



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH  
SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS



## Living on a Prayer

Tim Badal | February 16, 2014 | Matthew 6:5-8

The Upside-down Kingdom Series, Lessons Learned from the Sermon on the Mount, Part 18

Go ahead and open your Bibles to Matthew 6. We've been studying Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in a series entitled "An Upside-down Kingdom." In this study, we have been learning what Christ asks of His followers. We are now in the third part of this series and are examining "the kingdom affections"—things we are called to have as Christ followers. In this section, we're going to learn about having every aspect of our lives—including prayer and fasting—to be focused solely on Christ and His work. Next time, we're going to start a three part sub-series looking at the very familiar Lord's Prayer and learning how it can be a pattern for all of our prayers.

Let's review what we've already studied in this series. We began by looking at our "kingdom attitudes" with the first 12 verses of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. As we looked at the Beatitudes, we learned how we ought to view ourselves, God and one another.

Then we looked at "kingdom actions." We learned what it means to be salt and light in the world. Being salt and light means that we should do things differently than the world around us. We should look at our anger differently. We should be known for our forgiveness rather than revenge and retaliation. The way we speak, think about others and deal with our passions and desires should be different. These actions should be different because we're followers of Jesus Christ.

Now we are turning to something a little more "religious." The things in this section are things that we quickly say we do. But Jesus wants to move past our actions and look at our motivations behind them. As we look at these texts, we need to understand the sincere desire of God—that we would do these things free from wrong motives and methods which breed self-righteousness and hypocrisy in our lives.

Before Jesus gets to the Lord's Prayer, He reminds us that even the greatest intentions regarding prayer can be destroyed by wrong motives and wrong thinking. So He teaches us what it means to pray and how to pray in these next few passages.

Let's read our passage for today. I'm going to read Matthew 6:1-8 for context, but our text is found in verses 5-8 at the end of the passage. Matthew 6:1-8 says:

<sup>1</sup> "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

<sup>2</sup>“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup>But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>5</sup>“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. <sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>“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. <sup>8</sup>Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

Next time we'll look at how Jesus goes on to say, “Pray like this.”

Let's pray.

Father God, we ask Your blessing on our time in Your Word. Teach us how to pray. Teach us why we should pray. Move away all the distractions, the personal agendas and the motivations we may have for this incredible gift You've given us. Help us get down to the heart of the matter. I pray that we will seek You and Your kingdom. We do this by getting away quietly with You, sharing our hearts and opening our hearts to the God Who loves us. I pray that we would open our hearts to hear what You have to say to us. I pray that all the prayers in this house today—whether private ones that no one can hear or public ones that everyone hears—would be honorable and pleasing to You. That is why we are here: to give You the honor, the glory and the praise. In Christ's name. Amen.

Last time, Jesus taught us about our giving and service. In an almost identical fashion, Jesus now addresses the issue of prayer. He says that this spiritual activity He's given to us as a gift can so easily become self-aggrandizing.

During Jesus' time, it was a common practice for the chief priests and Pharisees to make a living off displaying their spiritual activity to others. Jesus says that they were missing the heart of the matter because we are to do all these things for the glory of God and not ourselves. This is no more clearly seen than in the activity of prayer.

Let me give you a deep and theological explanation for prayer: communication with God. Prayer is talking with Him. This can be done both privately and publicly.

Even before the days of Christ, people had taken this amazing gift and used it to flaunt their holiness. While some of the offenses that we're going to look at in the New Testament may be a little bit different from what we are experiencing today, we must remember that religious hypocrisy certainly is not dead—even here at Village Bible Church.

For many of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ, it is easy to simply attend religious services, actively sing and participate in the prayer portions of the service, “amen” the preacher during his message, give faithfully and serve faithfully just to be seen by others for the good things we do. While these are good and noble things, we should do them for our relationship with God in heaven, not to be seen by others.

Religious hypocrisy means that idolatry becomes the name of the game. Instead of pursuing God, His glory and His fame, we begin to worship self and the opinions of others. Jesus tells us that these ulterior motives destroy any reward we would have received from God and degrade our service to God because of our perpetual act of idolatry. So no matter how great we are at doing good things, God says we are wasting our time if our hearts aren't right. We might as well stay at home doing whatever we want rather than trying to play the part here at church.

