

“Prayer & The Good Life” Matthew 6:5-15 Shane Hatfield 6/19/22

Alright, let's study God's word. We've been looking at the good life according to Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount all spring and we're going to continue through that here in the summer. What we have seen is that Jesus started out by describing what righteous character looks like, what the righteous life looks like, then He transitioned into righteous character flowing into righteous deeds or righteous practices. There are three righteous practices that He talks about: giving, praying, and fasting. Last week we looked at giving and we learned that the good life is found in giving for God because God has given His only Son for us, and that's what motivates us and helps us live a life of spiritual vitality, and not spiritual hypocrisy. So, this week we're going to continue on that theme. We're going to look at the righteous practice of prayer and how that is connected to the good life.

So, we're going to read Matthew 6:5-15, and then we're going to skip to Matthew 7:7-11. Hear the word of the Lord.

**5** And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. **6** But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

**7** “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. **8** Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. **9** Pray then like this: “Our Father 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 lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

**14** For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, **15** but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Now we're going to skip to 7:7-11.

**7** “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. **8** For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. **9** Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? **10** Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? **11** If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

This is God's word. As Charlie read earlier, Psalm 119:93 says: “I will never forget your precepts, for by them I have life.” Let's listen to God's word and receive life from it today.

Our Wednesday morning men's Bible study is reading a book called, “A Praying Life,” by Paul Miller. He starts out that book by telling the story about a time when he and his family were

camping in western Pennsylvania in the endless mountains of Pennsylvania. I'm guessing that's the name of the mountains, or I don't know, maybe they just go on forever and they just call them the endless mountains. I don't know. They're in the mountains and he was walking from their campsite down to their vehicle, and as he got down to their vehicle, he noticed that his 14-year-old daughter was standing there by the car and she looked really tense and upset. What he found out was she had lost her contact and it had fallen to the ground where there were just leaves and twigs, and so, he walks up and he finds out what's going on, and he says, "Ashley, don't move. Let's pray." She says, "What good does it do? I've prayed for Kim to speak and she isn't speaking." Kim is one of Paul's other children who lives with autism and developmental delays, and she's mute. She can't talk. So, Ashley had been taking prayer seriously and she had been praying that Kim would learn how to speak, and she would begin speaking, but God had not answered that prayer. Ashley saw Kim's muteness as a testimony to a silent God. To Ashley, prayer it seemed, did not work.

Have you ever felt the way that Ashley felt? Have you ever felt like, what good does it do to pray? It doesn't seem like prayer works. I think Ashley's question is probably one that we could all honestly say that we've said at some time. I think it reflects a cynicism that can kind of grow in our hearts toward prayer. The cynicism can lead us to a general weariness in prayer. We've been praying and praying for years, or trying to pray, and it just doesn't seem like that much is happening, and so, we grow weary and we grow tired. I think this cynicism can lead to shame and guilt around the subject of prayer. I don't know how many times I've asked people, 'What is something you struggle with in the Christian life?' And they will say, 'Prayer. I don't pray enough, and I feel ashamed and guilty about not praying enough.' We know we should pray more, but we struggle to have any type of consistent prayer life.

Cynicism can lead to what I call 'hail Mary' prayers. If you're like me, you throw up a lot of hail Marys. It's not in the Catholic 'hail Mary' sense, but the football one. I spend four quarters just grinding it out, working as hard as I can to win the game, and then when I finally get to the end and defeat is imminent and it looks like I'm not going to win, I just drop back and throw up that hail Mary prayer, 'Lord please, please help me with this' and hope that He's the one who makes the catch for the touchdown and brings it home. But it starts with a cynical heart, it starts with the idea that well, God's not going to answer this prayer so I'd better get to working! I'd better be the one that answers it. Cynicism can lead to hypocritical prayer. It can lead to a prayer life where we pray publicly, maybe we pray at meals or we go to our prayer meeting and we pray during the service, but we don't actually believe it. We don't pray privately, because cynically, in our hearts we don't actually believe it's going to work. And then, cynicism can lead to just giving up on prayer altogether and saying, 'You know what, prayer doesn't work. God's not answering my prayers. There isn't a God out there who exists, I'm just giving up. I'm not praying at all.'

