

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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HOW NOT TO PRAY

Matthew 6:5-8

INTRODUCTION

This is not an example I commend to you, but it seems a father was berating his son for the son's lack of biblical knowledge. With sarcasm in his voice, the father said: "You probably don't even know the Lord's Prayer!"

"O yes, I do," said the son. With confidence he proceeded to pray: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

Surprised, the father stammered: "Sorry, son. I didn't realize you actually knew it."

It reminds me of a story George Kolarik used to love to tell about a young man – we'll call him Joe – who wasn't the brightest bulb in the chandelier. Joe was not a very good student, and he was in danger of not graduating from high school with the rest of his class. But Joe was well-liked by all of his classmates, and they pleaded with the principal to give Joe one more chance to pass the graduation exam. The principal reluctantly agreed. He said he would ask Joe one question. If he got it right, he could graduate. If he missed it, well, it would mean no graduation for Joe.

The principal said: "All right, Joe, here is the question: How much is 8 times 8?" With his high school graduation on the line, Joe thought about it for a moment and then said: "64."

At which point all of his classmates, who had been watching anxiously, said with one voice: "Ah, come on! Can't you give him another chance?"

I think that is a great story. It is quintessential George. Both stories remind us that we don't always know what we think we know. Which means that sometimes we don't know what we don't know, whether we're talking about math or prayer.

It is not math but prayer that I want to talk about with you today. The prayer Jesus taught to His followers – the prayer we know as the Lord's Prayer – is found in two places in the New Testament. It is found in Luke 11, where the disciples of Jesus, having observed their Master at prayer, come to Him with this request: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). The prayer is also given as part of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus introduces the Lord's Prayer in the larger context of His teaching on how and how not to "do religion" – how and how not to do "acts of righteousness" that show you take your religious duties seriously. In Matthew 6:1-18, Jesus shines the spotlight on three different religious activities.

- Giving to the poor or needy
- Prayer
- Fasting (which, in part at least, is a way to deny oneself and to practice both physical and spiritual discipline)

In each case, with all three of these, Jesus says: “Don’t do it – don’t engage in your religious practices – in order to be seen by other people. Don’t do any of these things in order to be affirmed or admired or applauded by men. If you do, you have missed the point, and the recognition you get from other people is the only reward you will get. You won’t get one from God.”

It is in this context in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus introduces the Lord’s Prayer. Over the next several weeks I want to explore with you the meaning and relevance of the Lord’s Prayer for our lives here and now in the 21st century. But before He teaches His followers how to pray (beginning in verse 9), Jesus teaches them – and us – how not to pray. That is the subject of our text in verses 5-8. And it is what I want you to think about with me today.

What does Jesus say? Essentially this: In all our acts of religion, in all the disciplines and expressions of our faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord of our lives – and here, particularly, in our life of prayer – we are to be different from both the Pharisees and the pagans. Both the respectable religious folks of our day and the irreligious. Both the world and those who, professing to be Christians, honor God with their lips but not with their hearts.

1. DO NOT BE LIKE THE HYPOCRITES

The first thing Jesus says is that, in our praying, we are not to be like the hypocrites. Notice verse 5: “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.”

Jesus despises hypocrisy, whether it is in church, on street corners, in the halls of government, at the dinner table or anywhere. What is hypocrisy? John Stott gives this helpful background on the meaning of the word: “In classical Greek the *hupocrites* was first an orator and then an actor (on the stage). So figuratively the word came to be applied to anybody who treats the world as a stage on which he plays a part. He lays aside his true identity and assumes a false one. He is no longer himself but in disguise, impersonating somebody else. He wears a mask (which is what actors did in the time of Jesus as they played different characters). Now in a theater there is no harm or deceit in the actors playing their parts. It is an accepted convention. The audience know they have come to a drama. They are not taken in by it. The trouble with the religious hypocrite, on the other hand, is that he deliberately sets out to deceive people. He is like an actor in that he is pretending (so that what we are seeing is not the real person but a part, a mask, a disguise), yet he is quite unlike the actor in this respect: he takes some religious practice which is a real activity (such as prayer) and he turns it into what it was never meant to be, namely ... a theatrical display before an audience. And it is all done for applause” (Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture*, p. 129).

The dictionary defines hypocrisy variously as:

- The practice of professing beliefs, feelings or virtues that one does not hold or possess
- The condition of a person pretending to be something he or she is not, especially in the area of morals or religion
- Insincerity by virtue of pretending to have qualities or beliefs you really do not have
- A feigning to be what one is not or to believe what one does not.

The problem with the hypocrites was not that they prayed in public, whether in church or standing on street corners. Just as there is no time when it is not time to pray, there is no place where it is not the right place to pray. Amid all the controversy over prayer in schools over the last 50 years, someone has made the astute observation that as long as they continue to give tests, there *will* be prayer in schools!

The problem with the hypocrites was not their location but their motivation. Behind the appearance of their piety hid their pride. In their prayers they did not focus on God and His glory. They focused instead on themselves and their reputations. Even in their praying! It was not a genuine connection and encounter with God that they desired, but the approval and applause of men. And while they got what they wanted, they missed out on the immeasurably greater rewards of real communion with God.

“Do not be like the hypocrites,” Jesus says.

You know as well as I do that one reason a lot of people give for staying away from church or for not getting involved in church is that the church is full of hypocrites. There are too many hypocrites in church, they say.

