

# Jesus on Prayer

by Martyn-Lloyd Jones

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*Jesus teaches that prayer should be a secret and sincere communication with God, not a public display of piety.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:5

**Topics:** "Prayer", "Humility in Worship"

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## Description

Martyn-Lloyd Jones emphasizes the profound nature of prayer as taught by Jesus in Matthew 6:5-8, warning against the hypocrisy of praying for the sake of appearance rather than genuine communion with God. He highlights that sin, particularly in the form of self-worship, can intrude even into our prayers, leading us to focus on ourselves instead of God. The preacher stresses the necessity of approaching God with humility, recognizing Him as our Father, and understanding our need for rebirth and a new nature to truly engage in prayer. Jones contrasts false prayer, which seeks human approval, with true prayer that is centered on God and excludes self-interest. Ultimately, he calls believers to trust in God's readiness to bless and to approach Him with childlike faith.

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## Transcript

IN MATTHEW 6:5-8, we come to an example taken by our Lord to illustrate His teaching concerning piety or the conduct of the religious life. This is the theme which He considers in the first eighteen verses of this chapter. "Take heed," He says in general, "that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them: else ye have no reward with your Father which is in heaven." Here is His second illustration of this. Following the question of almsgiving comes the whole question of praying to God, our communion and our fellowship with God. Here, again, we shall find that the same general characteristic which our Lord has already described is, alas, far too much in evidence. This portion of Scripture, I sometimes think, is one of the most searching and humbling in the entire realm of Scripture.

But we can read these verses in such a way as really to miss their entire point and teaching, and certainly without coming under conviction. The tendency always when reading this is just to regard it as an exposure of the Pharisees, a denunciation of the obvious hypocrite. We read, and we think of the kind of ostentatious person who obviously is calling attention to himself, as the Pharisees did in this matter. We therefore regard it as just an exposure of this blatant hypocrisy without any relevance to ourselves. But that is to miss the whole point of the teaching here, which is our Lord's devastating exposure of the terrible effects of sin upon the human soul, and especially sin in the form of self and of pride.

Sinful Attitudes

Sin, He shows us here, is something which follows us all the way, even into the very presence of God. Sin is not merely something that tends to assail and afflict us when we are far away from God, in the far country as it were. Sin is something so terrible, according to our Lord's exposure of it, that it will not only follow us to the gates of heaven, but-if it were possible-into heaven itself. Indeed, is not that the Scripture teaching with regard to the origin of sin? Sin is not something which began on earth. Before man fell there had been a previous Fall. Satan was a perfect, bright, angelic being dwelling in the heavenlies; and he had fallen before ever man fell. That is the essence of the teaching of our Lord in these verses. It is a terrible exposure of the horrible nature of sin.

Nothing is quite so fallacious as to think of sin only in terms of actions; and as long as we think of sin only in terms of things actually done, we fail to understand it. The essence of the biblical teaching on sin is that it is essentially a disposition. It is a state of heart. I suppose we can sum it up by saying that sin is ultimately self-worship and self-adulation, and our Lord shows (what to me is an alarming and terrifying thing) that this tendency on our part to self-adulation is something that follows us even into the very presence of God. It sometimes produces the result that even when we try to persuade ourselves that we are worshiping God, we are actually worshiping ourselves and doing nothing more.

That is the terrible nature of His teaching at this point. This thing that has entered into our very nature and constitution as human beings is something that is so polluting our whole being that when people are engaged in their highest form of activity they still have a battle to wage with it. It has always been agreed, I think, that the highest picture that you can ever have of a person is to look at him on his knees waiting upon God. That is the highest achievement of man; it is his noblest activity. Man is never greater than when he is there in communion and contact with God. Now, according to our Lord, sin is something which affects us so profoundly that even at that point it is with us and assailing us. Indeed, we must surely agree on the basis of New Testament teaching that it is only there we really begin to understand sin.

