

Better Praying Starts Here

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Well, as always it is a wonderful opportunity for us to open God's word together and I am so grateful that you have made it a priority in your schedule to be with us on Sunday morning. I trust that what we have to say will be a great encouragement to you as you seek to walk with Christ today as we come back to the topic of prayer which has naturally come up in the matter of our exposition of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5 through 7, and I invited you to turn to that portion of Scripture with us here today because that's where we are going to be spending our time this morning.

We've preached a couple of introductory messages on prayer as we've gone through this and now we are about to embark on a week's long study of what is known as the Lord's Prayer, some people refer to it as the Disciples' Prayer, called the Lord's Prayer because it is the prayer that the Lord taught us by which we might model effective righteous praying. And one of the things that I guess we would start with here this morning is this, is to recognize that God has prescribed a manner by which we were to pray and we need to understand that manner so that we could pray righteously; so that we could pray in a manner that is pleasing to God; so that we could pray in a manner that we know that our prayers are being received. And here is perhaps the most difficult thing for you to understand and to accept as we embark on this, every one of us, this is true: we do not know how to pray.

We need to come as those who need to be taught, as those who need to learn the proper manner of praying from our Lord Jesus, rather than to assume that our prior life before Christ had adequately prepared us to know how to speak to a holy God. We must think about these things and come as learners before a holy God, before our Lord Jesus and say, "How would you have me to pray?" rather than simply babbling and speaking the first things that come to our mind. If someone were teaching a class for the first time and they were going to teach on engineering, let's say, something that is completely outside of my realm of understanding and experience, but wouldn't you expect someone who was going to stand up and speak about engineering would have first been taught by engineers to know what to say? You don't naturally know engineering, in order to speak it you have to be taught.

Well, there are things that are more important than engineering. Approaching a holy God is the most important thing in the universe and to know how God prescribes it for God to

say, "This is how I would have you to pray," this is a matter of utmost significance to the true believer. And there is something liberating about that. It means that whatever baggage you've accumulated over the years in things that you've learned, you can take those bags off your shoulder and set them aside and come like David did before Goliath, not in Saul's armor, not in the clunky heavy armor of things that were put upon you by others, but you can come with the simple light slingshot of God and know that you can fling things in the heavenly direction that God will receive and will be pleased with. So we need to know how to pray righteously and that is the question which we're going to begin to address here this morning, and probably for the next two or three weeks.

Now, let me remind you of something. You know, I've gone out of my way, I think, to emphasize that we're talking about praying righteously, the kind of praying that God rewards, that God hears, that pleases God; we're using different synonyms to try to express the same thing. Let me remind you that righteousness is the dominant theme of the Sermon on the Mount. There is this overarching theme of righteousness which flavors everything else and so we're not simply learning a formula on how to pray and exact words to pray, we're learning how to pray righteously because that is the overarching theme that Christ was compelled to teach on as he gave this sermon at one particular instance of time.

Look at Matthew 5:6, for example. We've rehearsed these verses many times, we will continue to rehearse them in the future. Jesus said in Matthew 5:6, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." That's the overarching theme of the Sermon on the Mount. You see it again in Matthew 5:20, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 6:1 says, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven." And so again and again this theme of righteousness being brought before the hearers of Christ as they are listening to this sermon and that which God has preserved in his word to impress upon us.

Now, at some point, my brothers and sisters in Christ and those of you that are not in Christ, at some point you have to ask yourself a very fundamental question. You have to ask yourself why do you exist? What is your purpose in life? What matters to you? What is it that I most want out of life? And for far too many, our aspirations and our affections have been shaped by the world around us and we're thinking about the kind of career that we're going to have, or the kind of spouse that we want, or what kind of home are we going to buy next and all of that, those things that are just so entirely earthbound and occupy our attention. Well, Jesus told us in this sermon what your first priority should be as a believer and it is tied to the entire theme of righteousness.

Look at verse 33 of chapter 6. He said, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness," seek this first; seek that over which Christ reigns; seek that over which Christ considers preeminent; seek his righteousness as it is defined in this Sermon on the Mount. Make that your surpassing priority. You know, think about it, beloved, isn't it true that it doesn't matter how successful your career is if your life is not pleasing to God?