In Jesus' day religion and charity had become an exhibition for others. Jesus tells His followers, “How can you pretend to be praising God, when all you really care about is the praise of men?”

My title for this message is “Living on a Prayer.” All of us are living on a prayer although that may look a couple of different ways. Some of us are living on a prayer because our hopes are bound up in this activity God has given to His children. We love it, enjoy it and see it as a vital part of our lives without which we cannot live. We are living on that prayer.

Others of us see prayer as something we do because we're Christians. We're not sure why we do it or what it accomplishes but we do know that when we pray well people think better of us—especially within the church. It makes people think we know what we're talking about and that we have a close relationship with God.

So while those of us in this second group may be living on a prayer differently than the first group, we are still living on a prayer—a prayer that nobody will find out our real feelings about prayer or the lack of prayer we have when nobody else is watching.

## **1. Critiques about Self-righteous Prayers**

Prayer is a vital part of our lives and it was a vital part of the lives for people in Jesus' day. When Jesus addresses the issue of prayer, He begins by laying down some critiques.

Our text 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...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”* ([Matthew 6:5, 7-8](#)).

Jesus ends His critique by saying, “Don't do the things they do. Don't be like them.” Jesus is continuing His onslaught against all forms of fake religiosity by condemning people who simply play the part.

Last time we learned that a hypocrite is one who acts a part they want to play rather than being who they really are. So the hypocrites Jesus is condemning are people who look spiritual but deep down are only concerned about themselves, not God.

One of the chief ways hypocrites do this is through prayer. Jesus' whole point in His sermon is to contrast true spiritual life with what is false. Jesus isn't saying that the people were false in their desire to be spiritual; rather, they had bought into this false idea that the Pharisees were teaching. In [chapter five](#) Jesus says the people's theology is inadequate. In [chapter six](#) He says their approach to material things in this world is inadequate. Now He's telling us our religious lives are inadequate.

As Jesus tackles the issue of prayer, He has to strip away any thoughts of self-righteousness in our minds. He wants to get to the heart of the matter: when it comes to your relationship with God, do you talk with Him often? Why do you talk with Him? Do you talk with Him often when others are around so they can see that you're a spiritual person? Do you fail to give any time to Him in prayer in your private times? This is a good reminder for us as His disciples because we need to be careful lest our lives become like those of the Pharisees.

So Jesus confronts the issue of hypocrisy in prayer by sharing six things about prayer in His day.

## **Prayer Had Become Nothing More than a Ritual**

The prayers of Jesus' days had become ritualized. They only prayed if it followed a certain level of ritual in their lives. When you approach prayer from a ritualistic standpoint, it replaces the reality that you're having a conversation. Let's go back to our definition of prayer—communicating with God. When we start allowing prayer to become more than a simple articulation of who we are and how we relate to the God Whom we serve, we begin to move out of the biblical definition of how and why we ought to pray.

Some of us come from church backgrounds where rituals were a big part of the service. In these churches, the order of service holds a certain liturgy—you speak the right words at the right time. Here's the problem. While it is good for us to have a level of order in our worship services and even times when we as a corporate body are part of the prayer, we must be very careful that those moments don't just become routine. The liturgy must not take away our opportunity to engage and be in relationship with the God Whom we serve.

We are quick to look at our Catholic friends and say, "This is where they've gone wrong," but let us be reminded that even as evangelicals, we have our own liturgies. We have our little routines where prayer becomes mundane and mindless. We think, "Here we go again. We can do this sleeping."

We see this in our prayers at meal times when we utter the same things without ever thinking that maybe God is getting tired of us saying the same things. We do this with our children when we teach them mundane words like, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord, my soul to take." We do these formulas and routines because it makes us feel good and it doesn't take much time for us. But all we are doing is offering God scraps instead of our hearts. So

we can all identify with what Jesus is saying about how prayer had become a routine part of life but lost all significance and meaning.

### **Rote Prayers Were Recited for Every Occasion**

A fault that had crept into Jewish prayer by Jesus' day was the development of special prayers for special occasions. There were prayers for everything. When I say everything, I mean everything. Rabbis had written prayers for anything that could possibly happen so when something happened to you, you had the right prayer to say.

