

Coming Before the True God in Prayer

Matthew 6:5-8

Halifax: 25 April 2004

I. One of the great objects of preaching is to bring men, women, boys and girls before the true and living God.

A. It is a very difficult thing to do because human beings (notwithstanding all their pretences to the contrary) have a natural resistance about coming before God.

1. The truth is,

- we are deathly afraid to face the true God because deep down we know that He is holy and just, and that we are miserable sinners.

- a. What was the first thing Adam and Eve did after they had sinned in the Garden?

- They tried to hide themselves from God's presence, didn't they?

- b. Their urge to hide caused them to try all sorts of methods—necessity was the mother of invention!

- 1) They sowed fig leaves together to try to hide their nakedness...

- 2) They tried hid in the garden when they heard God approaching...

- 3) Then they tried to shift the blame for their wrong on others...

- Adam on Eve, and Eve on the serpent.

2. We are still at it today! There are a thousand ways we go about it!

- a. We frame arguments to try to deny God...

- Some to say He doesn't exist at all...

- Some to say He is limited in power and sovereignty...

- Some to say is not a personal God...

- Some to say He is not holy and pure...

- Some to say He does not see us most of the time...

- Some to say He does not care if we sin

- Some to say He will never punish sin

TRANS> We all embrace these God denying arguments to a certain extent.

- b. We find ways to distract ourselves so that we might forget about Him...

- We give ourselves over to pleasure—constantly distracted with movies or music or eating and drinking or a hobby.

- We get absorbed in our work so as to think of nothing else...

- We live entirely for social relationships...
- We get caught up in politics or in saving something (the economy, our forests, even in trying to preserve morality or fight abortion)...

TRANS> We all distract ourselves from God to a certain extent.

- c. We flatter ourselves... pretending that we are okay before God...
 - We join with others to promote the lie: “I’m okay, you’re okay.” “Most people are really good on the inside.”
 - We get very moral, clothing ourselves with honesty and fairness...
 - We may even get very religious (giving to the poor, saying our prayers, and even fasting and denying ourselves)
 - We compare ourselves to others—at least I’m not like so-in-so.
 - We make excuses and blame other people for our sin.

TRANS> We all flatter ourselves to a certain extent...

- It is therefore very difficult to bring human beings, sinful and fallen as they are, before the true God,
 - but that is what true preaching always aims to do.

B. For 19 weeks now, we have seen that this is what Jesus labours to do in the great sermon He preached which we call the Sermon on the Mount.

- 1. In the Beatitudes, He tells you who the blessed ones are...
 - a. And it is not those who feel good about themselves!
 - It is not those who have successfully devised some way to pretend that they are acceptable to God.
 - b. It is rather those who are poor in spirit
 - They realise that they have nothing acceptable to bring to God—not even from their inmost heart.
 - They mourn because they see their condition and that they are worthy of God’s judgement and condemnation.
 - They are meek because they have given up on trying to govern their own lives.
 - They hunger and thirst for righteousness because they know they don’t have righteousness in themselves.
 - With this attitude, they are merciful to others, are peacemakers, and are willing to suffer...

- And they are promised that they will see God because they are pure in heart...
 - They are no longer pretending that they are something they are not or that God is something He is not...
 - They see God as He is in truth, no more denials and twists!

TRANS> In short, in the beatitudes, Jesus is showing you that you are blessed if, and only if, you come before God—

- even though it exposes all that you are as a sinner.
 - The only person who will come to God in this honesty is the person who has faith in Jesus as Saviour.
 - Such a person does not come before God to pretend something, but rather to be saved by Him!
 - Such a person has given up on trying to justify himself and is looking to Jesus to do that.
 - Jesus was preaching all this to prepare His disciples for His death on the cross.
 - As long as they hid from God,
 - they might think they could make themselves right with Him without anyone dying on the cross for them.
 - It made no sense that someone should have to do such a thing if they were good in God's eyes.
 - It only makes sense for Jesus to die when you know that you are a ruined sinner...
 - When you realise that you need the Son of God to bear your sins...
 - and to suffer the punishment that you yourself deserve!
2. After the Beatitudes, Jesus moves on to counter all the twisting of the scripture that was going on in His day by those who were trying to hide from God.
- a. In chapter 5:17-48, He corrects some of the misinterpretations of God's law that were common in His day...
- He shows that murder and adultery are not just outward actions,
 - but also include the hatred and lust that resides in the heart.
 - He also deals with those who justified wrongful divorce, who practised dishonesty, who sought personal revenge and whose love was selective.