Isn't it true that it doesn't matter what kind of financial prosperity comes and goes in your life if God accepts you, receives you, and your life is pleasing to him? There is no comparison and so you must think about life through the defining prism of righteousness as that which consumes your passions, as that which owns your affections, as that which motivates you from the deepest part of your soul, rather than the matters which occupy most of the world and perhaps have occupied most of your life. Yeah, that's what we're saying, beloved. We are challenging the core presuppositions that men bring to life. That's what we're expounding on here today. This is the whole point of Jesus' sermon is that we would recognize the priority that God places on righteousness for his disciples and respond to that.

Now, one of the things that you would want to know is that in this sermon Jesus presupposes a repentant heart. He is speaking to his disciples here. We'll talk about this a little bit more later on, but he's presupposing a repentant heart and the life that flows out of a truly redeemed nature and the one who is truly redeemed, values Christ above all else; the one who is truly redeemed cares about righteousness because Christ himself is righteous and calls us to righteous living. So this is all rooted in the nature of true salvation. When God truly saves someone – beloved, mark it – he gives that person a new heart, he gives that person a new nature, and the desires of that new nature want to be like Christ; they want to respond to his teaching; they want to grow from their infancy into the mature man that God has called them to be. This is the nature of true salvation and it is the nature of true salvation to hunger and thirst for righteousness. A man or a woman, a boy or a girl who does not care about the nature of righteousness that God calls them to is a man or a woman or a young person who is not a Christian, no matter what their lips say.

And that's why this is so searching. We realize that lots of people claim to be Christians, lots of people claim Jesus as Lord, but there is nothing in their life that corresponds to that outward profession. And Christ warns us against that. He warns in this sermon, look at verse 21, having said all of these fundamental things about righteousness, Jesus says in chapter 7, verse 21, he says, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them," on that great day of judgment, "I never knew you; Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness." And, beloved, it's just really important for me to fulfill my responsibility before God and give an account to him in a time which is rapidly approaching in my life, to give an account to God for those who somehow hear my teaching, to remind you and to challenge you to examine yourself in light of these things; to realize that true Christianity is not a matter of outward lip profession, it is a matter of a completely transformed life under the power of Christ as revealed in the Gospel of the cross. And those who have no interest in the transformed life, should not deceive themselves into thinking that they have Christ and that their eternal destiny is secure if in this life their desires are dead to Christ and dead to Scripture and dead to righteous praying.

You must examine yourselves, beloved. You must know that you are in Christ and not simply rely on a past profession of him that made no difference in who you were or how you live. In that great overarching theme of righteousness now, Christ comes to a subset, an aspect of righteous living as we consider the matter of prayer in Matthew 6:9. Look at it with me now as we enter into the text. Jesus says, "Pray, then, in this way."

9 "Pray, then, in this way [he says]: 'Our Father who is in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name. 10 Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On
earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread. 12 And
forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And do not
lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom
and the power and the glory forever. Amen.'"

Let's remember the context as we approach this text of Scripture. Jesus had just in the prior four verses spent much time telling his disciples what not to do and how not to pray. In verse 5 he said to them, "Do not pray like the Pharisees and like the hypocrites do." Look at verse 5 with me. He 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." He says, "Don't pray like these people do." In verse 7, he warns them not to pray like the Gentiles and he 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."

Now, beloved, you must understand something really crucial here, something that is so basic and simple and right on the surface of the text. What this tells you is this: that in the eyes of God and in the teaching of Christ, not all prayer is acceptable to God. The fact that somebody prays does not mean God is receiving it, that he looks on it with favor, because Christ has given two very broad and specific categories, he said the praying of hypocrites is not received at the throne of God, the praying of people who babble meaningless repetition is not received at the throne of God. That's the basic thing that he's saying here and he's saying, "There's lots of praying that goes on in the world," and he says, "But you belong to me. You are my disciple and you are not to pray like they do," which begs the question, doesn't it, "Well then, Lord, how are we to pray? What kind of praying is it that is acceptable to our God?"

Well, he started to hint at it in verses 6 and 8 when he said in verse 6, "But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret." He says the praying that God accepts is that which is done privately, that is done secretly in the life of his disciples, not someone who is putting on a display for others to see. That's sobering. That's humbling. That's instructive, isn't it? And in verse 7, he had said, "Don't use the many words. They suppose they'll be heard for their many words," Jesus says, "Don't be like them. Don't pray like a hypocrite and don't just babble words on and on ad nauseam, ad infinitum," for those of you that like Latin. Jesus says, "You cannot" – oh, beloved, grasp this – "you cannot look at the world around you, you cannot look at religious systems around you and think that you have received a sure and certain way to pray righteously."

