



Righteous Praying #2

Matthew 6:5-8

GraceLife: December 3, 2006

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Last time, last week, we opened a discussion about the place of prayer in the life of the believer, and today's message is built on that. If you didn't hear that, you need the CD to get the full impact of everything that this passage teaches us. Basically, what we did was, we acknowledged the biblical duty that we have to pray, and we looked at several biblical examples from Jesus and the early church that are left for us in the Bible about what a vibrant prayer life looks like.

We also acknowledged this – we acknowledged the poorly kept secret, that is personal for far too many of us, about evangelical culture in our prosperous western society: For many of us, we affirm the importance of prayer, but deep in your heart you know that your own experience of prayer and even your own desire for prayer fall short of what it should be. It is one thing to intellectually acknowledge that; it is another thing to have a heart that says, “Lord, I must pray because I love You so much.”

Well, we are eager this morning – I'm eager this morning; I won't speak for you – I'm eager this morning to come back to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ to see and to show you what He says about prayer here in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 6, so that He can help you bridge that gap between what you profess about prayer and what you actually possess about prayer – that difference between what we affirm with our minds and what we actually do. What Jesus has to say today is no doubt going to help you bridge that gap that each of us feel to one degree or another.

Beloved without any doubt, this passage in Matthew chapter 6 is a great gift from the Lord Jesus Christ to His disciples as He teaches us about prayer. Matthew chapter 6, beginning in verse 5 – Jesus said this in the context of telling people not to practice their righteousness before men. Matthew chapter 6, verse 5 – Jesus says:

And when you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

And when you are praying – it can also be translated, “While you are praying” – do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

This is a glorious passage that will absolutely transform your prayer life – I say that without fear of contradiction. Let me start by making two general, but absolutely essential, observations about this passage as we think about this whole matter of prayer in your life as a believer in Jesus Christ:

First of all – and I alluded to this last time – Jesus says—look at the beginning of verse 5, He says: “When you pray” – that’s all He says about it. It is very broad and general. Beloved, get this, this will liberate your conscience so much: Jesus assumes that you will pray, and from what we saw last time, the Bible demands that you pray. But here in Matthew 6, Jesus leaves open the details about when and how long you will pray.

He does not say, “When you pray, get up at 5 a.m. and pray for a minimum of 45 minutes or your prayers don’t count.” Even though – some of you laugh, and that’s fine; you know, if you enjoy it, then have at it; it’s okay; I don’t mind that one bit – but even when we go to try to fix our prayer lives, when we are convicted about how poorly and how lowly our prayers are, when we try to fix our prayer lives, we usually start with such superficial issues and say, “I’m going to start, and doggone it, I’m going to set my alarm clock for 4 a.m. tomorrow. I’m going to pray for two hours.” Or whatever.

That’s where we start in trying to fix it: We start by trying to pray more. It is like the bad restaurant that brings you food and you say, “Well, the food is bad, but at least there’s plenty of it.” If you are praying badly, praying more without some kind of fundamental change doesn’t fix anything.

And so, beloved, what I want you to see in this passage for your upbuilding and for your encouragement is that Jesus, when He teaches on prayer in this chapter, is not teaching you time management principles for a good prayer life. That’s not what He is talking about at all. You have to put all of that stuff out of your mind so that you can receive this teaching that He has, to find fertile soil in your life so that your heart will respond in the kind of prayer that we all want as believers in Christ. Forget about time management; it has nothing to do – it is not in this passage at all.

Secondly, and by way of contrast – this is the flip side; this is the other side of that coin – what I want you to see in this passage, what I want you to go home and read again and meditate on until it sinks into your mind, is this: *When Jesus teaches His disciples to pray here in Matthew 6:5-8, He grounds all of the motivation for you to pray in the character of God.*

He tells you to pray because - verse 6 – “your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” He tells you to pray in verse 8 because “your Father in heaven knows what you need before you ask Him.” He draws your attention to the great character of God –

the great mercy, the great grace of God; the great omniscience, the great omnipresence of God – and says, “This is why you pray.”

Beloved, that changes everything. That changes everything! You can either go to prayer with your stopwatch out and say, “Okay, I’ve got to get my time in because that’s my duty;” or you can honor God when you pray and say: “I want to pray because of who this great and gracious God is and because He has promised to bless me, and I want His blessing and I want to know Him. Therefore, I want to spend time with Him.”