There were prayers for light, darkness, fire, lightning, seeing a new moon, seeing a comet in the distance, rain, storms, the sea, the land, the lakes and the rivers. They had prayers for when you had good news or bad news. They had prayers for new furnishings in your home. They had prayers for entering a city and leaving a city. They had prayers for when you were on the road between cities. There were prayers for everything.

You might ask, "Why in the world would they do all that?" It came from a good place. They wanted to make sure their prayers didn't just become focused in on a couple of things, so they wrote these prayers to help people pray for everything. While it's good to be praying about all these things, here's what happened: instead of sharing their hearts with their God, they now were simply saying these prayers without knowing why they were there or why they were praying them. But they were prayers that had been written so they might as well be used.

### **Prayer Was Relegated to Certain Times of the Day**

One example of this is the *Shema*. Jews were to repeat the *Shema* every day in the morning, afternoon and at night. The *Shema* is a prayer that comes from Deuteronomy 6:4, "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.*" Literally the Hebrew word *shama* means "to hear."

The short prayer from Deuteronomy 6:4 was to be a cry of adoration and identification for the Jew to say, "I believe in Yahweh. He is the One and only true God." But the Jews took verses 4-9, Deuteronomy 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41 and added them all together to make one long prayer that was to be given three times a day.

Let's go back to the first problem: this prayer was a routine. No matter where you found yourself at any moment in time, you had to stop and pray. Whether at work, at play, in bed, sick or hurting, you got up and prayed.

Another example of this is the *Shemoneh Esrei* (also called the *Amidah*) prayer. *Shemoneh Esrei* literally means 18; it is a collection of 18 prayers. So these 18 prayers were to be prayed throughout the day in the morning, afternoon and evening. If you were a little bit rushed on a particular day and didn't have time for the whole prayer, there were abbreviations of these prayers. The Jews said, "Just pray some of it so that you may be blessed." This routine happened over and over again.

We see this in the life of Muslims today with the call to prayer. Did you know that when you hear the call to prayer music coming from the mosques, you're hearing recorded music? It's a recording and they just hit play. It's become routine. It's become something that they just do and they're not sure why they do it. Jesus tells us, "Be careful," because even false religions will pursue such routine and mundane prayers.

## **Long and Flowery Prayers Were Held in High Regard**

The Jews said that if you were known for being long in your prayers, you would live longer. So if you wanted to add a few years to your life, all you had to do was pray long prayers.

Jesus is confronting the Pharisees about this idea and He says similar things on other occasions. For example, in [Mark 12:40](#) He says they, "...for a pretense [for show] *make long prayers*." He tells them, "You are praying these long prayers to make yourself look good, not because you long to be with God or to articulate to Him your love and concerns."

Now don't get me wrong—there's nothing wrong with long prayers as long as they're heartfelt. But let us be careful that our long prayers are not prayed to impress others with our vocabulary, theology or understanding of deep spiritual truths. Our prayers should never be used to show off.

There's something spiritual about seeing someone pray. We feel like someone is close to God when they pray for a long time with their hands clasped together, their eyes closed and their head down. There's something beautiful about seeing that. As an observer, we want to heap praises on someone who prays that way.

An eighteenth century Scotland commentator said, "The efficacy of prayer is measured by its passion, its fluency, and most of all by its length." We know that's not true. Some of the shortest prayers recorded in Scripture are some of the most beautiful and compelling to the heart of God. So while long prayers may not be bad, they are not to be used to impress others.

## **Prayers Were Comprised of Meaningless Repetition**

[Verse seven](#) 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 Jesus' day, the Jews had begun to follow the ways of pagan and Gentile worship. Gentiles and pagans would worship by heaping the same words over and over again. It was as if they thought that God would grow tired of them saying the same thing repeatedly and finally relent.

It's like what children do in the grocery store. They say, "But Mom, I want that gum. Mom, I want that gum. Mom, I want that gum. Mom, mom!" They are thinking, "If I keep asking, Mom will relent."