We tend to think of sin as we see it in its rags and in the gutters of life. We look at a drunkard, poor fellow, and we say: There is sin; that is sin. But that is not the essence of sin. To have a real picture and a true understanding of it, you must look at some great saint, some unusually devout and devoted man. Look at him there upon his knees in the very presence of God. Even there, self is intruding itself, and the temptation is for him to think about himself, to think pleasantly and pleasurably about himself, and really to be worshipping himself rather than God. That, not the other, is the true picture of sin. The other is sin, of course, but there you do not see it at its acme; you do not see it in its essence. Or, to put it in another form, if you really want to understand something about the nature of Satan and his activities, think of that wilderness where our Lord spent forty days and forty nights. That is the true picture of Satan where you see him tempting the very Son of God.

All that comes out in this statement. Sin is something that follows us even into the very presence of God.

### Necessary Rebirth

Before we come to our analysis of this, I would make one other preliminary observation which seems to me to be quite inevitable. If this picture does not persuade us of our own utter sinfulness, of our hopelessness as well as our helplessness, if it does not make us see our need of the grace of God in the matter of salvation, and the necessity of forgiveness, rebirth, and a new nature, than I know of nothing that ever can persuade us of it. Here we see a mighty argument for the New Testament doctrine about the absolute necessity of being born again, because sin is a matter of disposition, something that is so

profound and so vitally a part of us that it even accompanies us into the presence of God.

But follow that argument beyond this life and world, beyond death and the grave, and contemplate yourself in the presence of God in eternity for ever and ever. Is not the rebirth something which is a bare essential? Here, then, in these instructions about piety and the conduct of the religious life, we have implicit in almost every statement this ultimate New Testament doctrine of regeneration and the nature of the new man in Christ Jesus.

Indeed we can go on even beyond that and say that even if we are born again, and even if we have received a new life and a new nature, we still need these instructions. This is our Lord's instruction to Christian people. It is His warning to those who have been born again; even they have to be careful lest in their prayers and devotions they become guilty of this hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

### Two Ways of Praying

First, then, let us take this subject in general before coming to a consideration of what is commonly called "the Lord's Prayer." We are looking merely at what we might call an introduction to prayer as our Lord teaches it in these verses, and I think that once more the best way of approaching the subject is to divide it into two sections. There is a false way of praying and there is a true way of praying. Our Lord deals with them both.

#### False Way

The trouble with the false way is that its very approach is wrong. Its essential fault is that it is concentrating on itself. It is the concentrating of attention on the one who is praying rather than on the One to whom the prayer is offered. That is the trouble, and our Lord shows that here in a very graphic and striking way. He says: "When thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men." They stand in the synagogue in a prominent position; they stand forward.

You remember our Lord's parable of the Pharisee and the publican who went into the temple to pray. He makes exactly the same point there. He tells us that the Pharisee stood as far forward as he could in the most prominent place, and there he prayed. The publican, on the other hand, was so ashamed and full of contrition that "standing afar off" he could not even so much as lift up his face to heaven, but just cried out, "God be merciful to me a sinner." In the same way our Lord says here that the Pharisees stand in the synagogues and in the corners of the street, in the most prominent position, and pray in order that they may be seen of men. "Verily I say unto you, They have their reward." ,

According to our Lord, the reason for their praying in the street corners is something like this. A man on his way to the temple to pray is anxious to give the impression that he is such a devout soul that he cannot even wait until he gets to the temple. So he stands and prays at the street corner. For the same reason, when he reaches the temple, he goes forward to the most prominent position possible. Now what is important for us is to extract the principle, so I put that as the first picture.

The second is put in the words: "When ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking." If we take these two pictures together, we shall find that there are two main errors underlying this whole approach to God in prayer. The first is that my interest, if I am like the Pharisee, is in myself as the one who is praying. The second is that I feel that the efficacy of

my prayer depends upon my much praying or upon my particular manner of prayer. Let us look at these separately.