Beloved, that changes everything. *Pagans*, as Jesus says later in the passage, pagans can start a time clock. Pagans can pray for hours at a time, but their prayers are meaningless. Jesus says in this passage, “Don’t you be like them,” and He lays out before you something completely different.

Beloved, your heart ought to just jump at this and latch hold of it and never let go of it. Jesus motivates you to prayer, not by setting down rules for you. He points you to the character of God. That gracious, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent God will attract you to a kind of prayer that mere rules or personal discipline can never attain to.

Beloved, rules do not generate passion in prayer. You can set up all of the rules that you want about how you are going to pray and when you are going to pray, but that’s not going to make you passionate before the throne of God.

The one thing that will make you passionate before the throne of God is recognizing the glory of His character and saying, “I want that; I want *You*, Lord. You say You will come and You will bless me. You will see me in secret. You will hear my humble prayers; You will receive them. You know me so well and You will reward me for that. People, get out of my way; it is time for me to pray.” That’s how your heart responds to it.

Well, to help you along that road – what we just said is just an overview of what we have to say today – I want to give you two points of self-examination to help you along that road that Jesus lays out here. There are two points, each with two sub-points, to just to help your notes. As you sit here and you take stock of your prayer life, and in the coming days you take stock of your prayer life before the living God, here is what you need to do:

1. Examine Why You Pray

Oh, this is wonderful. I am so thankful to God for this passage. Two sub-points under that – examine why you pray – and the first question that you should ask yourself is:

A. Do you pray to please men?

Do you pray to please men? Because that’s where Jesus draws our attention here in verse 5 – look at it with me again. Jesus says:

When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

Jesus says, “Don’t be like the hypocrites.” He says don’t be like these stage actors who put a mask on their face – that’s where the term originally came from. A hypocrite is someone who hides his true identity and puts on a performance for his chosen audience.

Jesus says – and He points to the Pharisees as He has been throughout this passage since chapter 5, verse 20 – He points to the Pharisees and He says, “Look at them.” He says this praying man on the outside looks to be godly, but his private life is not consistent with the outward mask he puts on before men. He says, sure, when there is a crowd around – when he is out in the synagogue where the religious people gather, when he is out in the broad spacious public streets and prayer time comes – he is right there pumping his chest out and saying, “Oh, dear God, I thank you that I’m not like so and so.”

These hypocrites who choose the public places to do their prayers, Jesus says, given the assessment of God on those kinds of people – God looks into their hearts and He sees their motives just like He looks into your heart and mine and sees our motives for everything that we do – Jesus says God is not fooled by that; that’s a sham. He exposes their motives; He says they are only praying so that men would notice them.

They want to look like they are praying so that they can get a response from those who are watching, but the reality of it is something they couldn’t care less about. When they get home alone, Jesus says, they are not praying because they don’t love God. When these men pray, Jesus says, they are only using God to get the approval of men – how abominable, how unthinkable is that, that someone would use the living God to advance their own selfish personal ends and to puff up their own pride! That’s awful – that is absolutely awful!

Think about it this way – I’ll give you an illustration to see just how awful and abominable that is: Suppose there was a man that went out of his way to give public displays of affection to his wife when people were gathered around, when you are gathered around and he is all lovey-dovey and singing the praises of his wife. But in private, that same man to his same wife, privately ignores her, belittles her, or even beats her. We would all be absolutely appalled at that kind of hypocrisy – wanting to look like the loving husband when the reality was much different.

Beloved, it is the same thing when men want the public reputation of being godly without the private reality. Jesus condemns all of that hypocrisy and He says, “They have their reward in full.” Look at the end of verse 5 with me. He says, “Truly I say to you – you can take this to the bank – they have their reward in full.” Jesus says when men pray that way, when they pray to be noticed by others, they have all that they are going to get. You are seeking the notice of men; they noticed you; there is nothing left to do. God is not going to show His blessing on that kind of prayer.

