

“Prayer; Learning how to talk to God, Ant Introduction to the Divine Conversation” Matt 6:5-13  
First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City  
November 5, 2023  
Rev Jamie White

Friends, for the next three weeks we’re going to talk about prayer. This morning we begin with the words of Christ from the Sermon on the Mount, from Matthew 6:5-13. Hear the Word of the Lord: (NIV) **“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 others. Truly I tell you, 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. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”** The Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

We are an apple device family. Anyone else? I know lots of folks prefer androids, or google, or alexa. We’re “Siri” people. We have these incredible Apple speakers in our house that will tell us the weather forecast, get us football scores, and play us music. You’ve seen them, I’m sure. Now, as much as possible I like to refer tech set-up to my much savvier young adult children, so all our Siri devices have been set up by the boys. Now, to be clear, as helpful as our boys are with technology, they’re also too clever for their own good. One thing they’ve figured out is how to make Siri play my least favorite song in all the universe, whenever they feel like it. In fact, if anyone says, “Hey Siri Annoy Jamie” this is what happens at my house. (show congregation) They can also do this remotely from their apartments. Yep, they’re hilarious.

But, because the boys set up all our speakers, Siri, seems to really struggle to recognize mine and Dave’s voices. We are terrible at getting Siri to do what we ask. The other day I was asking Siri to set a timer and she literally said to me, “I’m sorry, I don’t recognize your voice. You’ll have to ask the account holder for access.” I am the account holder! Whenever Dave asks Siri to play music, he has to ask so many times that half the time he just gives up. It can be terribly frustrating to do exactly what you’re supposed to do, to say exactly what you’re supposed to say, and still, it just won’t work.

I think prayer can be lot like this for people, frustrating. Have you ever felt like you were saying the right words, but it wasn’t working. You were trying to so hard to do the right things, but prayer just felt frustrating and hard. We’ve all felt that way; yes, even your pastors. Prayer is a practice, that requires effort, energy, time, and most of all, love.

I will tell you right now, that the folks you encounter in this life that have the richest prayer lives, that seem to be able to center down and talk to God in a way that many of us find so

compelling... they didn't get there by accident. They got there by continuing to pray... from spending their energy and time praying, from developing a life practice of talking to the God they love.

For that is what prayer is, talking to God. At its most basic definition, prayer is a divine conversation. We speak to God and God speaks to us. Just like any good relationship or friendship, there is room for both parties to speak and to listen.

That's really all prayer is. I fear we make it too complicated, put too much pressure on what prayer should be. And church is partly responsible for that... we spend careful attention choosing the right words for our liturgy, the precise language for our prayers... and that is all to ensure we cover all that needs to be included. We're motivated by the right thing... but it also has the effect of subtly communicating that prayer ought to sound a certain way, that it must include certain churchy-words, that it needs to be especially eloquent or articulate. I can't tell you how frequently I am in a meeting and when I ask if anyone would like to open us in prayer, everyone's eyes go to the floor and someone will often say, "Oh no, not me. I'm no good at praying."

But this could never be true, for we are all good enough at praying friends... because we are all capable of talking to our God about what it is that's really going on in our hearts and minds. One of my favorite authors—specifically on the subject of prayer—is Richard Foster... and his advice is simply to begin where you really are. **You do not pray what OUGHT to be in you. You pray what's REALLY in you.**

Friends, prayer involves ordinary people bringing ordinary concerns to a loving and compassionate God. There is no pretense in prayer. We do not pretend to be more holy, more pure, or more saintly than we actually are. We do not try to conceal our conflicting and contradictory motives from God—or ourselves. And as Foster says, **"in this posture, we pour out our heart to the God who is greater than our heart and who knows all things. When we pray, genuinely pray, the real condition of our heart is revealed. This is as it should be. This is when God truly begins to work with us. The adventure is just beginning."**

This is what prayer is... just getting into a space that allows for a genuine conversation between you and God, that helps us get in touch with the real condition of our hearts. In our text from Matthew 6 this morning, Jesus is trying to help his disciples understand this.

Right off the bat, we immediately notice Jesus assumes his disciples are praying. Jesus begins verse 5 by saying, **"and when you pray."** Notice, he doesn't say, "and IF you pray." Jesus doesn't need to make a case for prayer as a practice; prayer was just a given for these disciples. But is it still? Is it for you? This text in Matthew frames prayer (and actually fasting and financial giving too) as a spiritual practice that just naturally flows out of a relationship with God. And though Jesus expects that we'll be praying, he wants to make sure we're doing so with the right motives.