- b. His goal was to bring them before the eyes of God so that they would understand what He sees when He looks at us...
 - They might think they were righteous and upstanding—
 - and other people might think they were too...
 - But if they come honestly before God, they will see otherwise!
 - They will see clearly that they need a Saviour.
 - They will see how glorious the true God is and will know that they have come short of His glory and that they cannot save themselves.

TRANS> I hope you can see this.

- Once you do,
 - you will not be able to rest until you have come to Christ for salvation.
- And let me add that even after you have trusted Christ...
 - There are still many ways that you hide from God because your faith is not yet perfect.
 - It is still difficult for you to admit your sin...
 - You still like to try to justify yourself—
 - either by denying what is true about yourself...
 - or by denying what is true about God.
 - This pretence hinders us
 - from rejoicing in our salvation as we might...
 - from bearing as much fruit as we might...
 - and from living a life of humble gratitude before God.
 - You can see why Jesus goes on in this sermon to expose us even more...
- C. In chapter 6, which we began last week, He unveils the sin that is present even in our very best religious deeds...
 - This is tough to face!
 - We like to think that at least our religious deeds are pure!
 - 1. But last week, we looked at the matter of giving to those in need...
 - I showed you that even in giving to the poor,
 - we often act in part to impress other people rather than to please God.
 - How shameful that we can't even show mercy without polluting it with pride.
 - This is very humbling...

2. But this week, we come to look at a topic that exposes our corruption even more!
 - a. In verses 5-8, Jesus takes up the matter of hypocrisy and pretension in prayer!
 - Sin even comes to corrupt our prayers!
 - b. In fact, this is where you see sin at its very worst!
 - 1) If you want to prove that human beings are fallen,
 - The best place to look is not in the gutter where the drunk is...
 - or in the brothel where the harlot lives...
 - Nor is it to look at violence...
 - domestic violence, suicide bombings, or war...
 - 2) The place you will find sin most clearly in evidence is in a man praying to God.
 - There he is, right in the very presence of God...
 - intimately with God, addressing the very Creator of the universe and just look at Him!
 - He is in God's presence,
 - Yet, he is so concerned about what others are thinking who see him pray...
 - Look his thoughts are wandering all over the place—
 - right there, in the presence of God, he even engages in lustful thoughts, covetous thoughts, bitter thoughts, envious thoughts...
 - thoughts that he would be ashamed for anyone to see...
 - yet he dares to bring them before God—not just to confess them, but to entertain them!
 - c. We bring sin into the very presence of God!
 - Sin will follow us to the grave and would go with us to heaven if it could.
 - Here you see man at His worst—
 - on His knees before His Maker!
3. What's wrong with us?
 - Do we not realise that we are truly before God when we pray?
 - What a pity that even in speaking about prayer,
 - Jesus has to remind us that we are before God.

- Oh that you might all come to realise this much more than you do!
- It will change your prayer life—just to know that you come before God.

TRANS> Jesus shows you two things in this passage to be mindful of when you come before God in prayer.

- I want to spend the rest of our time looking at them.

II. First, when you pray, come to God as the most significant presence.

A. Do you know what I mean by “the most significant presence?”

- I mean that you should come with the consciousness that God’s presence matters more than anything else!

1. There are a number of ways to illustrate this...

- a. If you are in a crowded room with someone that you hope to marry some day,
 - that person will probably be the most significant presence to you—compared to anyone else...
 - Everything you do, you will do consciously thinking about that other person...
 - You are interested in him (or her),
 - watching him, admiring him, learning of him, and presenting yourself before him so as to please him.
 - You probably even thought about him when you were getting dressed—before you even got there,
 - and you continue to think about him after you leave.
 - That person is the most significant presence to you
- b. Negatively, the most significant presence is the one you think can cause you the most harm...
 - You would surely say there was something wrong with a person who was all concerned about a flea that was about to bite him when there was a roaring lion that was about to do the same!
- c. Positively, the most significant presence for you is the one whose favour you think can give you the greatest reward or benefit.
 - If you are skating in the Olympics, your great concern is not what your mother in law or your little sister in the audience thinks...
 - You are most concerned about what the judges think!