And beloved, we could expand it a little further and to take this principle and tease it out just a little bit because in a group of this size – I say it with tenderness and compassion in my heart – I have no doubt that there are some thorough-going hypocrites in this audience. I have no doubt about that whatsoever. You put on a show for men so that they will think that you are a Christian – a godly Christian at that. But in reality, your whole heart is continually cold and hard and indifferent to Christ. Obedience to Him is something that you don't really concern yourself with. The realities of private holiness do not trouble your conscience at all.

To you, my friend, I want to say this: Don't be deceived in that hypocrisy. Maybe you are fooling the men around you; maybe you are fooling me – doesn't matter. God sees right through that. He pierces it with His omniscient eye and says, "I see all of that." And beloved, He is not mocked. Eventually, you hypocrites will reap what you have sewn because judgment is coming.

But I say to you, and trust that in the goodness and providence of God He brought you for a point of conviction on such a day as this, even now – even in the wealth of your hypocrisy, God is still extending His grace and calling you graciously to repent of that – graciously calling you to put your faith in Christ, to repent of all of the hypocrisy and enter into the living reality that is a true relationship with Jesus Christ. I call you to that today. Let this word of warning against the hypocrites in Jesus' day go deep into your heart as well.

For those of you who are true Christians here, let me encourage you with this thought as we examine why it is that we pray: *What other men think about your prayer life is utterly irrelevant.* You are not praying to please men. When you pray, no matter where you pray – if it is in a private setting or if you have opportunities to lead others in prayer – you are praying to an audience of one and Jesus is your Lord.

And if you pray to please Him, whether you get the approval of men or not is absolutely a point of indifference. And Jesus here lays out before you how it is that you can please God with your praying. And so the question that you really need to contemplate, for those of you who are in Christ, is the second sub-point of my first question as you examine why you pray. Ask yourself this question:

B. Do you pray to please God?

"Do I pray to please God? Because that's the only thing that matters." Look at verse 6 with me again. Jesus says, "But you..." Stop right there. Sharp contrast, and especially in the original language, it is a pointed contrast. He says the hypocrites are like this and He said things about that to establish the way that they pray. He says forget about them; different standards apply to you. "There is something different that should animate the way that you pray and I am going to contrast that for you," Jesus says.

A different kind of praying comes out of a true believer, and when you see that laid out for you, you know what to aim your heart after. Jesus here in this verse – this is so

precious! – Jesus in this verse describes a private intimacy with God that is the exclusive domain of the born-again believer in Christ and intended to be the domain of every believer in Christ. This is supposed to belong to you, beloved, if you are in Christ. Nine times in this one verse, Jesus uses the singular person “you” – not you among many, but you individually. Nine times in this one verse Jesus says that you are alone with God.

And what He says is, you say, “How is it that I go about pleasing God then?” He starts with this: He says in contrast to finding the most public place to pray, which maximizes your exposure before men like the hypocrites do, Jesus says, “You go find the most private places you can find to pray.” You get alone where no one can see you.

That place of solitude, the inner room that He describes, the closed door, is really speaking to a kind of solitude. If a family lives in a one-bedroom apartment, there is no place for the guy to go for that kind of solitude. So that’s not the main thing that Jesus is saying. He is saying, “Seek solitude where you can pray in private.” And He says as you pray privately, as you go out of your way to make sure that men are not watching you when you pray, let this thought motivate you and encourage you: Jesus says, “God is there in His omnipresence, and He sees you in order to bless you.”

Look at the end of verse 6 – He says, “Close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret.” Pray in secret so that you put to death all of those ulterior motives of wanting men to see the way that you pray. Put that pride to death and pray in secret where only God sees, and He says, “And your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”

Beloved, this reality, this truth from the lips of our omniscient Lord who is God incarnate Himself – that reality and that promise should change the way that you pray because when you remember the character of your Father, His seeing omniscience – “He sees me everywhere I go; that motivates me to holiness, but it also motivates me to encouragement. He sees me; He hasn’t abandoned me. He hasn’t forgotten me even when I am alone on my knees in prayer. He sees me; I trust Him for that” – when you see His fatherly love, His faithful willingness to bless – this is glorious, beloved – think about this – let it sink into your heart when you go in private to God to pray: you have the direct promise of the Lord Jesus Christ who says, “Your Father will see you and He will reward you.”

