

Sunday Mar. 28, 2021  
Lesson 4: Prayer and Holiness  
Scripture: Matthew 6: 5-18

**Context:**

The next part of our section on holiness comes from the New Testament in the gospel of Matthew. The purpose of the lesson is to reflect on the communal and personal nature of prayer and holiness. As we look at Jesus's instructions to those he addresses, we begin to understand how prayer is a gift from God to benefit the church and the world.

These teachings from Jesus come from what is known as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee and preaches from the hills, both expounding upon the Torah and then adding additions. Most congregations and Christians primarily know the Sermon on the Mount as a focus upon the Beatitudes, or blessings, given to the people to remember as they go forward in the midst of daily life.

In fact, Jesus gives them instruction for their personal devotion life as he instructs on how to pray, including both place and content. It is important to note that even though Jesus starts by addressing those who pray in synagogue, Jesus is not dismissing corporate prayer. Jesus, as a practicing Jew, would have prayed the prescribed prayers in the synagogue numerous times. Jesus was more concerned with the "hypocrites" who perform their personal prayer obligation in the most visible way on a wide street; their prayers are directed not to God but to their human audience, and from humans alone will they get their reward.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is giving them standards for private prayer; something holy and given to God alone.

Jesus starts out by reminding them of what is not prayer. Prayer, as some individuals in the Gentile community understand it, regarded prayer as a magical means of manipulating God into doing human bidding.<sup>2</sup> Instead, authentic prayer acknowledges how God knows our needs before asking and God will be God.

What follows is known as the Lord's Prayer, also found in the gospel of Luke. The beginning of the prayer "Let your kingdom come" urges God to establish rule on earth and pays homage to the belief of God as the ultimate transformer of the earth.<sup>3</sup> The rest of the prayer focuses on humans making treaties from asking for food, to seeking forgiveness, and to not being led to commit evil. The prayer glorifies God and petitions God to enable sinful humans to move closer to God.

Jesus continues to speak after giving instructions on prayer to emphasizing forgiveness. Then, Jesus concludes with how to fast. Like his prescription on prayer, people are not to focus on making public spectacles. They are to be solemn when they do so.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas R.A. Hare, "Matthew," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 64.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-68.

## **Application**

The quickest way to get a room to go quiet is to ask for someone to pray. Or at least that's been my experience with youth groups and occasionally adults. There is a reticence to leading in public prayer and lifting one's voice to honor and glorify God. Some of it I think is people being afraid to pray because they do not want to "mess up" in honoring God. The other part is that I believe we have forgotten how to pray and forgotten how our own personal devotional time is meant to inform how we live in public and glorify God with our daily lives.

The founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley, was serious about his prayer life. He would begin as early as four a.m. devoutly in prayer for his sins, the petitions of those in his care, and for the reign of God on earth. He did the same thing with evening prayers, focusing the last portion of his day on prayers for sins he had committed and for the evening rest awaiting him. Wesley knew the power of prayer and believed it affected everything he did.

While we may not have the time to avail to prayer as much as brother Wesley did because of the different aspects of our lives, we are called to lead lives of holiness, offering up prayers both communally and individually. Prayer is our way not only of communicating to God, but also reflecting on how God is speaking to our lives and how God is the one at the center of our lives.

I once had a professor of Methodist theology who said perhaps the greatest part of the prayer is the beginning of the prayer and how we name God. There are many things we can pray to: wealth, success, or the market. So it is always important to name to whom we are speaking. That is why we say things such as "Holy God," or "Steadfast God," or as Jesus taught us "Our Father who is in heaven." After we begin there, we can move onto the other parts of the prayer running the gamut of what is on our heart and mind.

While on Sunday mornings, the Morning Prayer or Pastoral Prayer, is usually a little longer, that is but a foretaste of what prayer can be in length. One thing I think people always get overly concerned about is the amount of time one spends in prayer. Yet Jesus makes clear here that length or eloquence is not the measure of the prayer. Instead, it is the discipline and spirit of going to God in prayer.

As Jesus gives us a template, he reminds us prayer is not about demanding something of God. "God if you give me the promotion I want, I promise I will tithe more." While I am sure that God would be pleased, as well as your pastor and treasurer at this development, that prayer does not line up with what Jesus has in mind. Jesus wants us to go even deeper in our formation as a follower of him.

For Jesus, the prayer to pray is for the deepest parts of the soul. We are to praise God for who God is, name our concerns and our struggles, and petition for God to direct us. The private prayer is a time when we name to God what God already knows about us.

Over time, I have found a helpful way to pray alongside the Lord's Prayer. The gifts of ACTS is a great template for prayer. In our prayers, we should Adore God, Confess our sins, give Thanks for all God has done, and give our Supplication for ourselves and others' behalf to God. As we do this, we make it more personal and can find a way to talk to God.

I've found that as we cultivate our personal prayer lives, we also help with our communal prayer lives. After teaching a lesson on prayer with our youth, one of the

youth continued to experiment with different ways to pray. She used her blog and leadership positions for prayer, and her prayers became bolder and more pronounced. When I ask her to pray, she does so with joy and I've watched as even adults seem more comfortable with leading in public prayer after listening to her. When we pray in our personal lives, we become more comfortable in leading in communal prayer and see how all prayers glorify God.

Why do you think it is important to have a personal prayer life? What are your favorite ways to pray? How do you pray along these lines as Jesus taught us to pray? Where do you think your prayer life might need to grow? How do you think God hears and puts our prayers to use for the kingdom of God?

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