

“This Is How You Should Pray,” Matthew 6:5-15 (First Sunday after Epiphany, January 7, 2018)

<sup>5</sup>“And 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. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup>But 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.

<sup>7</sup>“And 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. <sup>8</sup>Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. <sup>9</sup>Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. <sup>10</sup>Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup>Give us this day our daily bread, <sup>12</sup>and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup>And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

<sup>14</sup>“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, <sup>15</sup>but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

## PRAY

In one month, February 2-3, Paul Miller is coming to Oxford. He is the author of the book *A Praying Life*; it is the single most helpful book on prayer I’ve ever read. I am so excited and thankful that he is coming.

Every January I like to do a short, topical sermon series. It’s usually the only time of the year we are not teaching straight through some part of the Bible on a Sunday morning. Since Paul Miller is coming and hopefully to encourage you to be a part of the seminar (you can register for it on our website), I thought I’d teach this Sunday and next Sunday on the subject of prayer.

Ephesians 6:18 says we are to: “[Pray] at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints ...” I like how the old NIV puts the last part: “With this in mind, be alert and *always keep on praying* for all the saints.” And in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 Paul says we are to “pray without ceasing.”

Those verses bothered me for years. How in the world can someone pray “*at all times* in the Spirit,” “*always keep on praying* for all the saints,” and “pray without ceasing”? That seems impossible.

It is impossible if you define “prayer” in those verses as the formal, head-bowed, eyes-closed, on your knees kind of praying you do in your quiet time. That can’t only be what Paul was talking about because we know from the Bible he did other things besides that in his life – he preached, he had conversations, he worked, he wrote, slept, ate. He did not only pray.

My argument will be that the kind of praying Paul tells Christians to do in those verses is a combination of meditation on God’s Word (which, Lord willing, we’ll talk about next week) and what I’ll call speaking prayer, where we ask God for or tell God various things (which we will cover today).

The dominant picture in the Bible for prayer is that of a conversation with God, and it helps me to think of our meditation on the Scriptures as God speaking to us and our speaking prayers as us talking back to God. The line between the two is always so clear and bright, and you may be doing one form of prayer one instant and the other the next, but put them together and I think you have a chance to do what Paul assumed Christians would be doing until the Lord returns: pray without ceasing.

Our text for today is the Lord's Prayer, from Matthew 6, and there is no better place in the Bible to learn how to do speaking prayer than this one because this is the place where Jesus said, "This is how you should pray." Therefore, we're going to be really practical this morning. If we are going to pray the way Jesus tells us to pray, it involves realizing, trusting, and longing.

First, realizing. Matthew 6:7-8: "And 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." The ancient world in which Jesus lived and taught was full of pagan gods. These would have been the gods the Gentiles in verse 7 were praying to. For example, in the ancient, Greco-Roman world, you had the god of fertility, Demeter. If you wanted to have a bumper crop at your farm, or if you wanted your cows to birth new calves, or if you wanted your wife to have more children, you'd go to the temple of Demeter closest to you, you'd offer your sacrifices and pray your prayers and see what he would do.

If your love life wasn't what you wanted it to be, you'd go to the temple of the goddess of love, Aphrodite, and you'd offer your sacrifices and pray your prayers and see what she would do. Sometimes help was there for you in the temple itself. The temple of Aphrodite in ancient Corinth had a thousand prostitutes on staff to help the worshipers with their desires.

Whatever area of life you needed help with, the pagan pantheon had a god for you. One of the keys to pagan worship was repetition. The more temples you went to (because sometimes the territory of the gods overlapped – there is overlap between the domains of love and fertility – one often leads to the other), and the more prayers you offered at the temples, the better your chance of getting the answer you want. So you'd go to these temples and find all the worshippers saying the same things over and over and over again – they would heap up empty phrases. Jesus says not to do that – when you pray to your Father in heaven, you only need to ask once, because he knows what you need before you ask him.

At first glance, I admit, it's hard to see the application of these verses to us today because after all there are no pagan temples in Oxford, Mississippi. It's hard to see how this teaching applies to us ***until you realize*** a couple of things: *first, everyone prays*. You can't get away from it. You've heard the expression, "There are no atheists in foxholes." In times of stress, no matter what you say you believe about God, you pray. Last year *The New Yorker* had an article on Bernie Sanders, and they also interviewed his wife, Jane. And she said that during the primary, when millions of people were supporting Bernie and it looked like he might be the Democratic nominee, even though she didn't believe in God, Jane started to pray. She said, "I'm a secular person, but during the campaign every night I would pray – just 'Thank you, thank you, thank

you.”

