

A Simple Way to Pray II

Centerpoint

By Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

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First Presbyterian Church
1324 Marion St
Columbia, SC 29201

Website: www.firstprescolumbia.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/fpccolumbia

Well, we're still studying the Sermon on the Mount this evening and turning to the same passage we read and studied last Wednesday evening in Matthew 6, and we're going to read the same verses beginning at verse 5 of chapter 6 and going on through verse 15.

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.

We took a first look at this section last Wednesday evening and this Wednesday we need to remind ourselves that this section is the longest section in kind of a triptych that Jesus is employing for us here, a three-paneled picture of what the deeper righteousness looks like when it's applied to the basic disciplines of the Christian life: the practice of concern for others that's expressed in giving; the practice of commitment to the Lord that's expressed in praying; and the practice of self-discipline and control that's expressed in fasting. And we saw last time that in a unique way in these three panels that Jesus has painted for us here, the section on prayer begins with a double negative and you'll notice how strikingly unique that is. Verse 5, "when you pray, not like the hypocrites," verse 7, "when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do." And it looks to me as though Jesus extends this section here because he wants to prepare the way for what is in this section, the secret of learning to pray. In other words, he's taking time here to say on the one hand, not like the hypocrites so that there is no pretense in your prayer, on the

other hand, and this is the other end of the spectrum, isn't it, not like the Gentiles, not like the pagans who have no biblical revelation, don't heap up words as they do, don't think that by applying verbal pressure to God he will answer your prayers. You don't pray like that, nor do you need to pray like that.

So no pretense on the one hand, and no foolish thinking that if you pressure God by many words, he will give into you and give you what you are looking for, and as we saw last Wednesday evening, the very important principle that undergirds all this is that both the hypocrite and the pagan make the same mistake. It's a pattern that you see in various contexts in the Scriptures, two almost opposite errors are actually rooted in the same error, and the error that Jesus is pointing out here is that you wouldn't pray like that if you knew God as your heavenly Father. Sometimes, alas, when you're in meetings or when you're speaking to professing Christian believers, you do think to yourself, "You wouldn't speak like that if you really trusted the heavenly Father."

I had an occasion of an encounter with a young parent, a totally different part of the United States, I think about 18 months ago. He was in terror of Islam. He was in absolute abject terror of Islam because of his children and at the end of the conversation, I found myself saying to him, "My friend," I had never met him before and haven't met him since, "My friend, your problem is not Islam, your problem is that you are not going to exude any trust in the heavenly Father before your children as long as you continue to behave in this panic-stricken way." And you see, there is a kind a panic in hypocrisy, and there's a panic in paganism, and what Jesus is bringing to the fore here and I think the reason why he does it in this double way, is because he is eventually going to lead us into this great principle, and if there is a secret to prayer, this is the secret to prayer, it is knowing God as your heavenly Father and knowing that he is in secret. Remember that expression that certainly struck some of us last Wednesday night, he is in secret and he sees in secret, and how extraordinary we are if we think we go into his presence and try to pull the wool over his eyes. Now we're like our own children sometimes are, our children certainly sometimes were like this, they thought they could pull the wool over your eyes. They didn't realize you tried to pull the wool over your own mom and dad's eyes, and that you saw through the whole thing. And how interesting, isn't it, this is a subject of ongoing fascination to me that we teach our children not to be something in relationship to us as parents that we then go and be in relationship to the heavenly Father. We are hypocrites. We're pagans. We pretend. We put on all this show and Jesus, it's as though he's saying, "Come on now." He is through all the time here to do, he is the heavenly Father. Your allowing your prayer life to be dominated by yourself and your situation but your prayer life, like your whole life, needs to be dominated by the fact that you are living in the presence of the Father who sees in secret, and that you are living, yes, in a fallen world but you are among those for whom God as your heavenly Father in this fallen world, he makes no mistakes, he is never late, he works all things together according to the counsel of his own will for the good and blessing of his children. So he's saying, "Let's have none of this hypocrisy and none of this pressure and let's learn to pray to the Father who is in secret and sees in secret."

