

The Foundation Needed for Prayer

by Zac Poonen

This sermon emphasizes the importance of not neglecting God's word, drawing parallels between neglecting God's salvation and neglecting His teachings. It highlights the need for believers to study and meditate on God's word diligently, rather than neglecting it for worldly concerns. The sermon also delves into the significance of sincere and meaningful prayer, cautioning against hypocritical prayers for public recognition and emphasizing the value of listening to God in prayer.

Scripture: Matthew 7:24, Hebrews 2:3, Matthew 6:5, Luke 18:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Philippians 4:19, Isaiah 65:24, Luke 6:12, James 1:22

Topics: "Importance of God's Word", "Sincere Prayer"

Description

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Transcript

This is a familiar passage, but it's part of the Sermon on the Mount, and therefore it's important because Jesus said that if you hear these words and do them, you'll build on the rock. And if you hear these words and don't do them, or you neglect them or ignore them, then you're building on sand. Now, I don't think any of us will be guilty of ignoring God's word.

But you remember in Hebrews, the writer says, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? I don't think they were guilty of rejecting the salvation, but they were guilty of neglecting. And it's not so much that we reject parts of God's word. I don't think any true believer would ever reject God's word.

But Hebrews 2, 3 speaks about neglect. And I'm absolutely convinced that the vast majority of believers I've met, even in CSC churches, they neglect God's word. They don't study it carefully.

They would be more eager in these days to read all the details of coronavirus than to read what God's word is to say in exact details, what's happening here and what's happening there, and how many deaf people died, and how many people are sick in this state and what are the things we have to do in order to protect ourselves because we're also scared of death. I tell you, this is a time when we really discover

whether we have faith in the Lord or not. I thank God for such situations where those who want to hear can hear what God is saying as to how much we have faith, whether we can sleep peacefully at night, whether we are at rest, or whether we are constantly scared something or the other will happen, not to condemn us, but these are little words from the Lord to wake us up and say, hey, wake up.

You don't have as much faith as you imagined that you had. Then how strong is your faith for your salvation? How strong is your faith for the things you hear in the church about living an overcoming life? It's very, very important. I don't think any of us would reject the Sermon on the Mount, but there's a great possibility that we may neglect certain parts of it or say, ah, they are familiar with it.

So just a few things about prayer that Jesus said here, which you are very familiar with, but it's good for us to go over it again, Matthew chapter 6 and verse 5. He who hears these words and obeys them builds on the rock, and he who hears and understands can even explain them, but doesn't obey them, builds on the sand. No matter how well he understands it, no matter how well he can explain it to others, if he does not obey it, he is building on sand. So, first of all, in verse 5, when you pray, don't pray for people to recognize you or to appreciate your prayer.

Now, we would think we don't even need that exhortation, but the Lord is warning his disciples. Remember the Sermon on the Mount, if you read Matthew 5, verse 2-3, were spoken to disciples. The crowds were there, but he spoke to his disciples saying, when you disciples pray, verse 5, Matthew 6-5, don't be like the hypocrites, because they want to be seen by men or heard by men, and don't think we are completely free from that.

It's very difficult, at least I found it, when I started praying in public for the first time, I prayed to impress the people around me. And I'd go home and repent of it, and say, Lord, I judged myself while I prayed in the meeting today. It was 100% to impress people, and obviously you didn't hear it, even though it sounded a wonderful prayer.

Nothing happened. And then I would pray the next time, and again I would go home and judge myself. So it took me a long, long time to come to the place where I could pray in public and just be conscious of the Lord, and say, Lord, I'm talking to you.

And if others want to join in and say amen, that's up to them, but I'm talking to you. I'm not worried about what they think about my prayer. So don't neglect verse 5. When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites, because they pray in order to be seen and heard by others.

It's a very strong exhortation, and don't easily think that you've obeyed it. Examine yourself. I would advise you, every time you pray in public, or in any place where others are hearing you, go home and ask yourself, how did I pray today? Was it to pray? Was I conscious of the Lord, and was I praying to Him? Did I expect an answer from Him for what I prayed? Or was it for public consumption? And so it says, when you pray verse 6, go into your inner room, close your door, and pray to your Father in secret.

And the way I understand it is to shut the door in my mind. That's why we close our eyes. You can pray with your eyes open.

Jesus often lifted up his eyes to heaven and prayed. There's no rule that you must shut your eyes when you pray. But the only reason we do that is to cut out the world around us and to go into our inner room.

That's why we close our eyes. Closing our eyes is like closing the door. But more important than the eyes is to close the door of our mind and get inside a room, as it were, alone with God.