Everyone already prays, but I don't just mean that people pray to a God they don't think exists. I'm talking about Christians. You get around a group of Christians, and when the topic of prayer comes up everyone starts saying, "Oh, I know, I don't pray enough. I don't spend enough time in prayer." We all know what is meant when we hear that. And I wouldn't trust a Christian who said, "My prayer life is great – if anything, I pray too much." No one says that.

But, when it comes to prayer, the question really isn't whether or not you pray enough, because *we already pray a lot*. We just don't typically think of what we are doing *as prayer*. The second thing you need to realize to apply verse seven to our day is *that the pagan babbling and empty phrases and vain repetitions that filled those pagan temples in antiquity almost perfectly match the inner monologue going on in our hearts and minds, all the time*.

What do I mean? You are going about your day, it's like any other day, and then something bad happens or you get some bad news – about your career, your family, your health, your money, whatever. And all of the sudden, you start to **worry**. You think, "Oh no – this has happened. And if this has happened, then this might happen. Oh, no, and then *this* might happen. Then this other thing might happen. And if it does, I just won't be able to take it. I won't be able to handle that!" You know what I'm talking about.

Friends, on a heart level, that inner monologue of worry is almost identical to what the Bible calls prayer. It really *is* prayer. It just differs from the Lord's Prayer in two ways: *first, it's repetitive*. If you are a worrier, you can't turn it off, can you? You just keep on worrying. Over and over again, you mull the same concerns. You toss and turn in bed because you can't stop thinking about it. And if you could put a microphone in your heart, and connect it to a speaker outside your body, the worries coming out of your heart would sound just like the prayers in those pagan temples in the ancient world ... except the prayers would be in English, not Greek.

And of course the big way our inner worries differ from the Lord's prayer is *to whom they are addressed*. To whom are you directing these worries that are eating you up? You're not addressing them to God – who then? Maybe yourself? Or maybe you're praying without realizing it to a false god. Several times in the New Testament we read about spiritual rulers and authorities, the powers of this dark world, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Maybe, in this fallen world, without consciously meaning to, we naturally direct our worries to them instead of the God of heaven. It wouldn't have crossed Adam's mind in the Garden of Eden, in Paradise and without sin to do so, burdened by the fall as we are, that's what we do.

If, for example, you are worried to death because a loved one is traveling, and you just can't let it go, you're on pins and needles until they make it home, then at a heart level I don't know what you're doing differently from someone in ancient Greece going to the temple of Poseidon and offering repeated prayers in the hope that it will bring their child safely home over the sea.

Jesus in Matthew 6 shows us that we are already praying; we just need to realize it. But when we do, it's good news. We tend to think of our prayer life as something we need to do in addition to our so-called "real lives." We think that somehow we've got to shoehorn prayer into

our day on top of everything else we have to do, and it exhausts us just thinking about it. I remember reading years ago that Martin Luther once said, “I find that I can’t do anything unless I spend three hours a day in prayer.” It turns out Martin Luther probably didn’t say that, but still it was just about the most discouraging thing I’d read in my life to that point. I could no more fly to the moon than pray three hours each day, on my knees, eyes closed.

But when you realize that you’re already doing a lot of praying (even though it’s wrong in some important ways), it’s liberating. Because then the task is not so much to carve out more time in your day to pray, but instead, by God’s grace, to change the way you are already praying.

Paul Miller: “The quest for a contemplative life [where you spend hours by yourself in prayer] can actually be self-absorbed, focused on my quiet and me. If we love people and have the power to help, then we are going to be busy. Learning to pray does not offer us a less busy life; it offers us a less busy heart. In the midst of outer busyness we can develop inner quiet. Because we are less hectic on the inside, we have a greater capacity to love ... and thus to be busy, which in turn drives us even more into a life of prayer.” *A Praying Life*, 23.

Once we realize we are already praying, what kind of changes do we need to make to our prayers? Second, trusting. And now we get to the text of the Lord’s Prayer itself. The Lord’s Prayer is not a magic formula Jesus gave us to recite. Nor does it teach that we must legalistically follow a certain order in our prayers. Rather, the Lord’s Prayer is a guide to show us where to focus our energies when we pray.

