

Sermons on Matthew

The Lord's Prayer

Part One
Empty Prayers
Matthew 6:7, 8

With Study Questions

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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. -9- In this __manner, therefore, pray: _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 forgive our debtors. ¹³□And do not lead us into temptation, But __deliver us from the evil one. __For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. -14- __For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. -15- But __if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 6:7-15).

Preface

I'm always a bit nervous when I am invited to ecumenical (denominationally diverse) pastor's meetings. I don't want to have a bad attitude yet at the same time I often hear things that my conscious will not allow to go unchecked. Such was the case at a pastor's National Day of Prayer meeting I attended last year. 'It was a prayer meeting!' I thought to myself, 'How south can things go?'

I became so incensed at the heresy contained in the prayers that by the time it was my turn to pray, the only thing I could think to pray was that God forgive us for our prayers.

Prayer is an interesting phenomenon. People open their mouths and talk to God. Often times other people get to listen. I will occasionally listen to my own prayers on a sermon tape. I ask myself questions like: is this really the way I should talk to God? Where's the fear? Where's the humility? Am I that confident in myself that I can utter theological truths into the ear of God? Wouldn't this be like a two-year-old confidently uttering quantum physics truths into the ear of Einstein?

Am I making more of this than I ought? Should we even concern ourselves with our words and concepts in prayer? Is not prayer more personal than that? Don't words just get in the way?

The Bible has a lot of say about prayer. We are currently in what many consider to be the richest instruction regarding prayer found in all of Scripture.

Introduction

We now enter into a sub-sub series. Studying through Matthew, we find ourselves confronted with the Sermon on the Mount. In the heart of the Sermon on the Mount we see what has come to be called the Lord's Prayer. We will pitch our tents on this glorious passage and seek to give the Lord's Prayer our undivided meditation.

Unheard Pray-ers

Prior to teaching His followers how to pray, Jesus first gives instruction on how not to pray—we will start by focusing on this.

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 (Matthew 6:7).

The Bible has a lot to say about improper prayers and pray-ers (I will use this term for the person praying). There are certain pray-ers who shouldn't expect that God will entertain their prayers at all. Hypocrites should not think God will hear their prayers.

_For what is the hope of the hypocrite...? 9□_Will God hear his cry When trouble comes upon him (Job 27:8a, 9)?

The assumed answer to the above question is, of course, 'no'. Along with the hypocrite, we learn in Job that the proud man does not receive an answer from the Lord.

_There they cry out, but He does not answer, Because of the pride of evil men (Job 35:12).

Those who allow evil to be nurtured in their minds will find that God has turned them a deaf ear as well.

_If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord will not hear (Psalms 66:18).

The unmerciful person will not be heard by God

_Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor Will also cry himself and not be heard (Proverbs 21:13).

The faithless, double-minded man will not receive anything from the Lord.

But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. ⁻⁷⁻ For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁻⁸⁻ he is __a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways (James 1:6-8).

Must we then draw the conclusion that Christians need to obtain some superior level of righteousness in order to earn answered prayer? How righteous would one have to be in order to merit God's attentiveness? Considering the nature of God and man this hardly seems plausible.

In Daniel's prayer for Jerusalem, he does not appeal to the righteousness of the people but rather the mercy of God for answered prayer.

_O my God, incline Your ear and hear; open Your eyes __and see our desolations, and the city __which is called by Your name; for we do not present our supplications before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies (Daniel 9:18). -

It seems that there is only one commandment that has to be obeyed in order to receive an audience with God. John writes of this.

And __whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments __and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. ⁻²³⁻ And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of

His Son Jesus Christ __and love one another, as He gave __us commandment (1 John 3:22, 23).

I must also add that obedience to this commandment (to believe in Jesus), contains a tacit recognition (since Jesus came to rescue us from our lawlessness) that we are utterly incapable of keeping any commandments at an acceptable level.

So those men we read of earlier (the proud man, the unmerciful man, the iniquitous man) should not be thought of as some lower level carnal Christian. Since the privilege of prayer was purchased by the blood of Christ, it would cast an aspersion on the cross to say that our High Priest's sacrifice is insufficient to allow us access to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). So the genuine Christian will have his prayer heard.

We now move from the pray-er to the prayer itself.

Heathenesque Prayers

Jesus, in His preface to the Lord's Prayer, admonishes His followers not to pray the way the heathen (*ethnikos*) pray. It is of interest to note that the heathen do pray. Numerous conversations I have had with those who have a testimony of life-long prayers but find Jesus quite expendable.

Repetitive and Wordy

Be that as it may, that Jesus has procured a seat for His children at the Father's table should not induce us to folly or irreverence in our conversation at the meal. The folly Jesus presently addresses is the folly of *vain repetitions* or *many words* in prayer.

The word for "vain repetitions" (*battalogo*) or "babble" here is very likely an onomatopoeic word like buzz or gong where the word resembles the sound. The point here is that thoughtlessly repeating oneself or rambling on is a worldly prayer practice. The word for "many words" (*polylogia*) later in the verse means simply that—many words or overly loquacious.

