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## The DNA of Prayer: It's Personal, Part 1

### Matthew 6:5-13

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.

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We're entitling this series *The DNA of Prayer*. There are a couple gentlemen chatting one day, and as men often do, they got into a little sort of competitive banter. They were talking about religious and spiritual things, and one of them, trying to gain the upper hand on the other, sort of took a little dig at the one man and said, "You don't know much about the Bible, do you? I bet," he said, "you can't even say the Lord's Prayer. As a matter of fact," he said, "I bet you \$10 right now that you can't quote me the Lord's Prayer."

"I'll take that bet," said the other man. "Here it is. God is great. God is good. And we thank him for our food. All men," he said.

The other man chuckled, so reached into his pocket, pulled out his billfold, and said, "I didn't think you knew it. Here's your \$10."

There's a little tension in that joke because it's about spiritual things, and jokes have tension in them. And when it comes to spiritual things, sometimes people get nervous. We get a little on edge. Sometimes we feel a little insecure.

And so at the beginning of this series on prayer, I want to say to you that no matter what your prayer life is, no matter how often you pray, no matter how secure you feel in prayer or insecure you feel, it's okay wherever you're at in your faith journey. It's just fine. God has invited us to come to him just as we are.

And no matter where you're at in your life of prayer, we want to simply encourage you and build you up and strengthen you in your ability to come before the Lord and speak with him, because that's what prayer is in its essence, its simplest form. It's just plain deliberate communication with God—deliberate communication with God.

And we want people to know how to pray because it's a great gift that God has given us. This gift of prayer is something that God has graced upon us, to come before his throne, the Bible says boldly, and just simply talk to him about our lives.

And when you look at the history of the church, we learn that there's great power in prayer. Prayer is something that can be utilized by anyone, anywhere, anytime, and it is a tool that God has given us to enrich our lives and also to tap into his strength, his goodness, and conform ourselves with his will.

As a matter of fact, Acts chapter one tells us that the church that we're a part of today, the church in the world, was began by people who, after they were with Jesus and he ascended into heaven and an angelic being told them to go and wait in Jerusalem, they went there and waited and just gathered together. And the Scripture says they were constantly in prayer, praying to God together constantly. And this is where the birth of the church came.

God's people praying to him. And then in response to their prayers, God by his will poured out His Spirit upon them and gave birth to the Christian church in the world.

And the power of the Spirit and the working of the Spirit, and calling God's people to prayer down through history, has sustained the church that God is building that we're a part of. And so we want to be a praying church. And wherever you come from, we want you to be encouraged in your prayer life, strengthened in it, and built up so that we could be an ever more increasing church that's filled with the prayers of God's people.

Now, when you think about prayer, there are two sort of basic elements that you have to believe in order to pray. The first one is this: you have to believe that there is a God. The Bible says that to deny that there is a God is to work to suppress the truth. His invisible qualities are clearly seen by what has been created.

But there are many people who claim that they don't believe in the existence of God. Atheists don't believe in the existence of God. Some people believe in the existence of God, but they don't have this second belief that God is involved and he's listening to us.

So people who claim to be atheists, deists, agnostics, even pure evolutionists, have no reason to pray. Because even if they believe in the existence of a God, they don't believe he's personal and interactive and listening to people on the earth.

But Christians are different. We believe that there is a God who spun all of this into existence, and that he hasn't backed away from his creation. He's engaged with his creation in his mercy and kindness and love. And not only that, he will listen to those of us who are made in his image.

We can talk to him. He'll hear us, he'll respond, and he will even communicate back to us by His Spirit, through His Word, through his people, and even in creation, he speaks to us.

And so if you believe there is a God and you have some sense that he's personal and interactive, you can pray. You can talk to him.

And the early disciples were learning this as Jesus was here on the earth. They were watching him, and they saw, as Luke chapter five records, he often withdrew—God in the flesh here in the form of Jesus—Luke five tells us he often withdrew to lonely places to pray. And his early followers were observing him doing this.