- You want to please them because theirs is the opinion that will determine whether you get the gold medal or not!
1. Jesus exposes the great folly of coming to God in prayer when other people are a more significant presence to you than God Himself!
 - a. He talks about those whose main object in praying is that other people would see them!
 - 1) He talks about them standing in the synagogue or on the street corner that they may be seen by men!
 - The problem here is not primarily that they are standing—that was simply the normal posture for prayer—
 - Nor is it that they are praying in the synagogue—that was the place where prayers were supposed to be made...
 - nor is it even that they stood on the street corners...
 - The Jews observed three regular hours of prayer each day, and it was expected that those who were out would stop what they were doing and pray at those times.
 - In Acts, we find Christ’s disciples keeping these hours of prayer and going to pray at the temple at the appointed times.
 - 2) The problem was not in these things so much as in the motive—
 - Jesus speaks of those who pray **in order that** they may be seen by men!
 - And even here, the problem is not that they **were** seen by men...
 - Jesus Himself blessed the bread when he fed the five thousand—He prayed publicly before thousands!
 - Public prayer is commended all through the Bible...
 - The problem was not that they **were** seen by men,
 - but that the reason they were praying where they were or the way they were was in order that they might be seen by men.
 - They would make sure they were in a prominent place at the synagogue or on a busy street corner when it was time to pray so that everyone could see them there praying!
 - You know how you can sort of arrange things to come out a certain way?
 - And how you can let little comments slip out to make sure that people know about your prayers?

- Jesus is talking about when you do these things because you are more concerned about the presence of other people than you are about God's presence.

b. Jesus says the same thing about this that He said about charitable giving...

1) "They already have their reward!"

- The word that is used here is the same that is used in verse 2.
- As I showed you last week,
 - it is a commercial term that means "Paid in full."
- It was used the same way we use it—
 - when you buy something and receive a receipt that says:
 - "paid in full."

2) The idea here is that if you pray with the motive of being seen by men rather than of being heard by God...

- You have already gotten what you wanted.
- Why should you expect anything more?
 - You got the thing that was most important to you and that motivated you to act.
 - You were neither truly praying to God nor were you seeking to please Him—
 - all you wanted was to impress other people...
 - to be known as a person who prays...

3) What a pitiful reward you settle for when this is all you want!

- Here is the great God who made the universe and who has the destiny of every creature in His hands...
- And you ignore Him, and concern yourself more with your fellow creatures who crawl around on the earth with you!
 - They cannot give you a lasting reward!

A. This is where all those God-denying, God-suppressing ways I spoke about earlier interfere with your prayers.

1. God is just not as significant a presence to you as He should be because you have learned, along with all the rest of the human race, to push Him out of your life.

- a. That's why it is that when other people are at hand, you often have more concern about them than you do about God...
 - In your mind, at that moment, these other people's opinion is more important than God's!
 - Your perception of things is more distorted than the guy trying to avoid a flea when a lion is stalking him!
- b. And that's why, even when you pray in secret,
 - you can start out talking to God and end up planning your day or dreaming about how you want to fix up your house.
 - You would never do that if you were to go before the queen to present some request before her...
 - Your attention would be entirely upon her and the business at hand!
 - But God is not as real to you, even when you pray.

TRANS> Now you notice that I am referring to God's presence when you pray...

2. I realise that there is a sense in which God's presence should always be the most significant presence to you no matter whether you are praying or not...
 - a. When you are at work, your greatest interest there ought to be pleasing God, not pleasing your boss or your client...
 - that's true...
 - b. But when you pray, or when you come to worship, it is even more the case!
 - Because when you pray, it is a time that you are having direct communion with God... you are talking to Him...
 - It is a time set apart for you to give your attention to addressing Him—to making your requests known to Him.
 - And that is why it is very rude to allow other things to freely intrude when you are supposed to talking to God and giving Him your full attention!
- B. It is very important for you to have times of prayer that are set apart from other things to do this.
1. That is why Jesus says (in v. 6):
 - Matt 6:6: "But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."
 - a. Certainly, you can talk to God and pray to God all through the day as you go about your work—and you should do that...
 - Nehemiah is a great example of man who talks to God all through the day.

- He is very conscience that he is living before God and he often says things like:
 - “Remember me O God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of your mercy.”
- b. But Jesus is calling us to get away from our ordinary daily work in order that we might focus our entire attention on God in prayer.
 - 1) Surely, He does not mean that everyone has to pray in the storage closet.
 - Most of His hearers lived in one-room houses that didn’t even have a closet,
 - Jesus Himself often went up on a mountain to pray.
 - 2) He is calling you to shut out the world and get alone with God for prayer.
 - a) It will do you no good to enter your closet and shut your door if you end up planning your day while on your knees...
 - or if you make sure that everyone knows where you went and what you are doing there...
 - If that is the case, you might as well stand on the street corner.
 - b) Jesus is talking about getting alone with God to be intimate with God.
 - This is what Jesus accused His disciples of being unable to do for even an hour when they kept falling asleep after He had commanded them to watch and pray.
 - c) I would suggest that the reason it is so hard for us to be intimate with God in prayer is because other things are more real to us than God is...
 - We may believe that He sees in secret,
 - but we don’t believe it very strongly...
 - other things claim a more significant presence in our lives.
- 2. So Jesus encourages you to secret prayer by reminding you that God really does see in the secret place and really does reward.
 - There is a real presence in the closet!
 - you don’t have to rely on finding a reward somewhere else.