And so you run to prayer and you say, “God, no one sees me here but You, but I am absolutely confident of Your promise to bless and I seek that now.” And beloved, as these things sink into your mind, your heart will want His presence. You are not going to need an alarm clock to stimulate you to prayer so much, as you have a heart 24 hours a day that is drawn to the great character of this God, wanting His holy presence, wanting His private presence to enjoy the great intimacy that He bestows on those who are truly His children.

So you have to examine why you pray and settle in your heart that you are praying to please God not men, and that reality turns prayer – get this – it turns prayer from a

drudgery, from a duty that so many of you have felt over the years, this duty of “Oh, I need to pray more; I’m not praying enough. Let me get up; let me get started” – this reality sweeps all of that away and leaves you with the promise of the person of God as the reason that you pray and turns it into a delight.

It gives you a heart that reaches out to that and says, “Yes, that’s what I want. Of course, God saved me to have fellowship with me. He saved me that I would enjoy this kind of intimate communion with Him. Of course that’s what I want; of course I love His person! How could I not love the One who showed such great mercy on me at the cross of Jesus Christ? How could I not love and want to be with the One who says, ‘I have all powers; I see all things; and when you come to Me alone, I will bless you – I will reward you’?”

Beloved, you want that if you are a true believer. If that doesn’t appeal to you at all, that’s a sure sign that you need to examine yourself to see if you are in the faith or not. But we have to clear away so much of the stuff that we have piled on over the years – all of the rules that we tried to put on to make prayer effective, to get what we want out of prayer.

But, you know, I don’t care what I get out of prayer if God answers my prayers differently than what I asked. I don’t want Him to change His perfect will to what my will is. That’s why Jesus said, “Thy will be done not mine.” No, no, maybe God grants me blessing; maybe God answers according to what I asked; maybe He says no and does something else – that is secondary, beloved. The primary thing is to enjoy the presence of this holy God who bids you to come, to seek Him for His own worth, at His own bidding, at His own command.

And we will see in weeks to come what Jesus says about the content of prayer, in verses 9 through 15. But for now, I want you to see that it is the character of God that calls you into His presence and that will motivate you over the long haul, over the long term, rather than your self-made resolutions on what you are going to do differently. You start with the character of God to motivate you to pray – that’s why you pray.

And when you are clear on that – when you are clear on why you pray – there is another aspect of prayer for you to consider. Jesus’ word told you to examine why you pray – whether you pray to please men. Maybe you can give a good report the next time you get together in your accountability group – “Yeah, I prayed six days out of seven. Oh, man, the time I spent... oh, you wouldn’t believe!” Forget all of that – that is sinful if that’s why you pray. No, no, we pray to please God, and whether men know about it or not, we don’t even care. But there is a second point of self-examination that I want to lay out to you and that’s this:

2. Examine How You Pray

Two more sub-points here, just like the last one. Ask yourself this question as you examine how you pray:

A. Do you aim for quantity?

Do you aim for a quantity of prayer? Look at verse 7 with me. I think it will become clear what I mean by this – verse 7, Jesus says:

And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.

Jesus says there are pagans out there and they will pray and they will repeat prayers and they will do all of that on the assumption that if they just pray long enough and hard enough, somehow God will hear them and answer. Jesus says don't be like that.

And when He uses this term is translated “meaningless repetition,” it is the verb that means “to babble” – “da, da, da, da” – to speak without thinking. It has the idea of idle talk. What Jesus says here – listen to me, not that you're not, but you know what I'm saying – Jesus here is condemning a mechanical approach to prayer which is characterized by thoughtless speech and mindless repetition. He says, don't be that way.

When you pray, your mind is to be engaged, your heart is to be engaged. Prayer is not a mechanical repetition of words. It is not words that you say on one hand, while with your mind you are thinking about what you are going to do for the rest of the day – that's not praying; that is not acceptable to God.

And He says, when those Gentiles pray that way, they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. Jesus says they have got an entirely wrong perception; their paradigm is completely wrong. He says to the extent that you have that mindset that many words equal good prayer, you have got to take it all back to it and just beat that thing down and break it until it is shattered and there is nothing left and then rebuild it with what true prayer is, because these Gentiles thought that long, repetitious prayers would prompt God to respond favorably to them. And get this, beloved: Jesus says that's all wrong.