Oh, he goes away by himself, and he talks to his heavenly Father. He prays. Often. He does this.

By the time we get to Luke chapter 11, we read this: one day when Jesus was praying in a certain place, when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

“Teach us to pray.” My sense is they'd watched his life for some time, and they were seeing this man who was living differently on the earth. There was some sort of persevering power in him in the face of the resistance of this world. Jesus just kept going in the face of persecution and hardship. And not only that, he was touching people, and they were being healed. He was speaking as one with great authority. They were watching him cast demonic beings out of individuals. He had spiritual power of which they had never seen.

And they're watching him do this, and they're watching him withdraw to lonely places to pray. And one day, after he's coming back from prayer, one of them just says, “Lord, we want some of this. We want some of what you have. Is it coming from your prayer life? Would you teach us to do what you're doing to tap into this supernatural power? Would you teach us to pray?”

Well, in Matthew five, Jesus responded in the same way he did in Luke 11. He said to his disciples in Luke 11, “When you pray,” he was going to teach them. In Matthew five, he started it a little different place when he was teaching about prayer, and then he ended up at the same place he did with his disciples in Luke 11. In Matthew—actually Matthew six—Jesus said this: “When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites.”

Basically, he was encouraging them to start in private. The hypocrites love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, he says, “I say to you, they have received their reward.” People who pray as a demonstration to other people and do it in a way that is kind of showy—Jesus said they get their reward from the people around them. They may get the applause of others, the oohs and ahs of others for their eloquent prayers, but that's the only reward they will get.

Jesus said, “When you pray,” he said, “I would encourage you start to develop your prayer life in private. This is something personal between you and God.” As a matter of fact, he said, “When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.” Develop a private prayer life first.

You don't have to have an actual prayer closet. It can be the secret place of our heart, praying to God anywhere, any time. But prayer begins as a personal, secret communication between us and God.

Jesus said prayer at its essence is not something to be a show to other people. It's something God wants—heart to heart with him in our lives. Start your prayer life, Jesus said, in secret.

He was coaching them up on how he prayed and how his life was empowered by the prayers that he prayed. It starts in secret, and then he encouraged them to pray from their authentic selves.

“When you pray,” he said, “do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do.” It's not about all the words that you say. This should be a relief to many of us. God wants to take the pressure out of prayer.

If you sense this in his teaching, prayer is a conversation, a deliberate communication between us and the Almighty. It's a great gift.

“When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you even ask him.”

Jesus is saying God knows everything. You're not going to bring something to him that he doesn't already know. But though he knows everything, that doesn't always prompt him to action. But our prayers can.

Sometimes God is waiting for us to come to him as he's drawing us, open our authentic selves to him, and be open and honest with him about what's going on in our lives.

The DNA of prayer—it's a private thing, first and foremost, between us and God before it can be a public thing, coming from our authentic selves, talking to God about our lives, about what's going on inside of us—things that he already knows our needs—speaking to him openly and honestly.

I'm sharing these things with you in Jesus' teaching because in my journey in ministry, one of the things I've noticed is how insecure so many people are about prayer.

And I can tell you, over the course of my 30 plus years in ministry, this aspect of learning about the church in the world—I'll just say this—has been one of the saddest learnings for me.

I don't know exactly why, but I—I grew up in a home where my dad, when I was three years old, started to pray. And I listened to him pray out loud at the dinner table. Sometimes he and my mom in the living room, and I just assumed this was natural for people to experience prayer in their lives.

And then, having gotten out in ministry and sensing what happens in the world, I've just noticed that so many people have such an elevated view of prayer that they simply feel so insecure that they get nervous about this in the world. They get nervous about this in spiritual settings.

And I just want to unhook you all, no matter where you come from, with the topic of prayer, wherever you're at. God simply invites you to start praying to him, talking to him from your heart to his openly and honestly.

And then maybe over time, you can come to the point where, if you join a group or you're asked to pray, you would feel free to offer a prayer from your authentic self.

The church needs and the world needs more praying people.