

1.29.23 Two Ways Not To Pray

So far in this New Year we've reminded ourselves that "nothing we do for the Lord is in vain," there's no retirement from the Kingdom of God and that even **our hardships and frustrations somehow accomplish God's Kingdom purposes in the world**. Our next long-term study will be in Ephesians. But before we start in there, and because we are returning to our weekly prayer time [Feb/Mar Thu 3:30], I thought we'd take a couple weeks to **consider some things Jesus says about Prayer** in Matt 6- right in the center of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount

One of the big themes in the SotM is that our exterior Life MUST match up with our Interior Life. What we're *thinking and believing and feeling* needs to match what we're *doing, saying and being*. **The potential for this disconnect between interior and exterior is so real Jesus can say: Matt. 7:22** "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' **23** "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you..."

The mind is not a Sin-Free Zone. **Motive matters to God.**

In living our faith in Christ the interior must match up with the exterior.

And this is certainly true when it comes to PRAYER.

Jesus warns in 6:1: Be careful not to parade your righteousness around to get people's attention! He then goes on to apply this general command to Alms-giving, Prayer and Fasting. This morning's focus is **Prayer**. Jesus warns about two ways NOT to pray: **Do not pray for the sake of Reputation and Do not pray with Flattering Repetition**.

Now on the plus side, the behavior Jesus is addressing can only happen in a society that considers praying to God important. **Some Rabbi's taught: "Great is prayer, greater than all good works."** So as **Barclay** puts it, the things Jesus is correcting: "...are the faults of misguided devotion."

Every devout Jew prayed the **Shema** every morning before 9am- reciting what we would know as **Deut. 6:4-9 & 11:13-21**. And some a second time before 9pm. The Hebrews also prayed three times a day, reciting a series of 18 short prayers called **Amidah** (standing). Besides this liturgy of prayers there were set prayers for every part of one's life, from using new furniture to seeing the ocean or spotting a comet in the sky.

Certainly for centuries the Hebrews held the act of communicating with God in high esteem. So have we. But thanks to our Fallen Nature, humans tend to twist the best things to serve our selfishness. Just like then, the situation is ripe for *us to make the same prayer mistakes Jesus is talking about: praying to impress or using prayer like magic words*.

Jesus first warning is: **DO NOT PRAY FOR THE SAKE OF REPUTATION**

Matt. 6:5 “And when you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they will be seen by people. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

When **Lyndon Johnson** was President, he had several guests in for a meal at the family room of the White House. LBJ had given the honor of saying grace to journalist **Bill Moyers** (both a Baptist minister and press secretary to LBJ). As Moyers began to softly say grace, LBJ - who couldn't understand what was being said, interrupted Moyers, **"Speak up man."** Without looking up and barely stopping, Bill Moyers replied, **"I wasn't talking to you."** (Mr. Moyers was evidently NOT praying to impress the crowd.)

Obviously, Jesus was aware of people in his day who prayed to impress the crowd rather than God. He calls them **hypocrites**- playactors- because **they're portraying a devotion to God that is, more about worshiping themselves.** They are not so interested in **actually "wanting God"** as they are in appearing as if they want God. The immediate gratification of a **Godly Reputation** in the present is of more value than is the distant promise of God saying "well done."

Now I totally understand this. When Rebekah and I were Gamekeepers NW Waterfowl Game farm we really liked telling people that we were gamekeepers. To certain folks it makes us seem cool. But we didn't really LOVE the actual work: Twice daily feedings 365 days a year -no breaks and more... We loved the reputation but not the work because it was hard and unceasing.

Prayer is also hard work. Prayer is a spiritual discipline. Getting your mind to shut out the world and focus on God is no easy thing. It takes time and energy and commitment. It's a lot easier to parrot some religious words. And, honestly, the listener's response is typically more tangible and immediate than God's.

Jesus says of some of the religious leaders : Matt 23:6 “They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7 and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. Jesus accuses **these actors** of being addicted to **“good reviews,”** going so far as to say: “...they do all their deeds to be noticed by men” [Matt 23:5].

