

Sermon Title: Be Prayerful
Biblical Text: Matthew 6:5-15
Teaching Series: Kingdom Being
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Matthew 6:5-15

“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. 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. “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. Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 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, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Whenever a crisis or tragedy happens, people take to social media. It's one of the primary places we discover and interact with news; particularly national or global

headlines of suffering and violence and injustice. Inevitably, amidst the updates and details, there are comments and condolences. But there's a particular comment that has become part of the landscape of modern tragedy. *Thoughts and prayers*. And, of course, this response has come under significant scrutiny. Comedian Anthony Jeselnik perhaps summarized the sentiment best. After the shooting in Aurora, CO in 2012 and the bombing at the Boston Marathon in 2013 he said, "***Do you know what those comments are worth? F--- nothing. F----- less than nothing. You are not giving your time, your money, or even your compassion. All you are saying is ... don't forget about me today.***" What Jeselnik and others are pointing out is important. We often speak about prayer with a kind of sentimental flippancy, which not only devalues people but also devalues prayer. Our issue isn't actually with prayer per se, but with the heart behind these vain and empty phrases. After all, *how many of us who say 'thoughts and prayers,' actually pray? How many of us actually know the purpose and power of prayer?*

Jesus wants his disciples to pray and understand prayer. So, that's what I'd like to talk about today. I want to talk about prayer. I want to talk about what prayer is and what it's for. That's what Jesus highlights in our passage today. In fact, he begins by critiquing the same thing many of us do today—empty and vain prayers. However, his critique comes with a remedy. You see, he exposes us through his instructions on prayer ... but he also heals us. We'll see prayer was never meant to be a meaningless sentiment, but a powerful participation in the breaking in of Jesus' kingdom.

Here's how we'll organize our time ...

- *Cautions* for Prayer
- *Healing* through Prayer
- *Integrity* of Prayer

[Prayer]

Movement 1: Cautions for Prayer (vv.5-8)

Jesus' instruction on prayer comes within a particular context. It's found within a series of three spiritual disciplines—giving, praying, and fasting. Aaron covered giving last week. And next week we'll look at fasting. The theme of this thread is not simply about these practices in and of themselves, but about using discretion in these disciplines. As Jesus did through chapter 5, he's reframing righteousness around the heart. He's saying, *simply performing the act does not mean you have practiced righteousness.*

Giving isn't about giving.

It's about your heart.

Fasting isn't about fasting.

It's about your heart.

Praying isn't about praying.

It's about the heart.

That's where Jesus begins with prayer. He gives us two primary cautions which expose a singular issue of the heart. Let's look at the first. ***Read Matthew 5:5-6 ...***

“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. 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.” As before he juxtaposes his disciples' kingdom being with the way of the Gentiles or who he calls, *hypocrites*.

Apparently it was customary for the religious class in Jesus' day to pray in synagogues (houses of worship) and on street corners (the marketplace). At first blush this seems noble ... after all Jesus says they "***love to pray***" ... that's a good thing, *right?* Well, upon further consideration it's clear their love for prayer exposes a deeper love for themselves. They love what prayer gives them: *attention*.

Notice, they pray in church and out in public, ***that they may be seen by others***. In other words, they're more concerned with looking good than becoming good.

The first caution then is that we shouldn't pray ***vain*** prayers. We shouldn't pray to look good or be seen in a particular way. However, not because we won't look good. In fact, when we pray to look good, Jesus says we will. People will notice and they will be impressed. It will work. Notice, Jesus says we will receive the reward. People will be impressed by your courage, faithfulness, and piety.

However, there's a cost. Jesus says when we pray to be seen, God won't hear us.

And so he encourages his disciples to seek discretion and solitude and secrecy. This isn't dissing praying in public. It's correcting selfish motivation. *If being seen causes pride, go where you can't be seen.*

But Jesus isn't just concerned about the location of our prayers, but also the content. Look at v.7, we'll see a second caution. ***Read Matthew 5:7-8 ... "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."*** Again, Jesus compares his disciples with the hypocrites. In this case he says some people are prone to pray with big and eloquent words, yet their words have no meaning. He calls them "empty phrases." It means *babble*. People believed that longer they prayed and the more impressive their words, the more likely God would hear their prayers. But this too is an errant thought. *Why?* Because it supposes the power of prayer is in our character and performance rather than in God's love and goodness. Jesus says, ***your Father knows what you need before you ask.*** In other words, it's easy to pay closer attention to how we sound than who we are talking to. That's the second caution: we shouldn't pray *empty* prayers.