So, I'd ask you, how has cynicism affected your prayer life? What is your heart saying about prayer and what is it saying about the Father, and how are you responding to the challenges of prayer in this life? Well, I hope that as we look at Jesus' words today, that His teaching will soften our hearts and will soothe our hearts in this area so that prayer becomes intertwined with our view of the good life. You see, I think oftentimes we think okay, here's the

good life, and there's all these things in the good life and prayer is just one thing among many in the good life, right? My life would really be better if I'd pray, but there are also like twenty other things in here that would really make my life better. What I want you to see is that prayer is not one thing among many in the good life, prayer is intertwined in the good life. Prayer is connecting all these things in the good life. It's connecting us to our heavenly Father, and people, and places, and friends, and things around us. It's bringing all those things together into God's good kingdom. So, what Jesus is going to show us, I believe He teaches us to pray to our heavenly Father intimately, thoughtfully, humbly, and expectantly, and as we do that we're going to experience the good life with our good Father. So, that's our outline this morning. The outline in your handout is wrong, that was version 1.0. We're on version 5.0, okay? Jesus teaches us to pray intimately, thoughtfully, humbly, and expectantly.

So first, Jesus teaches us to pray intimately. In verses 5-6, Jesus contrasts Christian prayer with the prayer of the hypocrites. He says the hypocrites love to stand on the street corner, or stand in the synagogues and pray, why? So that they can be seen by others. So that they can be seen by men. He says, that's all the reward they get. Whatever fleeting moment of gratification they have from other people seeing them, that's all they get. That is their reward. But He says, when you pray, again, He assumes that we're going to be praying, go into your room and shut the door, and there your Father who is in secret will reward you. Now, is Jesus prohibiting all forms of public or corporate prayer? Did we all just sin by praying together here in church? No. I don't think that's what Jesus is saying, if it is, we're all in trouble. We should just say amen, and get out of here. But we couldn't, because we'd be sinning again to say amen. No, I think Jesus is not prohibiting public and corporate prayers, we know that Jesus prayed in the presence of His disciples. We know that the apostles and the prophets prayed publicly, right? They weren't sinning. So, He can't be outlawing all public prayer.

I think what Jesus is addressing is private prayer. He's saying your private, intimate prayers with God, those need to be private with Him. Don't act like you're praying privately to God out in public so that everybody else can see you. Think about it this way: what is prayer? Prayer is a conversation with God. It may take many different forms, it may be deeply theological and structured, it may be simple and repetitive, but at its essence, prayer is just a conversation with God. You're just talking to God. What is the best way to engage in an intimate conversation with somebody? It's privately. If you really want to get to know someone, you get with them one on one and you talk with them privately. We know this instinctively, right? Couples, friends, right? You have public conversations, then you move to private.

Whenever Shari and I first met in college we were at a fraternity, a sorority event, it was very public. We spent a long time talking together in this public setting. We did all the surface level questions: religion, politics, sports, all of those sorts of things in public, right? And then when we started dating we went to more private settings. We would go to the coffee shop. We would play cards, and talk, and drink coffee together, and that was another level of intimacy because it was just her and I talking. Then once we got even more serious we would go for walks, we would become even more intimate. By the time we got married I thought, 'Man, we know each other really, really well!' Then we moved in together, and then there in the comfort and the safety and the privacy of our home, that's when we began to have our most intimate

conversations. That's where that intimacy grew. Now, imagine that I never talked to Shari at home. I never had a conversation with her, and then I just went out in public and I acted like we really knew each other, what would I be doing? I would be a hypocrite. I would be playing like I knew Shari really well, but in reality, I wouldn't know her at all!

I think that's kind of what Jesus is getting at. He's saying, don't go out hypocritically in public and act like you have some intimate relationship with God when you actually don't. Pull away. Take time. Get alone with God in an intimate, private place and talk to Him. Develop an intimate relationship with Him! A private place is the best place to develop an intimate relationship with God. It protects our hearts and minds from the watchful eyes of others so we can focus on being with Him. He calls us in the Psalms, He says, "Seek my face," and the Psalmist says, "Your face Lord, do I seek." That's what we do when we go privately to prayer, we seek the Lord's face. So, let me just ask you, do you regularly set aside a time to pray alone with God? Intimately, to seek His face? That's what Jesus is inviting us to.

As soon as I say that, there's all this legalism, there's all this shame and guilt that comes on us and we feel, 'Oh, I've failed. I haven't done that. I should do that.' Don't see this as a rule, see this as an invitation! See this as a promise! When you get away alone with your heavenly Father and talk with Him, He's there! He loves you and He wants to be with you. He wants you to pour out your heart to Him privately and intimately! I love reading the Psalms because it's like reading the Psalmist's journal. You get to see how he pours out his heart to God in a private and intimate way. It's what God is inviting us into.