This is how the Gentiles and pagans operated. They believed that if you just keep repeating yourself, God will inevitably hear. He'll wake up, you will bring Him to where He needs to be and then He will have to listen to your prayer because you've been so persistent. So they would just babble on and on, over and over again.

We see this in 1 Kings 18 when Elijah dealt with the prophets of Baal. We see in verse 26 that they cried out in one voice all day long, “O Baal, answer us!” It even became unintelligible at times as they cut themselves just trying to get their god to notice them.

The Jewish version of this was a little bit different. They just babble on endlessly about the same things. Instead, they filled their prayers with all kinds of clichés and flowery adjectives. We do that too. We say things like, “Our Heavenly Father, who art in Heaven...the God Who is seated on His throne...the God Who knows all things.” We go on and on with these flowery statements about God.

Now, it’s not bad to articulate some of God’s attributes, but they did this so others would think they were smart and to butter up God so that He would listen—as if God doesn’t know Who He is or what He’s all about and needs us to tell Him.

It’s like a woman who tries to butter up her husband in order to get what she wants. She says, “Oh, you’re the greatest guy in the world,” hoping that he’ll then do whatever she asks. God doesn’t operate that way. God does not need the affirmation of people’s prayers in order to respond to them.

Jesus does an amazing job of dealing with this issue when He teaches us how to pray just a few verses later. How does He say we are to address God? With one simple title—Father. We don’t need to be superfluous with our words. We don’t need to add adjectives about our God ad nauseam. We need to approach God as our Father.

## **Prayers Were Used to Build Your Spiritual Reputation**

This is where Jesus has an issue. It’s not that some level of ritual makes prayer bad. A routine doesn’t make prayer bad. Some of us have routines. Some of us pray in the morning. Some of us pray during the day. Some of us pray on our way to work or on our way home in the car—we just ask that you keep your eyes open while you’re driving. Some of us pray in the evening. Some of us have shorter prayers. Others of us have longer prayers. Jesus isn’t saying that any of these things in and of themselves are bad. The issue He has is when all of these things lead to building your spiritual reputation through prayers.

Verse five says, “*For they [the hypocrites] love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners...*” Why do they want to pray in those areas? Is it because they feel moved by God when they’re in the synagogue? Is it because they’re overwhelmed in their worship that they want to pray? Is it because they want to be salt and light in the world on the street corners? No, Jesus—Who knows the hearts of these hypocrites—goes on in verse five to say, “*...that they may be seen by others.*”

The hypocrites want to be seen. They want to be known as spiritual people. Prayer is such a central part to religion that we know praying well will make others see us as spiritual.

In Jesus’ day, it was said that prayer was the highest of any works that a Jew could do. It was also said that a Jewish man who prayed well surrounded his house with a wall stronger than iron. In their sermons on the Sabbath, rabbis were known to lament to their congregation that there weren’t enough hours in the day for them to pray as much as they would like.

Israel was known as a land of prayer. If you could pray well, the Pharisees said, “Things will go well for you.” In contrast, Jesus says, “You’re missing the mark. You’re missing the point of prayer.”

## 2. Counsel Regarding True Prayer

Jesus doesn’t just leave us with a critique. Remember that He’s speaking to two different groups of people: the Pharisees—who need to be criticized for their idea of true spirituality—and His followers who needed counsel. So after laying forth a blazing indictment, Jesus now moves on to give some counsel to His followers. He says, “Listen, I don’t want you to be like them. As My followers, I expect you to serve differently and pray differently than the hypocrites.”

### True Prayer Must Be a Priority for All Believers

How does Christ want our prayers to look? He wants prayer to be a priority for all believers. Notice the words, “*And **when** you pray.*” Jesus doesn’t say, “**If** you pray” or “You **might** pray.” He says, “**When** you pray.” Therefore we see that Jesus is assuming His followers will be people of prayer.

As we hold this Word in our hands, Jesus is saying to us, “If you call yourself a follower of Mine then you will be a person of prayer. If you say you have a relationship with Me then you need to be communicating with Me.” When we gather in His house as His followers, Jesus expects it to be a place of prayer. The house of God has been dedicated to worshipping our Father in heaven.

