

**Reading:** Matthew 6:1-18

**Theme:** Prayer Matters!

In this section of the sermon on the Mount the Lord Jesus is teaching His disciples the right practices and motives for their religious activities and duties. We noted last week the arena about giving to the needy. In v5-15 Jesus draws our attention to the arena of prayer. It is taken for granted by the Lord Jesus that His people will pray (v5, 6, 7, & 9). This is a good starting point. Do we pray or just say prayers? Christ's followers should pray, just as a new born child should begin to breathe. One writer said "*If prayerless then graceless.*" If we are a child of God, following the Lord Jesus, then the desire to pray will be there to a lesser or, hopefully, greater extent.

In these verses Jesus illustrates the principle of v1 - of being careful not to do things merely for show to impress other people and He shows us the dangers we can fall into even in this whole area of prayer. In this section Jesus exposes the practice of the Pharisees, of the Jewish hypocrites of His day, but we are not to leave it there. This is also a warning to us, so that we learn that we can lapse into such things. These verses are pointed and prodding verses - pointed at us and are to search and prod us, to unsettle us so that we do not rest content in any hypocritical ways or motives, especially in the area of prayer. I want us to deal with v5-8 this morning and next time begin to start looking at the Lord's prayer. I want us to note 2 things from these verses:

### **1. Prattling Publicity Praying.**

In these verses Jesus warns of wrong ways of praying and it is so easy to fall into these wrong ways ourselves. We are not to think that we would never do them, but realise we can lapse, slide and wander into such. We are to learn what the principles of wrong

praying are, then examine our lives to see if they are present in our attitudes and actions.

Jesus warns of publicity in prayer in v5. Don't mistake this as inferring that praying in public, in a prayer meeting or in a meeting is wrong. The Bible never condemns public prayer and we have examples of it throughout Scripture - both by individuals and groups praying in public. What the Lord Jesus is warning of here is praying for publicity - publicising self, showing what we are doing, advertising the fact of our prayerfulness. The hypocrites used in the illustration loved to pray. They did not love prayer for its own sake, or view it as an honour, but they loved prayer as it gave them an opportunity to parade self, to get themselves noticed.

The Lord Jesus says these ones prayed wherever, not out of a divine compulsion, but to be seen by men - to be noticed, seen, admired, applauded and to be known as a person of prayer and so get a reputation of being spiritual, being godly. They forgot God is not fooled by such a show, by such a publicity stunt. The Lord knew they are concerned for self, self-honour and self-publicity.

**We are to be careful** when we pray in public - in a prayer meeting, in leading a service, in whatever situation, that we are not praying with an eye to what people will think of us and so pray in such a way that people will be impressed by our words, phrases, Scripture references, passion and the like. If we do, then our praying is subtly becoming hypocritical. We may not do this openly, but self can creep into our motives, if not into our manner of praying. CHS ends his comments on v5 with a short prayer *“Lord, let me never be so profane as to pray to Thee with the intent of getting praise to myself.”*

This may not necessarily include our times of public prayer, as we can also subtly let people know how great a person we are in prayer, by making constant references to our long prayer times etc. We can be affected by self and selfish ends, to desire publicity for self even in this matter of prayer. The hypocrite in us all lies closer to the surface than we care to imagine or admit!

The ones in Jesus' illustration also prayed in a wrong way because they imagined God was swayed and impressed by their babbling, their prattling on in an unthinking way, as if they had to explain everything in detail and the answers they required. Some pagans may have used repetitions of set prayers to impress their gods, but God's children do not need to do that. Sadly, for so many that's all that prayer is. They use the repetition of a set formula so as to charm, to earn an answer. It's used like a magic spell. CHS *"To repeat a form of prayer a very large number of times has always seemed to the ignorantly religious to be a praiseworthy thing; but assuredly it is not so. It is a mere exercise of the memory, and of the organs of noisemaking; and it is absurd to imagine that such a parrot exercise can be pleasing to the living God."*

The Lord Jesus says that babbling and prattling on like the pagans, did them no good – so believers are not to follow them. Sadly, we can fall into this error. Some do so by repeating set prayers in an **unthinking mindless way**. Others by thinking that long prayers are more spiritual, powerful and better than shorter prayers! Regrettably, we who lead in services can give that impression in public praying, and it may even spill over into our private praying. Those who lead in public prayer must be careful in our praying style, even length of time we pray, for we are to lead, encourage and take others on with us in prayer and not to leave them longing to hear the 'Amen'!

We are not to go for nice forms, long times in prayer. That said, long prayers are not wrong, but long prayers in order to impress self, others or God are! While we do not count beads and say our prayers, we can fall into the trap of being dominated by having fixed and set times of prayer and have the attitude or feeling we must pray for certain lengths of time, must say our prayers in the morning etc. We can become taken up with the time and not the way, motivation and manner of our prayers. God never measures the length of our prayers, but the weight, the matter and motive of our prayers.

We are not to fool or delude ourselves by praying for a long time, repeating in a mindless way words and phrases. We, as members of Christ's kingdom, are not to lapse into the ways of the hypocrites and pagan religions. We need to note this as those who are born-again of God's Spirit, living to please Him, yet we can be in danger of doing such things. This should shock and alarm us. It also teaches us about our enemy Satan and sin, that he can spoil even our highest exercises and duties, he would get in and make such things worthless and trite. When we pray we should want to enter into heaven to the throne of God and yet we can drag sin and self in there! The Lord Jesus when He was in prayer in the wilderness was attacked and tempted by the devil. The devil will do the same to us in countless subtle ways. We are to be warned so that we will not pray in a wrong way. That is just something of praying in the wrong way by prattling publicity praying, but now we see:

## **2. Private Personal Praying.**

The Lord Jesus instructs us on private personal praying. He knows we need help, guidance and encouragement, so He teaches us of prayer and later gives us a pattern prayer in which to pray (v9-13). The Lord Jesus expects that we pray in private (v6). Some take

this literally and follow the letter of the words in a cold ritualistic manner and never pray in a church meeting of any kind. Yet they have problems with Jesus' example as often He prayed with others around Him - as AV of Luke 9:18 says "*it came to pass, as He was alone praying, His disciples were with Him*"!