If you're struggling with prayer, if you struggle with cynicism, that's exactly the place where you need to go. Do you think God sees your cynicism? Do you think He knows it? Yeah! He wants you to come and talk to Him about it. He wants you to say, 'Lord, I have a cynical, hard heart. I'm not even sure if I believe that you hear me. Do you think He's big enough to take that? You bet He is. That's the kind of prayer He loves to answer. If you came to God and said, 'God, my heart is cold and cynical, I need you to change it.' Do you think God would go, 'Nope, I'm not going to answer that prayer.' No, that's exactly the kind of prayer He wants to answer! If you don't have any desire at all, you make that your prayer. You say, 'Lord, I want to want to be with You. I want to want to pray to You.' He is there with you waiting. He wants to talk to you. So, whether you're in the car, or you're at the office, or you're on a walk, wherever you are, talk to your heavenly Father. Get alone with Him. Be intimate with Him. Jesus teaches us to pray intimately.

And then, Jesus teaches us to pray thoughtfully. In verses 7-8 He contrasts Christian prayer with Gentile prayer. The Gentiles were the non-Jewish people, just in general, they did not have the teachings of God, they were not part of God's covenant community, so unless they converted to Judaism and began reading the Scripture, in general, they didn't know God. They didn't have a covenant relationship with Him, and so, they worshiped false gods. When they were praying to their gods, they would recite prayers over and over again mechanically and repeatedly to try to coerce their god to do what they needed him to do.

There's a good example of this in 1 Kings 18. There's a good reason to get to 1 Kings in your Bible reading, right? There's an interesting story where you have the prophets of Baal, and then you have Elijah the prophet of God and there's literally a competition to see who's got the real god! They make an altar and they tell the prophets of Baal, 'Okay, pray that your god would come down and light this altar on fire.' And so, the text says that the prophets of Baal cried out from morning 'til noon. They shouted and danced and slashed themselves, growing ever more frantic in an ever more futile attempt to gain Baal's attention, and guess what? Nothing happened. Nothing happened! They tried to coerce their god to light the altar on fire and he did not do it. Then Elijah comes up and Elijah simply prays in the name of the Lord and asks Him to turn back the hearts of the people, and even though the altar had been covered in water multiple times, there's no way it should have lit, a fire from heaven came down and lit the wood on fire. Elijah knew the real God. he prayed to the real God, and He answered him.

So, what He's saying is the Gentiles, they were not praying thoughtfully, they weren't saying words that they knew, they didn't know God, they didn't understand Him. So, He's saying don't pray like that! Don't pray up empty, meaningless phrases thinking that you can coerce God to answer your prayers. That's not how He works. Jesus even goes so far as to say that God already knows what we need. So, that brings up an interesting question, right? If God already knows, then why ask? Isn't that funny? Jesus is telling us to pray, but at the same time is saying, 'Well, God already knows what you need!' So, why ask? Well, the answer is, one, prayer glorifies God. Prayer draws us into an intimate relationship with Him. Prayer changes us, and God has sovereignly decided that He wants to answer prayers through our prayers! He's ordained the means and the end, He says, 'This is what I want to happen, and this is how I'm going to do it. I'm going to work through these people. I'm going to move them to prayer, and that's how I'm going to accomplish my purpose.' God has ordained all of that. So, Jesus teaches us, He says, I want you to pray thoughtfully. And then, like a good teacher, He then teaches us how to pray!

Jesus teaches us how to pray humbly, and thoughtfully first for God's glory. If you look at the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer, they all teach us to pray for God's glory. When we pray, 'Hallowed be your name,' we pray that God's character and reputation would be honored by all. When we pray, 'Your kingdom come,' we pray that God's kingship and kingdom would become more evident in the world through evangelism and discipleship. When we pray, 'Your will be done,' we pray that God's plan of redemption and restoration would take place here on earth until Jesus comes back and restores all things. When we pray these things, we're shaping our hearts and our minds around God's glory. So, He teaches us to pray humbly and thoughtfully for God's glory.

And then, He teaches us to pray humbly and thoughtfully for our needs. All of the next three petitions encompass our physical and spiritual needs that we have. When we pray, 'Give us this day our daily bread,' we're praying that God would provide everything we need for life and godliness. That's food, clothing, shelter, health, relationships, a good government, peace, anything and everything. You're saying, 'Lord, I need you to provide what I need to survive and thrive.' When we pray, 'Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors,' we pray that God would remove the spiritual barriers between us in our vertical relationship with God and also in our

horizontal relationship. Now, some of the language in here would make it seem as if our forgiveness is conditional upon forgiving others. We know from other scriptures that's not true, that couldn't be what Jesus is saying. We know that other places say we are saved by grace through faith alone, not from anything that we've done. So then, why does Jesus say that we have to forgive as we've been forgiven. It's because forgiveness is not a prerequisite for receiving forgiveness, but it is evidence of receiving forgiveness. When we forgive others, we show that our heavenly Father has forgiven us, that we understand His forgiveness. The person who will not forgive His brother and sister in Christ shows that they don't understand how much they've been forgiven. Jesus is saying that there's a connection between those two things. He drives this point home by saying that we *must* forgive as we've been forgiven.