Now last week I raised the question that often arises in this context: if as Jesus says here in verse 6 that our Father knows what we need before we ask him, why do we bother to pray at all? And we saw the answer to that is: because like earthly fathers, the heavenly Father brings his children into his purposes. He sits them on his lap, he engages with them, that our intercession is actually in the mystery of God's providence caught up into his purposes and for this reason we come to him in prayer and our prayers are really significant. He gives us the privilege of, as it were, touching the arm of the hand that moves the universe because he cares about us, loves us, and invites us to do exactly that. Not that we could overpower his arm but that it is his good pleasure to move his arm in concert with the way in which we hold onto him.

Now with respect to the fact that we are to close the door and pray in secret, of course, there are people who would say, "This is why I never go to prayer meetings." Ever met anybody like that? "No, my religion is private because Jesus said it should be in secret and therefore all this nonsense about people gathering together for prayer, it's not what Jesus would have wanted." Now is that so? Well, it can't possibly be so because this prayer begins not my Father in heaven but our Father in heaven. It's a prayer in the plural, for the plural. Not only so but if that were true, Jesus himself would be breaking his own principle, wouldn't he? We wouldn't, for example, have that magnificent prayer of John 17. One of the disciples should have tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Wait a minute, you shouldn't be praying like this so that we can hear." Nor would the disciples who had been told to observe everything that Jesus commanded them, last words of Matthew 28 then in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles done, what? Gathered together for concerts of prayer. And as you read through the opening chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, it's one of the dominant themes, one of the great characteristics of the living New Testament church that the people of God gathered together for prayer. So it is apparently possible to be more pious than God himself, more pious than Jesus; to be what Francis Schaeffer used to call super-spiritual. That is to say, to spin your own spirituality without any reference to the Scriptures.

So Jesus is leading us into this great principle that our privilege in prayer is to call God our heavenly Father, and mistakenly I tried to communicate the wonder of that last Wednesday by getting you to put your finger in your Old Testament and your fingers in the Sermon on the Mount and just sense the sheer drama of the fact nobody in the Old Testament Scriptures as an individual or as a little group comes and prays, "Our heavenly Father." Everybody. This is the new covenant. Everybody has that privilege of knowing the secrecy and the secret of this fellowship with God. I'm reminded of a famous English evangelist by the name of Billy Bray who was something of a character from Cornwall in the South of England, and Billy Bray had this little idiosyncrasy when anything happened, he would say to people, you must have known Christians who do this, they've got these little idiosyncratic sayings, "I must speak to Father about this," he would say. "I must speak to Father about this." And that's what Jesus is inviting us to do.

Now this leads us into the prayer itself and obviously we're not going to take six weeks to study the Lord's Prayer. You've probably had quite sufficient six weeks studying the Lord's Prayer in various contexts in your Christian life for us not to need to do it as we go

through the Sermon on the Mount, but there are two questions I think here to raise. The first is why is this prayer so helpful? It's enormously helpful to us. Why is it so helpful? The answer, of course, is because it's a directory for prayer. It's not a liturgy for prayer. We use it in our church as part of the liturgy but it's not given to us to be used in the cycle of Sundays otherwise we wouldn't be called to pray daily for our bread. It's a directory to govern our life of prayer. It's a framework of reference and, you know, if you ever struggle in prayer, ever find yourself dry in prayer, go back to the directory, begin to pray your way through the directory.

The other reason I think it's so helpful for us is because there is a symbiotic relationship between prayer and life. They're really just two sides of the same coin. And the Lord's Prayer is so helpful to us because it's not really possible to pray like this without beginning to live like this. You know, you can't come to the Father and say, "Hallowed be your name," with any sense of reality and still live the same old unholy life. You can't actually pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," and treat your daily bread the way people around you treat their daily bread. So the whole shape of it is marvelous not only to direct our intercession but to direct the character of our living. The person who prays the Lord's Prayer and begins to live the Lord's Prayer is the person who is going to be a very different Christian in the life of the world in which we live.