Because, you know, in the most holy place of the temple, there was no one but God. Say, Lord, I'm in the most holy place now. Only you are there.

And close the door, and your Father, who is in secret, will reward you. Very often our prayers are not rewarded because we're not praying to our Father in secret. So let's think of all the wasted prayers we have prayed for years and years and years and years.

It never went to heaven. It went to the roof. It went to all the people around.

You'd be amazed to see how much of our praying is for public consumption. It's just a ritual. It's like praying for the food.

That can become a ritual. But I'm not really thankful for the food I eat. I'm not really asking that God bless this food to strengthen me.

It's just a ritual. And we have to battle ritual in our lives. We think of all the other denominations.

Oh, look at the Roman Catholics with their rituals. I say, look at the folks in CFC churches with their rituals. Anything that's done as a routine, without meaning, is a ritual.

Whether it's a prayer, whether it's giving thanks for the food, or anything. Going to a meeting can become a ritual. So, it's very important that we are real in every single thing we do.

That's the mark of life. It's done in God's presence. It's done unto God.

Our prayer is an offering, and we are offering it unto God. And we're not bothered whether men see it or what they think of it. It doesn't make a difference.

You know, in the Old Testament, it said if a person couldn't afford to bring a sheep, as an offering, they could bring a little dove. Much cheaper. A dove, a small little bird, is much cheaper than a lamb.

So, rich people could bring a lamb. Poor people would only bring a dove. What's the meaning for us here in prayer? There are some people who can offer a lamb like spectacular prayers, very rich in language and everything else.

Impressive. And we say, Lord, we can't do that. Maybe he's genuine.

I don't want to judge him. We're not here to judge others. But, Lord, I can't seem to be able to pray like that.

But I can bring a few words, like a dove. And I'll begin with that, and one day maybe I'll be rich enough to bring a lamb. So, very, very important.

It's far better to pray three sentences in sincerity than a huge prayer impresses others. And the other thing he said here was, you know, he said that that's the basis on which verse 6, the Father, rewards us. So, the Father rewarding us is dependent on our shutting the door and praying to him alone.

And maybe that's why many Christians don't seem to get a reward from the Father of Revelation, and God speaking to them, and freeing them from anxiety and fear and so many things. Okay. And the other thing Jesus said in verse 7, another warning about prayer, is don't use meaningless repetition.

See, that's why I don't like the Pentecostals. I don't keep saying, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah. To me, it's a meaningless repetition.

I believe the vast majority of people in the world who say Hallelujah don't even know what it means. If you doubt me, go and ask somebody. Do you know what Hallelujah means? It's Hebrew.

It's three separate Hebrew words. It's not English. But people use it.

And because somebody else, they learned it from younger days. Hallelujah means praise. And Yah is the Lord.

It really means praise the Lord. I say, I might as well say it in English. Why do I have to say it in Hindi? Why should I say that? That's Hindi.

People don't understand. Why not say it in English? Praise the Lord. And why say it in Hebrew? Now, I'm not against it, but I only say that because meaningless repetition, that's what I'm talking about.

You can say Hallelujah. It's perfectly okay. There's nothing wrong in it.

But don't let it become a meaningless repetition. That's what it says in verse 7. And it's so possible. You can say praise the Lord.

It's a ritual, too. It can become meaningless repetition. We have to judge ourselves.

Say, Lord, I want to mean what I say in prayer. I want to say something which is not real and from my heart. And also, the other thing is speaks about long prayers.

Some people think if you pray for a long, long time, God will hear. It says here in verse 7, that's for the heathen thing. The heathen thing, that God will hear them because it's a very long prayer I pray.

It's a lot of garbage. I'm not saying you shouldn't pray a long prayer. You can pray for half an hour if you like, even in public, if you mean every word of it.

And you're praying to the Father and not to the audience. Sure. But make sure it's following the rules in verse 6 to 8, 5 to 7, where Jesus gave meaningless repetition.

And the other is long prayers. The Gentiles think they'll be heard by God because of their many, many words in their prayer. That doesn't mean our prayers are to be short.

But it must be meaningful and we must mean what we say. It must be prayed to the Father. And we must not think that God will hear us because our prayers are long.

And then, he said, you don't have to mention, repeat so many of your needs to the Father because it says in verse 8, your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. See, that's an amazing statement. Is there a single thing you need in your life which your Father doesn't know, which our Father doesn't know? In fact, there are a lot of things we need in our life which we ourselves don't know, which our Father knows we need and He provides for them.

