

April 19, 2026
Pursuing the Gospel: The Heart of Prayer
Matthew 6:5-8
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction...

As we look into our passage today, we're not entering into anything new as much as we are going deeper into the same themes that have already been unfolding in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Again, in Matt. 5, Jesus raised the standard of righteousness beyond external behavior to the condition of the heart. And last Sunday, as we started ch. 6, Jesus then turns to how we are to live out our righteousness and the motives behind such actions as giving, praying and fasting. Last week we discussed giving and fasting and, over the next few weeks, we will turn our attention to prayer.

Now, again, Jesus is not just talking about the actions themselves, but there's a thread that ties them all together. Jesus is exposing the danger of doing the right things for the wrong reasons. He is pulling back the curtain on our spiritual lives and asking a deeper question, "Who are you living for?" "Are you living for the attention and applause of other people?" or "Are you living for the glory and honor of God the Almighty?"

This is where Jesus begins his train of thought in Matt. 6:1, the passage we read last week, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them." That phrase, "to be seen," becomes the heartbeat of the warning and the central theme for this whole section. Again, who are we concerned with being "seen" by?

Now, as we move into Christ's teaching on prayer in vs. 5-8, Jesus applies that same concern to one of the most intimate aspects of our relationship with God. Because if there is anywhere in our lives where we should be real and authentic, it's in prayer. Prayer is meant to be the most personal and intimate way in which we express our relationship with God. And yet, Jesus knows that even prayer can be hijacked by the desire to be seen or for the purpose to get others to think we're more spiritual. And once again, Jesus addresses this way of thinking head on. If you are able, please stand with me in honor of God's word as I read from Matthew 6:5-8. [Read Passage]

Jesus continues his teaching in vs. 5 by saying, "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites." Notice, again as we pointed out last week, he doesn't say "if you pray" but "when you pray." Prayer, just like our giving and fasting, is assumed. It is expected. It is supposed to be a normal part of life for those who belong to the kingdom. And so, the issue is not whether we pray or not, it's about how and why we pray.

Now, the most basic definition of prayer is simply "talking to God." Now, it's much more than that, but we'll work with this simple definition for now. Prayer is the Christian's way of communicating with our Heavenly Father. We pray to praise God and thank him and tell him how much we love him. We pray to enjoy his presence and tell him what is going on in our lives. We pray to make requests and seek guidance and ask for wisdom.

And God loves it when his children come to him in prayer, just as we, who are parents, love it when our children come to us. You see, fellowship and communion with

God are at the heart of prayer. Too often we lose sight of how simple prayer is really supposed to be.

And God wants us to talk with him about everything. The Bible says in 1 Thess. 5:17, to “pray without ceasing,” meaning we should keep a running conversation going with God all day long. We can pray under any and all circumstances. Prayer develops our relationship with God and demonstrates our trust and utter dependence upon him.

Now getting back to our task at hand, Jesus uses the same word “hypocrites” in vs. 5 that we saw last week. Remember, in the ancient world, this word was used to describe an actor or someone who wore a mask and played a role on a stage. Jesus is saying, just like he did when talking about giving and fasting, it’s possible to pray and not actually be praying. It’s possible to speak to God while, in reality, we’re just performing for people and putting on a show.

And he goes on to describe those who pray this way when he says, “they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners...that they may be seen by others.” And, again, that’s the motivation. That’s the goal, to be seen. Here, Jesus has in mind Israel’s religious leaders. He has already shown, earlier in ch. 5, that their emphasis on outward actions and not inner attitudes leads to a false spirituality. They were just putting on airs. Jesus applies the idea of this type of motivation to public prayer. Those looking to announce their own spirituality loved to pray out loud for an audience both on the street and in places of worship.