So what does Jesus do after having said, "Do not be like them," in verse 8 and verse 9? Look at it with me. He says, "You pray, then, in this way." Oh, praise God for that! Praise God! In light of what we have just said that you and I do not enter into the Christian life with any idea of how to pray righteously, we don't have any idea what that is because we were dead, we were dark, we were lost in sin, we were not seeking God. There was nothing in your prior manner of life that prepared you to converse regularly with a holy God. Nothing prepared you for that and so in your inner man you're empty. Presupposing somebody at the moment of their conversion, you did not know how to pray when you came to Christ.

Then we look and we see there are these people who pray this way and these who pray that way and we realize that we can't learn prayer from them as well. So what do we do? We come and we sit humbly at the feet of our Master and we ask the question that everybody should ask when it comes to prayer. We should ask this simple question: what does Jesus say about prayer? What does Christ define as acceptable praying? Because that answer alone is the sure answer.

Speaking to you who are Christians, think about it this way: who is your Master? Who is your Lord? Who is your teacher? It's not the pope. For some of you maybe it was in the past, not anymore. You've put that aside. You left that ritualistic world and false system of religion a long time ago. It's not simply a favored teacher or anything like that. Our teacher in these matters must be Christ Jesus and must be him alone. That is the one place where we know that we get a sure and clear and accurate and dependable answer so that when we pray according to the manner of instruction that he gives, that we're praying in a way that God receives and that God will bless. That's wonderful. It is wonderful to realize that we have a sure answer in the midst of the spiritual fog from which we came and which surrounds us; we realize that there is a breath of powerful wind that blows all of that away and leaves us with clarity in its wake.

Well, that's what we want today. We want clarity and we want to know what Christ says and so we realize this: Jesus has said in those verses 5 through 8 that we looked at last week, he said, "They pray this way," and now in verse 9 he says, "You pray this way." He takes you by the hand, as it were, and he leads you in another direction. He leads you to that which the world cannot teach you. He leads you to that which your unregenerate heart would not know and would never do.

So we realize that we are on the brink of something very special. In the context of this entire sermon, here is what we have in front of us, here is the opportunity, the invitation that we have in front of us here today, is that Christ is inviting us to pray righteously and he is telling us what righteous praying looks like and so we could ask this question, say, "What does righteous praying look like?" Or better stated, to make the question a little bit more specific, "How do you start to pray righteously? Where does that begin?"

Well, notice what Jesus says. He says, "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven.'" Our Father who is in heaven. There is far more weight to those words than you

have ever probably realized. Our Father who is in heaven. Do you realize, let's just start here, do you realize who the most important person in praying is? When you pray, do you realize who the most important person is as you converse with God? It is not you. Righteous praying starts with a recognition of who God is. Isn't it true that the way that you speak in conversation is framed by the person with whom you're speaking? You would speak much differently to the Queen of England perhaps, or the President of the United States, than you would to a common person on the street. The recognition of who you were addressing would frame the way that you spoke, at least in normal human discourse. You would take account of who your audience was and the way that you're speaking would be framed by that.

And here's the thing, beloved: is it not true that God is supreme? Is it not true that Jesus Christ is the most important person in the universe? Isn't that true, that you are subordinate in every way to the person of Christ? Well, if that's true, beloved, then it follows that the one who has supremacy in your prayer life is not you, it is not your particular circumstances, it is not your particular desires. The supreme object in prayer, the supreme person in that converse with a holy God is God himself. You must start there.

Notice how the first half of this prayer is simply consumed with the interest of God and with the name of God. Look at it with me, verse 9, how it starts out, "Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done." "God, what I seek here is the glory of your name. I seek your kingdom. I seek your will as I approach you here today." And that frames the way that you pray. Now we'll talk about all of those things in greater detail next week, I just want to make the point that Jesus says that the starting point in prayer is our Father who is in heaven, and in saying that he leads us immediately into the name of God, the kingdom of God, and the will of God. That's all I want you to see as we're starting here this morning, is that there is a theocentric focus in prayer, there is a God-centered attention in prayer that defines righteous praying.