In both cautions, a wounded heart is exposed. You see, we pray to look good when our hearts believe we're really bad. That is, shame. And so we put up a religious exterior which seems holy and impressive. We pray to sound good when our hearts are convinced God is not good. A wounded heart prays to heal itself. This completely subverts the power and purpose of prayer. Prayer is not the place to

broadcast our righteousness, but rather the place we seek our wholeness and forgiveness and wholeness and the kingdom. What these cautions reveal is that we misunderstand prayer completely. Dr. Tim Keller explains in his book on prayer, "*The power of our prayers ... lies not primarily in our effort and striving, or in any technique, but rather in our knowledge of God*" (Prayer, 49). We might say, prayer is for us but it's about God. Which is really good news. That means when we prayer, we can confess our woundedness rather than use our prayers to cover our pain and grief.

This seems to be the foundation of Jesus' teaching on prayer.

Movement 2: Healing of Prayer (vv.9-13, Jeremiah 32:38, Genesis 18:14, Isaiah 6:5, 1 John 1:9, John 17:23-24)

We ought to be careful when approaching this popular passage. We should keep in mind that Jesus has just critiqued an approach to prayer which is rote or fraught with errant motivations, an attempt to look or sound a certain way rather than being a certain way or being with someone. If we're not careful, we can do the same with Jesus' prayer. You see, many have traded out the hypocrisy of the vain and empty prayers of the Pharisees for the vain and empty recitation of the Lord's Prayer. One empty ritual for another. Simply reading or memorizing or following the order of this prayer doesn't heal a wounded heart. Jesus is not teaching us a new law. He's not teaching us a new prayer to pray in public or in secret, or giving us new words

to babble. The content of the prayer was never really the issue. The heart of prayer was the problem. And so instead of giving us a new prayer, Jesus is showing us the real and living God. And so as we walk through this prayer, that's what we ought to look for ... God himself.

Let's read the entire prayer and then make some observations. Jesus says, ***Read Matthew 5:9-13 ... Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."*** Okay so, let's think ... how does Jesus point us to God? Each idea exposes and heals something.

- God is ours (v.9). This exposes how often we depersonalize God. Meaning he is more of an idea to us than someone with whom we are in relationship. And that's the healing. In fact he promised through the prophet Jeremiah, ***Read Jeremiah 32:38 ... And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.*** The very invitation and instruction to pray demonstrates that we are in a relationship with the God of the universe.
- God is Father (v.9). The fatherhood of God exposes a deep distrust or mistreatment or fear of relating to God as a parent. To be sure this isn't about God's masculinity (see Isaiah 66:13). Jesus is a man, but God's fatherhood is less about his gender than it is about his parental embodiment of provision and authority and, most of all, love. And that's the wound, *isn't it?* Many of

us have had earthly parents, perhaps earthly father's in particular, who abused their authority and did not love us well. Prayer then, becomes a place where such intimate wounds are addressed and healed as we recall that the Heavenly Father oversees our lives with power and love us with gentleness.

- God is in heaven (v.9). We are often bound up simply in what is possible in this world. Much of what we worry about is focused on our abilities, trends, likelihoods, and what makes good logical sense. But the healing power of prayer strips away the limits of this life. When we open ourselves up to God, we are opening ourselves and the problems we face in humanity to the limitless capacities of heaven. This tells us that God knows everything and can do anything. When Abraham and Sarah were utterly baffled by the prospect of becoming parents, both being nearly 100 years old, God said, ***Read Genesis 18:14 ... "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"*** We are on earth. But God is in heaven.
- God is holy (v.9). That word *hallowed* means sanctify or revere or holy. God is holy. And whenever we are in the company of holiness our sinfulness is exposed. When Isaiah had a vision of God's holiness he says, ***Read Isaiah 6:5 ... "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"*** He thought he was going to die. And yet, he doesn't. Rather, angels cleansed him and extended God's forgiveness to him

(vv.6-7). That's the healing. In prayer we confess God's holiness, and our sinfulness. But we also experience his grace, which makes us holy.

- God's kingdom is coming (v.10). There is a realm Jesus has been describing through the sermon, called the kingdom. The kingdom is short-hand for the rule and reign, or the will and power of God. This too exposes us. You see, all too often we are about our own kingdoms. We're focused on what we want and what we can do. The prayer centers us and corrects us. Not only are we healed by seeing the kingdom as the true and better already-but-not-yet reality, but we are also healed by Jesus' invitation to participate in its progressive arrival. We confess our kingdoms and even ask Jesus to destroy them as his kingdom, his way comes to bear on earth.
- God provides for us (v.11). Asking God for daily bread is humbly. Many of us don't live paycheck to paycheck, therefore we are used to believing we provide our own *monthly* or *annual* bread. That's exposing. However, there's more. At this point in the prayer it's important to acknowledge the plural form of Jesus' instruction. God is *our* father. *Our* daily bread. God provides for *us*. Theologian Justo Gonzalez explains, “...*when we ask for ‘our daily bread’ we are not asking only for ourselves, nor even for our sisters and brothers in the church, but for the entire human race, even those who may not know our Lord*” (*Teach Us to Pray*). Your prayers are not simply for you. Mine are not simply for me. Christian prayer is a communal connection with God and, in this case, a collective request for his provision. That very

fact begins to heal us from the wounds of individualism, isolation, and self-centeredness.