So, it's something that we have to remember that when we come before God, we don't have to feel that He doesn't know our need. He knows it already. Then, the logically minded person will ask, why then do we have to say it? That's because the Lord wants to give us the privilege of asking and receiving.

That we ask and then we get. But He already knows our need. Philippians 4.19 is a wonderful promise.

My God will supply all your need according to His riches and glory in Christ Jesus. Not all that we want. There's a difference between all you want and all you need.

God does not give us all that we want, but He's promised to give us all that we need. Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all that we need will be added to us without a doubt. And then He told us the right way to pray in the next few sentences.

He didn't say repeat this prayer. We're not to repeat it like a parrot or like a tape recorder going round and round. He said pray that in this way.

That means this should be the pattern of your praying. Not just each time you pray. We can pray short prayers like, Lord help me in this situation.

What should I do? Or guide me right here, Lord. What should I do? That's okay. We should be praying short prayers frequently during the day.

But generally in our life, our way of life, you know, there's a hymn, the words of which go like this. I love it. Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed.

That means spoken or not spoken. I believe that. That prayer is not just what we speak.

The soul's sincere desire, whether spoken or not spoken. And if it is not the soul's sincere desire, then it's a hypocritical prayer. But sometimes we don't express it.

But the Lord sees it in our heart and He sees that desire in our heart itself is a prayer. I don't have to speak in words. There's a desire in my heart for something.

That's a cry to God. It's very encouraging for me to know that. Because that's the only way I can fulfill.

Do you know there's a command in the Bible? I think of this sometimes when people say they pray for two hours every day. I used to read in my younger days when I read biographies of different Christians. Somebody would pray four hours a day and two hours a day.

And I say, instead of challenging me, I'll tell you honestly, they used to discourage me. I said, where in the world can I do that? How will I spend four hours in prayer? What will I say? And so I said, well, I've decided in my life that I'm going to go by the Bible. Not by the testimonies of great men of God or any such thing.

I'm going to go by what the Bible says. So I read in the Bible, how many hours a day should I pray? Many years ago, I did the research on this in the New Testament. Not the Pharisees who say we pray three times a day or fast twice a week.

No, no, no, no. Not following the Pharisees. What is the command of the Holy Spirit? What did Jesus say? Okay, first of all, let me see what Jesus said.

How many hours we should pray in a day? He told us, you know, how many hours we should pray. Is it two hours or four hours? I'll tell you, maybe you'll not notice that verse, but here it is. It's in Luke chapter 18.

How many hours a day should we pray? Sorry, Luke and chapter 18. And let me read it. Now, Jesus was telling them a parable to show that we ought to pray 24 hours a day.

You got it? So those of you who are keen to know how many hours a day you should pray, here it is. From Jesus' own mouth. 24 hours a day.

Then let's see what the Holy Spirit says. In the mouth of two, it's confirmed. Jesus said that.

What does the Holy Spirit say? Turn to 1 Thessalonians in chapter 5. 1 Thessalonians in chapter 5. This is the word of the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul. In verse 17. Again, pray 24 hours a day.

There it is. So both these verses tell us how many hours a day we should be praying. 24 hours a day.

So I got my answer, and it didn't disturb me after that if somebody else prayed for two hours or four hours. I said, my goal is to pray for 24 hours a day. And that means not on my knees all the time.

Jesus was not on his knees all the time. In fact, Jesus was many times walking on the roads from Jerusalem to Judea. Sometimes two days up and down.

So he had specific times of prayer. Sometimes he'd go alone somewhere in the wilderness and wait on the Father. But I realized that prayer is, like I said, the soul's sincere desire.

Uttered or unexpressed. I said, that's what I want to have. A continuous attitude of prayer.

Which is a continuous attitude of dependence on God. Like the branch in the tree recognizing without you I can do nothing. That's why I pray, because without him I can do nothing.

And secondly, wanting to hear. Man shall not live by bread alone. By every word that proceeds from God's mouth.

I want to hear throughout the day. So, and the other thing I thought of before I go into this prayer itself here. Is, what should I be telling God? He said here that he already knows everything I need.

He knows my physical need. He knows my financial need. He knows my medical needs.

He knows my spiritual need. There's not a need in my life that he doesn't know. In fact, he knows a lot of needs of mine which I don't realize myself.

So, what in the world am I going to tell him? Of course, I have the privilege of asking. Ask and you shall receive. You don't have, because you don't ask.

It says, so we must ask. I believe that. We must ask for victory over sin.

We must ask for healing for our children who are sick. I do that all the time. Anytime my children are sick, I lay hands on them and pray for them.