If, when you pray, you're trying to impress your peers you make yourself a Lie. You act the part of talking passionately to God when in fact you're performing for the crowd. **This is simple idolatry.** You're worshipping at the feet of yourself and hoping others will join in. [Her relationship to God is so beautiful, He's so close to God.]. [Truly, I don't believe anyone here has to worry about this issue, except me.]

But there is a thing we all should think about. Because you can do the same thing with the little phrase **“I'll pray for you”** or the popular: **“Sending thoughts and prayers.”**

“Thoughts and prayers” has become sort of a **punchline** because everyone knows how empty the phrase is. Like cotton candy it promises much, it even looks good, but it melts away to nothing.

When in a public forum [e.g. social media] and someone says: “I’ll pray for you,” I wonder if the one saying so will actually fulfill the promise. They might have good intentions. But now isn’t the time. I’ll get it later. And in the busyness of life it’s forgotten. Sometimes I think “I’ll pray for you” may be more of a social nicety among Christians [like “how are you? I’m fine.”]. And it comes with the added benefit of making you look and sound spiritual- as if prayer -and particularly prayer for the person in need- is important to you.

My personal practice is to avoid the phrase and, instead, pray immediately for the person or situation right where I am. Sometimes I will write a little prayer for the person or situation in the comments.

So if motive matters to God, then what’s your motive for saying: “I’ll pray for you?” Are you honestly committing yourself to bring the situation before God’s throne or are you offering a social nicety that conveniently polishes up your spiritual street cred. **Who is your audience when you publicly pray or promise to pray? Is it God or people?** One might ask: why does that matter?

It matters because, if it’s people, it’s both WANTING THE WRONG THING and TRUSTING THE WRONG THING. It’s trusting human approval for your validation when you should be preferring God’s approval. Sadly human approval is as reliable as cotton candy or “thoughts and prayers.” And it’s wanting the reputation of a child of God over actually BEING a child of God.

Do we want God or do we want people to THINK we want God? Jesus is challenging us all to check our prayer motives. Because Motives matter to God.

Jesus second warning is: **DO NOT PRAY WITH FLATTERING REPETITION.**

Matt. 6:7 “And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the **Gentiles** do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. 8 “So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

As a society we consume massive quantities of words: millions of websites, television broadcasts, texts and conversations, books, podcasts, videos, newspapers, magazines, radio, even junk mail. And as a society we know that words have power to influence behavior or opinions.

We’re VERY familiar with advertising companies and press agents and spin doctors. We all know that CONTROLLING THE CONTENT and REPEATING THE CONTENT as often as possible are the accepted means of **advertisers to move the public into the desired thoughts and behaviors,** whether it’s “not smoking,” voting for Jane Doe, or buying a Ford.

The ancient pagans didn’t have our experience with PR but, all the same, **they**

concluded the right words, repeated as often as possible, by as many people as possible, were required to move the gods into answering their prayers.

Repetition was important to the prayers of ancient pagan religions. An example: in Acts 19 a mob of Ephesians spends hours chanting: **“Great is Diana of the Ephesians.”** Part of the goal of the repetition was **a trance state** that would connect them directly to the spiritual realm and their god or goddess of choice.

In **1Kings 18** we find Elijah challenging the prophets of Baal to a sacrifice duel. The pagan prophets spend half a day calling out **“O Baal hear us,”** all to no avail.

Modern advertising agencies take the same approach. During our last election cycle most cable TV stations were deluged, inundated with political commercials. That’s because- like the ancient pagans- **we believe repetition will overwhelm the audience** and carry them where we want them to go.

Another piece of this was the **flattery and cajoling of the gods;** telling them how great they were, using ALL their titles, buttering them up to get on their good side so they would grant your request [the Eddie Haskel approach to prayer]. This was true of the **Greco-Roman deities,** as well as the Caesars – who were worshipped as gods.

The Christian historian Eusebius quoted a list of Caesar’s titles for us....

To get your request you gotta flourish those titles:

The emperor Caesar, Galerius, Valerius, Maximus, Invictus, Augustus, Pontifex Maximus, Germanicus Maximus, Egyptian Maximus, Phoebeus Maximus, Sarmenicus Maximus (repeated five times) Persecus Maximus (twice) Carpicus Maximus (six times) Armenicus Maximus, Medicus Maximus, Abendicus Maximus, Holder of tribunicial authority for the 20th time, emperor for the 19th, consul for the 8th, Pater Patriae Pro-Consul..... And so on and so forth.