Most of us as we've come out of our self-centered lives from our prior darkness when Christ saved us, we carry into that our own selfish baggage because we lived all of life just seeking what we wanted, right? That was the goal of life, was what did I want, and we carry that over into our spiritual lives now that we are Christians and what we have to realize is that we're now in a different realm where what we want, what we thought we wanted is now secondary to someone greater than ourselves, that our desires are framed by something that is transcendent of our own lives, and as a result of that as we start to grasp these things, it starts to transform over time the things that we even want out of prayer. So we bring our own goals and ambitions into our Christian life and God starts to change those, but we're still self-focused, we're still selfishly ambitious and we say, "Ah, now I know someone powerful who has the power to do what he wants. Let me take that power and leverage it to my advantage to fulfill my ambitions." I realize that many people don't think about it in those terms just like that, but isn't it true that that's the way that we prayed when we were first born again? The point being that we come to prayer and we are - oh, my friends - we come to prayer and we are far too concerned with what

we want and we have to leave that, we have to check that baggage at the door and leave it behind in righteous praying.

Martyn Lloyd Jones, for whom I gladly named my only son, said this, he said, "We tend to be so self-centered in our prayers that when we drop on our knees before God, we think only about ourselves and our troubles and perplexities. We start talking about them at once and, of course, nothing happens. That is not the way to approach God. We must pause before we speak in prayer." He's exactly right, as he usually was, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus teaches us to be more thoughtful in prayer, to be less self-centered in prayer, to make God, to make Christ, to make the interest of his kingdom that which we are seeking.

So here's the point, beloved. This is a point that applies to prayer but it is an application of a greater approach to life for you as a believer in Christ and it is this, that as a believer in Christ, as a disciple of Christ, here's what you do, here's how you think about life: you subordinate all of your life to the glory and the character of God, and as part of that, you subordinate your approach in prayer to the glory and character of God. Could it be any other way? If you've truly seen your sin, you've truly seen your guilt, you've truly seen the judgment that was rightly upon you and you realized that, in a manner of speaking, out of nowhere the Lord Jesus Christ came and saved you out of that wretched condition and brought you new life and brought you the forgiveness of your sins that he paid for with the atoning blood that he shed on Calvary, isn't it true that if a great one like that gave such a gracious gift to you that you didn't deserve, isn't it obvious that the whole nature, the whole turn of your heart would be, "I must live for this one who has saved me. I must give myself to this one who is so great and so glorious and has been so good to me," that all of my life would be lived that way, that that would be the orientation of your heart even though you fall short of it on a day to day basis? We get that but that's not what we're talking about right now. We're talking about what is the core ambition, the core desire of your heart as you live. What do you most want out of life? Well, we want the glory of God more than anything and when it comes to prayer, we just take that broad general principle and now we apply it specifically to prayer.

It's easier said than done. I understand that. We all, self included, we all have a fleshly carnal tendency to want to use prayer to manipulate our circumstances so that they are more to our liking or to manipulate prayer for the benefit of others so that they can be comfortable and that they can get what they want. My precious friends in Christ, that is not Christian praying. That is the wrong way to approach prayer if that is the fundamental attitude and disposition that you are bringing before the throne of God. That is not the right way to pray. That is not praying as Christ commanded. This righteous God, this good God, this saving God, this great God, is always the first priority and the first focus of attention.

Another commentator who wrote well on the Sermon on the Mount, John Stott, said this, he said, "It is always wise before we pray to spend time deliberately recalling who this God is. Only then shall we come to our loving Father in heaven with appropriate humility, devotion and confidence."

So here's what we're going to do today. We're going to focus our attention on six simple words that Christ said. Look at verse 9 with me, when he said this, he said, "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven.'" Those are our six words, this is our text for today, "Our Father who is in heaven." It will surprise you to understand that there are three fundamental principles of prayer that are embedded in that simple clause which so easily comes off of our lips. We so easily say these things, especially those of you that perhaps come out of a liturgical background where the Lord's Prayer was recited on a consistent basis in your worship services, and you're so used to that, so mindlessly run through it that you just recite it from memory and you don't even need to think about it. Well, it's quite obvious that Christ did not intend for us to pray these words without thought, without meaning.

