

Radical

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

(Matthew 5:27–28 ESV)

Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

(Luke 6:36 ESV)

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

(Matthew 5:20 ESV)

Radical Prayer

August 18th, 2019

Matthew 6:5-15

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Introduction:

Good morning church! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 6.

This is week 2 of our “Radical” series. We’re taking a closer look at some of the ways in which Jesus challenged and exposed the false beliefs and practices of his day. We’re looking at the corrective lessons that Jesus taught to his followers.

Throughout this series we’re going to hold our beliefs and practices under the microscope and we’re going to invite Jesus to reshape our thinking – to correct the errors that have crept into our hearts and minds.

It’s hard to break old habits, isn’t it? It’s hard to unlearn old lies. But thanks be to God, He has given us His word which is sharper than a double-edged sword and which shines light into the darkest places. O that He would shine His light on us today! To that end, look with me now at Matthew 6:5-15. Hear now 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. ⁶But 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. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us this day our daily bread,

¹²and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:5-15 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Jesus says: “Here’s how NOT to pray, and here’s how TO pray.” Our text today is remarkably simple, and yet, it contains profound lessons. So, let’s look at the text with that simple outline and first learn how NOT to pray:

How NOT to Pray

First, Jesus warns us:

1. Don’t pray to other people

We find this in verses 5-6 where Jesus describes the hypocrite. The hypocrite loves to pray in places where others can see and hear him. He stands at the synagogue with arms outstretched to God. He prays loudly on the street corner.

Now, Jesus is not saying that we should avoid public prayer. That's not the point. What Jesus is confronting here is the motivation of the heart. The problem isn't WHERE this man prays. The problem is WHY this man prays and TO WHOM this man prays.

He doesn't pray because he wants God to hear him – he prays because he wants others to hear him. He wants them to respect him. He wants them to be impressed by him.

And, it works. Jesus tells us:

Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. (Matthew 6:5b ESV)

The hypocrite puts on a show to convince those around him of his holiness and devotion... and it works! But here's the warning: Jesus says that recognition from his peers is ALL that he gets.

He gets the temporary attention and respect of his peers, but he doesn't get God.

I wonder how many hypocrites we have in our midst this morning. Have you ever been this man? Let's transpose the example of the first century Pharisee to a 21st century key.

The hypocrite doesn't love praying, but she does love being HEARD praying. While everyone else prays in her prayer group, she's not listening. She's thinking about what she can say in her prayer to impress the group with her Bible knowledge. Not only that, but she somehow manages to work her spiritual resume into every prayer. She says things like: "Lord, thank you for caring for Suzy. She's having a hard time right now, but I was able to go over there last night with a lasagne. Her kids are misbehaving, Lord. I know that, because she told me that while I was visiting with her with that lasagne that I made for her."

Listen: That is EXACTLY how the pharisee prays! Do you know why you keep working personal stories into your prayers? It's because you're thinking more about what people think of you than you are of what GOD thinks of you! He knows about the lasagne! You're not telling Him. You're telling us. You want us to know that you brought Suzy a lasagne. You want to impress us. And you did! Congratulations! You won the admiration of your peers, but according to Jesus that's

ALL you got from this prayer. Your motive wasn't to lift Suzy up to the Lord. Your motive was to lift yourself up to us. And that's sinful. And you need to repent.

He's also speaking to those of us who spend more time praying out loud in a prayer group or with a microphone on the stage than we do in private on our knees. I confess to my shame that there was a season in my life as a young man when I only prayed when I had a microphone. Do you know why that was? It's because I was a Pharisee. I wasn't seeking God in prayer. I was seeking the praises of man. I was after the wrong treasure.

Rule number one for how NOT to pray: Don't pray to other people.

Rule number two:

2. Don't pray like a pagan

Jesus tells us that the Gentiles would heap up empty phrases in order to manipulate the gods. Perhaps the clearest Old Testament example of this is the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Do you remember that one?