#### First Error - Showing Off

The first trouble, then, is this danger of being interested in myself as one who prays. This can show itself in many different ways. The first and the basic trouble is that such a person is anxious to be known among others as one who prays. That is the very beginning of it. He is anxious to have a reputation as a man of prayer, anxious and ambitious is that respect. That in itself is wrong.

The next step in this process is that it becomes a positive and actual desire to be seen praying by others. That, in turn, leads to things which will ensure that others do see us. This is a most subtle matter that is not always blatant and obvious. There is a type of person who parades himself and puts himself in a prominent position and is always calling attention to himself. But there are also subtle ways of doing this self-same thing.

The biographer, who was anxious to show the saintliness of an author, illustrated it like this. "Nothing was quite so characteristic of him," he said, "as the way in which, when he was walking from one room to another, he would suddenly in the corridor fall down on his knees and pray. Then he would get up and go on his way again." That, to the biographer, was proof of the saintliness and devoutness of this particular man.

I do not think I need explain what I mean. The trouble with the Pharisees was that they tried to give the impression that they could not wait until they got to the temple; they had to stand where they were at the street corners to pray, at once both blatant and obvious. Yes, but if you fall down on your knees in a corridor in a house, it is rather wonderful! I want to show on the basis of our Lord's teaching that that man would have been a greater saint if he had not dropped on to his knees, but rather had offered up his prayer to God as he was walking along that corridor. It would have been an equally sincere prayer, and nobody would have seen it. How subtle this is!

"Enter into thy closet, and ... shut thy door." My prayer is always going to be the secret prayer. Yes, but it is possible for a man to pray in secret in such a way that everybody knows he is praying in secret, because he gives the impression that by spending so much time there he is a great man of prayer.

Of course, we must not be over scrupulous about these matters, but the danger is so subtle that we must always bear it in mind. I remember people talking about a man who attended certain conferences and remarking with great admiration that they noticed that he always slipped away after the meetings, climbed a high rock away from everybody else, and then got down on his knees and prayed. Well, that good man certainly did that, and it is not for me to judge him. But I wonder whether in that great effort of climbing there was not a little admixture of this very thing our Lord here denounces. Anything that is unusual ultimately calls attention to itself. If I go out of my way, metaphorically, not to stand at the street corners, but become famous as the man of the lonely rock, I may be calling attention to myself. That is the trouble; the negative becomes the positive in a very subtle manner before we realize what we are doing.

But let us follow it a little further. Another form which this takes is the terrible sin of praying in public in a manner which suggests a desire to have an effect upon the people present rather than to approach God with reverence and godly fear. I am not sure, for I have frequently debated this matter with myself, and therefore speak with some hesitance, whether all this does not apply to the so-called "beautiful prayers"

that people are said to offer. I would question myself whether prayers should ever be beautiful. I mean that I am not happy about anyone who pays attention to the form of the prayer. I admit it is a highly debatable question and commend it to your consideration. There are people who say that anything that is offered to God should be beautiful and that, therefore, you should be careful about the phrasing and the diction and the cadence of your sentences. Nothing, they say, can be too beautiful to offer to God.

I admit there is a certain force in the argument. But it does seem to me that it is entirely negated by the consideration that prayer is ultimately a talk, a conversation, a communion with my Father; and one does not address one whom one loves in this perfect, polished manner, paying attention to the phrases and the words and all the rest. There is surely something essentially spontaneous about true communion and fellowship.

This is why I have never believed in the printing of so-called pulpit prayers. Of course, it ultimately rests on very much larger issues into which we cannot now enter. I am simply raising the question for your consideration. I would suggest, however, that the controlling principle is that the whole being of the person praying should be intent upon God and should be centered upon Him and that he should be oblivious to all other things. Far from desiring people to thank us for our so-called beautiful prayers, we should rather be troubled when they do so. Public prayer should be such that the people who are praying silently and the one who is uttering the words should be no longer conscious of each other, but should be carried on the wings of prayer into the very presence of God.