Notice that in verse 7, he had just said, "When you are praying," look at verse 7 with me, he had just said, "when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition." These words that he is giving to us here in verse 9 are not those things that we're just simply to mindlessly recant time after time again without thinking about what they mean.

"Our Father who is in heaven," has three very instructive principles for the way that you should think about praying and the way that you should pray and it starts right here. Point 1, what that phrase teaches you, first of all, if you are going to pray righteously at all, is that you must be a Christian. You must be born again if you're going to pray righteously. Psalm 66 which will be at soon in our Tuesday studies, Psalm 66 says, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord will not hear." Those who are dead in sins and trespasses have only one prayer that they can pray that God will hear and answer, it is, "Father, be merciful to me in the Lord Jesus Christ. I am a sinner." Every other bit of prayer is they're separated from God, you're separated from God and he does not hear, Isaiah 59:2 says.

So this reminds us when Jesus says, "Our Father who is in heaven," it reminds us that you must know God as your heavenly Father in order to pray in a righteous way. Jesus said in John 14:6, he said, "I am the way and the truth and the life: no one" – mark it, mark the exclusivity of it – "no one comes to the Father except through Me." And so the reminder that we are to pray to our Father who is in heaven reminds us that we need a Mediator with which to approach him and Christ has said that he alone is the Mediator. You must be born into the family of God for him to be your Father. You must be born again. You must be justified by faith alone, in Christ alone, on the testimony of the Scriptures alone, if you're ever going to pray to this God and have him receive you. He must actually be your Father and it is only through faith in Christ that anyone can call God Father. Jesus said so himself and he is our teacher.

Now, at that point, let me ask you a question, those of you who are in Christ and you know that you are in Christ and yet you struggle in prayer. As we've talked about multiple times in the past, you've been consumed with programs and prayer lists and times and watches and all of those things and you have found that it has just put a burden on you that you cannot meet and it has turned prayer into that which is irksome and burdensome and not a joy and a delight to you. I speak to your heart, many of you, don't

I? You know this by sad personal experience of what I speak. Well, let's step back from all of that and ask a simple question: how was it that you became a Christian? Did you become a Christian through the works of your hands? Did Christ save you because you had done a particular number of works or prayed a certain number of prayers or somehow you had worked your way and done things that he said, "I have to accept you now. Look at all of those good works on your ledger." Not one of you came to Christ like that. Not one of you came to Christ through the works of your hands. You came to Christ through the grace of God. You came to Christ through the shed blood of Calvary graciously poured out on your behalf. You came to God because God graciously chose to bring you because he loved you before the foundation of the world and intended to bless you throughout all of eternity. You came to God through grace. You appropriated that by faith, not by things that you did.

Well, having received, following the argument and the logic of Galatians which we'll read in coming weeks, beloved, think with me. If you received Christ, if you started in Christ by grace, are you suddenly perfecting your spiritual life through these laborious efforts that you take no joy in that others have imposed upon you? Could that possibly be the way that God receives us? Could that possibly be righteous praying? Of course not. That can't possibly be the ground of it, that your prayer is found acceptable to God based on the effort that you grit out and that you make in it. That can't be the ground. That can't be the basis. That can't be what it's all about. And that is found in these words, "Our Father who is in heaven." He is your Father. Don't you realize, beloved, I am giving you that which will liberate your life in prayer, that will liberate you from bondage in what I am saying? I am giving you pure clear water from the lips of Christ himself and that's why I belabor this point. Don't you realize that as a Christian when you approach this Father, that he has already accepted you in the Beloved? Don't you realize that God accepts you on the basis of the righteousness of Christ, not on the basis of your own good works? That was the whole foundation of where you started. Don't you realize that the blessing of prayer is found not in your imperfect faithfulness to pray according to certain schedules and lists? But the efficacy, what makes prayer effective is this: it is rooted in the gracious great character of God and that that is your hope and that alone in prayer?

This changes everything when we realize that prayer is rooted in our Father who is in heaven. And we all understand that your prayer life falls short. We all understand and realize that you do not pray as you should. We all realize that you've prayed poorly and inconsistently in the past. Well, beloved, isn't the whole point of Jesus Christ and his people, that he came to save us and to redeem us from our ineffective ways of reaching out to God? Isn't it true that his blood has washed us from all of our sins which would include our inadequate praying? Isn't it true that Christ himself was the perfect prayer and that all of his merit is accounted to us? We approach God accepted in the Beloved. We approach him through Christ. We approach him as our Father and what father is there, what righteous father is there that doesn't welcome his children into his presence?