TRANS> Therefore, when you pray, come to Him as the most significant presence.

- That is the first principle...
 - not lets look at the second:

III. Second, when you pray, come to God as a most gracious Father.

- This is brought out in verses 7-8
 - Matthew 6:7-8: And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen *do*. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

- A. This is so full of encouragement!
 1. With these words, Jesus presents God to us as Father, able and ready to help us!
 - a. Now it may be that some of you don't think much of fathers—you may have had a very bad father...
 - 1) But what did you want when you had a bad father?
 - You wanted a good father!
 - You know what a father is supposed to be!
 - 2) He is supposed to be one who is committed to providing for you—
 - not just for your bare necessities, but for your overall well-being!
 - He is to protect you from physical danger as well as spiritual danger...
 - He is to lead you in the ways of wisdom, and to teach you how to live with discretion and understanding.
 - He is to correct you when you go astray, and encourage you all along.
 - b. In this section, Jesus presents God as that kind of Father...
 - He is a loving Father who is out for His children's best interests.
 - And because He God, you can be all the more encouraged...
 - A good earthly father may be wise and he will use his wisdom for us,
 - but God has far more wisdom—divine wisdom—the He uses to guide us and teach us.
 - A good earthly father will be strong and he will use his strength for the care of His children,
 - but God has infinite power that He uses to father His children.
 - A good earthly father will be just and merciful toward his children,
 - but God has infinite mercy and justice that He exercises toward us continually for ever and ever.

- 2. When Jesus says that your heavenly “knows the things you have need of before you ask Him” what does that show you?

- a. It shows you that He cares enough about you to be thinking about you and your needs before you even pray.
 - It shows that He is eager to meet your needs...
 - And in a way that He has a whole provision laid up for you and is waiting for you to come and ask.

- b. He is presented as a Father eager to bless in other places of scripture as well:
 - 1) 2 Chron 16:9 shows Him actively seeking ways to bless His children:
 - 2 Chron 16:9: "For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of *those* whose heart *is* loyal to Him."

 - 2) Isa 65:24 tells us that He often begins to answer before we even ask:
 - Isa 65:24: "It shall come to pass That before they call, I will answer; And while they are still speaking, I will hear.
 - You might think here of a mother who goes out and buys winter clothes for her children before it turns cold...
 - Then when her children feel the cold, she is ready and provides for them.
 - This is how God deals with us.

 - 3) And Eph 3:20 tells us that God also does more than we can even ask or understand:
 - Eph 3:20: Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us,
 - He gives gifts that are beyond what we even know to exist!
 - Like a parent that teaches his child to read—the child would not have known that there was even such a thing as reading.

TRANS> What encouragement there is to come to a God like this in prayer—a God that is just waiting to bless you!

- B. The only reason people don't come to Him eagerly and sanely is because they do not know Him as Father.
 1. Because they are insecure in their relationship with Him, they use vain repetitions.
 - They felt they must to get Him to hear

 - a. Do you remember the prophets of Baal with Elijah on Mt. Carmel?

- Elijah challenged them to pray to Baal to send fire from heaven to consume their sacrifice, and they agreed to do so, but look at how they approached their god!
 - 1 Kings 18:26 So they took the bull which was given them, and they prepared *it*, and called on the name of Baal from morning even till noon, saying, "O Baal, hear us!" But *there was* no voice; no one answered. Then they leaped about the altar which they had made. 27 And so it was, at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Cry aloud, for he *is* a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, *or* perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened." 28 So they cried aloud, and cut themselves, as was their custom, with knives and lances, until the blood gushed out on them. 29 And when midday was past, they prophesied until the *time* of the offering of the *evening* sacrifice. But *there was* no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention.