Elijah challenged the false prophets to a test. They assembled two altars – one for Elijah and one for the prophets of Baal – and they were each to ask their god to send fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice on the altar. The prophets of Baal went first, and they spent the day crying out to their god again and again. They danced around to try and gain his attention. They even began to cut themselves hoping that he would be moved by their sincerity. All the while, Elijah stood off to the side and said:

“Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” (1 Kings 18:27b ESV)

We laugh at this story. We laugh at the foolishness of these false prophets. But is it possible that we have adopted some pagan practices into our own prayer lives without even thinking?

I suspect there are times when we DO try to manipulate God. I think sometimes we DO repeat requests over and over and we raise our voices as if somehow that will cause God to respond. We say things like: “Father, take this sickness from my brother. Take it from him, Father. TAKE IT AWAY! FATHER GOD! TAKE IT!!”

Now, sometimes we pray like that because we are simply overwhelmed with passion. I get that. I’ve prayed that. But, and here’s where I want to make sure we receive this correction from the text, if there is any part of us that thinks that God is more inclined to respond to us because we have multiplied our words and increased our volume then we are no different than the prophets of Baal. Let’s be careful not to pray like pagans.

New Christians, one of the lies that you are going to be tempted to believe is that God only answers the prayers that use fancy words and have Bible verses scattered throughout. I imagine, if the only prayers that you ever hear are the prayers we pray from the stage, that you might begin to worry that you don’t know enough to pray to God. You haven’t memorized enough Scripture. You haven’t studied enough theology.

But that’s simply not true. God delights to answer the prayers of the brand-new believer just as much as he delights to answer the prayers of the senior saints. He delights in the prayers of my three-year-old daughter and he delights to answer the prayers of Pastor Paul. The pagan tries to manipulate God with fancy words. The Christian comes just as he is. God hears our prayers – not because of how eloquent they are – but because of how sufficient Christ is.

Now, I think those warnings were necessary and corrective. Jesus needed to tear some false ideas down. But now that the rubble is out of the way Jesus is going to lay a foundation for a healthy and vibrant prayer life. Let’s look to the text and learn how to pray.

How to Pray

Jumping back to the story of Elijah and the prophets, do you remember what happened after the pagans shouted, danced and cut themselves?

Nothing. That’s what! Absolutely nothing happened. Manipulative pagan prayer is powerless.

But then Elijah took his turn, and here's what happened:

³⁶ And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. ³⁷ Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." ³⁸ Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. (1 Kings 18:36-38 ESV)

No dancing. No shouting. Just a simple prayer. Elijah says: "This is who you are. Would you glorify yourself before these people? Would you turn their hearts to you?"

God answered that simple prayer with fire from heaven.

Likewise, as Jesus teaches us how to pray in today's text, he gives us a model that is radically SIMPLE! We need to recapture this. If you're here this morning and you became a Christian YESTERDAY, you have all of the tools that you need to pray. There are no hoops to jump through. There's no course to take. God wants to hear from You. He wants you to humble yourself before Him every day. And so, he has made this painstakingly SIMPLE!

The first thing Jesus teaches us about radically simple prayer is that we should:

1. Pray with the family of God

Have you ever stopped to consider the pronouns in this prayer? Jesus doesn't say "my Father" or "your Father". He says: "OUR Father". Give US our daily bread. Forgive US our trespasses. The first thing that Jesus teaches us in this prayer is that we are going to be tempted to focus on ourselves, but we need to see ourselves in light of the global family of God.

And doesn't that change everything?

Suddenly, "give us our daily bread" means more than "help me fix the air conditioner in my cozy home." It also means, "God, provide for my brothers and sisters around the world who are afraid

that they're going to watch their child starve to death today." If we prayed that each morning, it would change the way we live, wouldn't it?

Suddenly, "lead us not into temptation" means more than "help me not to look at things I shouldn't look at today." It also means, "God, help that new believer in our church who is 11 days sober to keep their eyes fixed on you."

"Deliver us from evil" suddenly overflows with urgency and power when we think about the hundreds of thousands of Christians around the world who are persecuted for their faith.

Now, of course, we are to pray for our personal needs. The air conditioner and the daily temptations and everything in between are things that you SHOULD pray for. But let's remember that Jesus taught us to pray for "our" needs. When we pray, we should pray with the family of God.

