



Matthew 6:1-15
What If Jesus Was Serious?
 (A Series on The Sermon On The Mount)
 “How to Pray”

Rev. Brian North
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 Mother’s Day

Every now and then someone will email me, or I’ll just stumble across, a list of “church communication bloopers.” They’re things from Sunday bulleting and monthly newsletters, and so forth. And they’ll have things like these:

- **“The rosebud on the altar this morning is to announce the birth of David Alan Belzer, born to Rev. and Mrs. Belzer. He is their first sin.”** (Type-o!)
- **Low Self-Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday at 7 to 8:30 pm. Please use the back door.** Way to build up their self-esteem!
- **Our retiring pastor will preach his farewell message, after which the choir will sing, “Break Forth Into Joy.”** I don’t think my farewell sermon is coming any time soon, but Tim and Paul, please don’t file this away for future use, ok? Even if it’s true...just don’t. ☺

I share that because, today’s message was originally set for last week. But I realized three or four weeks ago that I had somehow skipped over the Bible verses that *should* have been for last week’s message. So, I made the correction, got things on track, and it pushed last week’s message to today.

The chapter title from the book (What if Jesus Was Serious? – a book on Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount,” which we are going through) that goes with today’s verses, and therefore would have given us the sermon title (each sermon is taking its title from the accompanying chapter in the book), is called, “A Prayer for Losers” – which is to emphasize our desperate need for God in our lives. So, here’s what the publicity for today’s service would have been had I kept that sermon title: **“Join us for Mother’s Day at Rose Hill Church, and a special message for moms titled, ‘A Prayer for Losers.’”** That’s *not* what we want to be communicating, and I don’t want us to end up in a church bloopers list. I’m smarter than I look! So, today’s message is titled, “How to Pray.” And this is so appropriate for Mother’s Day, because nothing will bring a person to their knees in prayer faster and more frequently than children.

Now, before we get to the prayer that Jesus teaches, he first has some teaching that leads into it. All of this flows out of the stuff he's already said; everything is connected. And it's all rooted in 5:19-20, which is sort of his thesis statement for the entire sermon: **“Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19-20).**

These two verses are the key to understanding the entire sermon on the Mount and how it all fits together; even the verses that come before them spring out of these two verses. **First, we see that Jesus' teaching matters.** “Whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus means that whoever practices and teaches what he is saying in this sermon...those people will be called great in the Kingdom of heaven. So, Jesus' teaching is important. We should take him seriously.

Then, secondly, we see that “righteousness” matters. And this isn't “righteousness” as in surf culture and *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (“righteous, dude!”). It's about living in a right relationship with God and with others. That's what Jesus means, and he's saying that this righteousness is seriously important. So, what he's saying is important and worth building your life on, and a right relationship with God and people matters. Everything that he says in this sermon flows out of that.

You may recall a few weeks ago we looked at Jesus' statement (5:16) about shining our light so that people would see it and glorify our Father in Heaven. It's a call to live our faith publicly, and in such a way that people are *attracted* to Jesus, and not *repelled*. But some parts of our faith are more private. They primarily are between you and God.

Our financial generosity is one of those personal things between us and God. Jesus talks about giving to the needy here – so giving directly to people in need, or in today's world: to organizations that meet people's needs; that's

between you and God. Same with giving to the church, even if that isn't explicitly what he speaks about here: the principal certainly applies. When we start making that kind of information public, when we give and people know what we're giving, it leads to pride and arrogance (or pride/arrogance leads to making our giving public) or it leads to shame and envy (by others). That's not what giving is about.

It's the same thing with prayer: **Prayer is between you and God.** Jesus is not saying that all public prayer is wrong, by the way. There are times where praying in public is good and appropriate, and we see it in Scripture. What he's steering us away from is praying in public as a prideful show of righteousness – as in, “look how holy we are.” In the first verse in today's reading (6:1) Jesus says, “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others *to be seen by them.*” In other words, “for the purpose of being seen by them.” We don't want that (impressing others) to be the reason we give or pray. That's what Jesus wants to keep us away from.

