



Matthew 6:5-8  
Practicing The Way  
“Prayer”

Rev. Brian North  
January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2025

Last week we began a new series called “Practicing the Way” looking at some of the core practices of Jesus in cultivating his walk with his heavenly Father. There are nine we will look at in this series. Last week was Sabbath – taking a regular day of rest and rejuvenation centered on our relationship with God and with people. Today, we turn to the topic of prayer. And so right off the bat here we see overlap between these spiritual practices, because prayer is certainly one thing that a person can do on the Sabbath. So, these are not all mutually exclusive. In fact, several of them could be part of your weekly Sabbath routine. Others overlap with each other as well that you can engage in on any day of the week.

Prayer is one of those spiritual practices that we practice/engage in any day of the week. A lot of Christians make prayer a part of their lives on a regular basis. At least weekly, daily for many, and almost sort of an ongoing state of being for some. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians, “Pray without ceasing.” Essentially, that means to live with a constant consciousness of the presence of God, and in a sort of ongoing dialogue with him. So, Christians certainly pray regularly.

But it’s not just Christians who pray. A lot of agnostics – these are people who say we can’t know whether or not God exists – they will pray when desperate enough. Even atheists – people who believe that God does not exist – will pray when necessary. My guess is that a lot of people who are agnostic and even atheistic prayed this last week in response to the fires in Los Angeles. “Desperate times call for desperate measures” as the saying goes...and sometimes even people who don’t believe God exists are desperate enough to pray.

So, what is prayer, why pray, and what is the outcome of our prayers? In other words, does prayer “work”? Today’s passage introduces this topic of prayer, so let’s read **Matthew 6:5-8**.

So, this teaching is a ways into Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. There's not really any context for his teaching on prayer in the sense of this being a response to a question someone asked, or a response to some event that happened or anything like that. It's literally a third of the way into a teaching of Jesus' that goes on a lot longer.

**The fact of prayer in general, and particularly of his audience actively praying at different points their lives, is completely assumed.** There's no "if" you pray, there's no sense of persuading people to pray or arguing for the necessity of prayer or anything like that. The fact that a person would pray is a given. We see that prayer is not to be a show. This doesn't mean you can't pray in public – we see public prayers in Scripture all the time; my family prays at our table when we eat out at a restaurant, – but Jesus does speak against those who pray in public for the purpose of being seen. Prayer is not about "look how great my spiritual life is that I pray even in public places." That's a big "no-no" in Jesus' book.

Twice Jesus speaks here of a reward. We see it at the end of verse 5 and also the end of verse 6. They are two different words. The first one, in reference to the "hypocrites" (remember: Jesus' word, not mine!) who love to pray to be seen by others, is the Greek word "misthos." **"Misthos" is most frequently translated as "reward" in the Bible, but it can also mean "wages" or "hire" as in "hire an employee."** And while we normally think of a "reward" as being positive, "misthos" can be a positive or negative one. If you're a parent and you're familiar with the Love and Logic parenting model, one of the main tenets of it is "natural consequences" for decisions and behaviors that kids make. Let them learn from those natural consequences. That's a good summary of what this word means: it's the outcomes, or the consequences – be they good or bad – from an action. That's what Jesus says about these guys who pray with poor motives.

**The other word (verse 6), for those who pray more authentically, is the word "apodidomi" – It can mean to "deliver," or to "sell or to give away," or to "pay off what is due like a debt or a wage" or to "fulfill a promise."** Arguably, the main promise God gives us in this life is that he will be with us. Whether mountain top highs or deep dark valleys, God is with us.

He never leaves us nor forsakes us. He's with us by the cool streams and the green fields, he's with us at the tables surrounded by our enemies. He's with us when we're grieving death, he's with us when we feel hemmed in on all sides. That's the reward, or the promise, that he will fulfill: his gracious presence.