- God forgive us (v.12). Again utilizing the plurals form we ask God for our forgiveness. If nothing else, that should tell us we don't just sin individually but we sin collectively. Or, if you please, systematically. As sinners, when we join forces to create systems, structures, companies, and churches we have the capacity to create things which bear our dysfunction, injustice, and sin. That's exposing. But it's also healing. When we confess systematic or communal sins, we are drawn together and drawn toward the Lord through the healing power of forgiveness. ***Read 1 John 1:9 ... If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*** What a promise! *Can you imagine the healing effect it would have to truly become a church that confesses our generational and systematic and and shared sins?* God would cleanse us. God would forgive us. God would bring justice.
- God protects us (v.13). Finally, Jesus invites to us to pray through our spiritual vulnerabilities. He says this in two ways. First, we can lack the power to resist temptation on our own. Second, we are already gripped by the power of evil. And so we ask for God's healing from the impulse to sin and from the bondage of sin. *With me?* That's what's exposed. Therefore in prayer we pray to our Heavenly Father who does not share our

vulnerabilities. We pray to the God who can lead us away from the trap of temptation and out of the grip of evil. That's the healing. God protects us.

So, that's who Jesus points us to throughout the prayer. He points us to our Heavenly Father. And in many ways, that's the point of prayer. That's the definition of prayer: *simply being with God*. But, *what effect does this have on us?* That's what prayer is. But, what does prayer do? Well, I think it's two-fold. There's an internal and an external effect. We might say, Jesus' prayer heals us inwardly and invites us to participate in the healing of the world. I think we have a tendency of choosing. Either seeing prayer as the practice of personal communion with God or as the place of encountering God for the sake of bringing the kingdom to the world around us. That's how Tim Keller describes it—communion and kingdom. He says, ***"We should not drive a wedge between seeking personal communion with God and seeking the advance of his kingdom in hearts and in the world ... if they are kept together, then communion will not be just wordless mystical awareness on the one hand, and our petitions will not be a way of procuring God's favor ... on the other"*** (5). Meaning, prayer won't be vain or empty. Prayer is communion and kingdom. That means when we say "I will pray for you" or even "thoughts and prayers" in times of crisis and grief, if we truly mean that we'll be praying to the God of the universe ... to be with him and beseech him ... then what we're doing is the greatest act of kindness and power imaginable. We are seeking healing for ourselves and others from the only one who can heal us.

This is precisely how Jesus prays. Just before he is betrayed by Judas and crucified, Jesus prayed. *Do you know he prayed for you? He prayed for us?* He did. And his prayer embraced both communion and kingdom. ***Read John 17:23-24 ... I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.***

Jesus speaks to his Father. He speaks with the intimacy about the love he shares with the Father. But he also prays for us. He asks the Father to bring us together, in harmony ... to make us one. The reason he asks the Father this is so that everyone will know about his love. In other words, he wants his kingdom will come.

Jesus cautions us not to pray vain or empty prayers.

Instead we pray prayers of healing; communion and kingdom.

And we're meant to do so with spiritual integrity ...

Movement 3: Integrity of Prayer (vv.14-15)

That's how Jesus concludes his instruction on prayer ... by bringing us back to forgiveness. ***Read Matthew 5:14-15 ... For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*** At first blush it seems as though Jesus is speaking about heavenly forgiveness as reward for earthly forgiveness. But this can't be true. The entire sermon to this point has spoken about his disciples as people who are blessed, salt, light, and invited to be participates in

his kingdom project. In other words, his disciples are received in fellowship and family with God, they're already forgiven. And so what Jesus must be talking about is integrity. Those who are forgiven by the Father demonstrate this grace by forgiving others. Or conversely, Bible teacher Leon Morris says, "*to fail to forgive others is to demonstrate that one has not felt the saving touch of God*" (Matthew, 149).

This makes sense. After all, Jesus begins his teaching on prayer by denouncing hypocrisy. He begins by cautioning us about the vain and empty prayers of the religious class. He ends with the wholeness of healing. One who has been forgiven, forgives. One who forgives, is forgiven. We pray with integrity when we pray as those who have been forgiven. We pray with integrity when we pray as if the Heavenly Father is a generous forgiver.

We should be skeptical of thoughts and prayers which lack integrity. Mere sentiment does not bring kingdom healing. However, we should be deeply grateful and full participants in a prayer life which has been made whole in Christ. A prayer life rooted not in our habits but in God's holiness.