



WAY 2 PRAY

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Did any of you catch the aurora this week? There was a major storm on the Sun a few days ago, sending superheated gas particles known as plasma hurtling toward Earth. That plasma reacted with Earth's atmosphere, putting on a spectacular light show. Or at least it did elsewhere in the country.

Here in Washington, there wasn't as much to see. The weather man on one of the local news shows was trying to get viewers pumped up about watching for it and said, "Look for something like the glow from a football stadium a long way off," and I thought, "Really? It's THAT exciting?"

People are fascinated by this hard to catch light show by the sun, and it is a sight to behold. But it also made me think how much we take for granted what the sun does every single day. We get all excited about this bit of green glow on the horizon when the sun lights up the whole sky on a regular basis. The plasma from the sun storm made the 93 million mile trek to Earth in 3-1/2 days, which is mind boggling. But all the light from the sun goes the same distance in roughly 10 minutes. And it's enough light that it can blind you if you look directly at it. It's hot enough that you can get a sun burn or fry an egg on the sidewalk, strong enough to power electric plants. Any force that can travel that far that quickly and still be so powerful after all that distance is truly breathtaking.

I was thinking how amazing it is that the truth of God's word is so powerful that it can blaze across the time barrier and shine light on our world today. It is still just as relevant and convicting and disturbing and comforting as it was when it was first proclaimed. These flip flops we've been examining all summer, these reverses, are still as jolting and unexpected as ever. Because God's word is timeless, and human nature is still the same as always. I'm so grateful God continues to pour his light on us every day.

Over the last two months we've looked at a wide variety of ideas from Scripture that fly in the face of the way we normally think: A quiet life is a good thing. There's strength in weakness. The smallest can be the greatest. Last Sunday we looked at loving your enemies. Our whole way of viewing our life and the people around us is challenged by what Christ did and taught.

Sometimes even our thinking about God and spiritual matters needs to be turned upside down as well. One of those areas where we have some long standing misconceptions is

in the area of prayer. And in the same Sermon on the Mount that we talked about last week, Jesus took some time to challenge conventional wisdom about prayer.

Matthew 6:5-13

"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.

"This, then, is how you should pray:

*"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.'*

Do you ever bump into somebody out of context and find that it takes your mind a minute to compute who it is and why they're there? Sometimes it's somebody you see all the time, but in only one capacity, like a barista at Starbucks or your doctor. Or your child... Put them in a different setting and they're harder to recognize.

Sometimes, it's when something is IN context that it becomes less recognizable. Probably one of the most familiar passages in the Bible is the Lord's Prayer we just read. Even people who have never gone to church recognize it because they've heard it used in movies, at funerals and in songs. It's so well known that it seems strange to include in a sermon series on surprising truths of the Bible. What new idea could we possibly squeeze from such well worn ground?

But most of us have learned the Lord's Prayer OUT of context. We know it by itself, but don't usually think about it in terms of what led up to it. And it looks different in that light. Because Jesus offered this prayer as a flip flop – an alternative to the typical human approach to prayer. It was intended to cut against the grain.

I think that's important to realize if we want to hear Christ's heart for prayer. We need to restore some of that initial surprise to these words because if we just see them as traditional, then we've lost the point.

Prayer is an almost universal instinct that is uniquely human. Remote tribes in the jungle pray, People from every religious persuasion pray. Even non-religious people pray when they find themselves in difficult situations. For Christians, it is a vital component in our relationship with God.

And yet if you were to ask most people about their prayer life, they would say they feel inadequate and unsatisfied with it. And there's often a sense of guilt. I should be praying more than I am. I read this survey of pastors this week and came away feeling dismal about my own prayer life. Many of them were far outpacing me in the hours they were devoting to prayer and the concerns of the world they were regularly praying for. Not that it's a competition, but I couldn't help but compare my own prayer life to theirs, and I came away feeling below par on the prayer meter.

When that happens, prayer becomes this chore or burden, a task we SHOULD be doing, rather than something life giving that we can't help but do.

How do you feel about prayer? Does it come easily for you, or do you feel like you don't know what you're doing? If you were to fill out a survey on how important prayer is in your life, what would you say? And would your views on how important it is match up with how much time you actually spend in prayer on a daily basis?

The goal today is not more guilt. In fact, I think part of Jesus' motivation in talking to the crowd was to alleviate some of their false guilt surrounding prayer.