Then Jesus models the prayer of a righteous person. We call this the Lord's Prayer. Or if you grew up Catholic you came to know it as the “Our Father.” I'm not sure Jesus necessarily intended that we would pray this exact prayer for all time and eternity, though I don't think it's wrong that we do. We pray it regularly here at Rose Hill (about half the time at 9:30; every Sunday at 11:00). But there are principles here that can shape any prayer we might pray. (And if you're a note-taker, then get limbered up because I've got 7 points here; if you're not a note-taker, well, you might want to convert and get baptized today with a seven-point half-sermon's worth of notes.)

First, we pray to our Heavenly Father. This is one of the Biblical names for God, as you likely know. So, we pray to God; Not to mother earth, not to a statue, not to no one in particular, not to ourselves, and certainly not to our pastor. This last week was the National Day of Prayer. And every year since the early 1950's the President of the United States – regardless of their political leanings – has issued a proclamation about the National Day of Prayer and invited the people of America to pray to God. This year, the presidential proclamation came out, but it did not mention “God” even once; that's the first time that has ever happened in nearly 70 years.¹ Jesus is very

clear: we pray to God our Heavenly Father, not to just “whoever” or “whatever.”

And just a little bonus item to help deepen your prayer life: Elsewhere, Jesus teaches about asking for things in prayer in his name. And Galatians 4:6 says, “God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” So, we pray *to* our Heavenly Father, *in* the name of Jesus, and we do it all *by* the power of the Holy Spirit who enables us to cry out to our Father. That’s who we pray to.

Second, we acknowledge that God is holy – that is, he is set apart. That’s really all that “hallowed” means (can be translated “holy”). God is set apart from us. He’s different than us, wholly other.

Third, notice that throughout the prayer it only speaks of “our” and “us” and “we” never “my” or “I” or “me”. It’s a reminder – even if you pray this on your own – that you are in community. You’re part of the body of Christ. This is such a good thing to be reminded of if you’re a mom or a dad and your kids are under your roof: You’re not in this alone. We’re together. Your church family – like here at Rose Hill – is here to help you. It takes a village to raise a child, right? This is one big multi-generational family here at Rose Hill Church where we help raise kids so they’d know Jesus as Lord and Savior, so they’d be surrounded with peers who would be good influences on them, so they’d have people of all generations to look up to - besides people in their own household - who model for them worship and discipleship and service in the church. We’re a community, and Jesus’ teaching on prayer reminds us of that.

Fourth, we see that Jesus doesn’t teach us to pray that God would take us to heaven (not that this is unbiblical – the resurrection of Jesus makes it clear as do other Biblical passages); **rather, he teaches us to pray that heaven would be brought down to earth.** “Thy/your kingdom come, thy/your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This is a challenging line for us. This is one point in the prayer that holds a mirror up to us and forces us to answer the question: Who’s will is governing my life? So often we want *our* will and *our* way to govern. But that’s not the way it is in God’s

Kingdom. In God's Kingdom, *God* is the King. You know what that means? *His* will is what matters. *His* will rules. And Jesus is saying that's what we are to pray for, here and now. If Jesus is serious, this is a particularly challenging point of the prayer.

Fifth, we pray for our daily bread. We live in a culture where most of us probably have enough food at home to last several days. In their day, however, "daily bread" was a legitimate concern for a large percentage of the population. There wasn't a fridge or freezer or a pantry filled with food to eat. But this is still a reminder for us that it is God who meets our deepest needs. It's almost like we could pray instead, "give us this day our daily fruit of the Spirit." "God – give me the patience that I need at work; God – give me joy for others rather than jealousy; God – give me peace in the midst of my health crisis; God – give me self-control because there is much more than our daily need of ice-cream is in the freezer. Give us enough to get through this day, and in a way that glorifies you." That, in many ways, is the essence of this line.

Sixth, we ask God for forgiveness – as we forgive others. Let me repeat that: we ask God to forgive us *as we forgive others*. Some people try and soften this. And it *is* Biblical that God's forgiveness knows no bounds for those who are in Christ. He's not limited – remember, He's the King and it's *his* will that matters. But this is another dangerous prayer that holds a mirror up to ourselves, and Jesus spends more time in verses 14 and 15 teaching about this after the prayer ends. So, we know he's serious. Are you forgiving others as you'd like God to forgive you?