You must be a true Christian if you're going to pray righteously. Now, secondly, if you're going to pray righteously, you must believe the goodness of God. You must believe the goodness of God. Why is it, what is it about our wretched carnal hearts that makes us

approach God with the idea in the back of our mind that he is stingy? That we have to pray certain amounts before he'll receive us well? What is it that makes us think that he's reluctant to bless? Is there anything about the revealed character of God found in Scripture that would remotely portray God like that to us? Certainly not in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus here as he moves into verses 9 through 13, what I want you to see, my friends, is that Jesus is assuming the goodness of God. He is presupposing the goodness of God and that the Father to whom we pray is one good God.

He's good and he's been speaking about that repeatedly. So for example, in verse 4 when he was talking about giving, what did he say? Verse 4, "your Father," do you see the word there? See how key that is in this whole chapter? "Your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." Verse 6, he says, "your Father who sees what is done in your private praying will reward you." In verse 8, he says, "your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." What has he said about prayer at this point? What has he said before this even begins? He has set before us the fact that God is predisposed to bless his children when they pray. And not only that, that he already knows what our needs are. We're not trying to rap on the door and get his attention so that we can tell him things that he doesn't already know, to inform him about our situation, Jesus says he already knows. And in the whole doctrine of omniscience as it relates to his people, it means that he knows these things with a sense of favor and condescension and care toward us.

That frames the way that you pray. You must have this sink deep into your heart. You must understand this. You must believe this and repent of any of those meagerly thoughts that you have carried about God because this is at the core of righteous praying. Beloved, we go to this God knowing that he is so good and so gracious that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners just like us, and that he applied the blood of Christ to our hearts and washed away all of our sins as a free gift from heaven, and that he has set us on a path that leads us to eternal glory. That's the kind of God that you're praying to. That's the kind of Father that he is: good and gracious and kind and loving and merciful.

"Our Father who is in heaven." And as you look at this word, "Father," going on and knowing that we all bring, we all tend to pray to God when we're most anxious, and that's understandable. We'll talk about that in months to come. But notice how this word "Father" is embedded in what Jesus gives as the cure for anxiety. Look at verse 25. He says, "For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on." Matthew 6:25. I hear those pages rattling. I'll give you a moment to catch up. This is really important. We're in no hurry this morning. Jesus says in verse 25, "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" Verse 26, he says, "Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." Your Father. Your heavenly Father. "Are you not worth much more than they?"

Beloved, we are reluctant to pray, we are slow to pray because we don't really believe the goodness of God like this. We don't invest ourselves in prayer because we don't think that God really cares enough to respond. Well, Jesus says, "Don't think about God like that. Don't think such low thoughts of your Father. He's good." Look at Christ. Look at the

cross and see the goodness and the love of God. Look at the way that he cares for little animals that live today and fall tomorrow and he feeds them and cares for them day by day by day. Oh, he's so good. Well, don't you realize, Jesus' logic is here, don't you realize that you are far more valuable to your Father than a bird? Don't you realize as one created in his image and saved by the blood of Christ, that there is infinite grace that's been bestowed upon you? Of course your Father loves you. Of course he's good. Of course he would receive your prayers.

So you approach him in faith, you approach him in trust in his goodness, and notice the distinction, beloved, notice the distinction. I realize I'm harping on this but our carnal thoughts and our love for our own self-righteousness requires me to blow cannonballs against those walls in your mind again and again and again until they fall. Don't you see the difference between approaching God on the basis of his goodness, on the basis of the shed blood of Christ, confident in the cross, confident in the love of God, don't you see the difference between that and that approach which well-meaning people have taught us, you've got to get up at a certain time and you've got to pray this long and you have to have this kind of prayer list and all of these other mechanics and everything drives you to what you are doing and what you are focused on, how you are doing it? The distinction between those two views of prayer could not be more vast. Is there a place for prayer lists? Yes, but that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about where does better praying start? Where is it that we start in prayer?