Uncertainty of the god’s intentions marks these prayers. **Gods of the ancient pagans are precocious, vain, petty, and volatile.** Flattery and repetition were critical to getting your answer

Advertisers in our day believe repetition and an appeal to our vanity will get us to do and buy all sorts of things. Similarly, **the pagans think the success of their prayer to “the gods” is dependent on the excellence of their flattery, the number of words and the intensity of expression.** Even in Judaism some Rabbi’s taught: “Whoever is long in prayer is heard.” But longer is not always better.

A dentist told an unfortunate fellow he’d have to have a tooth pulled. "How much will it cost," he asks the dentist. "It's \$35 a tooth." "How long will it take to pull the tooth," he asks. The dentist says, **"Oh, About a minute."** "Wow," says the patient, "I get paid by the hour and when I think of paying \$35 for a minute's work, that is a terribly high hourly wage." **"Well," the dentist says, "I can pull the tooth more slowly if you like."**

Longer is NOT necessarily better. This is as true in prayer as in tooth pulling. The Living God cannot be cajoled into doing what you want- not by flattery or repetition. Prayer is not saying the right magic words, reciting the proper incantation to

get God to give you a parking space. There is no formula prayer for success. Even the Lord's prayer is just a sample- a guideline to follow- not a promise of results.

The All Knowing Father God will not be manipulated by flowery phrases or a vast load of verbiage. Jesus says: You don't have to **fuss** or **wheedle** or **coerce**. You don't have to get God on your side. God is always on your side. Consider:

Psa. 139:1 O LORD, You have searched me and known *me*. **2** You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. **3** You scrutinize my path and my lying down, And are intimately acquainted with all my ways. **Psa. 139:17-18** How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand.

God knows you inside and out. God KNOWS every little thing that's going on in your life. **God LOVES you utterly and absolutely with no-matter- what- Agape Love.** In our text Jesus says: **8**...your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

So let's be clear: Prayer is not your Dear Diary to God- to fill him in on what he's missed. Talking with Him about your life is good. Do it. But remember: He KNOWS. He knows every detail of your circumstances. He knows your emotional state: joy, sorrow, confused, depressed, ecstatic with happiness.

And He KNOWS the whole of all surrounding details of the Kosmos.

Talk to Him, but remember He knows.

And you don't have to get on God's "good side." You never have to reach for beautiful words or flattering phrases. You cannot cajole God into doing anything He wasn't already planning on doing. In fact it seems our "words" are not particularly important: **Rom. 8:26** ...for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words... [That's God's Spirit Knowing YOU].

Considering our consumer culture's familiarity with advertising, it's not surprising American Christians might think they need to pray like an advertising campaign with a catchy slogan, emotional delivery and a massive, targeted, ad buy on the stations God watches most often. [Animal Planet/HGTV]

So we see some followers of Jesus calling on as many people as possible to pray very specific prayers, repeating them as often as possible- in hopes of moving the Father to act. [Baal/Ephesus].

But no. It doesn't work that way. **Jesus, who was known for spending long periods of time in prayer,** says they "7 ...suppose that they will be heard for their many words. **8** "So do not be like them;" They've got it wrong. God the Father is "for you." He has nothing but love for you. You are the Best Beloved of God. **He loves you as if you are His favorite.** And Jesus says **8b** your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

The way I see it, prayer is not so much about getting God to do the things you want as it is about improving our relationship with God- preparing us to receive what God

already has for us.

Jesus warning against **praying for the sake of Reputation** and **praying with flattering Repetition** is as applicable to us as to his Galilean audience. We are not yet perfected and even the best of us, may pray more for those listening than for God. And we are not above using prayer like it's a magic formula to get God to do the thing we think he should be doing.

The repetition of many words do not make a good prayer.

Grand, religious talk that impresses the crowd does not make a good prayer.

Honest hearts and clear communication make for good prayer.

Motive matters to God.

God wants you to want Him- not a reputation for wanting Him.

God wants you to trust Him- not the assessment of your human peers.

And God- your audience of one- wants that reflected in your prayers both public and private.

So Pray- but remember, He knows.

Amen