And as it turns out, prayer has long been one of the practices that people get wrong, because they easily lose sight of why they're praying. When we pray, we must ask; is the intention of our prayer-life to get noticed by others or noticed by God? To put it another way: do WE want to get attention, or do we want to get to God? Jesus tells us here that it's possible for even a good thing like prayer to be driven by impure motives— a desire for control, or for applause, or for image-management.

In verse 5, Jesus says, "do not be like the hypocrites, standing on the street corners praying for the crowds." The Greek word translated hypocrite here (*hypokritai*) literally means "stage-actor." You may find it interesting to know that throughout Jesus' youth, the Romans were developing a large city named Sephorris, about a mile from Nazareth (where Jesus grew up). As part of the big civic center being built, there was a 4,500-seat amphitheater for the Greco-Roman arts. So, Jesus is being intentional when he compares our ego-driven praying to that of stage-acting, or performing. When we pray for the approval of others, we are like a stage-actor, playing a part, in order to win the applause of the crowd... it isn't genuine, it's what we now call being a hypocrite.

Jesus tells us that a good way to check our hearts on this is secrecy, to move prayer from the street corner to the room or closet. Coach John Wooden wisely said, "*The truest measure of a man is who he is when no one is looking,*" but in the case of prayer, someone is looking; the God with whom we want a relationship. And that this God sees us, is all that should ever matter. You may have noticed that often I will pause a second or two before I pray, both here in worship and in various meetings. I do this to take a second and make sure I am postured toward God, not toward whoever is before me. It's one of the ways that I ensure I'm not praying on the corner, like a stage-actor. Jesus doesn't tell us not to pray in front of others... Jesus tells us to be sure we're not praying for the approval of others. There is a difference.

Friends, if prayer is this divine conversation, naturally flowing out of our relationship with God, well then, it's also not manipulating outcomes. In verses 7-8, Jesus directly challenges the kind of prayer that thinks it can earn a hearing from God, if you just use the right words or formulas. If I just pray long enough, intensely enough, with the right amount of faith, or repetition of words, then God has to answer my prayer. This too is not real prayer— but a false prayer that becomes a formula or technique to try and control God. The point here, again, is clearly not about a relationship, it's about what I want to get out of it. By the way, this is such an anxious way to pray— having to say the right words, and make the right requests, and with the right quality of fervor. Do we really believe God requires a precise formula to listen to us? Real peace comes from trusting that our God knows what it is we most need and loves us.

I'd like to read the first few verses of our text in Eugene Peterson's translation of *The Message* as I find it to be one of the most helpful translations of this particular text. **"And when you come before God, don't turn that into a theatrical production either. All these people making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for fifteen minutes of fame! Do you think God sits in a box seat? Here's**

**what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace. The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They're full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don't fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply."**

Friends, prayer is not intended to be hard, but it is intended to be authentic, genuine. I love this line here from verse 6, **"Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace."** It's about communicating with God as simply and honestly as you can manage.

Friends, if prayer is a struggle for you, I want to challenge you to do it like children this week. Your homework is to keep it as simple and honest as you possibly can. Remember, **You do not pray what OUGHT to be in you. You pray what's REALLY in you.** I want you to find a space where you can be your full and real self, where there is zero temptation to sound impressive, and where you can simply tell God what's on your mind and heart... and then listen to hear what God might say to your soul in return. Later in Matthews gospel, Jesus will remind everyone that "unless you become like the little children, you'll struggle to enter the kingdom of God." (Matt 18:3)

You know, my kids don't come to me sporadically, formally, or anxiously. They don't come to me motivated by what other people might think of them. They come constantly, informally, trustingly, and often annoyingly. They come with easy stuff and hard stuff. They come when they're happy and they come when they're sad. The point is they come to me. They come knowing they need me, knowing that they *lack*, and knowing they just don't know. And sometimes, especially when they were younger, they come just wanting to crawl in my lap and be held. This is what our prayer life should be like friends. Unforced, simple, and born out of love and trust for our God. Oh, that we would come to understand prayer this way.

Let us also come to the table this same way, with what is actually in us. (Communion)