

WHEN YOU PRAY (Matthew 6:5-8) – Sunday, June 6, 2010 – Summit EFC

Summer Series – *The Lord's Prayer: Making It Your Own*, Message #1 – Pastor Doug Corlew

Today we begin a new summer series on the greatest prayer in the Bible, commonly known as The Lord's Prayer. How many of you grew up in a church where The Lord's Prayer was said every Sunday? I did. Sometimes visitors to Summit will ask me why we don't say the Lord's Prayer every Sunday here.

We'll talk about that in a minute. But there's no doubt that The Lord's Prayer is one of the most well-known and well-loved passages in all of Scripture. When I visit nursing homes, even if I get no reaction to my message, if I end with The Lord's Prayer, everyone seems to perk up, engage with me, and join in. This prayer has meant so much to Christians of all denominations down through the ages.

A father was on his son's case for not knowing his Bible. "You probably don't even know the Lord's Prayer," he shouts sarcastically. "Oh yes I do," the boy answers triumphantly. "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Surprised, the father stammers, "Sorry, son. I had no idea you actually knew it."

So maybe we better look it up and make sure we have it right! Let's turn to **Matthew 6** this morning. The Lord's Prayer is actually recorded twice in the gospels, Matthew 6 and Luke 11 – apparently two separate occasions when Jesus taught this prayer, using slightly different words each time.

We'll take **Matthew 6** as our primary text this summer, where The Lord's Prayer is recorded in **v 9-13**. Jesus says, *Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. 10 Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread, 12 and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen*

That final sentence is found only in some ancient manuscripts, but not all of them, so if you don't see it in your translation, you'll probably find it in a footnote. But throughout the summer, we're going to examine every phrase of this all-important prayer, with the goal of deepening our relationship with God and strengthening our communication with Him. We want to take The Lord's Prayer, and make it our own.

One theologian writes, *It is a model prayer... beautiful and symmetrical, like the most finished work of art. The words are plain and unadorned, yet majestic... The Prayer is short, that it may be quickly learned, easily remembered, and frequently used; but it contains all things pertaining to life and godliness. In its simplicity it seems adapted purposely for the weakness of the inexperienced and ignorant, and yet none can say that he is familiar with the heights and depths which it reveals, and with the treasures of wisdom it contains... It is the beloved and revered friend of our childhood, and it grows with our growth, a never-failing counselor and companion amid all the changing scenes of life.*

So regardless of your background or your age, your familiarity or lack of familiarity with The Lord's Prayer, I think you are going to be challenged and encouraged by this series.

Now this morning we're going to consider the *context* of the prayer in Matthew's gospel, which may not be as familiar to you, but is vitally important as we seek to understand Christ's intentions in giving us the prayer. So let's take a look in our Bibles at the teaching of Jesus which *precedes* the prayer, as I read –

Matthew 6:5-8 - Jesus says, *"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. 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. 7 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. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

According to Jesus, what is the Father really looking for from us? The Lord wants us to be real with Him, just like we value authenticity in all of our human relationships. So how would Jesus measure the authenticity of our prayer life? Two things:

1st, when you pray, **SEEK YOUR FATHER IN SECRET**. Throughout this paragraph, Jesus assumes something. Did you notice that? “*When you pray,*” He says in v 5. And He repeats the same phrase in v 6, and then again in v 7. So from the beginning, Jesus assumes that we do pray, at least a little.

And yet many of us who are serious about living for Christ struggle to pray. For many Christians, the secret life of prayer is a source of secret shame. And so perhaps it should not surprise us that since we have so much we need to learn about prayer, Jesus begins with a subject we do know something about: the prayers of a hypocrite.

When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, He says. The Greek word for *hypocrite* originally was used of an actor, someone who played a part in a dramatic production. In the Greek theatre, actors often wore masks to conceal their true identities.

By the time of Jesus, the word *hypocrite* was used for anyone who treated the world as his stage, casting himself in the starring role. If we had seen the religious hypocrites Jesus saw, we might have been very impressed by them. On the outside, they gave every impression of being highly spiritual.

According to Jesus, *they love to pray!* That’s a good thing, right? So why does Jesus warn us not to be like them? Is it because they loved *to stand* when they prayed? No, some of the great prayers of the Bible were offered in the standing position. Then was it because they loved to stand and pray –

in the synagogues and at the street corners ? No, Jesus often did that very thing. There’s nothing wrong with public prayer. The real problem was that they loved to stand and pray publicly –

that they may be seen by others. The last phrase is the important one. It’s not being seen by others that’s wrong, but doing things for the purpose of being seen. The problem with the hypocrite is his motivation. He doesn’t really want to be holy; he only wants to be seen as holy. He is more concerned with his reputation for righteousness than about actually becoming righteous.

The praise of people matters more to him than the approval of God. So he positions his prayers for maximum effect; it’s all for show. In this case, he prays at the corners of major intersections!

But God is not deceived; He is able to unmask the hypocrite. He can tell the difference between a genuine prayer that’s offered up to Him in faith, and a pretentious prayer that’s simply offered to impress others. One indication of our hypocrisy is if we only pray is when someone else is watching or listening.