And of course, also settles our priorities. It sets a tone for our lives and it settles the priorities of our lives, and I don't suppose anyone has ever tried to expound the Lord's Prayer without pointing out that the first petitions are all related to God and his glory, and the second group of petitions are all related to ourselves and our most fundamental needs and the order is the driving order of the Christian life. It's the only safe way to live, the glory of God and underneath the glory of God, that comforting and strengthening of my own Christian life, and we're always in danger when we reverse that order, aren't we? That's why in our prayer times we don't always work our way through the form of the Lord's Prayer but we do always try to get a strong grip on this. We don't open prayer meetings by saying, "My Auntie Susan's broken her leg," and don't even consider how it is that Auntie Susan's broken leg might be for the glory of God. We're only interested in ourselves and our discomforts and Jesus is saying to us actually we'll be a lot more comfortable about our discomforts when we're all taken up with the glory of the Lord. And so these first petitions, "Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," are all Shorter Catechism #1 questions, aren't they, issues? My chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, and once I've glorified him, then I'm able to say, "In order that I may glorify you, my daily bread, the pardon of my sins, the protection of my life, these are the basic things, Father, that I need from you."

So let's look at these first three petitions which focus on the Lord's glory. The first of them is the hallowing of the Father's name, the sanctifying, the reverencing of the name, that is to say, the being and the person of God as that's expressed in his name. And so although in our church services we don't cross ourselves or genuflect at any point, we nevertheless have a sense of reverence for the very name of God. We don't say it lightly. We are in awe of him because of who he is.

Some of you know that one of my pet things is the disintegration of the use of formal names. I am all for intimacy and informality but in our egalitarianism we've done something, haven't we, you know? I still remember the emotional shock the first time I got a haircut in the United States, A., because it was a woman who came over. I thought she was just going to put me into the seat and a man would come along, but this woman was actually going to do something with my hair. That was really hard for me. But then they said to me, "What's your name?" And I said, "Ferguson." And they said, "Well, what's your first name?" I said, "Sinclair." "Well, Sinclair," you know? And I'm, "Do I know you?" You know? Do you have the same relationship with me as other people who call me by my Christian name? Is there no societal way of distinguishing distant relationships and relationships that are further away? The French used to have that. I read somewhere recently the French are abandoning the distinction between, pardon my French, *tu* and *vous*, you know? Which used to be a very.... The way you learn French in high school, you know, that you're very careful about whether you use one or the other.

Now what concerns me about that here is that actually isn't it interesting how this is, this societal democratizing that has taken place relationally horizontally has actually in the last 50 years or so begun to take place vertically, you know? Easy, pally, slick, cozy, informal and often cheap language about God, you know? And what Jesus is saying is when you come into the secret place where the Father in heaven is so intimate with you, actually that intimacy will produce in you, first of all, not a sense of chumminess but a sense of intense awe that overcomes you. His love, his goodness, his grace, his majesty is melting and overcoming and we need to have some sense of that, that when we come into his presence.

I think in this connection that when Jesus says, "May your name be holy," that you can almost draw a direct line from Matthew 6 to Isaiah 6, can't you? You remember Isaiah in the temple and this vision of God high and lifted up, and the seraphim ever crying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts." And I guess I must have noticed this when I was a youngster, you know, I often heard people speaking about why it was that these seraphim covered their feet and covered their eyes and had a couple of extra wings to fly, but I never heard anybody say to me what I think is the truest thing here: these are creatures that have never sinned, these are creatures that have been long in the presence of God in the most intimate fashion, and perfectly holy creatures when they're in the presence of this gracious and great heavenly Father who actually become in that picture instruments of the pardon of Isaiah as the coal is on his lips and his sin is pardoned, they actually cover their faces before the uncreated holiness of the heavenly Father.

