

# Matthew 6:5-15

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     So we're looking tonight at this passage, Matthew 6, and when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites. Prayer is big, certainly in Edinburgh just now, if you look in the side of many buses, you've got the words try praying.

And try praying is an initiative that's trying to reach people who maybe don't go to church and trying to get them to think about spiritual realities through the medium of prayer. And the stats are certainly showing us that during the COVID-19 epidemic that many people are turning to prayer who never prayed before.

I'm sure many of you know our beloved Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. His father, Stanley, was extremely concerned that Boris was unwell.

And of course, even Stanley admitted that he put up a prayer or said a prayer during his son's illness. Many of us, of course, are drawn to prayer.

But I wonder tonight, what's our own prayer life like? What we have here is Jesus setting before us the Kingdom Manifesto.

[ 1 : 1 3 ]     We have here what's called the Sermon on the Mount. Now, I am sitting in a seat here in my office in Edinburgh. Normally, I'm behind a podium and kind of walking about, eye contact with people, trying to preach.

That's what free church preaching is, isn't it? Standing in a pulpit. And yet, maybe what we're doing just now, sitting down and just perhaps more calmly talking to people, is a little bit nearer to what Jesus said.

Because, you know, Matthew 5, 1. When Jesus saw the crowds, he would up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him and he began to teach them.

So, what we see in the Sermon on the Mount are the values of the Kingdom of God. What it's really like to be a Christian, a manifesto of Christian living, according to what Jesus is saying.

And the values of the Kingdom. Now, the Sermon on the Mount was quite a sermon. Afterwards, we've got these words in chapter 7, verse 28, where it says there that the people were amazed, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law.

[ 2 : 3 4 ]     So, the themes tonight, for example, prayer and fasting, were themes that the local rabbis and the teachers of the law would talk about. But when Jesus spoke, there was something else.

There was a depth. There was an authority to it. And that's what happens when we just preach the Word of God. There's an inherent authority to it. And whoever you have as your new minister, you will want someone who sticks to the Word of God, who follows the contours of Scripture, and who opens up the whole counsel of God, bringing things out of it that are new, bringing things out of it that are old, exhorting us, and sometimes even giving us some wounding from the Word.

But whenever we preach from the Bible, we preach with authority. So, again, by way of introduction, we're talking here about prayer. Prayer, well, what is prayer?

Of course, it's coming before God through the mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ, held by the Holy Spirit. But if you strip prayer down to its most basic level, it is talking to God.

That's what it says here in the passage. It speaks here, When you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father. This morning, I gave a West Wing illustration.

[ 4 : 02 ] Oh, here's another one. When Bartlett wants to talk, maybe to one of his colleagues, and there's a crowd in the room. Often he uses these words, will you give us the room, please?

And everybody exits, apart from Bartlett, maybe Leo, or one of his confidants. And there's just the two of them in the room. That's what prayer is.

When we have the room, when God is with us, he is meeting with us, and we are able to talk to him. There is this conversation going on, and it's an amazing privilege.

And we can talk to God anywhere, as we'll be seeing later on in the passage. And so the big picture here as well is, the Sermon on the Mount, of course, chapter five especially, has been talking about a lot of things are inward and not outward.

So you've got the famous passage, don't you, from 21 onwards. We alluded to it this morning, that if you have hatred inside, you're really committing murder.

[ 5 : 13 ] Again, we've got the passage from chapter 5, 27 onwards, where we have the teaching on adultery. If anyone looks at a woman, it says, lustfully, he has already committed adultery with her in her heart.

So it's talking there about inner things. And that's one of the big marks of the kingdom. It's not just outward sort of boundary markers that mark off what made you a Jewish person or a covenant person.

It's not just the outward boundary markers, but Jesus is coming with a radical new agenda, and he's saying there are inner things to be changed. But lest we think it's all inner, he's moving on in chapter six.

He's saying, yes, there are outer things as well, praying and fasting, but although these are outer things, they have to be done as it were, we have to articulate them or we have to do them before the face of God.

He's saying that it's very important that we do these things ultimately in secret. Verse one, be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them.

[ 6 : 38 ] A few weeks ago, we saw the president of the United States taking his entourage over to the walls of St. John's Church in DC, and he had a Bible there, and it was a photo opportunity.

We don't use the Bible as a photo opportunity. We don't pray before men. So what can we say about prayer tonight? Just very briefly, just a few thoughts as we find them in this passage.

I think the very first thing I'm saying is it's expected, that it's a mark of someone who is a Christian.

You know, often we'll say, well, it's what we do. It's what we do as a family. It's what we do as an organization. It's part of our culture.

It's expected. So we get that in the passage, just in a very natural way. Verse five, for example, and when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites.

[ 7 : 41 ] Verses 16, when you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do. And so the language is written there just almost as it's a normal part of life.

This is what we do. Prayer then is, shall we say, it's natural to a Christian. It's natural just to want to talk to God, to communicate to him.

There's a paradox because there's also an unnatural element because it's a battle. We would do many other things apart from pray. We would read a magazine.