As **D.A. Carson** puts it, “*The person who prays more in public than in private reveals that he is less interested in God’s approval than in human praise. Not piety but a reputation for piety is his concern.*”

Did you know that only 10% of an iceberg floats above the surface of the ocean, while the other 90% is submerged under water? **Philip Graham Ryken** uses this fact to illustrate what things should be like in our spiritual lives. Our public practice of religion should be just the tip of the iceberg.

The prayers we pray at church or in our small groups or at the dinner table should be supported by a much larger mass of private prayer each day. Unfortunately, Ryken says –

The prayer life of the average Christian is more like the Titanic than an iceberg. We are proud vessels above the surface, but underneath our respectable Christianity, the bulkheads are filling with water, the pumps are failing, and we are in danger of sinking in a sea of spiritual neglect. Hypocrites pray simply to be seen, to look impressive. And so, somewhat surprisingly –

Jesus says they *are* rewarded for their efforts! *Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward (v 5)*. Isn't it interesting that if what you really want is the approval of other human beings, God will probably let you have it? You will gain the smug satisfaction of having others think you are quite spiritual.

However, that is all you will get. Your reward has been received in full. By the time the hypocrite says, "Amen," he has already received everything he will ever get for his prayers. You see, the problem with the hypocrite's reward is that it never lasts very long. Human praise never does.

And besides, human approval will not be much help to you on the Day of Judgment. When Christ returns as the glorious Judge of the living and the dead, He will not read your letters of recommendation. He will not care how spiritual people think you are. He will know whether you have truly given Him your heart.

So unless the hypocrite's reward is all you want, do not be a hypocrite when you pray. Do not pretend to be what you are not. Do not be like the Pharisee who piously prayed, "*God, I thank you that I am not like other men.*" Instead, be real, and come as you are, like the tax collector who humbly prayed, "*God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*" **(Luke 18:9-14)**

No matter how visible we are in the church, Jesus is saying there *is* reason for us to question the authenticity of our spiritual lives if we do not seek the Father sincerely, behind closed doors.

In **v 6**, He says, *But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.* The word He uses for *room* here is the word for a small inner closet or chamber. In those days, the storeroom was often the only room in the house with a door.

The point is not that every Christian must have a literal prayer closet, but every Christian should have a particular place to pray, preferably somewhere hidden and private. I realize that's not always easy to come by, especially if you're a busy mom with kids underfoot.

300 years ago Susannah Wesley had 19 children, including the famous Charles and John Wesley. Susannah trained her children to respect that whenever she threw her apron over head it was time for them to occupy themselves because she was meeting with God! Her prayer closet was under her apron.

Where do you pray? What place has become sacred to you as the place where you meet with God? Is it a closet in your home? Do you go out on the porch or deck? Do you pray in the car on your way to work? Is your tractor like a sanctuary for you? Can you close the door to your office for 10 minutes at lunch time?

Jesus was often sneaking away to pray in some secret place: *Rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed (Mark 1:35).*

Another time, *After he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone (Matt 14:23).*

And Luke tells us that (*Jesus*) would (often) withdraw to desolate places and pray (**Luke 5:16**). So Jesus practiced what He preached. He spent much time in prayer in the secret place. Why? The reason Jesus went to the secret place is because His Father was there! And that's the reason we should go to the secret place, because the Father is waiting for us as well! The same Father!

In **v 6** Jesus says, 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.

Notice those personal pronouns. God is not somewhere far away from you and totally inaccessible. He is near you; He is available. God may be unseen, but He is not unseeing.

Psalm 34:15 says, *The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry.* He not only sees, He hears! Those who seek the Lord in secret will be rewarded for their efforts.

Jesus may be speaking of rewards in heaven. He may be speaking of the rewards of answered prayer. But there is also a sense in which true prayer is its own reward – just being in the presence of our heavenly Father! Oh what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear!

God values an authentic relationship with us, and that means we must not develop our spirituality merely in the public sphere, to be seen by others, but we must seek the Father in secret.

And **2nd**, when you pray, **MAKE YOUR PRAYERS PERSONAL**. In **v 7-8** Jesus continues: “*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. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*”

At some point, Jesus evidently was exposed to other religions, and He overheard pagan Gentiles saying their prayers. And what really struck Him about their prayers was how repetitious they were.

So He tells His disciples, “*Do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do.*” The **King James Version** reads, “*Use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do.*” The **NIV** says, “*Do not keep on babbling like pagans.*” **NASB** translates it, “*Do not use meaningless repetition,*” and **The Living Bible** says, “*Don't recite the same prayer over and over as the heathen do.*”

In the ancient world, both the Greeks and the Romans were extremely verbose in their prayers. When they recited their incantations, they were hoping to appease the angry gods. So pagan prayers were kind of like spiritual good luck charms. And still today, many religions of the world babble their prayers, repeating their mantras over and over again, until the mind becomes comfortably numb.

And yet babbling is also a potential danger in Christian churches that use a fixed liturgy for their prayers. The same phrases can be mumbled so frequently that they cease to have any meaning. And ironically, the prayer that is mindlessly babbled more than any other is probably, what? The Lord's Prayer! How sad.

