

SERMON GUIDE

Prohibitions and Promises

Matthew 6:5-8



1.7.2024

SCRIPTURE:

Matthew 6:5-8

SERMON NOTES:

There are few things as important and essential to the Christian life than prayer. Yet when you ask the majority of Christians about how they feel about their prayer lives, very few, if any, believe they are good at it. I don't know anyone who believes they've mastered it, most would settle for being someone decent at it. Most genuine believers often live with a low-level sense of guilt for not praying more frequently and more earnestly than they do.

This is why I'm beginning this year with a 3 week teaching series entitled: Learn How to Pray. We are going to study the Lord's Prayer for the next 3 weeks in an effort to 1. become better at praying personally, and 2. becoming better at praying as a church. I want us to learn and understand the beauty and power of this prayer so that we can be a praying people, both personally and corporately together.

Why study this prayer in order to get better at praying? Because this passage is literally Jesus teaching us a master class on prayer. In Luke's Gospel (Luke 11:2), Jesus' teaching prompted one of the disciples to request, "Lord, teach us to pray." This led Jesus to give the Lord's Prayer to them. If you were to sit down and ask Jesus to show you how to pray, this is how He would do it, just as He did for the disciples. We don't need some other system, method, technique, or vibe. Jesus shows us, in the Scriptures, how to pray.

R.C. Sproul said it this way: ***"I think the greatest weakness in the church today is that almost no one believes that God invests His power in the Bible. Everyone is looking for power in a program, in a methodology, in a technique, in anything and everything but that in which God has placed it—His Word. He alone has the power to change lives for eternity, and that power is focused on the Scriptures."***

Sproul said this in response to our slowness to look to Scripture, particularly the Lord's instructions on prayer, to find help in this area. One of the things we've become victims of in our modern age is the idea that we have to be spontaneous or inventive in order to be genuine. We don't. The Lord's Prayer not only supplies us with words, but it supplies us with a framework for all of our prayers. We're going to talk about that in this series. The first 3 requests in the prayer focus on God's glory (His name, His kingdom, & His will). The second set of three requests focuses on our good (our provision, our

forgiveness, & our protection). You can summarize the Lord's Prayer framework, and all of praying, as a focus on: **God's glory** and **our good**.

Kevin DeYoung notes how significant it is that when the Lord is asked about how to pray, He doesn't focus on or seem concerned with **when** they prayed or **where** they prayed or **how long** they prayed. He focused on **what** they prayed. Next week we will look at the first 3 petitions for God's glory and the week after, the second three petitions on our good. By doing this, we will gain an understanding of how to pray.

Today, we are looking at the prelude to the Lord's Prayer, and focusing on the 2 prohibitions Jesus gives and the 2 promises that counteract them.

Exegesis of Matthew 6:5-8

I. Prohibitions

The first thing for us to see in the lead up to the Lord's Prayer is Jesus' strong prohibitions.

A. Don't pray like the hypocrites

A hypocrite is a word we're used to in our world today. People love to call other people hypocrites when they believe they do not live in alignment with their professed beliefs. And that is correct. We get the word hypocrite from the Greek word, "hypokrites." It was the Greek word for a play actor. It was someone who put on a mask to play a part. When you say someone is a hypocrite, you are saying they only play a part. They are not really what they are presenting themselves to be. They claim to believe one thing, but live in a different way. It's the professed vegetarian that eats a steak every night.

It's important to emphasize here that the hypocrite is not someone who does certain things while feeling a different way. Attending worship gatherings even when you don't feel like it isn't hypocrisy. Neither is praying or reading Scripture when your heart isn't in it. Doing what is right when you don't feel like it is what maturity looks like. That is faithfulness. It is when we publicize one set of beliefs but live by a different set of beliefs. It's saying one thing in public, but living another thing in private. That's hypocrisy.

Jesus says the mark of the hypocrites is they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and street corners. Why? So they can be seen by others. In other words, they are more concerned with practicing their righteousness before men than praying to God (Matthew 6:1). To be clear, it is not praying in public that is frowned upon here. What is hypocritical is praying more in public (for others) than in private (before God). We're not supposed to pray simply to be seen by others or thought spiritual by others.