The first concern he addressed revolved around some of the people who appeared to have it all together when it came to their prayer life. In the first century, Israelites had regularly scheduled prayer times three times a day. Wherever you were, you stopped and prayed. These "hypocrites" Jesus was referring to apparently liked stopping in a crowded location where they could put on a show for a captive audience. Instead of prayer being something for God to answer, it was a vehicle for impressing people around them with their level of devotion.

I've talked to many of you about prayer at one time or another, and I have to say I have not met a single person at New Day who has a real addiction to praying loudly on the street corners for everyone to hear. It's not a big problem in our culture. Most people have a FEAR of praying in public. We're more worried what negative thought people might have of us if we pray, rather than thinking it will impress anyone.

Still, there are underlying issues in what Jesus is talking about that apply to all of us. They are prayer traps he wants us to avoid. I can know I've gotten stuck in this one when

My prayer is a projector. Just like this projector throws an image up on the wall, we tend to view our prayers as projecting an image of us to God, if not to the world. Jesus tells his listeners to not be like the hypocrites. The Greek word translated here as “hypocrites” is literally the Greek word for “stage actors.” Don’t be an actor when you’re praying.

Actors would wear a mask in their plays, pretending to be a character, literally putting on a false face. And these people praying on the street corners were putting on a mask, so what you saw was not who they really were. It was the image they wanted to project. Their spirituality was an act and they were playing a role.

We can wear a mask when we pray by not being honest about what’s really going on in our lives, trying to put a spin on it. We can wear a mask by never getting personal in our prayers. Sometimes the mask is avoiding prayer. We feel insecure talking to God, so we just don’t go there. Rather than just coming to God as we are, we try to be the kind of people in prayer we think he would like best, covering up our unattractive sides.

In his book called Prayer, Phillip Yancey writes, “Foolishly, I hide myself in fear that God will be displeased, though in fact the hiding may be what displeases God most.”

Some family friends of ours were part of a church plant over near Port Angeles a few years back. The church was attracting new people with little or no church background. One Saturday they had a men’s breakfast, and a man came who was a brand new Christian. He hadn’t yet learned the art of cleaning up your act for prayer. And that morning he prayed, “Oh Lord, we need your help. We don’t know what the hell we’re doing.”

Now I don’t really advocate swearing at God in prayer. But I have a hard time believing God was offended by that man’s raw honesty. Too often we think that what we need to do is get our act together first so that God will accept our prayer. But that’s not authentic.

C.S. Lewis said, “We must lay before him what is in us, not what ought to be in us.”

Prayer is being real with God, not projecting some image we hope he will like. That’s really hard to let go of, because when it comes down to it, I want God to be impressed with my prayer. I want him to say, “Wow. That was a good one. I’m going to answer that one for sure.” Somewhere in the back of my mind is this notion that prayer is performance and it has to be a certain standard to succeed. Jesus says that’s rubbish – prayer is coming to God with nothing but our helplessness.

A second sign that things are askew is when **My prayer is centered on me.**

We went up to Fremont this week to walk around and check out the guitars at Dusty Strings. Fremont’s slogan is Delibertus Quirkus – Freedom to be peculiar, and that pretty much sums up the town. If you’re driving down the street, you might miss one of the most audacious attractions. Right in the middle of a median strip in a busy intersection is

a sign that declares itself to be the center of the universe. It tells you how far it is to the Fremont troll, and how far it is to the Milky Way. And across the street you can buy a T-shirt that says you've been to the center of the universe.

But of course, calling yourself the center and actually being the center are two different things. Jesus said those hypocrites were interested in being the center of attention. They wanted the spotlight. They wanted to be thought well of.

We often come to God as if he is revolving around our needs and our concerns are the most important thing in the world. Is my prayer consumed with my own agenda? We're fixated on the answers we want. And the topics tend to be all about us.

Jesus saw that as a trap that limited the results of prayer. The hypocrites wanted attention, so that's what they got. That was their reward in full. But they missed out on more significant answers from God. When we make ourselves the center of the universe, God may graciously still answer our prayers. But will our "reward in full" be much less because we missed out on the heart of prayer that's centered on God?

To move us away from prayer that is a projector and prayer centered on ourselves, Jesus said this:

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.

Susanna Wesley, the mother of John and Charles Wesley, had 17 children, 9 of whom lived to adulthood. She could never get a moment of quiet and peace. So when she wanted to pray, she would sit in her rocking chair and flip her apron up over her face to create that quiet place right in the middle of the chaos.