**Then Jesus teaches about how to pray.** Now, right after this passage, Jesus says, "this, then, is how you should pray" and he gives them an example with what we call "The Lord's Prayer." We pray that prayer regularly here at Rose Hill. But part of his teaching is about people who pray on and on and repetitively and sort of babbling away. And he speaks against that kind of prayer. Repeating some request of mantra over and over is unnecessary. I know for myself, I'm certainly not one to get into some kind of repetitive prayer phrase saying the same thing over and over and over, again and again and again, repeating, restating, and reiterating myself. Maybe in my preaching...but not my praying. Two different things! 😊

The point Jesus is making is: get to the point in your praying, and you don't need to repeat it over and over. The longest prayer Jesus ever prays is found in John 17, and it's not really all that long, and it certainly isn't repetitive.

Now: **One question a lot of people have is, "Why pray?" If God knows everything, what's the point?"** And most people ask this thinking they've come up with some very original critique of Jesus and the Bible and the Christian faith and use it as maybe part of their reason why they have doubts about our faith. What most of these people fail to realize, is that they're not original in their thinking. In fact, Jesus himself beat them to the punch. Verse 8 reads, **"Do not be like them (meaning, those people who ask over and over for certain outcomes), for your Father knows what you need before you ask him"** (Matthew 6:8, *emphasis added*). Jesus sucks all the wind out of our doubts by acknowledging this fact himself. Yes, God knows what you need before you ask him. He says so right here, in a teaching on prayer, where he makes the presumption that we *do* pray. It is a given that we should pray, and it is a given that God knows what we're going to ask for.

So, let's talk about ways to pray. If you're a note-taker and want notes on practical ways to impact your prayer life, this section is for you. Not all prayer is asking God to do something on our behalf. That's one part of it, but far from everything. A great model to help us broaden our prayers is something that I learned in my early 20's...so, a couple years ago...is the acronym, **ACTS (like the book of the Bible): Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication (requests).**

Start with giving God praise and adoration. This can be as simple as a couple words address to God, such as "Gracious and Holy God" to something longer. But it's about showing adoration and reverence for God. Then there's confession: This can certainly be and should include confession of sin, but also confession of our faith and desire to trust in Jesus. Thanksgiving comes next: Thanking God for what he's done and for who he is: merciful, loving, kind, and so forth. Thank him for challenging you and giving you ministry opportunities that he's given you. There is much to thank God for. And then last, and note that this is last: supplications. Requests. Petitions. The thing we tend to gravitate to first is last. That's one reason I love this model of prayer. Not that requests are less important, but sometimes we only pray prayers that ask God to do things for us. This ACTS model helps broaden our prayers.

So that's one way to approach prayer. There are other ways to pray, and I'd like to share some of them. **Prayer can also be praying the prayers of others.** This can get you out of ruts in your prayer life. Look up "Christian prayers" online and try praying some of them, or get a book of prayers. Church liturgical resources have a ton of prayers in them. Read the Psalms as prayers – that's what most of them are to begin with anyway. Read them as if they're your own prayers. So, pray the prayers of others, making them your own in that process. **Prayer is also just talking with God about your life.** Sharing your burdens and your worries and the mundane aspects of life. Some people journal these things, which is a fantastic prayer tool. My wife is great at this. I've never looked at her prayer journal but it's probably filled with prayers of lament that have to do with me. 😊 Prayer need not be all about laments and burdens though: talk with God about what is good in your life – the things that bring you joy. Just talk to him or write to him about whatever is going on in your life.

**Prayer is a two-way street, too. So, listen to God.** The way God speaks to us most concretely is through Scripture. If the earlier point was to read Scripture as your prayer to God, this is now reading it as his prayer to you. Read a short passage, not even a whole chapter, just a handful of verses. Read them through the lens of “what might God be saying to me here?” “What does God want me to take away from this passage?” Reflect on it. Read it a few times. What stands out? What word or phrase catches your attention, seems to jump out at you? What might God be saying to you?