Second, Jesus teaches us to:

2. Pray to your Father who is Holy, Holy, Holy

Our Father who art in heaven. (Matthew 6:9a ESV)

This was a radical development. God as "Father" is not a central theme in the Old Testament.¹ The Pharisees didn't pray this way. They spoke to God as One who was majestic and distant and holy... and all of that is true. But they were missing part of the picture. YES, God is transcendent and holy, holy, holy! But that same God is also imminent, and He has invited us to address Him as Father.

I often need to be reminded of this as I pray. Sometimes I come to God so aware of my unworthiness that I forget that He's my Father who WANTS to hear from me! If I'm hard at work in my office and my daughter Abigail creeps in with tears in her eyes because of a scraped knee,

¹ See D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Matthew - Luke)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 8, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 169.

am I going to send her away? Of course not! I'm her father! Well, then why is it that when we're hobbled by depression, or we're struggling with a habitual sin, or we're stressed about our finances – why is it that we don't take it to God?

God is your Father, Christian! He delights to hear from you!

But we need the other corrective too, don't we? Yes, He is our Father who is near, but He also "art in heaven! He is a consuming fire who dwells in inapproachable light. He is the holy, holy, holy One who is presently being worshiped by myriads of angels around His throne. Remembering this truth keeps us from speaking to God flippantly. It keeps us from looking at sin as if it is insignificant. It right-sizes us and positions us to understand just how great a privilege it is that we GET TO TALK TO GOD!

I think that D.A. Carson is right when he says:

Unfortunately, many modern Christians find it very difficult to delight in the privilege of addressing the Sovereign of the universe as "Father" because they have lost the heritage that emphasizes God's transcendence.²

Let's recapture our awareness of the transcendence of God. When we pray, we need to hold onto both of these realities. He is our Father who is holy, holy, holy.

Third:

3. Pray about God's global agenda first, and your personal agenda second

Look at the next petition in this prayer. Jesus teaches us to pray:

hallowed be your name. (Matthew 6:9b ESV)

² D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Matthew - Luke)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 8, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 169.

We don't use the word "hallowed" very often in our vernacular so let's stop and consider this for a moment. "Hallowed" literally means "made holy".

We're saying: "Help me to see you as Holy today, God! Help the world to see you as Holy! Let Your glory and splendour and awe and wonder be seen by all today!" By the way, isn't this just like the prayer that Elijah prayed in the story we were considering earlier? He said:

"O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, ...³⁷ Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." (1 Kings 18:36b-37 ESV)

Do you hear that!? Not only do we want people to see that God is Holy, we also want them to surrender to His rule, so we pray:

Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:10 ESV)

We're praying: "God, let us experience the extension of your kingdom on this earth today. Cause your people to grow in obedience. Cause your gospel to spread. Bring an end to injustice. Bring an end to poverty. Bring an end to our sin. Use whatever means necessary to further your kingdom in this world."

Jesus is teaching us here that God's agenda in the world should be the first thing that we think about when we stop to pray. We should be praying BIG prayers! But how many of us actually do? When's the last time that you prayed a truly BIG prayer?

If we genuinely believed that God could answer our big, hairy, prayers then we would pray them, wouldn't we? Jesus rebuked this same lack of faith in his disciples and he said:

For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you." (Matthew 17:20 ESV)

Talk about radical sayings of Jesus! Now, Jesus' concern here wasn't about geography or topography. The moving of a mountain was simply an illustration of God's ability to do that which we perceive to be impossible.

Do we believe that God can do the impossible? Then let's pray that way!

God, end abortion, and cause the men and women who find themselves in those desperate situations to call upon Your name! God, save every man, woman, boy and girl in the city of Orillia and give us the courage to preach the Gospel shamelessly! God, awaken Your church in North America and Europe out of her apathy and materialism and cause us to be useful for You and for the advancement of Your kingdom!