What we've done here over the past couple of weeks is we've just taken a bulldozer to everything and said, "Let's start fresh. Let's start anew. Let's not pour new wine into old wine skins that are just going to burst." You see, you cannot marry an approach to prayer that says, "I am simply going to trust in the goodness of God," you can't marry what we're talking about, what Christ is talking about here today, you can't join that with your works based approach from the past and expect your prayer life to get off the ground. No, you start by believing in the goodness of God.

And look at what he says in chapter 7, verse 7, and how all of this is tied to God as your Father and his goodness. He says in verse 7, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives," this is in the context of speaking to his disciples, that's the "everyone" here, "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." And he illustrates his point about the goodness of the heavenly Father. He says, "what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he?" No earthly father would do that, certainly not a righteous one. And he says in verse 11, "If you then, being evil," if you in sin, "know how to give good gifts to your children," and to receive their requests favorably and respond to them, if you are a sinner and you can do that, multiply that principle by infinity of the infinite goodness of God and you have a measure of how God responds to his children when they pray. Verse 11, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven," your heavenly Father, "how much more will He give what is good to those who ask Him!"

This should make a lot of us just want to repent of the whole way that we've prayed, resenting the effort that it takes, thinking that, "What is the point of this?" because we have excluded and we have forgotten the goodness of the God to whom we pray. This is why, beloved, when you pray you don't just rush in and say, "God, here are my problems for today." You don't do that. You take the time, you take some moments to remember, "Oh yes, I'm praying to my Father and my Father is good. I enjoy the blessings of salvation. I'm going to heaven. God feeds the birds, I can only imagine how he is predisposed to respond favorably to me." And you pray out of love and you pray out of appreciation rather than self-will, self-effort, and meeting a list that was nowhere imposed upon you in Scripture or by the Lord Jesus Christ. You believe the goodness of God. Before you pray, you take yourself in hand and say, "God is my good Father." And if you doubt that in the midst of the press of your circumstances, go back to these Scriptures that we have looked at today and let the power of the word of God transform your disposition toward your Father. "God is my good Father. He will bless me as I come."

So you take yourself at hand. In a sense, you become your best preacher and you preach to yourself and you say to yourself, "Out with my doubt! Out with my despair and discouragement! The one true God is my heavenly Father. One way or another, he will be good to me. I know that he loves me. I know that he'll receive me and therefore I come to him trusting in his goodness. One way or another all will be well in the end, therefore I preach out of a response of love and trust to this good God who has saved me forevermore. Amen." I know you see the difference by now.

This is a different kind of work. This is spiritual work in which you address the lack of faith in your heart, you meet that with applying the word of God to it and say, "I cannot let that attitude frame the way that I pray. I'll frame it according to the truth of who God is. He's a good God and I'm going to pray to him on the presupposition and the assurance that he will receive me well and he will bless me when I come." That's where righteous praying begins.

Now, along with that there is a second aspect that you should remember, a third one, actually, in terms of the way that we framed the outline here today. You must be a Christian. You must believe the goodness of God. Thirdly, finally for today, you must believe the greatness of God. You must believe the greatness of God. Jesus, just as he assumes and presupposes the goodness of God in his teaching on prayer, he is equally presupposing the greatness of God in prayer.

Look at what he said in verse 6. He's presupposed the omniscience of God. In verse 6 he says, "your Father sees what is done in secret." What is that saying except that God is omniscient? That God sees everything that happens? That God sees what's going on in the human heart? That God hears the words that you say? In fact, nay, let's go further, God knows what you are going to say before you even say it. The Psalmist said, "Before there was a word on my tongue, behold, O God, you know it all." You must believe the greatness of God, that he is present and he is omniscient when you pray in secret.

Jesus presupposes the power of God, the omnipotence of God. Look at verse 6 with me. He says, "your Father who sees what is done in secret," God is there when you pray, that's his omnipresence, kind of mixing my terms here. His omnipresence, meaning he's with you when you pray, his omnipotence allows Jesus to say this, "your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." In other words, we'll just keep this simple: God has the power to deliver. God has the power to act. There is nothing outside the power of God. There is nothing too difficult for him, Jeremiah 32:17. You need to remind yourself of that and pray in faith in the power of God. Not that he will do precisely what you ask him to do in circumstances, we're transcending that, we're talking about who he is in his very nature. And who is he in his very nature? He is the omnipresent God. He is the God of all power.

