

# What About Prayer • Part 1

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. *The Tavern & The Christians*

1. A tavern was being built in a city that until then had been without a bar
2. A group of Christians in a certain church opposed this and began an all-night prayer meeting, asking God to intervene
3. A few days later, lightning struck the tavern, burning it to the ground
4. The owner brought a lawsuit against the church, claiming they were responsible
5. The Christians hired a lawyer, claiming they were *not* responsible
6. The judge said, "No matter how this case turns out, one thing is clear. The tavern owner believes in prayer and the Christians do not."

### B. *Where Are Your Umbrellas*

1. In a similar story, some years ago in a farming community in the Midwest, the church elders called for a special prayer meeting to pray for rain
2. There had been a drought for far too long and the local crops looked to be lost unless the rains soon fell
3. The night of the prayer meeting came, and most of the farmers in the area showed up
4. But as the pastor of the church took the platform, he said, "I doubt there will be rain any time soon."
5. The people grumbled and complained and told him such a lack of faith was a discouragement to them
6. He replied, "I have *plenty* faith." And as he said this, he reached behind the pulpit and pulled out his umbrella.
7. It was the only one in the room!
8. He said, "We came here to pray for rain. Why then did you not bring your umbrellas?"

### C. *Our Series On Prayer*

1. Today we begin a short week series on prayer - Tonight = PRAYER
2. This has been a long time in coming
3. Frankly, it's a series I've been both *excited* and *reluctant* to begin for 2 reasons
  - a. first of all, I've been reluctant to start it because teaching on prayer is *DANGEROUS*
    - 1) the devil doesn't want us to pray
    - 2) because prayer spells defeat for him and his plans of world domination
    - 3) it's well been said that the church of Christ marches forward on it's knees
    - 4) Satan hates it when we pray!
    - 5) so when we set ourselves to study what the Bible says about prayer, we can expect opposition
    - 6) tonight, as you prepare to return to pray with us here, be on guard

- because the enemy will test your mettle and determination
- 7) don't "think about coming out for prayer tonight" - Just Do It!
  - 8) settle the issue that come what may, you are going to come for prayer
  - 9) so, that's the first reason I've been reluctant to start this series - it's dangerous because we are entering into the ring of spiritual battle
- b. and second, I've been reluctant to start this series because of my own inadequacies in prayer
- 1) I feel I just don't pray as much or as well as I ought to
  - 2) who am I to teach on prayer?
  - 3) I want you to know that I have really struggled with this
  - 4) but I've learned that when it comes to prayer, *rare* is the person who thinks he or she prays *enough*
  - 5) asking someone if they pray *ENOUGH* is like asking them if they've stopped stealing from work<sup>yet</sup>
    - a) however you answer it - you feel somehow guilty
  - 6) talking about prayer can easily become an instant guilt producer because few if any of us feel like we really pray as well or as often as we should
  - 7) so let's begin right there . . .
4. This series is aimed at understanding what God's Word says about prayer
  5. it isn't intended to produce guilt that then moves you to pray
  6. Prayer should be motivated by the love of God!

## II. MATTHEW 6:5-8

### A. *The Sermon On the Mount*

1. In the Sermon on the Mount, we find Jesus' most compact teaching on what following Him looks like
2. He tells us what kind of *attitudes* His disciples will have,
  - a. what *effect* they will have on one another and the world -
  - b. and He reveals the kind of *habits* they will form
3. In one section of the sermon, He tells His followers *how to pray*.
4. What better place for us to go to learn how to pray than straight to the Words of Jesus?

### B. Vs. 5-6

- {5} "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.
- {6} "But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

1. He says . . .

#### **When you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites**

2. A hypocrite is an actor, a pretender
3. If there was any one kind of person that Jesus was really hard on it was this -

religious pretenders, hypocrites who acted all holy and pure on the outside but who were all show and no go

- a. Jesus called them white-washed tombs
  - b. they looked nice and clean on the outside
  - c. but inside they were nothing but rotting bones
4. Jesus tells His followers - "Don't be a hypocrite in prayer! Don't pretend."
  5. Why would someone *pretend* to pray? Jesus answers that right here . . .