And remember that He is teaching you as one of His disciples about prayer as He says this. He says God's favor is not bought with the quantity of your words; it is not about how long you pray – it is not. And that is gloriously liberating! “You mean to say that I could pray for five or ten minutes with my heart really focused and engaged, and that would be more acceptable to God than if I prayed for an hour and was half-asleep when I did it?” Yes – that's exactly what Jesus is saying here!

He says you can't force God to answer by saying the same thing repeatedly in a thoughtless way, by just going on and on and on without engaging your mind and heart in His character and who it is that you are praying to. Jesus says that's what pagans do.

If you have any doubt that that kind of praying is meaningless and totally devoid of any substance whatsoever, beloved – I say this with gentleness in my heart with who I am going to address this to – if you have any doubt about that, go to a Catholic mass

sometime. Go to a Catholic funeral sometime, and listen to them repeat the same thing over and over again in a monotone and you will have an idea of what Jesus is saying – that is totally meaningless. It is just empty repetition without any spiritual reality behind it.

Jesus says your Father is not like that. That is not the kind of prayer that He receives, and so don't pray like them – don't pray like that. And you say, "It's okay: I've been a Protestant all of my life, so what Jesus is saying doesn't apply to me." No, that's not it at all. You see, Jesus is going deeper than that. We can use the Catholic model of prayer or Jewish model of prayer, which is just repetition of the same word over and over and over again – we can use that to make the point that Jesus is teaching His disciples.

And where you need to apply this in your own life is this – and this convicts all of us – when you are speaking words ostensibly in prayer while your mind is thinking about something else, you are just engaged in meaningless repetition – you are just babbling. You are not really thinking about God; your heart really isn't engaged in that.

Let me make it more personal. Let me make it where I'm going to get some complaints, okay? So you can start addressing your notes to me or figuring it out this way. Let me get it right to where we live: running through your prayer list. When your heart is not engaged, when you are just mouthing the requests that you have penciled out before on your list, there is a problem.

That is the same kind of meaningless repetition if – notice my conditional statement here, so maybe that will restrict some of the complaints that I get about this – *if* you are simply going through that list in a mechanical way, you are not really praying. If it is just the same thing day after day and your mind is not engaged, your heart isn't fervent, your heart isn't passionate – you are not praying. It is just meaningless repetition.

For some of you, you need to just bomb your prayer list and start all over because – follow me here if you are not too offended to turn off what I said because, beloved, I'm saying this for your upbuilding and for your benefit – prayer involves intelligent, thoughtful words addressed to the living God that you are consciously engaged in.

Some people can go through a prayer list and be consciously engaged and their heart move toward that direction. It is not that prayer lists by themselves are wrong – I'm not saying that. What I'm talking about is how you use it and substituting mechanical repetition of your prayer list as a substitute for real prayer – Jesus says, "I'm not buying that; it's just meaningless repetition."

You say, "I don't know if I agree with that." Put it this way: Can you imagine having a human relationship where someone came to you and every day they said the same things to you repeatedly with no variety, no thought, no emotions: "Hello Janet. Good day to you today. Fine weather we're having – yes? I hope you have a nice day." And the next day it is the same thing: "Hello Janet. Nice day we're having. Nice weather – yes? Good day." And again the next day – it's the same thing over and over again. You will

get tired of that pretty quickly. You would turn your head away and say, “I don’t want to talk to that person. There is no relational reality here. He is on autopilot.”

God looks at that mechanical praying and says exactly the same thing – “You are just on autopilot; I don’t want to hear it.” Until you get your heart and mind engaged, you are just praying like a pagan. You think you can just roll this off of your tongue without thinking and say, “That’s what I want in prayer.” Jesus says, “No, that’s not it at all.” Jesus here says that many words do not guarantee that your prayers will be heard.

And beloved, that truth has hit me like a ton of glorious bricks, and it is so liberating to realize that. Jesus is not setting a time schedule here; He is not setting down a bunch of rules about how you must pray. He is calling for a heart relationship to God in prayer that is rooted in the character of God, the goodness of God. And that, beloved, should draw the believing heart to say, “That’s what I want; I want to be with my Father.”

How many of you who’ve been Christians for a long period of time – how many of you have fallen into that kind of repetitious model where your heart is not really engaged if you are even praying at all?