And so what Jesus is leading us into, and this is the ecstasy of fellowship with God, is that chumminess is not intimacy, actually chumminess is very real superficiality. As you just watch that with people, youngsters in their relationship with one another, men, really chummy men, you know, it's not usually a sign of intimacy. But this beautiful intimacy into which we are drawn comes alongside and a melting and overwhelming sense of how holy he is and how great he is and how majestic he is. Think of Jesus in that prayer in John 17, surely the most intimate moment recorded in the whole of Scripture. The Father is in the presence of his Son. The Son's in the presence of his Father. Before his death

he's pouring out his heart for his deepest longings that he'll be glorified again with the Father and that his people will be saved, and you remember how he speaks to him? "Oh," he says, "holy Father."

And this is what we aim for in prayer and this is what we aim for in worship. That's actually very challenging, isn't it? In our life together in worship, how do we marry together the intimacy that belongs to the family and the recognition who the Father is who is in the midst of the family? And that's why when we leave services of worship or times of prayer, the best of them if that's not too trivial a way to put it, the best of them are those times when we have been amazed how much we've sense ourselves drawn into his arms, and at the same time we are in awe of who he is who has drawn us into his arms.

And so when we begin to pray, our concern is for the hallowing of the Father's name and then, of course, our concern is for the coming of the Father's kingdom. "Your kingdom come," which means in this context that his will, "will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Now here's another thing that we need to be clear in our minds. I say this slightly tongue-in-cheek but only slightly tongue-in-cheek, he does not say, "Our heavenly Father, hallowed be your name. May your democracy come. May your republic come." He says, "May your kingdom come." And whatever we may think of forms of government, the form of government that best pleases God is kingdom, and that's what we are praying he will establish, a kingdom in which he reigns supreme.

And actually this is a massive petition. This is a huge. This is one of those petitions that you can kind of balance the Bible on because the whole story of the Bible is the story of God's kingdom, how remember in Genesis 1:26-28 God makes Adam, puts him into the garden of Eden and say, "Now Adam, this is my kingdom and I want you to exercise dominion over it, to be what's technically called the vicegerent of the whole thing because this is my kingdom, this is my gift to my Son, and I want you to guard this kingdom." And of course, Adam who is made to be the king under Christ of this whole world, he loses his crown, loses his glory, and from this point on where it's at least in the teaching of the Scriptures, the kingdoms of this world belong to Satan which, of course, is why in the previous chapter he had been able to offer them to Jesus. That was a bona fide offer. "If you worship me, you can have the kingdoms of this world." He is the prince of this world as the Scriptures say.

So our Lord Jesus has come into the world, if we'd been going through the whole of Matthew we would have seen that earlier on in Matthew and supremely in chapter 4 where he heads into the wilderness in order to overcome the prince of this world, to begin to gain back, to win back the kingdoms of this world, and once he has, as it were, faced down the prince of this world and overcome him in the temptations. Although clearly the prince of this world is not finished, he has had his first major defeat.

And so Jesus goes about preaching that the kingdom has come and he does these kingdom things and he begins to bring about restoration, and finally as the Gospels tell us, on the cross he makes an open display of the powers of darkness and irrevocably

establishes that this world has now been won back for him, Matthew 28:18-20, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. I've got it back from Satan." The language of the book of Revelation, Satan has been bound and now the nations will be undeceived, and the whole period between the return of Christ to glory and the return of Christ from glory is the period when his people are reclaiming the world for the Lord Jesus, establishing his kingdom until the day dawns about which 1 Corinthians 15 speaks when the Lord Jesus Christ will place everything under his feet, and then he will bring this restored kingdom, as Paul puts it, back to his Father and say to his Father, "Father, Adam lost it. I came to restore it. I have now consummated it. And just as you created this world as your love gift to me, I give this world back to you restored and redeemed as my love gift to you." And then says the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, then the Son, that is as our Redeemer, as our Savior, in our humanity having accomplished all this in our humanity, the Son will bow before the Father and God will be all-in-all.