Within Christ’s command for us to have a lifestyle of prayer, there are no set times, places, words or phrases. He just wants us to pray—any time and any place. He wants short prayers and long prayers. He wants prayers in private and in public. He wants prayers full of theological depth and simple child-like prayers.

Jesus wants His children to pray. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are to have a spirit of prayer. Paul said we are to “*pray without ceasing*” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The desire to pray to our God in heaven should permeate our lives.

So whatever reasons or excuses we may have regarding our prayerlessness, Jesus says, “I’m not buying it.” We are to be a people of prayer.

### True Prayer Must Be Personal in Nature

Look at how many times the word “you” is used in our text:

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.

When we pray we need to remember that we are in a conversation with our Father.



How many of us go to our earthly fathers and start speaking in a language very different from what we use with anybody else? I know I don't. I say, "Hey Dad, how are you doing? Dad, how can I help you? What can I be doing, Dad?" We communicate in a normal way.

He says, "Son, how are the kids?" There's no pretense or hidden agenda. I'm just talking with my dad.

When we're praying God is not expecting you to use theological jargon. He's not expecting you to look super spiritual. He wants you to come to Him as His child; He wants you to show your love, to show your affection and to seek His will in your life. He wants you to get to know Him more intimately. He wants you to talk to Him—to tell Him your feelings, your desires, your hurts and pains, where you're confused or where you've gone wrong.

Don't forget that a part of any communication is the ability to listen. We need to allow the wisdom of our Father in heaven to speak to us. In order to hear from Him, we need to drop all pretenses. We don't speak to our earthly dads with pomp and circumstance. No, the way we speak to them is quite natural and free flowing. So our prayers to our heavenly Father should be the same way.

### **True Prayer Must Be Seen as a Precious Gift**

As I was studying this passage, I was struck by the phrase, "*Pray to your Father.*" That's far more precious than I have ever realized before. Think about it for a moment. Think about prayer throughout Scripture.

Before there was sin Adam could commune with his God in the garden—he could walk with Him and talk with Him. In the Old Testament some of the patriarchs—not all of them—had the privilege of intimately conversing with God. When Jesus came to earth, He used this form—prayer—of communicating with His Father. Jesus depended on it in His earthly ministry.

Amidst our sin and rebellion, we have the same opportunity that Adam did before he sinned. We have the same opportunity that some of the patriarchs had. We have the prayer relationship with God that Jesus depended on when He was here on earth. We have these same opportunities available to us.

Hebrews 4:16 says, "*Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*" We've been given a precious gift to be able to do this amidst our faults and frailties. Yet how quick we are to throw that away. We seem so bored by praying, so distracted by temporal things.

We have been given the gift of greatest worth. It is not a chore. No, prayer is the highest form of God's grace to His people because Jesus was the One Who gave us the opportunity to pray to our Father in heaven. So when we don't pray as Christians we are taking one of God's greatest gifts and saying, "It's not worth it. It's not what I'm looking for. It's not what I need."

### **True Prayer Must Be Done Right to Be Powerful**

We need to get this right because prayer is powerful when it's done right. We can't make up the way that we're going to approach God in our prayers. We can't pray to any deity we want. We have to pray to God through our Mediator—Jesus Christ. We need to pray about the right things. All selfishness and

manipulation that we might bring into our prayer life needs to be put away. We need to quiet ourselves and ask God, “Speak to me.” We need to be like the little boy Samuel in the temple who heard the Lord speak to him and said, “Lord, Your servant is listening.”

One thing I've loved about our staff meetings for the last year is how Dave Haidle has led us in a year of prayer by praying through the different prayers of Scripture and allowing those prayers to guide us as a staff. I would encourage you to do the same thing. There are tons of prayers in the Scriptures. There are prayers written by men in good times, in bad times, praising God, confessing sin, giving thanksgiving and giving adoration to God. When we pray the Scriptures it allows us to know that we are praying according to the will and Word of God. We know that we are seeking His will and plans, not our own.

In James 5:16-18 we are told that Elijah was a man like us and that the prayers of a righteous man like him have great power. How can this be? Our prayers won't build our acclaim like the hypocrites. But when we pray the right things for the right reasons God says He hears us.

Verse six tells us that we will be rewarded by our Father in heaven. How will we be rewarded?