How many of you can look back into your past Christian experience, look back at times when you were under the fire of persecution or maybe look back to those early days of prayer before someone got a hold of you and said, “These are the rules that you must follow” – how many of you can look back and say, “I remember what passion was like! I remember crying out to God for the salvation of my loved ones. I remember being on the floor before Him and just pleading for His favor. I remember being in prayer and just being enraptured by how glorious it was to be in the presence of the Father who loved me!”

Beloved, go back to that – go back. Plow that ground again, drill those wells again, where the real reality of prayer is, instead of the mechanical approach that so many of us have fallen into, maybe without even thinking about it. Because that kind of reality, that kind of passionate prayer, can still be yours today – it doesn’t have to be the dead thing we’ve turned it into – praise God for that.

It is not that God has changed and all of the sudden that’s what makes this boring. It is because somewhere along the way, we lost our way. At some point, we started to drift away and started praying like pagans do and saying, “It is about how long I pray and covering every item on my prayer list, and if I don’t do that, I haven’t really prayed.” God have mercy on us. God does not want long prayers simply for the sake of you praying long prayers.

And beloved, there is a reason – it is for your sake that I’m so energized by this. It is for your sake, beloved, that I’m so animated by this, because I want to rescue your conscience from that which has held it in bondage for so long. I know because I’ve been there and I hated it. And what Jesus does here is He breaks all of those chains and He sets your heart free to really pray.

“Righteous Praying, #2”

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So much evangelical preaching on prayer, at least in our western society, in pulpits all across the land – you have heard it and I have heard it from different teachers in different places – so much evangelical preaching on prayer is geared toward simply making you pray for a longer period of time than you are currently doing, and it leaves you feeling guilty because you don't measure up to the pattern of men who lived hundreds of years ago in a different kind of society.

And they leave you with an unspoken impression, maybe the untended impression, that if you are praying here, it is not until you get up *here* that you really start to pray. So work yourself up and maybe then God will find your prayers acceptable. I know they would never put it that way, but you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Get this: Jesus sets up many words as a *bad* example. Look at what He says – verse 7 says:

When you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.

You can't assume that many words equals good prayer any more than assume that bad food at a restaurant will be made better if they just give you a bigger portion. No – we've got to go right back to the start, beloved – and Jesus wasn't the first one to say this, this caution about many words in prayer. Write this verse down – in Ecclesiastes 5:2, Solomon says the same thing – he says:

Do not be hasty in words or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth; therefore, let your words be few.

God does not want long prayers that are simply the result of trying to meet an artificial time standard. He is not looking for quantity. You don't have to pray for two hours before God starts to get impressed and say, "I'll start to listen now. That's 120 minutes – man, good job!"

You see, beloved, all of this is tied into your understanding of the character of God, because we are not trying with our long prayers to overcome some perceived reluctance of God to respond to us. You don't have to keep talking and talking and talking until God says, "Okay, that's enough – what is it you want now?" No, when you come to God, He is ready and willing to bless.

You say, 'Well, what is it that He wants then, if it is not the quantity of prayer that He is after?' You'll find the answer as you start to deal with this second question about examining how you pray. The second question is this:

B. Do you aim for quality of prayer?

Quality of prayer – verse 8. Jesus says, “So do not be like them...” Don’t be like the Gentiles who meaninglessly repeat many words, who think that the length of their prayer is what guarantees that it will be heard. He says, “Don’t be like that, beloved.” He says, “For your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.”

Beloved, you don’t have to rehearse the facts to God to get Him up to speed on what is happening in your life: “Lord, I’ve got a really bad problem here at work. You know, my boss just really goes off on me and then when he does, I get all upset.” God knows all of that stuff already. So don’t waste your words informing Him about the situation, Jesus says.

God is a loving Father who already knows your needs and how best to meet them. And so beloved, let me lay out something for you. Your job in prayer is to be as clear and simple in prayer as you can be and trust God to bless you based on His great character. You just go to Him with a humble heart and lay it out before Him clearly.

Lay it before Him simply and pursue a quality of prayer that is based on the fact that you know who He is and you trust Him. My kids don’t have to go into a 30-minute explanation of why they are hungry – or more often they go to Nancy and say that; they don’t come to me so much for it – but they don’t have to explain the mechanics of hunger. All they say is, “Mom, I’m ready for lunch,” and they get it.