B. Don't pray like the pagans

Jesus also warns us about a second issue: don't pray like the pagans. Jesus mentions how the Gentiles pray. He's not focusing here on ethnicity, but on the beliefs of the Gentiles. They are pagan. What does that mean? It means their devotion and religious beliefs boil down to performing the proper actions. It's

all about doing your duties. Use the right words. Burn the right incense. Provide the right sacrifices. Visit the right sites and shrines.

We are encouraged to pray persistently and not give up (Luke 18), but there is a big difference between persistent prayer and babbling prayer. The word there for "heap up empty phrases" means "persistent babbling" or "vain repetitions." The idea is Gentiles don't have a relationship to God (or the gods), so they think their many words will be to their advantage. They think the act of uttering lots of words will please God. This is why we see the prophets of Baal crying out for hours on Mt. Carmel. They cut themselves and act out and utter lots of words.

This is still how many approach prayer. It happens today more than we think. This is why Jesus speaks about it. It can happen in churches like ours, and others, who like to use liturgies. It's possible to go through the motions and just say words. This doesn't mean we can't use creeds, ancient prayers, or anything else. We can do these things from the heart, meaning them, without them becoming dull, lifeless, or rote. But many churches today avoid the liturgies and offer up prayers without thinking and pile up empty phrase on top of empty phrase. It leads to prayers like, "Daddy God, thank you for dying on the cross" which has so much going wrong with it. We often think the more freestyle and emotional our prayers, the more God will hear us. John Stott called this kind of prayer, "all lips, no mind, no heart."

So these two prohibitions by Jesus are given to us about praying. Let me ask you this before I keep going: **which of these two are most vulnerable to doing?** Are you more disposed to being the **hypocrite** (praying more in public for others than private) or the **pagan** (heaping up lots of words and phrases)?

Before we get into how we're supposed to pray in the next two weeks, we want to truly understand how not to pray. Jesus has laid that out here. Now what we're going to look at is why we shouldn't pray that way. Each of these prohibitions come with a promise.

II. Promises

A. Your Father sees in secret and will reward

Jesus tells us rather than praying to be seen by others we should go to your room (in private) and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret. And this is the promise: Your Father sees and hears you. And He will reward you. You don't have to pretend. You don't need to put a religious mask on with flowery language or fancy words. Go to your Father and do not fear punishment. He rewards those who come.

This is a matter of faith. Do we really believe He hears us when we come to Him? Do we believe He sees and knows? Do we believe He rewards? These are all questions about our faith. Prayer requires faith.

Don't live for earthly applause or to be impressive. Seek the smile of your Father in Heaven.

B. Your Father knows what you need before you ask

This is one of the most incredible promises in all of Scripture. Because you are in Christ, and God is now your Father, you can approach the throne knowing you are heard, but even more: you know the Father knows what you need before you ask. Why does that matter? That means we don't have to go on and on to ensure He knows our needs. He knows everything we need.

God doesn't know this purely from His omniscient knowledge of everything, but from His particular knowledge of you. He knows everything. Our informing Him of our needs or asking Him for His intervention in situations isn't to bring Him up to speed. He doesn't need help running the universe. We're also not seeking to change His mind. Rather, we pray, despite Him knowing what we need, because God has arranged the world to work in this way. He uses our prayers as a means to bring about His ends. He has made it such that those who petition Him for grace will receive more grace than those who don't. God doesn't need prayer, but He uses prayer like He does other means. He ordains the means of hard work and diligent labor to bring about financial prosperity. He ordains the means of rain and sun to grow crops, and crops to nourish bodies. All of the means are Gods, just like the ends. The same is true for prayer. Prayer is used by God to bring about His sovereign plans.

So we are not to pray like a hypocrite, for public notice only, but instead we are to pray in secret to our Father who sees and rewards. We are not to pray like pagans, who think a bunch of words and repetitions will get God to act on their behalf, instead we remember that our Father knows our needs before we even ask Him.

I want to close this message by highlighting something very subtle, yet astonishing in our passage today. When Jesus teaches us how to pray, He tells us to address God as our Father. The God who created the universe, the God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob, the God who brought the plagues and parted the Red Sea, the God who gave victory to Joshua and the armies of Israel over stronger nations, the God who stopped the flames of the furnace from burning Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego...that God, Jesus instructs us to call Him Father.