Then, when we pray, 'Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil,' we pray that God would protect us from our sinful nature, from evil people around us that want to hurt us, and from *the* evil one who is in the world and wants us to betray God. The one who has been forgiven from the penalty of sin wants nothing to do with sin in the future, wants to be protected from sin in all areas. So, again, Jesus is teaching us that prayer is not just one part of the good life. Prayer is an essential and intertwined aspect of the good life in every facet of our lives. There is not a single area of our lives that prayer couldn't and shouldn't touch. He's inviting us into a praying life in every area. It's vital for all of our life. If we don't pray, then spiritually we're not receiving the life that we could. It's essential. Eventually, our souls will die if we're not connected to our Father through prayer.

I once remember reading in a book, a pastor's wife was struggling with a chronic illness and she needed to pray, and she had gone to her husband several times and said, 'Hey, we need to pray regularly, I'm really sick. I don't feel well. We need to pray regularly. We need to pray regularly.' And he said, 'Yeah, we'll pray. We'll pray.' But he'd been kind of inconsistent. He wasn't really regular in his prayers, and so, she was trying to find a way to get her point across about how important it was for them to pray and she said, 'Imagine that you had a sickness and the doctor said there is a pill that you can take that will keep you alive, that will heal your sickness, but you have to take that pill every day. If you take that pill every day, you will live. But if you don't take that pill, then you'll die. Would you take it every day?' And her husband said, 'Yes!' And she said, 'That pill for me is prayer. If I don't pray, I am going to die spiritually, before I die physically.' They committed themselves to praying together every night, because she had to pray. Now, I say that not to make you feel bad about not praying but to show you the point that that's how essential prayer is to our lives! It's not just one good thing among many, it is vital, essential, necessary. It is how we connect to our heavenly Father, and we draw near to Him, and we experience His goodness and His glory. It's a way that He uses to provide for us in every area of our lives.

So, Jesus teaches us that a disciple's prayer is not self-centered, it's God-centered. It's not a mechanical performance, it's something that we humbly, and thoughtfully do, like little children coming to their Father. That's the paradigm that Jesus has. That's why the prayer starts, 'Our Father in heaven.' You've got to realize that was revolutionary. Until this point, scholars say there's nowhere in Jewish history when the Jews were taught to pray to God as Father. Maybe there were shadows of it in the Old Testament, but nobody thought to pray to

God as Father and here Jesus is saying, here it is. Here's the paradigm. Come to your heavenly Father the way a little child comes to his or her parent, and ask Him to meet your needs. What do we find when we come to this God? We find that we receive our daily bread through God the Father's creation and providence. We find forgiveness through God the Son's atoning work, and we're rescued from evil through God the Holy Spirit's indwelling power. We find that God the Father, Son, and Spirit is at work in all these things, meeting our needs so that we might have spiritual life.

So, Jesus teaches us to pray intimately, He teaches us to pray thoughtfully, and humbly, and then lastly, He teaches us to pray expectantly. If you look at chapter 7:7-8, He makes some amazing promises. He says, "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, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." Jesus is promising to answer those who come to the Father in prayer. He is promising a reward. I think what He's saying here is that the promise is so sure that the method doesn't matter. Look, He says, "Ask and it will be given to you." So, imagine a little child. The little child comes up to mom or dad and asks for something that they need, they're going to give it to them. But what if they don't ask? What if, you know this as parents, sometimes your kids just come in and you know what they need, right? I know that if Emmarie wakes me up in the middle of the night, I know exactly what she's going to want. She doesn't have to say it. She could just walk to the door, and I know what she's going to want. I know she's going to want to know, 'Did you check on me?' and 'Can I get a drink of water?' And the answer to those two questions is always, 'Yes.' All she has to do is walk to the door. All she has to do is seek me and I'll answer.

He says, "Knock and it will be opened." Sometimes kids, you come to mom and dad and what do you do? You start pulling on their leg, you start knocking on the door, you don't even have to say anything, you just start doing this, and what do they do? A good parent knows exactly what you need and they answer you. I think that's what Jesus is saying. I think He's giving us a promise that our Father will always answer us. Now, I'm going to say something that's going to take some qualification. I believe that God always answers prayer, always. He answers in one of three ways: yes, no, or not yet. He always answers prayer this way.