1. We will see our prayers answered. When we pray the right things with the right motives we will position ourselves to see our prayers answered. Many of us say we have unanswered prayers. We don't see God answering our prayers because we don't have the right perspective. We're not positioning ourselves in the right way; we're praying for the wrong reasons. We pray so that we might receive. Then when we don't get what we want our only perspective is, “Well, I haven't gotten what I prayed for, so God isn't answering my prayer.” God reminds us that He answers prayers according to His will not ours. That's why Jesus reminds us in the Lord's Prayer that it is not “our will be done” but *“your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”*
2. We will see the glory of the impact our prayers have in the lives of others. When we take our eyes off ourselves and begin to pray for others, we will see a bird's eye perspective of what God is doing in His kingdom. Jesus' longest prayer in all of Scripture is a prayer more about us than Himself. Remarkably, this prayer took place only hours before His death on the cross. He could have spent that time worrying about all that He had going on—and there was a deep sense of profound concern about what the cross would bring—but He turned His thoughts away from Himself and prayed for His disciples. He prayed for you and me.

### **3. Closing Thoughts to Remember**

Let us make prayer a greater priority in our lives. Jesus gives us some closing thoughts to help us embrace His teaching on prayer.

#### **Our Spirituality Is Determined by God, Not Others**

Let us never forget this. Whether it's in our service, in our giving, in our prayer, or in our fasting, these things that we do with great frequency are for God not for man. It's not for us; it's for our Savior.

As I was preparing this message, I was reminded of a song my parents used to listen to when I was a young boy. Our passage is the very essence of this song. Listen to some of the lyrics:

The part that no one sees that no one knows,  
Labor that seldom shows  
The silent gift where honor is not bestowed.  
No earthly eye observes these precious deeds  
But there is One who sees  
Who will reward each act of charity.  
The secret part done from the heart  
The hidden part, the part that no one sees.  
The secret part that only Jesus sees.  
("The Part that No One Sees" by Billy & Sarah Gaines)

When Jesus looks in your heart and hears your prayers, is He glorified? Or are you? Does He see a humble and meek servant who is poor in spirit? Or does He see a heart of hypocrisy in your prayers, charity and giving? Are you doing it because you're playing a part for the show? All that we do must be for God or it will be lost.

Many people look at how [Revelation 21:4](#) says Jesus will wipe away every tear and they think that's at the beginning side of heaven. They think on the Day of Judgment we will get there and Jesus will start wiping away all our tears right away; we immediately get rid of all pain and sorrow.

I think there will be tears in heaven. The Bible says all the good things we have done for God will be tested by fire. I cannot imagine that when I get to heaven my box of good deeds is going to do well when it is put through the fire.

I've done many good things so my box of good deeds is going to be pretty big. But here's the problem: I'm going to put that big box with all my sermons, prayers and the good things that I've done on the scale so it can be tested. After it goes through the fire, I'm not going to have any problem picking it up again because God's going to say, "Your motive for A was wrong. The reason you did B was wrong. You did C so others would see. You didn't do D for Me. You didn't do E for the good of others, you did it for yourself."

Brothers and sisters, we need to recognize that the Day of Judgment isn't about what others see—it's going to be you and God, no one else. You're not going to be able to bring up witnesses for your defense and say, "My wife has nice things to say about me," or, "My church has nice things to say." God's going to say, "It isn't about them. You can fool them but you can't fool Me." We need to be careful that we're not putting on a show for others in our prayers. We need to be submitting to God.

## **The Depth of Our Prayer Lives Is Seen in Our Private Prayers**

How do go about evaluating our prayer lives? You might say, "Tim, I don't feel good about my prayer life right now. How do I know if I'm doing a good job?" Stop looking at how you pray in small group. Stop looking at how you pray in church. Don't put yourself up on a pedestal because you pray before every meal, whether in the company of Christians or non-Christians. The real question is, "How well do you pray when you're alone and in secret?"

Jesus says in verse six, *"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."* In verses five and seven, the word "you" is plural. But in verse six Jesus uses the singular tense for "you." He's talking to us about our individual times of prayer.