I think if you compare and contrast the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in this respect you will see what I mean. We do not have many of the recorded prayers of the great evangelists of the eighteenth century, but we have many of the popular prayers of the so-called pulpit giants of the nineteenth century. I am not at all sure but that it was not just there that the change took place in the life of the Christian church, which has led to the present lack of spirituality and the present state of the Christian church in general. The church became polished and polite and dignified, and the supposed worshippers were unconsciously occupied with themselves and forgetful that they were in communion with the living God. Such forgetfulness is a subtle thing.

#### Second Error-Attention on Form

The second trouble in connection with this wrong approach arises when we tend to concentrate on the form of our prayers, or on the amount or length of time spent in prayer. "When ye pray," He says, "use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking." You are familiar with what is meant by this term "vain repetitions." It is to be seen still in practice in many Eastern countries where they have prayer wheels. The same tendency is shown also in Roman Catholicism in the counting of beads. But again it comes to us in a much more subtle way.

There are people who often attach great importance to having a set time for prayer. In a sense it is a good thing to have a set time for prayer, but if our concern is primarily to pray at the set time rather than to pray, we may as well not pray. We can get so easily into the habit of following a routine and forgetting what we are really doing. As the Mohammedan at certain hours of the day falls down on his knees, so many people who have their set time for prayer rush to God at this particular time and often lose their tempers in doing so should anyone hinder them. They must get on their knees at this particular hour. Regarded objectively, how foolish it seems! But again, let every one examine himself.

It is not only the question of the set time, however; the subtle danger shows itself in yet another way. Great saints, for instance, have always spent much time in prayer and in the presence of God. Therefore we tend to think that the way to be a saint is to spend much time in prayer and in the presence of God.

But the important point about the great saint is not that he spent much time in prayer. He did not keep his eye on the clock. He knew he was in the presence of God; he entered into eternity as it were. Prayer was his life, he could not live without it. He was not concerned about remembering the length of time. The moment we begin to do that, it becomes mechanical and we have ruined everything.

What our Lord says about the matter is: "Verily I say unto you, they have their reward." What did they desire? They wanted the praise of men, and they had it. And similarly today they are spoken of as great men of prayer; they are spoken of as those who offered wonderful, beautiful prayers. Yes, they get all that. But, poor souls, it is all they will get. "Verily I say unto you, They have their reward."

### Approaching God the Right Way

Let us turn from them to the true way. There is a right way of praying, and again the whole secret is in the matter of the approach. That is the essence of our Lord's teaching.

"Thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him" - Matthew 6:6-8.

What does it mean? When it is stated in terms of the essential principle, the one thing that is important when we pray anywhere is that we must realize we are approaching God. That is the one thing that matters. It is simply this question of "recollection," as it is called. If only we would realize that we are approaching God, everything else would be all right.

### Process of Exclusion

But we need a little more detailed instruction, and fortunately our Lord gives it. He divides it up like this. First of all there is the process of exclusion. To make sure that I realize I am approaching God, I have to exclude certain things. I have to enter into that closet. "When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret." Now what does this mean?

There are some people who would fondly persuade themselves that this is just a prohibition of all prayer meetings. They say, "I do not go to prayer meetings, I pray in secret." But it is not a prohibition of prayer meetings. It is not a prohibition of prayer in public, for that is taught of God and commended in the Scriptures. There are prayer meetings recorded in the Scriptures, and they are of the very essence and life of the Church. That is not what He is prohibiting.

The principle is that there are certain things which we have to shut out whether we are praying in public or praying in secret. Here are some of them.

You shut out and forget other people. Then you shut out and forget yourself. That is what is meant by entering "into thy closet." You can enter into that closet when you are walking alone in a busy street or going from one room to another in a house. You enter into that closet when you are in communion with

God and nobody knows what you are doing.

There is no value in my entering into the secret chamber and locking the door if the whole time I am full of self and thinking about myself and am priding myself on my prayer. I might as well be standing at the street corner. No; I have to exclude myself as well as other people; my heart has to be open entirely and only to God. I say with the Psalmist: "Unite my heart to fear thy name. I will praise thee, O Lord my God, with all my heart" (Psalm 86:11-12). This is of the very essence of this matter of prayer. When we pray we must deliberately remind ourselves that we are going to talk to God. Therefore other people, and self also, must be excluded and locked out.

