God has given us.

So prayer always sincere, always genuine, always serious, always from the heart and simple. We have the amazing privilege of being able to speak to our Heavenly Father in simplicity because prayer is just a child talking to the Father who loves them.

That's all prayer is. It's as simple as that. So we can pray confidently, we can pray honestly, we can pray with simplicity and last of all and quickly we can pray in security.

Jesus is reminding us here that God knows our needs. That means that we can come to him in total openness and honesty. We don't need to hide anything as we said we can't hide anything.

[28 : 12] But if God knows everything about us and if prayer is that time when our lives are laid totally bare before God, inevitably we are making ourselves very vulnerable because everything is laid bare before God.

But the fact that you Heavenly Father knows what you need before you even ask means that there is never a moment when you are not utterly safe and secure in his eyes.

An interesting question is this where do you see Jesus at his most vulnerable? In his temptation, in his confrontations with the Jewish leaders, in his trial, in his approach to the cross.

I don't think it's in any of these. Because the place where we see Jesus at his most vulnerable is in prayer.

And Jesus lets his vulnerability show in prayer because that's where he was at his most safe. And that's our wonderful lesson for us to learn for our prayer life as disciples. Because when you pray to your Father he knows your every need before you have to ask him.

[29 : 46] That means you are totally safe. He is your Father. He will never mistreat you. He will never deceive you. He will never ever compromise.

It is devotion and dedication to you. That means you never need to be afraid to pray about something. Now this is an interesting point. Some people sometimes say, oh don't pray for certain things.

So maybe people will say don't ever ask God to humble you. Or don't ask God to use you for whatever he wants. I've heard people say that. The idea that you know shouldn't pray for certain things. I don't know if any of you have ever heard people say like that. Say things like that.

You know don't pray about certain things. Is it right to say that? Is that correct? It's not. Well in terms of these things.

Well I'm talking about the kind of push. I think they need a lot of prayers. The kind of thing I'm talking about those. It's not that people will say you know not to pray for something because it's risky in the sense don't ask God. This kind of thing. Don't ask God to humble you.

[31 : 12] Don't lay yourself totally bare to God. He might send you to Indonesia. You know that kind of thing. People sometimes. I've just heard people say that. You know particularly in regard to humble.

Don't ask God to give you a strong faith because that means you'll be put through all sorts of trials to make yourself. And the reason I think that that is inappropriate is because it's suggesting that God is trying to catch us out. And suggesting that if you pray to God you'll put something into his head. And he's trying to make things worse for us. And ultimately following God's purposes is going to make something bad happen into your life.

It's basically saying watch out in case you give God a bad idea. An idea that will be hard. And I think that that is totally wrong. Because the Sermon and the Mount is telling us that that is totally impossible. You can't put something into God's head by praying because he knows what you need before you ask.

And that means that you don't ever have to be afraid to pray about something. Because your Heavenly Father will only ever act in your best interests. Now that does not mean that difficult things won't happen. And every single parent in here knows that you have to do things to your children.

That they don't want you to do. They're ultimately for their good. That's just a basic principle of discipline. And God is the wisest, lovingest, gentlest Father in that regard. But God forbid that we ever ever think that God is trying to catch us out in our prayer lives. Our Father knows what we need.

[33 : 00] He knows us. He knows us. And that means that we can be totally vulnerable before Him. We can pour out our souls to Him.

We can lay ourselves bare in His arms. All because He's our Father. And He will always keep us safe.

And it's a reminder that the secret place of your prayer life is also the safest place that we can ever be.

And that I hope is why this phrase, your Father knows what you need before you ask Him, should never make us think.

I'm not going to think. It should drive us to our knees. And it gives us the confidence and the reassurance and the security to pour out our hearts before God, safe in the knowledge that He is our Father and He knows what we need before we ask Him.