Jesus wants you to ask yourself some hard questions: How much do you pray in secret? What is your prayer life like? If you want to know how good your prayer life is, don't look at your public prayers—look at your private ones. It's in those quiet moments where a child of God's true intimacy with his Father is found.

Let me give you a helpful illustration. We just had Valentine's Day recently. Valentine's Day is a wonderful day. Around this time of year, we see many people in relationships showing public displays of affection (PDA). We see things like people holding hands, kissing one another on the cheek or giving each other shoulder rubs. There are many different ways to show one another affection in public.

Some PDA is good because it shows that you care for one another. That's a good thing. Growing up, it was always good for me to see my parents show some affection to one another every once in a while. Now you only want it to go so far so that it doesn't go from, "That's nice, Mom and Dad love each other," to "Ew, Mom and Dad! I want to vomit!"

But no vibrant relationship is based only on public displays of affection. Public prayers are public displays of affection. They're good. But if that's the only affection you show, your relationship with the One to Whom you're praying is going to be surface level at best.

Far too many of us want only to show public displays of affection. But anyone in a relationship knows it's the private moments between two people that build a healthy relationship. So it is with prayer. The prayers that make a person have a deeper walk with God are done in private, not in public.

Some of you might ask, "Tim, isn't Jesus judging public prayer?" Some people think this text is saying that public prayer is bad because Jesus says our prayers should be done in secret. Yes, most of our prayers should be done in secret between us and God. But anyone who loves another person recognizes that there needs to be a level of public affection.

If you were to ask me, "Do you love Amanda?" I wouldn't say, "You know I don't try to show that in public. I don't want anybody to know." No! Of course I want you to see my love for Amanda! When I'm walking around or talking with Amanda, I want you to be able to see, "Hey, those two people love one another. They care for each other. They have a deep relationship."

But if that's the only affection I show to Amanda, we would have a problem. If I don't talk to her when we are in private or spend any time with her in private, think about how upsetting that would be to her as my wife. In the same way, think of how upsetting it is to God when we make big displays out of praying in public but then never go to Him in private and share our hearts.

To take this passage and say that Jesus is telling us to not pray in public doesn't fit with other passages. We need to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. To say prayers should only be done in secret goes against the practice of Jesus, against the practice of the church in Acts, against the teachings of Peter, Paul and John to the early church and against the pattern we see throughout the church since the time of Christ. Public prayer is right and good. It should be something that all followers of Christ long to do and see in each other.

Maybe you're an introvert. Does that mean you never tell others that you love your spouse? Of course it doesn't. So for my brothers and sisters who say, "I don't know if I can do that; it just doesn't feel right," I would encourage you to remember it is simply a public display of affection. We all know when public displays of affection start going wrong, so just use wisdom.

Public prayer encourages our brothers and sisters in Christ. It allows us to learn how to pray. If all prayers were private I wouldn't know how to pray. Who would have taught me? I learned how to pray at a young age by hearing my parents pray in public. But let me tell you something: I learned even more about prayer when I ran into their room and saw them on their knees. Our prayers need to be both public and private to show our full affection to God.

## **Our Prayer Lives Will Be Dependent on Our View of God**

At the end of our passage Jesus says we should have confidence in prayer because we have a Father Who *"knows what you need before you ask him."* If God knows it, He can handle it. And if we can't handle it but He can, then shouldn't we naturally turn to Him in prayer?

We have no idea what a day might bring but our God knows everything. He knows the beginning from the end and the end from the beginning. We have a God Who is in heaven, Whose name is hallowed, Whose kingdom has come and Whose will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven, Who gives us daily bread, Who forgives and Who delivers us from all evil (Matthew 6:9-13). If God can do all those things then why in the world aren't we turning to Him?

If we have a small view of God and keep Him in a small box then our prayer life will be small. But if God is big in our lives then our prayer lives will be big because God is the God Who can answer every prayer. A praying person recognizes that even though something is impossible for us, nothing is impossible with God. So if you have a big view of God then why aren't you running to Jesus in prayer for all things and in all ways?