Matthew 6:11-15: “Give us this day our daily bread,<sup>12</sup> and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.<sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.<sup>14</sup> For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,<sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

I’ll summarize the Lord’s Prayer like this: first, Jesus is telling his people to *trust God with their fears*. That’s verse 11: “Give us this day our daily bread.” The Greek behind that verse is very unusual. It literally means “give us tomorrow’s bread today,” or “let us know today how we are going to be able to eat tomorrow.” In the ancient world, that was a common concern. In our land of prosperity, it’s much rarer for us to wonder where tomorrow’s breakfast will come from, though there have been a few times in our marriage where Mimi and I were close.

We may not be worried about tomorrow’s bread, but all of us know what it’s like to wonder how we are going to pay the next month’s rent, or car payment, or credit card bill. Many of us have gotten to the checkout at Wal-Mart and had to put stuff back because we didn’t have enough to money to pay for everything in the cart.

Your money worries may be your own fault (because you’ve spent too much on stuff you don’t need) but that doesn’t make your worries any less real, and everyone has them, no matter how much money or how little you actually have.

In the Lord’s Prayer Jesus says that rather than worrying yourself to death over your fears, *trust God with them*. How? **When you begin to worry about tomorrow’s bread, trust God just**

**enough to consciously turn those worries into prayers directed to your Father in heaven who cares for you.** “[D]o not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”  
Philippians 4:6-7.

It doesn't take a lot of trust in God to do this – *just enough* that when you feel worry coming on, you take a little bit of time and a little bit of energy to consciously form a prayer addressed to God in the name of Jesus about this source of worry. *Use your worries as a prompt to pray.*

In fact, you can take virtually every emotional response you have in your life and use it as a prompt, as a reminder, to pray. If you're worried, remember to pray over the source of the worry. If you're feeling lust, remember to pray for strength to resist temptation. If you're happy over some good news, remember to pray a prayer of thanksgiving to God. If you're tired, remember to pray for strength to finish the task. If you're outside and struck by the beauty of creation, like the super moon we had last week, remember to adore God for the glories of the works of his hand.

Praying the Lord's prayer means *trusting God with your fears and, second, trusting God with your anger.* Matthew 6:12-15: “[F]orgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> 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, <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

A lot of commentators have wondered why Jesus talks about forgiveness in verse 12, then talks about temptation in verse 13, only to return back to the topic of forgiveness in verses 14-15.

Why does Jesus do that? Because Jesus is saying that *one of the greatest temptations you'll experience is the temptation to refuse to forgive the people who've wronged you and hold onto your anger.*

If you've been really hurt by someone (and I know some of you have been terribly hurt by other people), I do not want to minimize that. And it's perfectly natural to want to see some kind of justice done to the wrongdoer. *But holding onto your anger will only ultimately hurt you.* You don't forgive the people who hurt you for their benefit; you forgive for your benefit, to protect yourself from the danger that comes from holding onto anger.

Hebrews 12:15: “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled...” Anger, held onto long enough, turns into a demonic, Satanic-fueled bitterness, that will ultimately destroy you. The Bible tells us that when we are angry because we've been wronged, we need to go and carefully confront the person who hurt us. If that doesn't work, we need to go to Matthew 18 and follow the procedures Jesus set forth there. But above all else we are taught to forgive. Anger in your life is a prompt to go to the last petition of the Lord's Prayer and say, “God, I'm trusting you with my anger. Please don't let me succumb to the temptation to be bitter; help me to forgive.”

One last thing under this point: *trust God to be audience enough for your prayers*. “And 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. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.” Matthew 6:5.

Jesus is not prohibiting public prayers. If he were, the apostles totally missed that teaching because the book of Acts is full of Peter and Paul praying in public. But he saying it can be dangerous, because Jesus knows we’ll experience the temptation to pray with *the people in front of us in mind, not God*. People in positions of authority, like pastors, struggle with this. We are tempted to pray primarily to sound spiritually, wise, and eloquent in front of our people. Jesus says that kind of praying is an offense to him.

But it’s not just pastors that are tempted to use prayers for our benefit. I had a coach growing up who would always lead the team in prayer after games. I’m sure a lot of parents saw that and thought, “That’s great – the coach is praying with the team.” But they didn’t hear those prayers. He would close his eyes and bow his head and pray, but he wasn’t talking to God. Instead, he’d use that time to berate us for how badly we played or for our lack of effort. He would “pray” about how he was going to punish us in practice the next day. It was, as you might expect, infuriating to sit there and have to listen to it.