That's what we're praying for, nothing less than that. We're not just praying that there may be a few more members added to our church, our eyes are fixed on that final horizon and everything between now and that final horizon because our longing is that Jesus Christ might be seen to reign in the world in which we live. That's why later on, of course, Jesus will say to them, "Here's the whole secret of life, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and everything you need will be added to you."

So the hallowing of the Father's name, the coming of the Father's kingdom, and involved in that our submission to the Father's will, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The title of these two studies is drawn, as I said last week, from a little book that Martin Luther wrote for his barber, Peter, but it was Martin Luther who in earlier life when he was climbing the holy stairs reputed to be the judgment stairs in Pilate's hall, and praying the Lord's Prayer on each of the steps to give him, was it 10 years per step out of purgatory, that when he came to this, "Your will be done," he paused and found it the most difficult petition to make; that it's a great thing, you know, it's a wonderfully exciting thing to think about Jesus reigning where ere the sun's journeys run, that means for me today as I pray this prayer is, that every single day as I pray this prayer daily, I'm saying, "Father, I submit my will to your will and I know that will be a struggle for me, and I know there are times when your will will cross my will, and I know there are times when your providential purposes will be very difficult for me to fit into the gracious promises you've given to bless me, but with all my powers today, I submit myself to everything that you have taught me and told me in the Scriptures and I'm willing for anything that you do providentially in my life in order that your glory may be seen."

So this is a real reminder to us that we are not our own. We are his. And it's the only safe place to be, but it's a very challenging place to be because we are still sinners and we still have that hellish disposition, as C. S. Lewis would say, but we want to say to him, "Now in this instance, my will be done, and it just would be very nice if for once you would submit yourself to my will." And Father knows best and we learn to trust him.

So then the petitions for our needs, a minute and a half each. First of all, for provision, "Give us this day our daily bread." Now this is really just fascinating, I mean,

everything's fascinating when you see it for the first time but there are hardly any occurrences in antiquity of the expression that Matthew uses here. Linguists used to think that this was the only occurrence, "daily" was the only occurrence of this particular word anywhere to be found in antiquity, and the people who do that kind of scholarship where you work for 10 years in order to find one word hidden away somewhere, tell us that there are other occurrences of the word but there are so few that people are not really sure what it means, whether it means that we are praying for our bread for today or for the coming day, and of course, it's both, it just depends when you pray the Lord's Prayer. As one might see if you're praying this at 6 o'clock in the morning, it's bread for today. If you're praying it at 10 o'clock at night, it is bread for tomorrow that you're praying for.

Now we can't pray that prayer, of course, we should, in fact, just score this prayer out of our Bible, shouldn't we? Your bread's in your freezer so you don't need to pray about this. Well, you do because the bread in your freezer is not going to nourish you in the freezer, and it's not guaranteed to nourish you because you put it in your mouth. It's only guaranteed to nourish you if God blesses it to your nourishment. That's why although we didn't dig the ground and plant the seed and cut the stuff down and put it into something else or jiggle it around and try and make a loaf of bread every time we have our toast in the morning or whatever you have in the morning, we give thanks for it and we pray that God will bless it to us because things don't happen automatically in this world. This is the biblical framework, nothing happens in this world unless God in his upholding and purposeful manner makes it work. Go to the doctor, get the medicine. I think especially that we need to pray this about our daily medicine if we take daily medicine. The medicine itself does not have within it the power to bring healing. If it did, then the doctors wouldn't be fiddling around trying to change the medicine so much because the power would be in the medicine. No, actually the affect of the medicine is undergird by this vast complexity of the reaction of the medicine to all the complexity and confusion in my body, and all this is under the aegis of the sovereign purposes of God and so we pray, "Lord, sanctify the medicine. Sanctify the food. Use it to make us strong. We recognize that we are absolutely dependent upon you."