And then lastly: **Just be with God. This is a form of prayer.** As John Mark Comer writes in “Practicing the Way”: This is “just looking at God, [who is] looking at you, in love” (p. 184). It’s a kind of contemplative prayer. On my sabbatical this summer, one of the things I did was a four-day, three-night silent retreat where this kind of “Being with God” was the whole point. It was just a time of intentional, ongoing consideration of who God is, who I am, and my relationship with God. I didn’t “do nothing” the whole time: I spent time reading my Bible, other books, praying in more typical ways, going for walks...But it was just kind of *being* in God’s presence. You don’t need to be on a retreat to do this. A few minutes might be plenty to start with. But that’s a kind of prayer. Just be with God.

And so, at the end of the day: **When it comes to prayer, there are a lot of forms it takes and ways to engage God in it.** You might try doing different ones on different days of the week. As I mentioned at the start, Paul tells us to pray without ceasing. It’s like a lifestyle thing where we are in constant communication with God, not just asking for things, but listening to him, being sensitive to the spirit leading us, so we might be of service to God.

And when it comes to the question of “why pray” that I mentioned a few minutes ago, this “being of service to God” gets to the heart of it.

**Frequently, prayer is less about God doing stuff for us or others, but about God working in and through us.** It’s about allowing God’s spirit to open our eyes to see the ways He’s working in us and the ways we can be the answer to our prayers or the answer to someone else’s prayers, in our everyday lives.

Let me close with an example from this past week. When Gwen and I were in seminary at Fuller in Pasadena, CA, we lived in the town just north – Altadena. You might have heard about it on the news lately with the fires. A gal named Bert and her husband, Jim, who has passed away a few years ago, were our neighbors and landlords. We lived in a backhouse (Cottage/ADU) in their back yard. Bert is on staff at Fuller as director of alumni relations, and so we frequently see her at conferences and things where she's there to put on an alumni breakfast or some other event...and Gwen and I are the volunteer Fuller alumni coordinators for the Seattle area so we're in regular contact with her there. We know and love Bert deeply.

Well, she evacuated on Tuesday, and the fire this week made it down to her property, and just a short way past. Kind of on the edge of how far south the Eaton Canyon fire came, at least for now. But every house across the street from her got burned to the ground. Houses to the north of her on her side of the street burned down; houses a few houses south of her burned down. Houses and businesses to the west of her on Lake Ave. were burned. Four houses - hers and one house to the north and two to the south - were spared. Why?

One of her neighbors is a firefighter. I don't know the whole story but he came back to the neighborhood to check on things. Maybe he was getting a break from the firefighting and swung by his house to see how things were, since he had the credentials to do so. All I know is that instead of simply praying that God would spare his home – and I don't know if he's a praying type of guy or not but as I said earlier, even people who don't normally pray will pray when desperate enough, so let's presume he did – but rather than simply pray for protection, he did something.

He had a hose, he hooked it up to a fire hydrant, and he saved the four houses that he could. The ones across the street were already well on fire and beyond saving. Concrete foundations and brick chimneys are all that's left. His action saved the home of my friend Bert, and the backhouse where her daughter and her family now lives, along with three other properties.

Prayer is not just about what God can do. It's about what God can do through you; and your praying helps to make you more aware of what the needs are, and strengthen you to take action and be the answer to someone's prayer. Prayer prompts us to action. (Write that down, perhaps.)

**Prayer is one of the regular spiritual habits of Jesus. He prayed. A lot.** He didn't just tell his disciples to pray. He didn't just tell them how to pray. He didn't just presume they'd pray. He prayed. And he went into action, all the way to the cross. Some prayers of his we have; others we just are told of the fact that he prayed. But prayer was one way he stayed spiritually centered and could be an instrument of grace for his heavenly Father, here on earth. It's the same for you and me, as we live in apprenticeship to Jesus...as we live in discipleship to him. So, make prayer part of your daily routine. Keep praying, giving him our adoration, our confession, our thanksgiving, and our supplications, and then go out and live for him each and every day, wherever we may be, so that people's prayers – yours and others – would be answered. Let's pray...Amen.