We read a newspaper. We listen to a podcast. Even in terms of Christian things, sometimes we would rather read the Bible. We would go to a sermon. We would even witness rather than spend time with God in prayer.

Remember when the apostle Paul had become a Christian. The mark that he had become a Christian was, go to that place and behold, he prays. Now, Paul prayed, I'm sure, many times when he was Saul of Tarsus.

[ 8 : 53 ] But when he became a Christian, there was a new intimacy. There was a new nearness. It is expected of us. It is a fundamental mark of being a believer.

When we have passed from death unto life, it is something that shows us that we are indeed converted. I read a quote the other day.

In fact, I wrote it down from Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones. He said, there is nothing that tells the truth about Christian people so much as our prayer life. Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer.

So I'm certainly glad a giant like Martin Lloyd-Jones said that he find prayer difficult in his own life. I said prayer is natural.

The key to that naturalness is again found in the Bible. If you look at chapter verse 6, it says, close the door and pray to your father who is unseen.

[ 9 : 54 ] Then your father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. So we have the word father there mentioned twice in one verse. You have it again in verse 8 for your father knows what you need even before you ask him.

We have it in verse 9, our father in heaven, the famous introduction to the Lord's Prayer. We have it twice in verse 14 and we have it in verse 15 and in verse 18.

So the key to prayer is not technique. Tonight it's not a technique, you know, how to pray, find a quiet place, go on your knees, spend a few minutes before you speak, just get your mind into meditative good condition.

No, the key to good prayer is a relationship that we see God as a father. That's how we're saying here that it's expected.

it is expected of that relationship that we have with our father. I know someone extremely well who had a fairly traumatic upbringing in many levels and one of the things that happened was at the age of 14 this person's father just exited the house.

[ 11 : 17 ] There was a breakup in the marriage and the father went and the mother began to brief the children against the father. The father sent money, the children didn't receive it.

The father sent lectures, the children didn't receive them. And for years and years, it was about eight years that the father was estranged from the children.

They didn't see him, they didn't hear of him. And then one of the children when they were older said, I want to see my dad. And they told me that during that first meeting, it was just amazing.

There was just a sense of communion. The broken fellowship was restored again as they were united together and all of it fatherhood meant.

And they couldn't stop talking for about three hours just catching up. It's natural if we have that view of God as our father.

[ 12 : 23 ] You know, in some traditions, there's almost an unwillingness to see God as our father. He is seen as remote. He is seen as distant. He is seen as altogether not like us.

And a lot of that is true. He's not like us. But he is a father who cares for us. So if you get the fatherhood right, if you get your relationship with God right, then prayer will be far more natural.

It will flow, it will come in a much easier and indeed a more natural way. Again, notice in the passage, we've got the eight times the word father is used.

There's another interesting word you see in verse six, you see in verse 16, and you see again in verse 18. And that's the word reward. Then your father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Verse 16, about fasting, it's a negative there, those who show off will receive their reward in full. But then verse 18, the positive again, your father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

[ 13 : 37 ] What is the reward? The reward is God himself. Not what we get from God, but the reward is the intimacy of the relationship.

The Pharisees, verse five, love to pray. They love to pray standing, but the Christian prays because he loves. So the Pharisees love to pray, but the believer prays because they love.

That's why there's a contrast in verse one, outward, formal prayers, righteousness before men have no reward at all, but to be right with God, to be cared for.

Discipline and devotion are twins. That's an important thing. Discipline and devotion are twins because as we grow in that devotion to him, so discipline will come.

and so what are we saying here about prayer? It's expected. The second thing we notice about prayer is it's hidden. You hide your prayer line.

[ 14 : 51 ] Nobody knows about your prayer line. I think that's clear, isn't it? Verse six, when you pray, go into your room, close the door.

Then your father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. Wasn't that then? Meme, is that what you call them in social media?

a few weeks ago, there was a bit of a fad when you would put your child in the high chair, your baby, and you would leave some sweets and mummy would say, don't take any sweets.

Now, the mum would put the camera and hide the camera on her phone. And of course, children aren't into delayed gratification. I'm not into delayed gratification.

I would have eaten a sweetie. But when the room's quiet and there's nobody there, the children would all, all of them, I think, took the sweetie. And when they come back, some of them admitted it and some of them wouldn't.

[ 15 : 57 ] We saw through the camera what was done in the room in private. And our prayer is called here to be private. It's not something that we talk about.

It's just something that we do. we don't discuss our private prayer life with other people. It's something that we just calculate in a relationship with God.

He applies it here in fasting. You know, if you fast in a fairly serious way, it could have physical effects. Jesus is saying, whatever you do, hide that.

When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face so that it will not be obvious to others. Don't make a big display of it. Don't tell everybody you're fasting so that the whole world knows about it.

Hide it. Don't go around with a glum face. It's to be a thing of joy. At least we appear as if we're doing okay, we don't adopt a martyr's complex.

[ 17 : 08 ] So you see these two men in the passage, don't you, in Matthew 6. One is in the synagogue, the other one is in the room. One is with the audience of many, one is with the audience of one.