**They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men.**

6. When we pray today, the usual posture is to bow our head, close our eyes, and fold our hands
7. But in Jesus' day they adopted a very different posture in prayer
  - a. people typically stood or knelt
  - b. then they would lift both their heads and hands toward heaven
  - c. their eyes would be wide open - looking up
  - d. and prayer was usually offered out loud
8. Since the hypocrites wanted to be seen they would draw attention to themselves by standing in public places
  - a. they would find the most crowded places in the temple courtyard
  - b. or they would stand on a busy corner of the city
  - c. then they would lift up their hands and heads
  - d. and break forth in lofty words of praise and prayer
9. But these pretenders only wanted the people passing by to *think* they were spiritual
  - a. they loved and desired the praise of man
  - b. they wanted others to say, "Oh my, have you heard Isaac pray? What a man of God!"
10. Jesus said that since that is what these actors wanted, they have their reward!
11. But that is it!
12. Their prayers go no higher than the ears of men and women
13. They pray, not to be heard by God, but by man!
14. Note that well friend!
  - a. the aim of genuine, sincere prayer is God, not others
  - b. in prayer, we are supposed to be talking to God, not our husband or wife,
    - 1) not our children, not our roommate
    - 2) not Aunt Millie or the other elders
  - c. genuine prayer isn't a lecture or a long drawn out explanation
    - 1) who would presume to lecture God?
    - 2) does God need a long explanation?
    - 3) no - He knows the details better than we ever will
  - d. many of us have participated in a prayer meeting, where there are those who you just know aren't really talking to God
  - e. they use the pretense of prayer to lecture the rest of the room [Gossip]
  - f. prayer becomes a way for them to make others *think* they are deeply spiritual [KJ English]
  - g. or they spell out the details of some need they have because they hope that

- someone there might get the clue and ante up [shoes - Nike Air Jordans size 9½]
- h. a little boy was saying his night time prayers with his mother
    - 1) "Lord, bless Mommy & Daddy, and God, GIVE ME A NEW BICYCLE!!!"
    - 2) the mother said, "Honey, God's not deaf."
    - 3) he replied, "I know Mom, but Grandma's in the next room, and she's hard of hearing."
  15. The first thing we need to learn about prayer is this - It's directed to God, not man
  16. The elders of a certain church once went to a young man to criticize some of the vocabulary he used in the prayers he prayed at their prayer meetings
    - a. after they had laid their load on him
    - b. he turned to them and said, "Are you gentlemen finished? I have just one thing to say: I wasn't speaking to you."
  17. Instead of merely play-acting at prayer, Jesus says this . . .
- {6} "But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.**
18. It's from this verse that we get the idea of the prayer-closet
    - a. the KJV translates the word "room" as *closet*
    - b. it referred to a room that was used not for living in but for storage - so you would rarely encounter other people there
  19. The idea is that our prayer-life needs to be sincere, genuine communication with God
  20. And as it is, as we devote ourselves to seeking Him in *private*, He will reward us with *public* answers
  21. Is Jesus saying here that we shouldn't pray in public? Is he prohibiting group prayer?
    - a. not at all!
    - b. in 1 Timothy 2 Paul encourages public and group prayer,
    - c. Jesus prayed publicly when he blessed the loaves and fishes (John 6:11) -in Garden
    - d. on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples were together, seeking God
  22. It's not wrong to pray in public, but it is wrong to pray in public if we are not in the habit of praying in private.
    - a. 8/9's of the bulk of an iceberg is below the waterline and out of sight
    - b. only 1/9<sup>th</sup> is visible above the surface.
    - c. our prayer life should be like that - 8/9's seen only by God, with 1/9<sup>th</sup> seen by others
  23. Develop a habit of private prayer!

### **C. Vs. 7-8**

- {7} "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.**

**{8} "Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him."**

1. The Jews who heard these words were familiar with how the Gentiles prayed to their gods
  - a. pagans thought that if they named *all* their gods -
  - b. repeated their request to each one in the same words
  - c. and then repeated that request multiple times
  - d. they would have a better chance of being heard
  - e. their formula for answered prayer was:  
"Volume = Effect"
2. Jesus said, "Don't do that. Don't think like the heathen think about prayer."
3. Prayer should not consist of heaped up phrases and idle repetitions
4. We should never think of God like some kind of cosmic genie who is asleep in the bottle of heaven and is roused from His slumber by the volume of our prayers
5. The probability of an answer to our request is *not* in proportion to the total number of our words
6. Consider this:
  - a. the Lord's Prayer contains 56 words;
  - b. the Gettysburg Address, 266;
  - c. the Ten Commandments, 297;
  - d. the Declaration of Independence, 300;
  - e. and a recent U.S. government order setting the price of cabbage, 26,911.
  - f. it's not how long we talk, it's what we *say* that is important
7. Certainly Jesus' straightforward command prohibiting vain repetitions here has resulted in their banishment from the prayers of His people - Right?
  - a. hardly!
  - b. many of you here today are probably thinking of the thousands of times you prayed the rosary as a Catholic
  - c. that's a pretty clear violation of this command
  - d. but lest we hop on that bandwagon and restrict this only to the rosary, let me ask this: Does your mind ever wander when you are praying and when you come to you realize you've just been mouthing familiar & oft repeated prayers?
  - e. maybe you're not saying "Hail Mary, mother of God, blessed be the fruit of thy womb"
  - f. but you are saying something along the lines of, "Lord we ask that Ye would bless this food and make it nourishment to us your humble servants. We give Thee thanks for it, in Jesus Name, Amen."
  - g. but truth be told - word for word, that's the same prayer you said last night, and the night before, and the night before that - and were it not for this message today - it would have been the same prayer you would have prayed tonight!
  - h. how's that any different from saying the rosary?
8. Or what about "prayer-cliches" as I call them; oft repeated phrases or rote prayers that we say time and again without any thought or real sincerity