And he is the God who knows all. Look at verse 8. He says, "your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." Where does better praying start? It starts right here remembering the greatness of God. He is omnipresent. He is with you every time you pray. He is omnipotent. He has the power to answer prayer. He has the power to do whatever he wishes. He is omniscient. He knows your difficult circumstances. He knows the harsh circumstances that some of your loved ones are facing that is totally outside your ability to do anything with it. He gets all of that. And beloved, his glory is not diminished one whit by any of it.

So while the circumstances make you weak and dependent, they have not made God weak and dependent and you approach him and you say, "Father, I approach you through the Lord Jesus Christ. You're my Father. I know that you love me. I can't imagine why, I just know it to be true from Scripture. I know it's not of anything in me. You accept me in Christ. You're so good. I approach you on the basis of your goodness, not of my effort here. I don't trust in the power of my own praying, Lord. I don't believe in the power of my own words to create reality. What I trust in, what I believe in, is in your power. In your greatness. In your goodness." And you approach him like that.

So, beloved, going back to verse 9, what is it that clues us into these things? What is it about what Jesus says that provokes us to think about the greatness of God? "Our Father who is in heaven, our Father who reigns from the throne room of the universe, the Maker of heaven and earth, the God who is over all, that's the God to whom I'm praying. This is one great God!" He is great and I look at the cross and I say, "Oh, he's so good!" And eventually when this starts to sink into your heart, beloved, here's what you say, it's not, "Oh, I have to pray now." When these things are really rooted in your heart and mind and outlook, beloved, the question that comes to your mind is, "How can I help but pray? How can I resist praying to this God who receives me and promises to reward me when I converse with him?" This is where righteous praying starts. God's greatness means that he has the full ability, the full authority to carry out his good intentions toward you. He has heavenly power to accomplish what he wants.

So where does better praying start? It doesn't start with you trying harder. Praise God for that. You could be the most miserably failed prayer in the history of the Christian

universe and you can start here and start on the right trajectory. This is available to every one of us that knows Christ. This is no secret. Look, think about this, you must understand these things, beloved, because this changes everything. There is no secret that is hidden from you that some spiritual giant got that God didn't give to you. This greatness and goodness of God is freely available to every one of you. Those of you that know Christ, the doors of heaven are already flung open and God invites you to come through his Son. And you start thinking about prayer there. There with the thought before you say a word, you say, "Oh, my Father is good. I trust him. My Father is great and I bow down before him."

It's that principle of faith that is the start of better praying, my friends. If you start there, better praying is going to take care of itself. If you want to start with rules that govern your behavior and govern the clock and all of that stuff, I hope by now that's become very distasteful in your mind. But those who start with those rules have lost the battle before it ever began because they're trusting in themselves rather than the greatness and the goodness of God.

Any Christian can pray well. Any one of you because we all have the same Father through the same Lord Jesus Christ. In this Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has called his disciples to meaningful prayer. Do you know what? That might as well start with you because it's available and God invites you to come.

Let's bow before him.

O God, what tongue could ever begin to exhaust the goodness and the greatness of your being? Certainly not ours. So we close with a simple statement of thanks, a simple prayer of gratitude. Thank you for loving us and making us your children so that we can cry out to you from the depths of our heart, 'Abba, Father,' and know that you receive us well. Lord, if we would receive our own children with kindness and we're evil in heart and mind, how much greater must you be willing to receive even the simplest of prayers from those that your Son purchased with his own lifeblood? Our God, we repent of our past negative thoughts of you that somehow you were stingy, that somehow you wanted something else by way of works from us other than a simple trust in your character as revealed in Scripture. We ask you to forgive us of our prayerlessness and more deeply, Father, we ask you to forgive us of our wrong ways of thinking about you when you have surrounded us with your goodness. Father, how did we ever think that you wouldn't continue to be good to us in the future? Where did we think that we had found the boundaries of your kindness and what manner of distorted thinking from our own minds led us to conclude miserly thoughts about the infinitely good and infinitely great God? Forgive us of those things. We reject them. We repent of them and in a simple trust, approaching you through our Lord Jesus Christ, we affirm our confidence and our trust and our sure unshakable belief in your greatness and in your goodness and on that basis, Father, we look forward to praying better on that which is based not in us, but is more clearly based in the one who receives our prayers and gladly responds according to his perfect will. In these things we rest, in these things we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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