Jesus tells us to trust that God is the only audience you need to worry about when you pray in public. You’re talking to him, no one else. Public prayer is good so long as you focus on two goals: first, to gather everyone together to pray in a united fashion about certain things and, second, to teach people by example how to pray to their Father in heaven. You learn to pray, after all, by listening to other people pray.

The Lord’s Prayer teaches us about realizing, trusting, and, third, longing. Matthew 6:9-10: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. <sup>10</sup>Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Here’s the question everyone who claims to be a Christian must answer for themselves before they can really pray is: am I desperate, above all else, for God’s will to be done in this world, or my will to be done?

Because of sin, our thoughts will naturally revolve around us. We want our lives to be easier and more comfortable. We all want people to notice us and take an interest in us and give us their attention. We want to people to put our needs and desires ahead of theirs, and we resent and we get jealous of anyone who steals the attention we think is due us. Our default mode is to work and strive so that our will is done in our lives, because that’s what sin has done to our hearts.

*You can’t change your heart, but you see God can, you’ll pray*. Paul Miller in *A Praying Life* writes, “The great struggle of my life is not trying to discern God’s will; it is trying to discern and then disown my will. Once I see that, then prayer flows. I have to be praying because I am no longer in charge.”

Then a little later in the book, Paul Miller includes a paper one his daughters, Emily, wrote while she was in college. I'm going to quote it at length because I think it beautifully describes what God has to do before you can long for his will to be done in your life, and then begin to pray.

“Every Thursday morning during high school I had jazz band practice. One of these mornings I was running late. I had to be out of the house by 7:15 and the clock read 7:21. My dad was sitting in the car waiting for me, so I grabbed my mascara and ran out the door ... I sat in the front seat and complained the whole way, saying that I didn't want to be in band, even though it was my idea. I flipped down the cover of the mirror on the visor, in order to put on my mascara. But the flap kept popping back up, concealing the mirror. After about 3 times of it popping back up, I pushed the flap down so hard, it broke. My dad began to talk to me about my attitude. As we pulled up to the two glass doors of school, I got out of the car in a huff and shut the door, without a good-bye or a thank you.

“I could try to justify my ways, but the real issue was my heart. I was bitter that my sister Kim, who has autism, seemed to receive more attention than me. I was insecure at school. I didn't have the right clothes; I didn't have the right hair; and I was tired of not fitting in. Maybe it was my insecurities that drove me to disrespect my dad by critiquing him day in and day out. But the main reason was I did not have the love of Jesus in me.

“I decided at the end of my senior year to take a year off between high school and college and work in an orphanage in Guatemala. During that year, God showed me areas of my life where I had put up walls, places where I didn't want God[’s will].

“One day, I was sitting in the guest dining room of the orphanage, talking with a volunteer who had come down for a few weeks. I decided to show her pictures of my family. My dad has a blog on his work website, and I knew that he had pictures there ... As I read the comments below the pictures, written by my dad, I became so overwhelmed with the love of my father. The person next to me must have thought I was crazy as tears streaked down my face. I remembered all the times I yelled at him for his loud chewing, the times I told him he didn't love me, the times I would stomp out of a room ... through most of my teenage years ... As I sat at the table, gazing at the computer screen in front of me, my thoughts came to God ... [and] to all the times I had ignored God, in my relationships with other people, in sports, in music, all areas of my life. When times were good, I ignored God, but when times were hard, I blamed God. But, nothing that I did separated me from the love of Christ. ‘But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us’ (Romans 5:8). I, completely underserving, received the greatest gift of all, eternal life, because of God's love and his grace upon me.

“I have the love of a father. My earthly father showed me through a simple web page that it isn't what I do that makes him love me. He loves me because I am his daughter. My disrespect didn't push his love away from me. For me, this was a small picture of the love that my heavenly Father has for me. I will never fully comprehend how I can be loved so much, when my heart is often so ugly and unlovable.” *A Praying Life*, 175-76.

Obviously it won't take the same form in all our lives, but when what happened to Emily happens to you, when you see your sin and you begin to see the depth of the love God has for

you in Jesus, you will long for his will, not yours, to be done. You will be so sick of your self-will and you will pray. You will pray, you will change, you will find joy and peace, and you'll be salt and light in the world around you. Why? Because God will have used your prayers to make you like Jesus. AMEN.