What Jesus means here is that in our approach to God we have to remove ourselves from distractions that would hinder our praying. The example of going into a private room is used, but we can be distracted there by our thoughts, desires, motives, mobiles, emails etc. One writer I read online said that he would leave his mobile behind, go for a walk and pray as he walked. I know Bill Dyer would go off to a local wood as he was praying through his sermon material and church matters, for he would not be disturbed by the phone or things going on in the house. The trouble was it was also a wood where church members used to like to go for a walk and he'd often end up talking with them. When Jesus refers to a private, inner room He illustrates that we are to shut out other people from our thoughts, attention, but we must also shut out ourselves from the centre of our attention so that we can be alone in prayer with God and not seek to impress others or ourselves!

The emphasis is not so much on the time and place, but on the motives and attitude of mind and heart. It is not the secrecy, but the sincerity. The true worshiper will not desire the limelight, even if they are praying in a public meeting, for they will in a right way exclude others and self and come before God alone. Yes, in a public meeting we are to pray in order that others can follow and also say their Amen, but in private we say our own Amen (*let it be so*) to indicate what we have prayed, we mean and desire from God.

It means we can enter our closet, our private place, inner room as we are walking, in a crowd, as we drive (*keeping our eyes open though!*) For we can enter in to the presence of God in prayer and no one will know of it as we do not publicise it. Yet we pray best when all our attention is confined to God and not spread out on what others think, or on what we are doing, or how well we think we doing in prayer. There is to be this shutting out of distractions and coming privately to God in prayer.

The Lord Jesus reminds His people that such praying is not only in private, but is **personal** as He says we are to “*pray to your Father*”. This needs to be grasped as it is so important. Prayer is only possible because of the personal relationship we as Christians have entered into with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. If we are not a Christian, then we cannot truly pray, cannot truly pray as Jesus speaks of in these sections, for this is based on relationship - the Lord’s prayer begins with “*Our Father...*”

This underlines the honour and privilege that we as Christians have, for we can go to the almighty God of Creation, the all-knowing, all-seeing God and call Him “Father”. We are to remember that there exists between Almighty God and all who trust the Lord Jesus as their Saviour, a father and child relationship and that is why we do not need to babble and prattle on, for our Father knows us better than we know ourselves, He loves us, cares for us and even knows what we have need of even before we ask Him! Our Father also knows what is right and best for us and thankfully He does not give us everything we pray for, else what spoilt brats we would be! I’m thankful to the answers of prayer that come back “No” or were answered so differently to how I felt they **had** to be answered!

Consider who it is we pray to. We are to remember His love, care and knowledge of us. This can only be ours if we have the Lord Jesus as our Saviour. Then we will have this father and child relationship with God in heaven. If we do not have it, then realise we can come to know God as our Father by trusting the Lord Jesus as our own Saviour. If He is our Father through the Lord Jesus, then we are able to come to Him in prayer with confidence, love, even with boldness. We do not have to try and win Him round, or make Him inclined towards us by repeating lots of phrases. Not at all - for He is toward us, cares for us and there is no need for a mechanical, or superstitious repetition of words or saying long prayers to impress Him.

We to come to God our Father with confidence, knowing He will delight to bless us even more than we desire to be blessed. Our sincere prayers do not have to be wordy and long, but as our relationship grows and develops with God, we will find we want to spend more time with Him, indeed we will not notice the time we spend with Him, for as we delight in His company and presence, time becomes irrelevant. In the light of the Lord's teaching it is so tragic that so few of us as believers fail to realise and use more fully the honour, the privilege we have.

Sadly, we can be content with publicity prattling prayers and can remain puffed up as self-gratified and satisfied paupers. We can pat ourselves contentedly on our spiritual backs, when what we need is a good boot up the spiritual backside to realise our foolishness and poverty in prayer. We pray and live as paupers and yet should be as princes and princesses; we just have tokens of God's love and power (*as amazing as they are*), when we should be enraptured, delighting in, intoxicated with the presence and sure knowledge of God as our Father. Sadly, we can live and pray so often as orphans trying to please a hard ogre and yet our

Father in heaven would have us know the extravagant love He has for us. We may approach Him with our own little hang ups, complications, in fear that He will not bother with us and yet He, our Father in heaven, knows our wants, our needs and He wants us to approach Him in love, in joy, in simplicity, in faith and in confidence.

I know some fathers on earth have been or are real rotters, hard, harsh and cruel. Yet this heavenly Father is not, He is not at all like that. He is the best, the most fantastic and wonderful Father in heaven and He wants what is truly best for us at all times. We are to come to Him in prayer, perhaps even for the 1<sup>st</sup> time to ask Him to make us His child through the Lord Jesus so that He will be our Father in heaven. When you have Lord Jesus as your Saviour and God as your Father, then you will join those of us who already know Him and we all can come in confident, bold, humble love and faith and we can have the glorious privilege and benefit of prayer in both private and in public as we go on in our Christian lives.