Before I get to my final point let me offer an encouragement and a challenge for Village Bible Church. Many of you will walk away saying, "I just need to pray more." That may be true for some but I want to speak corporately for a moment. I want to encourage you that I believe this is a house of prayer—both secret and public prayer. I'm encouraged because in this place our kids and our teenagers are praying. We have dozens of small groups who get together and pray in living rooms throughout the week all across this area. As a leader in this church I can tell you that your leaders are praying.

I think we're doing what God has called us to do but let me challenge us with this: I believe our prayers are far too focused on us and what God can do for us. We need to focus more on what we can do for God. If we open our minds and hearts to what God's will is for our lives, then our requests might be more than just medical reports and small things. Those are important, but we need to ask for even more.

We should pray for God to do the impossible. We should pray for God to change lives. We should pray for God to change our hearts so that we might go and be the salt and light He calls us to be. Let us not be a people focused only on supplications—which are right and good—but let us remember the prayers of adoration, confession and thanksgiving. Let our prayers be fully orbbed because we have a God Who deserves every one of them.

### **Our Prayer Lives Will Grow When We Dedicate Time and Energy to It**

Some of us like to work out and some of us don't. Do you know what inevitably happens when we do work out? We put forth the energy to get a gym membership, get all of our gear, show up at the gym and then we do the actual workout. Then what happens? We hurt. There's pain and suffering. We say, "I don't want to do that again. Parts of my body I didn't even know I had are hurting."

Prayer is a discipline just like a physical workout. It will be cumbersome. We won't feel like we know what we're doing. When we start out, it will seem like there are parts of us that are hurting. What is the temptation for us to say after a workout? We want to say, "I just can't do it anymore. I've pulled my back. I better just take it easy for a little while." But those of you who work out know the greatest muscle needed for working out is dedication and perseverance.

Prayer is the same way, so start out small. Start by taking some time tomorrow—or even today—to get away. Spend some time in silent prayer. "Lord, I don't know what I'm doing but I know I love You. I don't know the things I should be praying but You know I love my family so I'll start there. You know the things I'm concerned about so I'll pray for those too. You know I'm around unbelievers so I'll pray for them. You know there are things that are beyond my ability to handle or comprehend, so I'm just going to praise the God Who has it all covered." We just need to take a couple of moments each day and little by little we begin to grow.

Far too many of us think we have to pray someone else's way. Jesus prayed early in the morning, during the day and late at night. Some of you like to get up to pray at 4:30 in the morning. Personally, I think there's nothing good that happens at 4:30 a.m. If the Lord comes back at 4:30 a.m. I'm going to be stuck in the tribulation because I can't get up that early. I don't function.

Stop trying to live someone else's prayer life and live yours. Your Father wants to talk with you no matter what time of day it is. Those of you who like to get up early in the morning will have God's ear. When you fall asleep at 8:30 at night, God's going to be hearing your prayers. Both ways are okay.

Find your rhythm; find your place. Bare your soul and heart to God because He truly wants to hear your prayers. When you pray be careful that hypocrisy and self-righteousness are stripped away so that God hears only your prayers and not other static along the way.

Let's pray.

Lord, it is hard to put everything that surrounds our ability to talk with the infinite God into a message. Yet we are told by Your Son to bring our requests and praises to You. So I pray for my friends and loved ones here that we would be a people who show our love to You by communicating with You, by talking with You, by sharing our hearts with You, by giving our hopes and dreams to You and by giving our concerns and anxieties to You. I pray that we might listen to You and hear Your still, small voice. I pray that we would hear Your words of affirmation, love, challenge, critique and conviction. I pray that this would lead us to a deeper walk with You—not so that we can wear on our lapel how great we are or tell others about our deep and wonderful walks with Jesus. Rather, I pray that in that secret and quiet place we may know what it means to draw near to You and experience how You draw near to us. I believe that's the heart cry of this congregation. So I pray that we will draw near to You, strip away everything that keeps us from You and devote ourselves to the discipline of prayer.

Lord, as You continue to teach us how to pray, I ask that this prayer You have given us in Scripture won't just become rote like some magic words. Let us use it as a pattern for all of our prayers so that we may honor You in our times of private and public prayer. Lead us from this place a different people. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

*Note: This transcription has been provided by Sermon Transcribers ([www.sermontranscribers.net](http://www.sermontranscribers.net)).*