Let's pray big prayers that align with His agenda. And then – and this is so incredible – He invites us to pray for the little stuff too.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread, (Matthew 6:11a ESV)

God is in the business of overthrowing corrupt governments and He's in the business of replacing broken vans. He invites us to pray for the salvation of the nations and he invites us to pray for a sandwich at lunch time.

He invites us to pray this way because He loves us.

He invites us to pray this way because He wants us to learn that He is Lord over every detail. His sovereign rule and reign extends from the furthest corners of the earth to the baby toe that you stubbed on the table this morning and He wants you to lift everything up to Him.

Finally,

4. Pray for forgiveness for and freedom from sin

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. (Matthew 6:12-13 ESV)

As we pray that God's name would be seen as holy in the world, we recognize all of the ways that we have tarnished His name with our disobedience. We become convicted for the shows that we have watched and the jokes that we have laughed at. We become aware of the impatience that we have shown to our spouses and our co-workers.

As we pray that God's kingdom would come and that His will would be done, we become aware of all the opportunities that we missed to share the gospel this week and all the times that we openly disregarded the will of God.

By the end of the Lord's Prayer, if we've been praying thoughtfully, we are fully convinced of our sin. And, seeing how great our sin is, and how marvelous God's grace towards us is, we are also perfectly positioned to forgive others. Indeed, in verses 14-15, Jesus goes on to explain:

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. (Matthew 6:14-15 ESV)

These verses have caused lots of confusion over the years. It almost seems like God's forgiveness is conditional. You can be forgiven, but ONLY if you forgive others first.

But that's not what Jesus is saying! Forgiving others is not the TASK that you need to do to receive forgiveness. No, forgiving others is the EVIDENCE that shows that you have truly experienced God's forgiveness!

The people who receive God's grace are the people who have been broken by the awareness of their sin. In Isaiah 66 we're told:

But this is the one to whom I will look:
he who is humble and contrite in spirit
and trembles at my word. (Isaiah 66:2b ESV)

Once you have been broken because of your own sin, the sins of your neighbor or your spouse pail in comparison. I've sinned against God in 1001 ways! And yet He forgives me! He sent His Son to die for me! Hallelujah!

How then, in view of the grace that has forgiven 1001 sins, can I refuse to forgive those who have wronged me? Answer: I CAN'T. Which means, if you can't forgive others – if you hold grudges and slander and gossip – then you GIVE NO EVIDENCE that you have actually received the grace of God in Christ.

But for those who have – for those whose sins have been washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ – what a sweet prayer to pray each day. “Forgive me, as I forgive those who have wronged me... God, I want to forgive Bobby today. I want to let go of the grudge I've been holding against him. Help me to love him, Father.” When we pray prayers like that each day, the Devil has no opportunity to drive a wedge between us. He wants to pit us against one another, but Jesus taught us a prayer that will bind us together.

We pray for forgiveness FOR sin and we pray for freedom FROM sin.

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil. (Matthew 6:13 ESV)

That's a wise prayer, isn't it? Throughout our wisdom series we saw again and again that the Bible puts forward two paths – the path of wisdom and life and the path of folly and death. The Lord's Prayer teaches us to ask God to keep us on the right path each and every day. The Lord's Prayer calls us to be wise and humble enough to confess: “I'm going into a world full of temptations and I have a heart that is prone to wander. I need you to protect me today.”

Conclusion

As we conclude, let's be freshly reminded this morning that God is not impressed by the things that we are impressed by. He's not looking for a show of eloquent speech. He's not looking for a barrage of repetition. He's looking for a broken and sincere heart that acknowledges Him for who He reveals Himself to be and that desires to fall into alignment with His plans and purposes.

Radical simplicity.

Over the past two months, we have opened up the microphone at RCC and invited people to share anything that God had been laying on their heart. Three times in the last two months, God has prompted someone to share that we MUST become a people of prayer. I agree. I feel as if God is stirring this up in us as a congregation. Isaiah 56:7 says:

these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples. (Isaiah 56:7 ESV)

Let us become a house of prayer. From the youngest to the oldest, in prayer groups and in the pulpit, on the drives to work and around the tables in our homes, let's recommit ourselves to prayer.

For the glory of God, and the good of all people. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.