What should we ask ourselves as readers of this admonition? It seems we should ask ourselves whether or not these infractions have found their way into our prayer lives in some form. We may not be engaging in outright mantras (a repeated prayer or incantation), but

that doesn't mean we're immune to this. Quite frankly it is a little trickier than merely avoiding repetitiveness or wordiness.

Repetitiveness is not necessarily bad. If so, Psalm 136 would be a mistake.

¹ Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for *He is good!*
For His mercy *endures* forever.

² Oh, give thanks to the God of gods!
For His mercy *endures* forever.

³ Oh, give thanks to the Lord of lords!
For His mercy *endures* forever:

⁴ To Him who alone does great wonders,
For His mercy *endures* forever;

⁵ To Him who by wisdom made the heavens,
For His mercy *endures* forever;

⁶ To Him who laid out the earth above the waters,
For His mercy *endures* forever;

⁷ To Him who made great lights,
For His mercy *endures* forever—

⁸ The sun to rule by day,
For His mercy *endures* forever;

⁹ The moon and stars to rule by night,
For His mercy *endures* forever (Psalm 136:1-9).

This goes on for twenty-six verses. And although it is not strict repetition (the words of adoration remain the same while the attributes of God mentioned change in every verse) one cannot help recognize the repetitive nature of the passage.

Long prayers with many words are not necessarily wrong either. The song of Deborah and Barak make up the entire fifth chapter of Judges. And, of course, we read of Jesus who, "...continued all night in prayer to God" (Luke 6:12).

Power of Prayer or God?

So it is not enough to merely assert that long, wordy or repetitiveness prayers are unacceptable. The answer is found in the second half of the verse. The problem with the heathen prayer is "that they think they will be heard for their many words." It is when we assign the effectiveness of the prayer to the prayer itself

rather than the power and mercy of God that we get into trouble. And this, I fear, is as rampant today as it was during the time of Christ.

The Roman Catholic Paternosters (repeating the Lord's Prayer as an act of penitence) and Hail Marys easily fall into the above category. But Rome is not the only violator. In certain Protestant sects prayer meetings become frenzied. The loud and boisterous rebuking of the devil would appear to be more effective than a gentle, silent petition to the Christ who defeated the devil on the cross.

Repetitiveness in worship (since worship is prayer) can also fall into this category. In this I can speak from experience. Rather than thoughtfully meditating upon those attributes of God which should spark our admiration and humility—thus causing us to extol His Holy Name in the midst of the assembly, we become absorbed in our own experience of worship. In the repetition (similar the mantra) we lose track of conscious thought. This, I must argue, is unbiblical. Matthew Henry, I believe, reflects the meaning of Christ's words by stating,

Though the life of prayer lies in *lifting up the soul and pouring out the heart*, yet there is some interest which words have in prayer,¹

Add to this the words of Calvin,

Besides, the grace of God is not obtained by an unmeaning flow of words; but, on the contrary, a devout heart throws out its affections, like arrows, to pierce heaven.²

A Christian's prayers and worship ought to be thoughtful.

Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. ² **Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter**

¹Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Mt 6:5). Peabody: Hendrickson.

²Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

anything hastily before God. For God *is* in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few.³ For a dream comes through much activity, And a fool's voice is known by his many words (Ecclesiastes 5:1-3).

For Your Father Knows

The reason Jesus gives for a Christian's prayer to be different from a heathen's prayer lies in the character of the God who receives our prayers.

Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him (Matthew 6:8).

Later in this chapter Jesus will say it again.

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'⁻³² For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things (Matthew 6:31-32).

God's intimate acquaintance with our thoughts and needs are clearly revealed in Isaiah.

It shall come to pass That before they call, I will answer; And while they are still speaking, I will hear (Isaiah 65:24).

We should not think that the highly moral or masterful pray-er has any greater access to God than the struggling, bruised and inarticulate reed. For it is the mercy of God rather than the morals of man—it is the omniscience (all knowing) of God rather than the oratory or musical skills of man—which grant us His listening ear.

God knows before we ask!?! Some may well query...why then bother asking? For God, in His great Fatherly love and mercy has chosen to employ our prayers in His divine providence and they availeth much (James 5:16). He could have chosen to use the rocks but He has chosen to use us instead—our love, our steps, our words

and our prayers. God has included us in that which is divine. And for this we should be eternally grateful.

And having included our prayers in His glorious plans, Jesus will now proceed to give instruction on how we ought to pray.

Questions for Study

1. Why do certain prayers go unheard by God (pages 3, 4)?
2. How righteous does a person have to be for God to hear their prayers (pages 4, 5)?
3. What is the one commandment a person needs to obey in order to have their prayers heard? Explain (page 5).
4. How do the heathen pray (pages 5, 6)?
5. Are repetitious or long prayers necessarily wrong (pages 6, 7)?
6. What is the real problem with the heathenesque prayer (pages 7, 8)?
7. What reason does Jesus give as to why the Christian prayer should be different than the heathen prayer (pages 8, 9)?
8. If God knows everything, why pray (page 9)?