The father is in the room. John Stott has written a great commentary on the Sermon on the Mount called Christian Counterculture.

And he argues that the room in verse 6 from a Greek scholar, he argues that the room was the treasure store room that people went into to get a site or to gain treasures.

And so that in a sense is what prayer is. You're coming to a king, large petitions with you bring. And because prayer is private, prayer cannot be stopped.

Prayer can be a classic, you know, devotions, some folk are really disciplined, devotions, morning, evening, same time, set your clock to it.

[ 18 : 15 ] Other folk like to pray in buildings, but prayer cannot be stopped. During lockdown, my choice of reading has been a little bit bizarre.

I'm reading Albert Camus' book of the plague. That cheers you up. I also read Terry Waite's book, Taken on Trust, about how he was captured in house arrest by Hezbollah.

He was four years in a room without much natural light, very little external stimuli. But he said there that in spite of it all, he could still pray.

our prayer cannot be stopped. Prayer may be on a quiet walk. Prayer may be in the tears in the pillow.

Prayer is something that we do and sometimes the deepest prayers are in the most difficult situations. When I was in pastoral ministry, I remember a person telling me that they were in an abusive situation in a marriage and they locked themselves in the bathroom and their partner was hammering at the door, battering at the door in a very violent way.

[ 19 : 37 ] And the person told me that at that moment they just got on their knees and prayed to God. And they said it was a paradoxical situation because as the battering and the intensity increased, there was a calm as this person met privately, secretly.

You see, it was the man, that man battering the door, that big, strong man against that little woman. He did not know that that woman on her own in prayer was in a room full of angels and that the power that she had access to at that moment was a million times more than what the boy had.

Yeah, you can pray even in that situation. Yes, it's good to have a regular and intentional prayer. That's an idea that we have here in spiritual discipline also.

prayer is what we do. It's natural. Prayer is private. But the third thing we notice here is that prayer is done in faith.

Then your father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. And then it says there that our father, verse 8, knows what we need before we ask him.

[ 21 : 09 ] Prayer is done in faith. We get that through perhaps one of the more negative things in the passage. The negative bit there is when it says in verse 7, and when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of our many words.

When we pray, we do it in faith. We speak to God and we leave it. The pagans just went on and on and on.

They used many words. They used really complicated words. Sometimes in prayer, less is more. And just as in real life, well, this is real life, just in our life rather, there's nothing more annoying than someone who goes on and on and on and on thinking that by that, grinding away with mere empty words because their words are voluminous that they will get their way.

No, we simply say it and leave it with God. We take it to the Lord in prayer. He knows what we need.

The main beneficiary in prayer is us. God doesn't need us. He doesn't need our prayer. Prayer doesn't feed the ego of God.

[ 22 : 38 ] Of course, there are mysteries. Even that verse there in verse eight, your father knows what you need even before you ask him.

I'm going to let you into a wee secret here about fatherhood and now I'm in a new phase, now grandfatherhood. the secret is this, that we love when our children ask us for things.

What a privilege it is to hear them. What a privilege it is just to hear them come to you for help, for resources, for advice, because that is just what we do.

We love to hear that. So what Jesus is saying here is verbosity. We don't need to go on and on. Remember that many of the great prayers of the Bible were short.

The prayer for salvation, Lord, for mercy to me, a sinner. The prayer of the man whose daughter was unwell, Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.

[ 23 : 50 ] The dying thief, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And of course, one of the last prayers in the Bible, of all Maranatha, even so come, Lord Jesus.

That's one of the things we would love to see at Bon Accord. We would love to see in the culture of many of our churches. It's a culture of prayer, Matthew 6 prayer.

Just as in mission, the key is not to get churches, more missional, that's true, but the primary key is to get people, us, talking about Jesus.

So it is in terms of church prayer culture, to get us all meeting God in that private way. Now the fourth thing and final thing, and that will be very brief here, is that prayer is structured.

He goes on to teach us the Lord's prayer. Now, let me get this right. Sometimes prayer is in a butt structure, it's a groaning which cannot be uttered, as Paul says in Romans.

[ 25 : 06 ] Sometimes it's a cry, sometimes it's an unarticulated scream from the very depths of our being. But Jesus is talking here about times when we have an appointment with God and we meet with God and we just go through a structure.

Now the structure of the Lord's prayer is very simple. Verse 9 to verse 10 is about God hallowing his name, thinking about him, and then it's a focus on the wider world.

So that always begins with God. A more famous structure is the acronym acts, adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, as we come before God and as we meet with him.

This evening then, it's been such a pleasure being with you just for these short moments, almost this evening, meditation as we meet with God.

Read the passage again in private, in your own personal devotions. And maybe if you find prayer difficult, just go to the Lord Jesus as the disciples went and say, Lord, teach us to pray.

[ 26 : 32 ] Let's come before God now and let's meet with him in prayer. Our Lord, we thank you for this evening. we ask that you would teach us to pray, that we would have that intimacy as a child before a father, with that social ease and yet reverence and respect.

God create in us a desire to pray with you. Bless us now. Amen.