That is so liberating, and the liberation that it brings to you makes you want to pray more and more, but from a different motive. You see, beloved, you put your confidence that your prayers are meaningful and God will respond to your prayers based on who He is, not on how you pray. So you are seeking a quality of prayer that is rooted in trusting His character that He has revealed in the Bible.

You say, “I don’t know.” But beloved let me say this; many of the greatest prayers in the Bible were *short*. Seventy-eight of the 150 Psalms are 12 verses or less – a complete unit of thought inspired by the Spirit of God for the occasion for which they were written, and so good and perfect in the sight of God that they were recorded in the canon to be an example to us on how to pray for all ages until Jesus comes.

When Moses wanted to see the glory of God in Exodus 32 he said, “Lord, I pray You, show me Your glory.” How great is that prayer! What condition of heart does that express! He says, “God, I just so desire that You show me Your glory.” He prayed it in five seconds, and prayed from a heart that was animated by desires that put all of us to shame – “God, just show me Your glory.”

Think about the dying thief on the cross – Luke 23:42, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” The Bible ends with a short prayer – Revelation 22, verse 20: “Come, Lord Jesus.” Think about what goes into those kinds of prayers – the love for the

glory of God, the desire for His salvation, the desire to see Him vindicate His plan for history. And the shortness of the prayers is disproportionate to the heart that prays them.

So what I want you to see, beloved, is that there is nothing intrinsically meritorious about long prayers; there is nothing intrinsically defective about short prayers. And if you start your thinking about prayer from that point, it will change your prayer life.

Now some people I know have a set schedule for prayer; some of you use prayer lists – understand that I am not criticizing that per se. That is fine as far as it goes. But here is the challenge for those of you that are oriented towards that kind of structure; here is your challenge that you have to deal with in your heart: *That structure is not a substitute for real passion in prayer.* That structure is fine only so far as it is a secondary means of fulfilling your love for the Lord. So you seek a quality of prayer instead of a quantity of prayer and trust that in time God will direct it to where He wants to be.

James Boyce illustrates his concern with the following story. This is great, so stay with me. He says:

At one point George Whitefield, the Calvinistic evangelist, and John Wesley, the Arminian evangelist, were preaching together in the daytime and rooming together in the same boarding house each night. One evening after a particularly strenuous day, the two of them returned to the boarding house exhausted and prepared for bed. When they were ready, each knelt beside the bed to pray.

Whitfield the Calvinist prayed like this: “Lord, we thank You for all those with whom we spoke today and we rejoice that their lives and destinies are entirely in Your hand. Honor our efforts according to Your perfect will. Amen.” He rose from his knees and got into bed.

But John Wesley had hardly gotten past his invocation of his prayer during that length of time. And he looked up from the side of his bed and said, “Mr. Whitefield, is this where your Calvinism leads you?” Then Wesley put his head down and went on praying – having criticized Whitefield for the content and length of his prayer. Whitfield stayed in bed and went to sleep.

About two hours later, Whitefield woke up, and there was Wesley, still on his knees beside the bed. So Whitfield got up and went around to where Wesley was kneeling. When he got there, he found Wesley asleep. He shook him by the shoulder and said to him, “Mr. Wesley, is this where your Arminianism leads you?”

You see, beloved, George Whitefield had a quality of prayer that led him to informed brevity of trusting the Lord. Wesley was seeking a quantity of prayer that put him to sleep – and, I might add, probably put the Lord to sleep as well.

So beloved, what am I saying? Don't make prayer so complicated. God is good and He will bless your simple prayers as you pray to Him in private. And as you embrace that, beloved – stay with me just one more second – as you embrace that, prayer will increasingly become a lifestyle to you, not just an hour in the day.

Mechanical repetition will be replaced by a warm-hearted devotion to Christ that is based on a true love for His person, not in adherence to a set of rules that you or someone else has made up for you. So God help us that the quality of our prayers would be worthy of this great Christ who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Let's pray:

Father, teach us to pray with quality and to Your blessing and approval. Keep us from praying to please men and with words that just fill the space of air but really mean or signify nothing because we are not really engaged with You. Help us to that end, Father, we pray. In Jesus name, amen.

This transcript was prepared by Shari Main.