Friends, this is vital to understand. To pray to the God of the universe with this kind of intimacy and familial closeness is not a human right, it is a spiritual privilege. It is a privilege provided through Christ. Jesus can tell us, His disciples (and us) to pray that way, because through His righteous life and His sacrificial death, He has made us children of God. Only disciples of Jesus can call God Father.

Two quick things on this. First, when we pray to God the Father, it is the collective work of the Trinity. Romans 8 tells us it is the Spirit of God who enables us to cry, "Abba! Father!," bearing witness that we are children, heirs of God, and fellow heirs with Christ" (verses 14-17). All who pray the Lord's Prayer from the heart are demonstrating the work of the Trinity. Second, the address of God as Father cannot be substituted with "Mother." This isn't because God is male, but because this is how God has chosen to reveal Himself (with masculine pronouns). It doesn't matter what our world thinks is appropriate or more in step with the times.

At the end of the day, praying is about a relationship with our Creator. The heart of prayer is about recognizing who God is. He is not hard of hearing. And He is not hard of heart. You can speak to God as you are, not with flowery language in an effort to impress Him, but as your Heavenly Father. The key to prayer is a heart willing to simply show up and talk to God. And the Scriptures tell us, which we must believe by faith, is that He hears us and is eager to listen.

LOOK BACK

- How was your week? What is one thing you're grateful for and one thing that challenged you?
- How did you GROW in obedience to Christ over the last week?
- Where did you GO to share the gospel or have a spiritual conversation with someone?

BUILD UP

- **REVIEW:**
 - Read Matthew 6:5-8 and then have someone else in the group read it again, preferably from a different version.
 - What big takeaways did you have from the teaching?
 - Additional Scripture:
 - Psalm 5:3
 - Psalm 18:6
 - James 4:8
 - Hebrews 4:16
 - Colossians 4:2
 - 1 John 5:15
 - Psalm 145:18
 - 2 Chronicles 7:14
 - James 5:16
 - Ephesians 6:18
 - Philippians 4:6
 - Jeremiah 33:3
 - Matthew 5:20
 - Matthew 23:15,23,25
 - Luke 18:9-14
 - 1 John 5:14-15
 - Luke 18:1-8
 - Exodus 32:7-14

- **REFLECT:**
 - Why is prayer important to our walk with God?
 - What does it mean to pray like the hypocrites?
 - What does it mean to pray like the pagans?
 - What does it mean to pray in secret?
 - How does God know what we need before we ask?
- **RESPOND:**
 - Do you pray like the hypocrite or the pagan?
 - What are some ways you can pray in secret?
- **MEDITATE:**
 - Matthew 6:6 -- *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.*
- **MEMORIZE:**
 - Colossians 4:2 -- *Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.*

SEND OUT

- **GROW:** How will you abide in Christ this week and grow in your love and understanding of Him?
- **GO:** Who in your sphere of influence needs to hear this story or the gospel?
- **PRAYER:**
 - Pray over any request from your group members.
 - Directional Elder - **Scott Marlow**
 - Ministry - **For the City**
 - **Pray for our long-term families on the field:**
 - The Wilsons
 - The Grays
 - The Starks
 - **Pray for our mid-term sent ones on the field:**
 - Kaesi
 - **Pray for the lost - Unreached People Group (UPG):** Raddi in India



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- **Population in country:** 90,000
- **Global population:** 90,000
- **Christian Adherent:** 0.00%
- **Evangelical:** 0.00%
- **Primary Religion:** Hinduism
- **Primary Language:** Kannada
- **Summary:** The Raddi people are very family oriented; they prefer marriages between cousins. When the father dies, the oldest son takes charge of the family. The Raddi are mostly farmers, and they are vegetarians, which possibly indicates high status.
- **Prayer Focus:** Pray that the few believers among the Raddi people would be zealous for Christ and his kingdom. Pray for believers to be emboldened by the Holy Spirit to study the Word and be filled with a burning desire to share what they have learned with the Raddi people. Pray for an entire people movement to the only Savior, Jesus Christ.
- Want to keep up with other Unreached People Groups? Download the Unreached of the Day App <https://joshuaproject.net/pray/unreachedoftheday/app>