### The Need For Awe

The next step is realization. After exclusion, realization. Realize what? Well, we must realize that we are in the presence of God. What does that mean? It means realization of something of who God is and what God is. Before we begin to utter words we always ought to say to ourselves: "I am now entering into the audience chamber of that God, the almighty, the absolute, the eternal and great God with all His power and His might and majesty, that God who is a consuming fire, that God who is 'light and in whom is no darkness at all,' that utter, absolute Holy God. That is what I am doing." We must recollect and realize all that.

But above all, our Lord insists that we should realize that, in addition, He is our Father. "When thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." The relationship is that of Father and child, "for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him." O that we realized this! If only we realized that this almighty God is our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. If only we realized that we are indeed His children and that whenever we pray it is like a child going to its father! He knows all about us; He knows our every need before we tell Him.

As a father cares for his child, looks at his child, is concerned about his child, and anticipates his needs of the child, so is God with respect to all those who are in Christ Jesus. He desires to bless us very much more than we desire to be blessed. He has a view of us; He has a plan and a program for us; He has an ambition for us -I say it with reverence-which transcends our highest thought and imagination. We must remember that He is our Father. The great, the holy, the almighty God is our Father. He cares for us. He has counted the very hairs of our head. He has said that nothing can happen to us apart from Him.

Then we must remember what Paul puts so gloriously in Ephesians 3:20. That He "is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think." That is the true notion of prayer, says Christ. You do not go and just turn a wheel. You do not just count the beads. You do not say: "I must spend hours in prayer, I have decided to do it and I must do it." You do not say that the way to get a blessing is to spend whole nights in prayer, and that because people will not do so they cannot expect blessing. We must get rid of this mathematical notion of prayer. What we have to do first of all is to realize who God is, what He is and what our relationship to Him is.

### The Need for Trust in God

Finally we must have confidence. We must come with the simple confidence of a child. We need a child-like faith. We need this assurance that God is truly our Father, and therefore we must rigidly exclude any idea that we must go on repeating our petitions because it is our repetition that is going to produce the blessing. God likes us to show our keenness, our anxiety, and our desire over a thing. He tells us to

"hunger and thirst after righteousness" - Matthew 5:6 and to seek it; He tells us to "pray and not to faint" - Luke 18: 1, we are told to "pray without ceasing" - 1 Thessalonians 5:17. Yes; but that does not mean mechanical repetitions; it does not mean believing that we shall be heard for our "much speaking."

It means that when I pray I know that God is my Father, that He delights to bless me, that He is much more ready to give than I am to receive, and that He is always concerned about my welfare. I must get rid of this thought that God is standing between me and my desires and that which is best for me. I must see God as my Father, who has purchased my ultimate good in Christ and is waiting to bless me with His own fullness in Christ Jesus.

So, we exclude, we realize, and then in confidence we make our requests known to God, knowing He knows all about it before we begin to speak. As a father delights that his child should come repeatedly to ask for a thing rather than that the child should say, "Father has always done this," as the father likes the child to keep on coming because he likes the personal contact, so God desires us to come into His presence. But we must not come with doubtful minds; we must know that God is much more ready to give than we are to receive. The result will be that "thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." O the blessings that are stored at the right hand of God for God's children. Shame on us for being paupers when we were meant to be princes; shame on us for so often harboring unworthy, wrong thoughts of God in this matter. It is all due to fear, and because we lack this simplicity, this faith, this confidence, this knowledge of God as our Father. If we but have that, the blessings of God will begin to fall upon us and may be so overwhelming that with D.L. Moody we shall feel that they are almost more than our physical frames can bear, and cry out with him, saying, "Stop, God."

God is able to do for us exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think. Let us believe that and then go to Him in simple confidence.

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