Jesus teaches on this topic multiple times, and in one of them (Mt. 18:21-22) he says that we are to forgive someone not just 7 times – which is the number of times that one of the disciples asked about – but 7x70 times. 490. And the number isn't actually the point. It's like when my kids ask if they can watch television, and I'll say, "in a few minutes." No way do I mean "a few" in the way it's usually construed – like 3 or 4. When I say "in a few minutes," I really mean: after their homework is done, they've showered, cleaned their room, put their laundry away, and taken the dog for a walk...and I'll probably come up with other things for them to do as they do those things.

That's a few minutes. Amen? Of course, the amount of time they can watch is a few minutes – and by that, I do mean 3 or 4 minutes. ☺ So “a few” is a figure of speech. And forgiving someone 7x70 times is just a figure of speech to say: you keep forgiving as much as you have to. The point there, and in this prayer, is: don't stop forgiving. In your marriage, in your parenting, in your working, in your churching, in your driving, in your rooting for the Mariners who blew it last night: keep on forgiving.

Seventh comes the line that is probably most challenging (theologically): **asking God not to lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.** Or simply, deliver us from evil. This phrase, “lead us not into temptation,” seems to fly in the face of what we know about God. Let me say a few things that might help us see God more clearly and understand the full sovereignty of God. First, we must remember that there's a difference between temptation and sin. Temptation is just that – you're tempted. To sin, is to act on the temptation. There's a difference, and it's important to make the distinction.

Second, there are several Biblical examples of God leading into temptation or “testing” which is another way of translating this word: there's Job, who God permits to be tested by the devil; and then Abraham is tested by God with his son, Isaac; and then perhaps most profoundly in Jesus' own life: do you remember who led him into the desert where he was tempted three times by Satan? The Spirit. The Holy Spirit. God's Spirit. In fact, Matthew records that for us just a couple chapters before these verses today.

If God did that with them...and I'm sure you've heard sermons on those passages/people (I've preached on all of them here) and you've affirmed the lesson learned in your heart or maybe even with an “Amen” – though we Presbyterians are woefully silent in the sermons. Amen? ☺ But if God led those guys in that way (and it isn't often, which is worth noting), why not us? We can certainly pray that God *wouldn't* – that is what Jesus teaches here – but sometimes He does. Guess what: Sometimes God's will is different than yours and mine! And sometimes his will is tough! Later in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians we read this: **“No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to humankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you**

be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Two quick things from this verse that solidify everything we’ve been looking at in this point, plus one that’s extra: First (this is the extra one), any temptation or test that you face isn’t all that special – it’s common to all humankind. Sorry if I just burst your bubble...and it’s not that *you* aren’t special to God (you are)...but whatever you’re facing: others have been there, resisted the temptation and have been delivered from falling into sin and into evil. This actually is good news, because it means there are people you can learn from about how to resist temptation. Second, notice – like the other three examples I gave (Abraham, Job, Jesus) – that God is over the temptation: He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. In other words, he will let you be tempted, but only so far. It completely reinforces Jesus’ teaching here in the prayer. Lastly, we see that God will provide a way out so you can endure it...so you can get past the temptation and *not* fall into sin. That’s *exactly* what God did with Abraham, with Job, and with Jesus. God provided a sacrifice for Abraham, God provided Job with an unshakeable faith, and Jesus had God’s Word to call upon to resist temptation. God provides a way out every single time. So he *does* deliver us from evil: in *this* world *and* on the other side of the grave when we are in a right relationship with God...when we have faith in Jesus.

So, if Jesus is serious, then: This is how we pray. We pray to God our heavenly and holy Father, and we do so in the context of community; We pray for God’s will to be done; We pray for God’s provision in our lives; We pray for forgiveness – us forgiving others, and God’s forgiveness of us; we pray that God wouldn’t lead us to temptation, and that he would provide a way out, and that ultimately we would be delivered from evil. This is how to pray. Pray this prayer, and use it as a model for your own prayers, so that you would have a right relationship with your heavenly father and with the people in your life. Let’s pray (including the Lord’s Prayer) ...Amen.

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/05/05/a-proclamation-on-national-day-of-prayer/>