Now, the reason Jesus mentions these two particular locations is because these were two main places where a Jew in Jesus’ day might pray in this hypocritical manner. You see, the times for public prayer at the synagogue were 9am, noon and 3pm and often times the religious leaders would use these opportunities to pray out loud in order to aid those gathered there in worship. Nothing wrong with that. But apparently, they were not always aiding the worship of others, they were simply drawing attention to themselves. And they would also use the street corners to their advantage during these same times of prayer as the crowds would be making their way to the synagogue for prayer.

And Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.” In other words, if the goal is the attention of others, then their attention is all you get. The applause of people becomes the full and final reward and it fades quickly. As with selfishly motivated giving or fasting, Jesus says those who pray “for show” have received all the reward they’re going to get and the Father will not honor acts of spiritual pride disguised as acts of righteousness.

Now, we’ve all probably seen this play out, not just in a church setting but in everyday life. Think about someone who tells a story in a group, not because the story needs to be told, but because they want to highlight how impressive or generous or even how spiritual they are. Or, how about in a church setting someone who prays in a group setting and, if we’re honest, the prayer starts to sound more like a sermon directed outward toward those around them and not vertically toward God. The words are addressed to God, but the intent is aimed at people to draw attention to themselves.

And if we’re even more honest, we’ve all felt that pull at some point. The subtle desire to sound a little more eloquent with our words or a little more spiritual or impressive when we pray. Not necessarily in a loud or obnoxious way, but in small almost invisible

ways. That's what makes this so convicting for us. Jesus isn't just addressing extreme hypocrisy here, he's exposing the quiet drift of the human heart. How easy it is to divert the focus onto ourselves and away from God.

Well, then in vs. 6, Jesus gives another kingdom alternative, "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret." Now, it's important to realize that Jesus is not forbidding public prayer. We see Jesus himself pray publicly and we see public prayers written in scripture in the early church. We see this played out even among us as we gather, at different times, and pray together, often out loud. And there is something special, something powerful, about praying together collectively as part of a community. No, Jesus certainly did not prohibit public prayer, but our prayers should always be directed to God and not towards man. The issue is not location, it's our motivation.

The "room" mentioned here represents a place of privacy, a place where there is no audience, no platform and no one to impress. It's the difference between talking to God and talking about God in front of others. The specific Greek word translated as "room" was used to describe a storeroom in a house where the family's treasures and valuables were kept. This reminds us that there are treasures available and waiting for us in our prayer times with God for the treasure is not anything material, it is unhindered time and fellowship with God himself. The treasure is God himself!

Because Jesus went to the cross and paid the penalty for our sin, those of us who are in Christ, who were once separated from God because of our sin, are now brought near through the blood of Christ and into the very throne room of God and there we can spend time with our Heavenly Father. Do you understand what a privilege that is ours? How often we forsake what God has so richly provided for us.

Behind the closed door there's no image to maintain. No expectations to meet. No one to compare yourself to. It's just you and God. And that's exactly the point, as God is revealed here as "your Father who sees in secret," who meets you in that quiet place. And that phrase is repeated a few times in this passage and it's meant to comfort us and challenge us at the same time.

God sees what no one else sees. He hears the prayers that never get heard by anyone else. He sees the tears, the struggles to find words and the moments of silence. And he values those not less, but more, because they are real and authentic and come from a surrendered heart.

Think about it this way. If someone only ever talked to you when other people were around, and every conversation seemed carefully crafted to impress everybody else around you both, you would begin to question whether the relationship was real, wouldn't you? But when someone speaks to you privately, honestly and without any pretense that's where true relationships are being formed and built. And that's what God desires for us, not polished performance, but genuine intimacy with him.

Now there's a shift, in vs. 7 from hypocrisy to another misuse of prayer, and that is empty repetition. Jesus says, "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."

In the surrounding cultures at that time, prayer was often about saying the right formula, repeating certain phrases or using many words to try to get the attention of the

gods. The idea was that more words meant more effectiveness. That if you said enough, or said it the right way, you could somehow secure a response. Jesus is making the point that prayer is not about saying more, or mindlessly repeating words we've memorized or even screaming to get God's attention. It's about meaning what we say.