- a. "Lord, please bless my family and my church"
  - b. now, the first couple times you prayed that, it was sincere
  - c. but after praying it for three years, it's can easily become nothing more than a phrase we spin out into the air while our minds are a million miles away
  - d. that too is a vain repetition
9. Jesus is not saying we should never pray about the same thing more than once
    - a. notice that He doesn't say, "Don't repeat yourself."
    - b. what he says is, "Don't repeat *vain* things."
  10. It's Okay to repeat yourself, but we must make sure we are staying *engaged* in our prayers
  11. In fact, Jesus told a story about a widow who through sheer persistence in her request of an unjust judge, got him to hear her case and give her the justice she was seeking
  12. The point of that story was that if an *unjust* judge would yield to the persistence of a lowly widow, **how much more** will the Righteous God hear and answer the persistent prayers of His people
  13. So Jesus does not prohibit repetition - what He decries in *mindless, vain, empty* repetition that thinks the sheer volume of words is enough to move the hand of God
  14. Now v. 8 throws a curve to our whole theology of prayer
  15. Jesus says, in the context of teaching on prayer, that God know what we need before we ask Him.
  16. The question that immediately comes to mind then is; If God already knows what we need, then why do we bother with prayer at all?
    - a. if vain repetition is pointless because God already knows our need -
    - b. isn't the initial request pointless too?
  17. The answer of course is "No!"
  18. Of course God knows our needs before we mention them - He knows all things
    - a. He knew us before we were born
    - b. He knows what our needs are today, and tomorrow, and the day after
    - c. He knows what our prayers will be before we pray them
    - d. and He knows how He will answer them
  19. Jesus is not saying that prayer is *ineffectual* - He is saying that *vain repetition* is ineffectual and we have better things to do with our time than spin out long insincere prayers
  20. While God knows what our needs are before we do, prayer is still vital
    - a. it's vital because it provides us the opportunity to go to God and tell Him we are now aware of what our needs are
    - b. then as we speak to Him, we yield to Him the right to work and provide the answers
    - c. when He does, in His time and His way, our love and appreciation for Him is deepened because we can make the connection between our need, our prayer, our God, and His provision
  21. Prayer is like a rope that ties us to God
    - a. we are in a row-boat, and He is a Rock
    - b. one end of the rope is tied to the rock, the other we hold in our hands
    - c. when we pray, we do not pull the rock toward us; we pull ourselves against

- the current of this fallen world toward the Rock
- d. the more we pull, the closer we get
  - e. prayer doesn't change God's will - it changes ours

### III. CONCLUSION

#### A. *Next Week*

1. In the next verses, Jesus gives the disciples a model for prayer,
2. Which is what we'll get in to next week

#### B. *Pulling The Rope*

1. But let's end here this morning
2. How are you pulling the rope of prayer?
3. CH Spurgeon once said,  
"Prayer pulls the rope down below and the great bell rings above in the ears of God. Some scarcely stir the bell, for they pull so lazily; others give only an occasional jerk at the rope. But he who communicates with heaven is the man who grasps the rope boldly and pulls continuously with all his might."
4. No doubt Spurgeon was thinking of Hebrew 4:16 as he spoke those words

**Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

5. Help in time of need!
  - a. friends, if ever there was a time of need in this world, in this nation, and in the church, IT IS NOW!!!!!!!!!!
  - b. so - let's come boldly to the throne of God - the throne over all the universe, a throne that is marked by *unmerited favor*
  - c. let's plead for mercy and grace,
  - d. not with the tired and worn out empty words that have marked our prayers to date
  - e. but let's get on our knees and plead with heaven in sincere and fervent prayers for nothing less than a visitation of the living God
  - f. join us tonight as we join hands on the rope of prayer and ring that bell so loudly it cracks like the liberty bell in Philadelphia