And every father and mother should do that for their children. We need to pray. But beyond all that, what do we need to pray for? And then I thought of the prayer is like a conversation.

I'm not giving a lecture to God. You know, for example, now I'm talking to you. You guys have to keep quiet.

I'm speaking. Now, if I pray like that, I'm telling God, God, now you keep quiet. You're in the audience.

I'm talking to you. But that's not prayer. That's, I could be preaching to God because he's silent.

I say, that can't be prayer. So, when I began to try to understand this instead of getting rid of all the traditional understanding of many things in Christianity, as you probably know, I've got rid of a lot of traditional understanding that is in Christendom of various things. And I've got to go back to the Bible.

So, I thought, what was Jesus doing when he spent so many hours in prayer? For example, I'll give you one example. Always my example is Jesus. Looking under Jesus, we run the race.

It says here in Luke chapter 6, that he, Luke chapter 6 and verse 12, Jesus went into the mountain to pray and he spent a whole night in prayer to God. So, he was living in a constant spirit of prayer 24 hours, but then he spent specific times alone to prevent, to not allow others to distract him. And he spent a whole night and I asked myself, what was he telling God for 10 hours at night? What is he saying? I want this.

I want that. I want the other thing. Father, I want this.

I want this. Or do this for me. Do that.

What was he saying? I wanted to find out. And I came to the conclusion when I see the next verse. And when the day came, verse 13, he chose 12 of all among all his disciples.

Maybe there were a hundred of them. He chose 12. How did he know which 12 to choose? That's what he spent the whole night in prayer for.

To hear Father. Is it this one or that one? And he thought of all these hundred or whatever number they were. This one, that one.

Father, show me. Remember, he was on earth as a man. He had the limitations of man.

And it was not that the Father dictated to him. God doesn't dictate to us. We wait on the Father and then we gradually in our mind, we begin to understand his will.

That's how Jesus also. So he waited a whole night in prayer. Because he was taking a very momentous decision that was going to affect his kingdom for the next 2,000 years.

He had to select the right people who would change the world for the next 2,000 years. It couldn't be any Tom, Dick, or Harry. So he knew that he had to wait on the Father.

And the Father said, OK, you've got to select Simon, and Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James, and Simon, and Judas, the son of James, and Judas Iscariot. That was the Father who led him to choose Judas Iscariot as well. Who was a wholehearted, faithful brother at that time, but who became, it says in verse 16, a traitor.

He was not a traitor to start with. When you say somebody became a leper, he was not a leper to start with. He became a leper.

He became a traitor. He was a wholehearted disciple who became a traitor, a warning for all wholehearted disciples. So then I realized that Jesus was listening more than talking.

So gradually I realized that prayer is more listening than talking. See, it's like a student before a teacher. God is the teacher.

I'm a student. And a good student doesn't talk as much as he listens in the class. I mean, if I'm sitting in a classroom and the teacher is teaching, I'm listening.

I can sit there for one hour. Maybe I ask questions for two or three minutes. But 57 minutes, I'm listening.

Then I realized that prayer is listening. If I spend most of the time talking, I'm the teacher and God is the student. God, this, this, this, this, this.

I'm informing him as if he doesn't know what's happening. No. That relieved me tremendously of condemnation.

Because sometimes I need to pray and after a while I say, what do I have to pray about now? I don't even know what to say. I can go over the same thing and be a meaningless repetition of what I already said. Until I discovered prayer was listening.

It's not only when student and teacher, even if you're speaking to a more godly man. For example, if I'm on the telephone. And I'm speaking to someone.

And you hear me one hour on the phone and I don't say much. I stay only for two or three minutes. And I listen for 57 minutes.

You definitely make sure that the man at the other end of the line is a more godly man than me. That's why I'm listening more. But if you hear me speaking for 57 minutes and listening only two or three minutes, then you realize this is probably some young brother that Zach is talking to.

And I tell you very often, we talk to God as if he's a young brother to whom I have to talk most of the time. And I don't have to listen to anything he says. Most Christians are like that.

They go, go, go, on and on and on and on. Okay, I'm in. I changed all that.

There are many things we have to change. Many of you came out of dead churches because you got rid of all those traditions. There are still traditions hanging on to us, which we don't realize.

And a lot of it in prayer. Learn to listen. Yeah, that's the other thing I learned in the matter of prayer, listening.

And, of course, speaking as well. But he's a senior and I'm a junior. So I listen more than I speak.

He's a teacher and I'm a student. So I listen more than I speak. So when we think of these things, we realize that if I get this foundation right, then we can understand more of what Jesus spoke there.

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