Are there hypocrites in church? Of course. Probably some of us here today qualify for the designation. I don't know. There are probably hypocrites in every church. But it is not accurate to say that the church is *full* of hypocrites. What *is* accurate is to say that the church is full of sinners. The church is full of imperfect people. None of us perfectly lives out what we say we believe. We all fall short. We all miss the mark. We all transgress the law of God. It doesn't make us hypocrites. It means that we are all sinners.

Do you know why Jesus came into the world? The answer is found in 1 Timothy 1:15, which says: “This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” To save sinners is the reason Jesus came. And the church He established is the fellowship (or community) of redeemed sinners. Not hypocrites but sinners saved by the grace of God. That is who we are.

In your praying, as in every area of your life as a follower of Christ, no hypocrisy. No play-acting. No pretending to be someone or something you're not. Don't try to impress people with your spiritual fervor. It's not about us. It's not about you or me. It's all about God. He is the One who deserves the applause and the praise.

The opposite of hypocrisy is sincerity. Authenticity. When you pray, whether it is in public or private, be real with God. Jesus is not saying in verse 6 that praying in public is always wrong. The point is that whether we are in public or private, we are not to be concerned with what others may think of us but fix our eyes and hearts on God, who calls us to Himself in prayer.

The clearest example in the Bible of hypocrisy in prayer is in the parable Jesus told of the Pharisee and the publican in Luke 18:9-14. You probably know the story. These two men, one a Pharisee known for his rigorous devotion to the Jewish law, and one a publican (or tax-collector) who would never win a popularity contest among the Jews, both went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee strategically stood and prayed where others could both see and hear him, while the tax-collector stood off by himself in the shadows. Though the Pharisee addressed his prayer to God, he was really there to announce to everybody within earshot what a good and virtuous man he was. His prayer was all about him. His goal was not really to commune with God, but to be seen and praised by men. The tax-collector, on the other hand, recognizing his sinfulness and how unworthy he was to come into God's presence, simply prayed: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

That is exactly the kind of prayer God welcomes – the humble, sincere prayer of a sinner who knows his or her need of God's mercy and grace.

As Jesus said, only one of those men went home in a right relationship with God. And it wasn't the Pharisee. Self-righteousness and hypocrisy don't cut it with Jesus. Never did and never will.

In your praying, and in the whole of your life as a follower of Christ, don't be like the hypocrites. Don't pretend to be something you're not in order to impress people. And don't think you're better than you really are. Take time to meet with God in secret. You will be investing in eternity.

2. DO NOT BE LIKE THE PAGANS

The second point Jesus makes is that we are not to be like pagans. Look at verses 7 and 8: "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."

What does Jesus mean? He is saying that prayer is not some kind of magic formula to be used to get what we want from God, or to get God to do what we want. To those who think that if only we use the right words, or if only we repeat our prayers enough times, we will propel God into action, Jesus says: "You have missed the point." There is no place in our prayers for "vain repetitions" as it says in the King James Version. In the same way that hypocrites try to impress others with their piety and their prayers, the pagans try to impress God with the volume of their words. Someone said you should never use a gallon of words to express a spoonful of thought. That is good advice that applies as much to our prayers as it does to our everyday conversations.

God is not impressed with our babbling on and on. It is neither the quantity nor the eloquence of our prayers that matters to God but our heart

The pagans thought they could force the hand of God – they could manipulate God to get what they wanted from Him – if they just found the right formula in prayer and kept repeating it over and over. But Jesus says no. God is not like that. And prayer is not like that.

Think about Elijah on Mount Carmel with the 450 prophets of Baal. You can read about it in 1 Kings 18. The prophets of Baal prayed frantically to their god from morning until evening, pleading with Baal to send fire from heaven to consume their sacrifice and to demonstrate that Baal was truly god. But nothing happened, despite all their rituals and babbling.

Then it was Elijah's turn. After drenching his sacrifice with water three times, he prayed a simple, passionate, faith-filled prayer to the Lord. And the Lord answered Elijah's prayer. The fire of God fell and burned up the offering, prompting all the people to fall on their faces and exclaim: "The LORD – He is God! The LORD – He is God!" And He is.

3. THEN HOW?

If we are not to be like hypocrites and pagans, then how are we to pray? Very simply, we are to pray as children who are dearly loved by our all-wise and all-gracious and all-holy and all-powerful heavenly Father. To all of us who belong to Him and to His family through faith in the saving work of His Son, God is our Father, a Father who loves His children and knows about all our needs. That means He loves *you* and knows all about *your* needs. And mine.

Trusting in His fatherly love, we can come to Him with all our requests and needs. As Jesus says in Matthew 7, "Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives. Everyone who seeks finds. And to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!" (Matthew 7:7-11).

In your praying, know that God loves you and knows about all your needs.

You might well ask – and you would not be the first to do so: If God already knows what we need, why pray? What is the point? Listen to the answer John Calvin gives: "Believers do not pray with the view of informing God about things unknown to Him, or of exciting Him to do His duty, or of urging Him as though He were reluctant. On the contrary, (we) pray in order that (we) may arouse (our)selves to seek Him, that (we) may exercise (our) faith in meditating on His promises, that (we) may relieve (our)selves from (our) anxieties by pouring them into His bosom; in a word, that (we) may declare that from Him alone (we) hope and expect, both for (our)selves and for others, all good things."

Let that truth sink into your heart and encourage you both in your praying and in your experience each day as you live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.