

SLIDE 1

Motive for Prayer
Matthew 6:5-15
September 10, 2023
WVPC

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus advises us to sort out our motives for charitable giving, for prayer, and for fasting. Last week we talked about both giving and fasting, both of which are things that Jesus presumes that we do; he says “when”, not “if”. Jesus pointed out that our motives for giving or fasting are important. If we make a big public deal out of giving or fasting, then our motive is to get lots of praise from the people around us. Not the best motive in the world. But if we give and fast as secretly as possible, so that only God knows that we’re doing those things, then our motive is to please God. Which is a much better motive. If we genuinely are trying to please God, then God is pleased, even if we don’t get every detail right. And then we are blessed by God’s joy and delight.

Today we are going to look at what Jesus has to say about prayer. He does know what he’s talking about! When he was a human being on earth, he prayed a LOT – sometimes all night long. Who else can better teach us about prayer than Jesus? He’s fully God, so he knows what pleases God, and he’s also fully human, so he knows our needs and what we want to pray about. No one else in the history of this planet can teach us as well as Jesus about our motives in prayer, and how to pray.

So the Scripture passage for today is Matthew, Chapter 6, vv 5 -15. Hear now the word of God as it comes to us from the gospel of Matthew.

SLIDE 2- X

“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. ⁶But 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. ⁷And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹“This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,

¹⁰your kingdom come,
your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us today our daily bread.

¹²And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,^[a]
but deliver us from the evil one.^[b]

¹⁴ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

Here ends the reading of God’s holy word- thanks be to God.

We could spend the rest of our lives just reflecting on the Lord’s Prayer, including Jesus’ comments before and after the prayer. I don’t know how many books have been written about it; but I do know that my bookshelves would never be able to hold them all. Which isn’t surprising. Though we may try, we’re never going to understand the full depth of the Lord’s Prayer. And that’s because prayer is about relationship with God. Our relationships with one another are hard enough to understand. Our relationship with God is something that we will never be able to fully understand, because it’s not an equal partnership. We are human creatures on one planet, and we are limited. God is the infinite creator of everything and is unlimited.

So we are going to focus mostly on what Jesus said about prayer, rather than try to analyze the Lord’s Prayer itself. The Lord’s Prayer is not so much something that we understand with our minds. It’s more something we do, together, as a response to God. The Lord’s Prayer is a unifier of all Christians in every time and every place. It’s plural. “OUR Father...give US today...forgive US our debts as WE also have forgiven our debtors... lead US not into temptation, but deliver US from the evil one.” It’s about God, and it’s about us, together. It is the one and only prayer that all Christians in every age and in every place and in every denomination have prayed together for 2000 years. All Orthodox. All Catholics. All Protestants of all varieties. We may argue about translations; but this is the one prayer that unifies us all. To me, that says that the Lord’s Prayer is a miracle, in and of itself, and it’s a great privilege to be able to pray it together every week.

SLIDE Y

Jesus starts off his discussion of prayer by emphasizing what our motives should be, just as in his discussion about charitable giving and fasting which we talked about last week. And just as our motive in giving should be about pleasing God, rather than seeking attention for ourselves – just as our motive in fasting should be about pleasing God, rather than seeking attention for ourselves – so also our motive in praying should be about connecting with God, rather than seeking admiration from our friends, or attention for ourselves. “Oh, look how holy she is, she prays all the time” – NOT! If we want to show off how holy we are, well, Jesus tells us we’ve already received our reward. If what we really want is just to talk with God, well, that’s what God wants as well. And he rewards us with his presence.

So Jesus advises us to pray secretly. The word translated as “room” in English actually means “storage area” in Greek. In Jesus’ day, most houses were very small – about the size of a travel trailer – and families were large. Not a lot of privacy, in other words. But most houses did have a storage area, with a door, where you could keep small animals and tools and storage jars. And that’s where

Jesus advises that we go to pray. It doesn't have to be a designated holy spot. It just has to be private. And, says Jesus, God will reward you. And he should know. Jesus himself usually prayed secretly if he needed extended conversation with God the Father. For example, in Matthew 14:23, Jesus dismisses the crowd and goes up on a mountainside to pray, and he is there alone until shortly before dawn. He modeled what he teaches us to do.

And, Jesus doesn't mean to say that we should ONLY pray alone, in secret. He also endorses group prayer. For example, in Matthew 18, that Jesus says, "Truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." That's the basis for the prayers of the people that we do every Sunday, and the prayers at staff meetings and committee meetings and deacon and Session meetings. Group prayers are fine. They're encouraged. The one kind of prayer that Jesus DOESN'T encourage is, individual prayer in public, in such a way that it's obvious what you're doing. Like if someone were kneeling down at Home Depot on a busy Saturday morning. That would be a bit awkward, wouldn't it? And that's not something that God would reward.

SLIDE Z

Another thing that Jesus tells us about prayer, is that it doesn't have to go on and on, and it doesn't have to be flowery or beautifully worded. Who are we trying to impress when we pray? Other people who might be listening? What kind of motive is that? I think that would fall under the category of, "They have already received their reward," don't you?

Or are we trying to impress God? Really? Do we really think that God is going to be more inclined to grant our prayer if we word it beautifully? Or if we explain all the reasons why he ought to do what we ask? Or do we really think that God listens to the prayer of a pastor more than the prayer of a thief? Remember this is God we're talking about here. God, who knows us far better than we know ourselves. God, who created everything that ever has or ever will be in existence.

Jesus says, "When you pray, do not keep 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." A two-word prayer – "God, help" - is perfectly fine. Yes, God knows what we need, before we ask him, and better than we do. But he wants us to ask him anyway, because it's for our own good. It strengthens our sense of connection to him, every time we turn to him in prayer.

SLIDE A

Jesus also connects forgiveness to prayer. One of the phrases in the Lord's Prayer is, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." That's the one phrase Jesus comments on after he's taught the prayer – no doubt because forgiving others is so hard for us to do. Every single week, when we pray this prayer together, we're reminded that we are supposed to have forgiven those who owe us something. Maybe they owe us an apology. Maybe they owe us money or restitution. It doesn't matter what the issue is – we are expected to forgive others if we want to truly benefit from God's forgiveness. And Jesus does make that very clear. In v. 14 he says, "For if you

forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” It’s a good thing that we can always ask God to help us forgive one another! We may not be able to forgive on our own. But God will be very glad to help us forgive, if we just ask.

What do you personally like best about the Lord’s Prayer? One of the phrases? The language? What I personally like the best about the Lord’s Prayer is that it binds us together with every other Christian who has ever lived and also with every other Christian who currently lives. Even if I pray it as an individual, it reminds me that I am part of the “we” and “us” – part of the “great cloud of witnesses”, as Hebrews 12 puts it.