I want to go back to the story that I opened with in the beginning. Paul Miller comes to his daughter. She has lost her contact in the forest. She says, 'How do I know prayer is going to work?' Eventually through their conversation, he father her, pastored her, and they went ahead and prayed. They prayed a very simple prayer, that God would help them find the contact. When they opened their eyes they looked down, and there they found the contact sitting on top of a leaf. They picked it up, cleaned it off, put it in, and went on their way. He was so thankful that God had answered that seemingly small, and simple prayer. Sometimes God will say yes to your prayers, no matter how small they are, no matter how big they are, because He's a good Father and He loves you and He knows what you need, and He knows that's what you need. Sometimes He will say no.

They continued to pray for Kim, his other daughter, they continued to pray that she would speak, speaking was so hard for her, it was so painful that one time when she was a little

child, and she was in speech therapy and she crawled out of the room in tears because she just couldn't talk. Finally the mom said, 'That's it. We're never going back.' She never spoke, to my knowledge she doesn't speak still, on her own. So, God never answered that prayer. He said, 'No.' Did God ever tell Jesus no? Yeah! In the garden of Gethsemane, three times Jesus said, 'Father, if there's any other way that we can do this. If there's any other way this salvation can take place, do it.' And three times the Father said 'No,' and three times Jesus said, 'Not my will be done, but your will be done.' The apostle Paul had a thorn in his flesh, we don't know what the thorn was, I think that's genius on God's part. It could be anything. But three times Paul prayed that God would take away that thorn and three times He said no. There may be some times when you pray and God will say no because He's a good Father and He knows what we need and He wants us to trust Him.

Sometimes He'll say not yet. Although Kim never learned the ability to speak on her own, God did provide a computer and so, Kim talks today by using a computer. She'll punch in a series of codes when she wants something, and the computer will speak. That's a way that she can talk to her parents. So, in God's providence, they have a way they can communicate with her. Now one day, some day, Kim will go to heaven, she'll receive a glorified body, all things will be restored, and she'll be able to speak. Imagine what it'll be like for her friends and family to hear her praising God in heaven for the first time ever. That's a not yet prayer. God said no, but He also said not yet. There are some things that you've been praying for that God may be saying no, and He also may be saying not yet. One day, some day that prayer in heaven may be answered in its fullness. God promises to answer our prayers and He promises that our Father will give good gifts.

He uses earthly parents as an example. He says, "You who are evil," even the best parent on earth, everything they do is tainted by sin, if *they* know how to give good gifts, then how much more does your Father who is in heaven know to give good gifts if you ask Him. This week is Tucker's birthday. It's on Thursday? The 24th. Whatever day the 24th is, okay? Don't tell Tucker I couldn't remember his birthday, which day of the week it's on. It's Tucker's birthday! I'm going to be out of town next week so we celebrated his birthday last night. We got him presents and a cake because that's what he wanted. So, we got his present, we put it in the bag, and he went to open it, and when he did, there was nothing in the bag. I said, 'You just thought I loved you! You just thought I was going to get you a good gift! I know you wanted a watch, but we didn't get you a watch, we got you nothing!' And then we pulled out the cake. The cake was hard and old and moldy. It'd make him sick if he ate it. And I said, 'That's your cake! That's what you're going to eat!' Is that what I did? No! I didn't do that! He wanted a watch! And so, he opened up his package and there was a watch. And he wanted an angel food cake and so I went to Sprouts and I got him an angel food cake, because even I - a broken, flawed, imperfect, sinful father - know how to give a good gift. How much more does your Father in heaven know how to give good gifts to you? And so, whatever God has said, yes, no, or not yet, it is a good gift. Ask your Father to show you how it's a good gift. Ask the Father to show you that it is a good gift, and ask Him to use that to change your cynical heart.

How do we know it's a good gift? How do we know we can trust Him? How do we know that He can change our cynical hearts? He gave us the ultimate gift. He gave His only Son for



us! In Romans, Paul says, "If God did not withhold His only Son from you, how much more will He also graciously give you all things." Everything we have is a gift of God's grace. If He gave His only Son for you, how will He not also give you everything that you need? How will He not also give you a family, friends, or a church, or a job, or food, or clothing, or shelter? He will! He's a good Father and He loves you. Let that soak in. Let's soak it in together. Oh that we would be a church that believes that we have a good Father who loves us, loves us so much He gave His only Son for us, and that that would drive us to pray in all things for God's glory and for our good. Let's pray together.