One author I read said that Jesus was probably talking about a metaphorical interior room, since most of his listeners wouldn't have had the luxury of a private place within their homes. The physical surroundings are not that important – what matters is going to God in the secret places of your heart. Wherever you're praying – at home or in front of other people – the intent is personal communion with God. To say that God sees what is done in secret means two things: It means keeping our focus on our private conversations with God, because they're the priority. But it also means being willing to go with God into that secret part of your heart that's hard to let anyone see. It's peeling off the mask and going deep with God, with no audience but him. That is when prayer comes alive – when we get to the real us and acknowledge what God already sees.

Do my prayers go to that interior place? Or do I keep my conversations with God about surface things. Christ says when we do, the Father rewards us for it. There is much to be gained when we are honest and open before God.

There was another group besides the hypocrites that Jesus singles out as having misconceptions about prayer:

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.

When I think of pagans I think of people mixed up in voodoo and the occult. Actually, I think of the movie *Dragnet*, where PAGAN stood for People Against Goodness and Normalcy. But here, the word is just the general word for all the nations other than Israel. Christ is describing the non-Jewish approach to prayer.

And he says, their approach is to just keep talking. Two traps catch us here. The first is **when my prayer starts going for quantity.**

Do you remember in school having to write papers for English class and coming to the conclusion that if you could just fill up enough pages that you could get a good grade? As if maybe the teacher just weighed each essay to see if it had enough heft to deserve an A.

Sometimes we think of prayer that way. “If I just keep praying and praying, I’ll get my answer.” “I need to pray enough about this so God takes me seriously.” “I need to explain the situation to God more fully, because I don’t think I used the right words the first time.” “If I only pray about this for five minutes, God won’t listen like he would if I prayed for five hours.”

God certainly encourages our persistence in prayer. And I’m sure he appreciates it when we spend more time talking to him instead of less. But our purpose can’t be to cross some threshold of quantity, because that’s just trying to manipulate God to get what we want. And that produces anxiety in prayer, because we’re always wondering, “Have I done enough?”

More prayer doesn’t necessarily translate into better prayer. As the writer of *Ecclesiastes* puts it,

Ecclesiastes 5:2-3

*Do not be quick with your mouth,
do not be hasty in your heart
to utter anything before God.
God is in heaven
and you are on earth,
so let your words be few.
As a dream comes when there are many cares,
so the speech of a fool when there are many words.*

Those of you who feel like you never know what to say when you pray, take heart! You don’t have to say much.

The pagans Jesus was referring to were also relying on repetition – saying the same things over and over. This is more than looking for quantity: **this is prayer finding a formula**. It turns prayer into something magical.

In the movie *Imagine That*, Eddie Murphy plays a stockbroker who is losing his touch until his daughter begins accurately predicting the market. He becomes convinced that the secret is her special blanket that lets her talk to an imaginary princess. So he becomes obsessed with this blanket and performing all these crazy rituals and dances with it to get the pretend people to tell him what he needs to know. He gets so desperate that he ignores his daughter and even steals her blanket from her. Eventually he realizes that what matters is not the magic formula for getting the stock predictions – what's more valuable is his daughter.

I'm sure the directors weren't intending the movie to be one big commentary on prayer, but it is. We reduce prayer to finding the magic formula to get what we want, the secret key to unlocking the universe, and in the process we lose sight of God.

It's ironic that for many people, the Lord's Prayer is one of those often repeated formulas. It gets memorized and said word for word over and over as if that is what God wants. But Jesus was offering this prayer as an antidote to formula. It was intended to be a way out of the box, and yet here we have made it fit with the way our minds want to think: If we say the right words enough times, God will give us what we want.

That's not a big enough view of God, or prayer. Jesus gives us such a bigger picture in the Lord's Prayer that we could spend a whole sermon series on it. We can't possibly do it justice in the time we have remaining. So what I really want to focus our attention on this morning is how exactly this prayer reverses the errors we've been looking at.

It does so right from the very first two words: "Our Father." This immediately forces prayer to become about **relationships**. It's not just "my Father" – it's "our Father". We're in this together. If a danger in prayer is becoming me-centered, then keeping in mind the collective nature of our faith helps me regain perspective. I don't need to be comparing myself to you – we're on the same team. It's not just me approaching God on behalf of myself – I'm remembering that I am one part of a body with many members.