- b. "Vain repetitions" refers to empty babbling.
 - 1) The Greek word in the original is *battologew*.
 - Some say this word is derived from Battus, a king of Cyrene, who is said to have stuttered;
 - Others say it is from Battus, an author of tedious and wordy poems.
 - Whatever the case, it refers particularly to meaningless or empty words that are spoken without thought... thoughtless utterances.
 - 2) *battologew* has always been a very prominent feature in pagan religion.
 - a) Some Buddhists use prayer wheels on which they write prayers and believe that prayers will be repeated each time the wheel is spun.
 - b) It has been found that Egyptian religions as early as 2000 BC spoke in tongues to their gods...
 - The Greeks did the same in their worship and this was going on everywhere before Jesus came into the world.
 - The tongues that occurred at Pentecost were very different, however, in that the people spoke in intelligible languages that they did not know, but were understood by others.
 - Paul rebukes the Corinthians because they fell into the pagan practice of *battologew*.
 - This is not surprising since they also followed the pagan practice of drunkenness in worship as well as many other things.

- c) Another form of battologew is the rosary.
 - The rosary uses beads to count off prayers that are repeated over and over.
 - This is said to have originated with Spanish Muslims in the Middle Ages.
- c. Why do people come to god in these ways?
- 1) Jesus tells us directly—
 - It is because “they think that they will be heard for their many words.”
 - Bruce explains,
 - “The Pagans thought that by endless repetitions and many words they would inform their gods as to their needs and weary them (*‘fatigare deos’*) into granting their requests.”
 - 2) Clearly, such persons do not have a sense of God as a heavenly Father, waiting to pour out His blessings on them when they come!
 - Jesus says, that is why they pray as they do.
2. But Jesus tells you **not** to pray like this!
- “Do not be like them!”
- a. Do I need to point out that there is a lot of battologew in the church today?
 - 1) There are those who light prayer candles supposing that as long as the candle remains, prayer is offered to God...just like a prayer wheel...
 - 2) There are those who pray in unintelligible tongues, like the pagan Greek and Egyptian religions...
 - they suppose that God will be pleased with meaningless noise...
 - 3) There are those who pray the rosary, repeating their ave marias or their paternosters over and over again.
 - b. Jesus does not say that all who pray like this are hypocrites...
 - The hypocrites were the ones who prayed to be seen by men...
 - Some who use battologew are very sincere and believe that these things will truly please God.
 - They do it because they think they will be heard for their many words.
 - But Jesus tells us not to pray like this.

- c. But *battologew* is not completely absent from anyone's prayers...
 - Are there not times when you find yourself mouthing off words that you have said before—bed-time prayers or whatever—with very little thought about what you are really saying?
 - This is not limited only to memorised prayers...
 - some of the worst offenders are those who suppose that because their prayers are always free compositions they are not thoughtless.
 - If we are honest,
 - we all must admit that we have offered words to God with very little thought.

TRANS> So what do you need to overcome this problem at its root?

C. You need to see God as a the kind of Father who knows the things you have need of before you ask!

1. And I declare to you that He has been revealed to us in that way through Jesus Christ His Son!
 - a. Think about this!
 - As a gracious loving Father, God made provision for our salvation long before we ever knew we needed to be saved!
 - He went to great expense to lay up provision for our need—
 - He spared not His only Son, freely giving Him to die on the cross that we might be forgiven.
 - b. And not only that, but He provided His word for us—
 - 1) the Law that shows us how we have come short of His glory and deserve to be condemned forever...
 - and the gospel that shows us how Jesus came and took God's curse for us so that we might be saved.
 - 2) And our heavenly Father is the One who gave us wisdom that we might see both our need as well as His solution!

TRANS> He prepared all this for us before we even asked!

- He provided it for us even though it was something so marvellous that none of us would have ever even thought to ask for it!
 - That is the kind of gracious Father He is!

2. What you all need to do is to see all this about God!

- a. If you are not a believer,
 - You don't need to run away from Him and avoid Him...
 - You need to see how He has provided salvation for all who will come to Christ.
 - He is there waiting with a full provision for all who see their need to come and be saved.

- b. And if you are already a believer,
 - 1) Then you need to consider well what kind of Father He is!
 - He has spent all to provide for you salvation through Christ...
 - Will He who spared not His own Son not also freely give you all things?

 - 2) Do you see Him as a Father who has laid up blessing for you?
 - Do you come to Him as a Father who is eager to bless you with all that is good for you?
 - He waits for you to come and ask because He does not want you to receive His blessing without knowing that it is from Him...
 - But if you will come and ask, He will give you far more than you can ask or think!

 - 3) The thing that He has clearly prepared for us and that He most delights to give is that you might be conformed to the image of His Son.
 - He wants to produce in you the fruits that He found in His Son—
 - the fruits that He was so pleased with!
 - The love that was willing to give all for the good of His brethren.

 - God wants only the best for His children...
 - He loves us and we should be encouraged to come to Him as ask...
 - Who would try to hide from a Father like this?

Eph 3:14-21: For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what *is* the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.