Jesus gave us the Lord's Prayer so we could learn to pray sincerely, not mindlessly. And yet we often use it without even thinking about what it means. We *say* the Lord's Prayer without actually *praying* it.

That's why most evangelical churches do not include the Lord's Prayer at every service. Not that it's wrong to do so, or that all churches or Christians that do so are praying mindlessly. But we do see it as a danger. Of course, there are many ways we can become mindless in worship. We're so familiar with a song that we don't think about what we're singing. Or it's a new song so we tune it out. Or we read our bulletin while someone is praying. Mindless worship happens with or without a liturgy.

But my point is that Jesus taught this prayer after encouraging us to make our prayers more personal! How many times in this passage does He emphasize that when we pray, we're talking to our *Father*?

As a father, I know I wouldn't want my kids simply memorizing a script and repeating it to me every day as their primary form of communication. I want them to tell me what's on their heart. I want to interact with them, and I don't want to have the exact same conversation with them every day.

Again, it's not that The Lord's Prayer should never be quoted. I think every Christian should memorize it and pray it word for word sometimes. But surely Jesus' intention was for us to use the Prayer as a pattern or model, so that our prayers stay balanced and focused on the right things.

The Lord's Prayer is to be a launch pad from which we should be lifted to higher places of worship, surrender, confession, petition. But whether we are quoting any prayer or using our own words, we should be careful that our minds are fully engaged and our hearts are truly being lifted up to God.

In **v 7** Jesus explains why pagans heap up empty phrases when they pray: *for they think that they will be heard for their many words*. They are not sure whether God hears them. Think about it: If your God is not all-seeing, all-knowing, or all-loving, then you can't pray with any real confidence.

So the pagan is never sure if he's going to get an answer or not. But he figures, "If I pray long enough or hard enough, or use just the right words, I'll improve my chances. I just need to come up with the right formula at the right time, and perhaps one of the gods will answer."

But Jesus tells us in **v 8**, *Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.* Isn't that a great word of re-assurance? Your Father sees you in secret, and your Father already knows exactly what you need! The first words of the Lord's Prayer are what? "Our Father in heaven." So Jesus is telling us, "Don't pray like you are an orphan!"

The tragedy of a child without a father is that he or she can never depend on a father's love. An orphan never learns what it is like to be tucked into bed by a loving father or to hear the promise of his unconditional love. As a result, many orphans have nagging doubts about their identity. They are insecure and sometimes even run away from someone who loves them.

Too many people act like that with God. They don't trust in the Father. They think they have to beg in desperation for anything they get from Him, because deep in their hearts they are not certain that God really loves them and wants what is best for them. Am I describing you?

The reason some people pray like spiritual orphans is because they have not yet given their hearts to Jesus Christ. Because everyone who gives their heart to Christ is adopted into God's family, you know.

John 1:12 says, *To all who did receive (Christ), who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.* **Galatians 3:26** says, *for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.* Perhaps the time has finally come for you to become a true child of God through faith in Jesus, His Son.

Human fathers always have their limitations, but our adoptive Heavenly Father is perfect, generous, thoughtful, and forgiving. Having the perfect Father makes all the difference when it comes to praying.

First of all, it means you can keep it simple when you talk to Him. When children need something from their fathers, they do not hire a lawyer, draft a formal petition, or get down on their knees to beg.

They just ask. That's why Christian prayers are straightforward. The prayers of pagans tend to be overly complicated, but when Christians pray, they pray to their Father.

As a general rule, the prayers of God's children are short and sweet. In fact, one of the striking things about most biblical prayers, including the Lord's Prayer, is their brevity.

Remember, Jesus rebuked the religious scribes who *for a pretense make long prayers* (**Mark 12:40**). It's not that long prayers are necessarily wrong, but when they are made to impress others, they are offensive to God.

In one of his public meetings, evangelist **D.L. Moody** asked a man to pray, and the man prayed. And he prayed. And he prayed. He prayed for so long that Moody finally interrupted him and said to the crowd, "As our brother finishes his prayer, let's sing a hymn." Those who were there said that Moody's action helped to save the meeting and perhaps even helped to save some lost souls!

Our prayers must be fervent, of course, and they ought to be frequent, but they do not need to be fancy. God does not need lengthy explanations. He's already well-informed, you know! Did you know He's never learned any new information from you when you prayed, and you've never caught Him by surprise?

The Lord knows what we need even before we need it. And we can trust His heart because He is a loving Father, and He often supplies what we need even before we ask Him!

God says, "*Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear*" (**Isa 65:24**). Even we human parents know how to anticipate the needs of our children. We don't wait for them to beg before we respond. Often we meet the need before they even mention it to us.

Before they even ask for a drink, we've already taken the milk out of the refrigerator. Before they ask us to play ball or take them fishing, we've already changed our clothes and made time to be with them.

And Jesus says, "*If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him?*" (**Matthew 7:11**)

Our heavenly Father loves to take care of His children. If there is something you really need, just ask. You do not need to beg, borrow, or steal. You don't need to recite some magic words. Just tell your Father what you need. He already knows, and very likely, help is already on the way!