I also have a relationship with God that lets me approach him like a dad instead of some impersonal force. Brennan Manning points out that when a child brings a picture they've drawn to their father, the father doesn't begin to critique their work. Instead he scoops the child up into his lap and delights in the gift they've brought him. There is a tenderness in prayer that we lose when we forget he's a Father.

For some of you, calling God our Father is troubling, because you have had a negative or absent father figure in your life. That title represents nothing but pain for you, and to associate God with that feels wrong. It is a deep tragedy of our world that no doubt saddens God immensely.

The only thing I can say to that is to let God begin to redeem the word Father for you and restore its original intended meaning. How do you do that? George MacDonald said, “You must interpret the word by all that you have missed in life.” All the character qualities you ached for in an earthly father – loving, strong, protecting, encouraging, providing, trustworthy, compassionate – all that can be found in God. So to call him Father is to reclaim the true meaning of the word, not to see him through a distorted human lens.

Besides being about relationships, Christ shows us in his words that prayer is about **reorienting**.

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.*

That whole first half of the prayer is remembering the real center of the universe. Listen, God doesn't need me to ask him for his name to be hallowed – it already is. He doesn't need my permission or blessing to see his kingdom come and his will be done. He'll accomplish that according to his own plans. The statements in these verses don't somehow release God – they realign my heart to his will. They draw me back to what matters most. Father, your name IS holy. Help me to live like it's holy. Your kingdom is coming and has come. Help me to live for your kingdom not my own.

In the grand scheme of things, it doesn't make any difference what anybody around me thinks of my prayer. Me and my prayer are not the hub of the wheel. My needs and wants, my insecurities and inadequacies in prayer all begin to fade when I place my eyes back on God and his kingdom.

The rest of the prayer is mostly about **receiving** from God. Give us our daily bread. Forgive us. Lead us not into temptation. Deliver us from evil. Where the pagan mindset has us trying to manipulate God into giving us something we want, this prayer just helps us open up to accept what God has for us. We are in a constant anxious scramble when we're trying to manipulate God. But seeing prayer as receiving from him is much more restful and peaceful.

At the beginning I mentioned that survey of pastors. One interesting fact about that survey was that the pastors who were most satisfied with their prayer life were the ones who spent less time asking God for things and more time just listening for what he was saying.

This has been one aspect of prayer that I have been slow to understand, but am just now beginning to grasp. Prayer is not a one-way conversation, and I think that is perhaps the biggest fallacy of the way we normally think. It's less about us getting our words right than getting our hearts right.

So what does that look like? Jesus said that his sheep know his voice, and sometimes it's just a matter of slowing down to listen for it. It's usually unmistakable when we stop clamoring long enough to pay attention. More often than not, if we can't hear it, it's because we don't want to. I was talking with Dave Wittenberg the other day (who, by the way, will be bringing the message next Sunday). Dave has been wrestling with the challenges of starting his own business, feeling the pressure to see it succeed. But he said, "I feel like God has just been saying to me 'Be still.'" Not exactly typical business advice, but it sure sounds like God's voice.

I was talking with Drew Levang about his YWAM experience the other night, and he told me some fantastic stories of how he had needed to wait on the Lord in prayer and how God totally spoke to him in incredible ways, right when he needed him to.

God is still in the business of talking to his people when they pray. So as we close, I'd like to lead us in an exercise of listening for God this morning. He already knows before we say anything. He may impress something on your heart this morning, bring a word or Scripture verse to mind, talk to you about a sin or someone you need to make things right with. Or you might not sense him saying anything at all. But the practice of listening for his voice in and of itself has value, because it reminds us that prayer is more about receiving from him than it is informing him.

Take a moment to think about ways you may be wearing a mask before God and putting on your best show. Envision yourself putting that mask aside. Just confess that to him. Ask him for his help in letting that go.

Christ told us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Ask for God to provide for your needs. What are the needs heaviest on your heart? Ask him specifically about those, and wait for him to speak to you.

"Forgive us our debts." What do you need to ask God's forgiveness for this morning? If nothing comes to mind, ask him to speak to you about anything that may need to be confessed. God sees what is down in the most secret places of your heart. Ask him to shine a light on what he's seeing there that maybe even you have been unaware of. Let him talk to you about what you may need to deal with.

"As we forgive our debtors." Let God bring to mind anyone you've had trouble forgiving.

"Lead us not into temptation." Have you been blind to temptations? Are there dangers you're ignoring? Are there areas in your life where you are most needing his leading?

"Deliver us from the evil one." Has the devil got you backed into a corner? Is there an area of your life where he has a hold?