And you know, I've always slightly cynically looked at those words on our dollar bills, "In God We Trust," you know, but you need to trust in God even with respect to your dollar bill, don't you? Don't you think God follows dollar bills? If he knows what happens to a widow's mite when it's thrown into the trumpets in the temple, I sometimes wonder if, you know? We don't pray in our church about the offering. We don't do it together publicly. It must be that God follows every check in that offering. He knows where it all goes. He is the ultimate accountant. I may give largely and unwillingly and in the economy of God, mentally he may have this little dark hole where all that stuff goes down.

And so about absolutely everything, and this is both the delight and the challenge that we have the privilege of bringing everything to the Lord and at the same time we recognize there is no blessing apart from the Lord and so we pray about our daily bread, our daily provision, and then we pray also for our pardon. Now this may strike you as a little odd that we pray for bread before we pray for pardon. Shouldn't it be the other way around?

Well, if you don't get any bread, you'll be dead and the question of prayer for pardon will be an irrelevant one. What this is saying to us is that the Lord is concerned about the sustaining of our lives but in that context he is even more deeply concerned about the sustaining of our fellowship with him.

And so this is a prayer for Christians. That's quite important to understand. This is a prayer for Christians, or to put it another way around, a bit more technically but maybe make the point better, this is a prayer for the justified. This is a prayer for those who are in a right relationship to God and may call God Father. Just because I was my father's son did not mean that when I offended him I could say, "Well, it's alright, dad, isn't it, because you're my father." My father would have said, "It is certainly not alright precisely because I'm your father. Now tell me you're sorry." And that's really the principle, isn't it, that if he is our Father, we want what the old writers used to call to keep close accounts with him. We don't want anything in the debt column.

And we're taught to pray that we may be forgiven as we have forgiven others. Actually verses 14 to 15, if the New Testament had been a modern book, there would have been a little footnote, wouldn't there? You know, here's a further explanation of this, that if you forgive others their trespasses, your Father in heaven will forgive you, and if you don't, the Father in heaven won't forgive you. Now why? For this reason. I was told not to use this as an illustration but I'm going to use it as an illustration. When I saw Dorothy tonight, she said, "That mouthwash." Well, I swallowed a glass of mouthwash before I'd come out. You know, I've not been drinking whiskey or anything like that. Nothing to disguise. But what I'd taken into my mouth I could not conceal. It wasn't that we were even kissing each other at the back of the room there, I just couldn't conceal what I had taken into my mouth and that's the principle here. When you're forgiven, it doesn't remain hidden, it comes out of your mouth again.

And then finally we pray for protection, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil," or the evil one. The best key to this prayer is found not in discussing, "Does he lead us into temptation? Does he not lead us into temptation?" The best key to this is found at the beginning of the previous chapter to the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 4 and verse 1, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." And that apparently was so ferocious for him that he wants his disciples to pray, "Father, don't lead us there but if we are to be led there, deliver us from the evil one."

And with this I'll finish, there's so much more to say about this, don't you think it's interesting that in terms of the interrelationship between living the Christian life and praying, that Jesus is actually more concerned about the activity of the devil than many of us are as Christians? It's never give him a second thought. But Jesus says actually you always need to have spiritual eyes at the back of your head because it's not just the wee boys and girls for whom there's a wicked spirit watching round them still and he tries to tempt them to all harm and ill, that's true of grown-up Christian believers as well.

And so here is a simple way to pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our

daily bread. Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." And you do kind of wish it really did belong to the New Testament to add, "Because yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever." And although that's not part of the text, it is nevertheless wonderfully true.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the riches of your word. We thank you for the privilege and pleasure that we share together as we study it, as it flows into our lives, and then flows out from our lives, and we pray that more and more we may become a people who know you intimately with a sense of awe and have learned to pray in Jesus' way and in the Spirit's power. So as we soon come to prayer, we pray that we may make this our own. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.