And this speaks directly into our world today, where we often equate quantity with quality. We often want more words, more noise and more content. Even in our spiritual lives, we can drift into autopilot, repeating familiar phrases without engaging our hearts. But Jesus says that's not how this works with God. Prayer is not about manipulating him or impressing him with the length of our prayer or the eloquence of our words. It's about relationship. Which means prayer is not about performing or producing, it's about being in his presence. No amount of words is going to impress him any more or any less. He just wants us to come to him.

And that should give us all the assurance we need as Jesus gives one of the most comforting statements in all of scripture in vs. 8 when he says, "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." Your Father knows. That means that we never have to come to God trying to inform him, impress him or convince him to care. Before a word is formed in our minds or before our burden is fully understood, your Father already knows. He knows the need behind your request, the fear behind the silence and the longing you can't even put into words. And he doesn't know at a distance, he knows as a Father who is attentive, compassionate and deeply involved in your life.

So, brothers and sisters, the truth is when you pray, you're not striving to be heard, you already are. You don't have to try earning God's attention, you already have it. And this frees us to come to God honestly, simply and even imperfectly, because the comfort of prayer is not in how well we speak, but in who is listening.

But this raises an honest question. If God already knows what we need, why pray at all? Because prayer is not primarily about informing God, it's about forming us. It's about drawing near to him. It's about aligning our hearts and our will with his. It's about our total dependence on him. When you pray, you are not updating God as if he doesn't already know, you are opening yourself up and allowing him to speak to your soul.

Those of you who are parents, think of the times when one of your children came to you to talk about something. Often times, you already knew what your child needed. But the conversation still mattered. In fact, the conversation is part of the relationship you have with your children. And our children learn trust, dependence and closeness through those conversations. It is the same when we bring ourselves before God, our Heavenly Father, in prayer.

So what does this mean for us? First, once again, it calls us to examine our motives. Not just do we pray, but why do we pray? Is it driven by a desire to be seen, to maintain an image or to check a box on our "self righteous" checklist? Or is it a genuine pursuit of God?

Second, it invites us into a "secret place" with God, as described in these verses. A place where your spiritual life is not maintained by public moments but by private communion with God. Where the most important prayers you pray are the ones no one else ever hears. There's a quiet strength that comes from that kind of life. Because when your relationship with God is rooted in the "secret place", it's not dependent on circumstances, recognition or approval but on an ever deepening relationship with your Heavenly Father.

Third, it frees us from pressure. You don't have to perform. Many don't like to pray in front of people. But that's because we feel this pressure to perform. But prayer isn't about having all the right words. You don't have to worry about impressing God or anybody else. You can come honestly, simply and even imperfectly because you are coming to your loving Heavenly Father. And that changes everything.

Imagine how different our prayer life would look if we truly believed that. If we approached God not as an audience to impress, but as a Father who already knows, already sees and already cares. I think this would have a tremendous impact on, not only our own prayer lives, but on the entire life of the church if we understood the importance and value of real and authentic prayer and communion with God.

Well, as we close, the invitation here is simple but it's not easy. We need to step away from the need to be seen and step into the presence of God. We need to lay down the pressure to perform, and the habit of empty words and instead develop a prayer life with God that is real, hidden and sincere. Because in the end, the strength of your walk with God will not be measured by what others hear from you, but by what is formed in you when no one else is around. And there, in the secret place, your Father is already waiting, seeing, knowing and inviting you deeper into a relationship that no audience can replace. Let's pray.

Benediction: As you go, may you turn from every desire to be seen by others and instead seek the quiet place with your Father. May your prayers be sincere, your words simple and your heart fully known before him. And may you rest in this truth, that your Father knows your needs and welcomes you into his presence through Christ our Savior. Amen.