

A Simple Way to Pray I

Centerpoint

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Bible Text: Matthew 6:5-10
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Let's turn in our Bibles to the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew. Matthew 6 and this evening let's read from verse 5 through verse 15. Verse 5 through verse 15. The title of our study tonight, "A Simple Way to Pray," speaking of Germans which Martin Luther was, is the title of one of Martin Luther's books which he wrote for his barber, his hairdresser, who asked him if he could help him to learn to pray. Peter, he had a German second name but his first name was Peter, I remember, and Luther wrote this little book from which I've drawn the title. The study tonight has nothing whatsoever to do with anything Martin Luther says in that book but the idea of that book we will come to in our second study in this particular passage, but I thought I'd give both studies the same title.

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.

They have received their reward. You've had it, in other words.

6 But when you pray, go into your room [into your closet] 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 [or from the evil one]. 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.

Well, a couple of weeks ago when we turned to Matthew 6, we moved into a new section, didn't we, in the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus in this very orderly way moves from his description of those who are citizens in the kingdom of God who have received the

kingship of the Lord Jesus Christ, their character in the beatitudes, their impact on the world in the sense that they are both light and salt in the world, their relationship to the old covenant law, and especially their difference from contemporary religious leaders in the sense that their righteousness is a righteousness that goes deeper or goes higher depending on your point of view than the righteousness of the Pharisees which, of course, Jesus' contemporaries assumed was a complete impossibility. The idea of the ordinary believer, a fisherman, a tax collector, a zealot, having a righteousness that surpassed that of the scribes and Pharisees was unimaginable in that context. And yet Jesus then goes on, you remember, to show the difference between living, as it were, by an accommodated form of the law in which you add to the law but in the process of adding, you actually subtract from the function of the law, and that what the kingdom of God does when we are born into it and brought into it, in God's grace is it so transforms us inwardly that the law of God becomes written on our hearts, it becomes our desire not to see how we can accommodate life to God's law, it becomes our desire to see how as our Lord Jesus did, we can live out God's law to the full. And he's turned now in what we call chapter 6 to the way in which this deeper righteousness works out in the basic disciplines of the spiritual life and these are basic religious disciplines both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Jesus is speaking contemporaneously first of all about the way in which we give to the needy, second now in our study about the way in which we pray, and thirdly about the way in which we engage in self-discipline, and then he's going on to speak in the rest of chapter 6 about the way in which the Gospel of the kingdom and the knowledge of God to which it leads brings us not only into a deeper spirituality but into a wonderful freedom not only from hypocrisy, verses 1 to 18, but also from anxiety in the rest of the chapter.

And in an interesting way, actually, these two things go together in our lives. Hypocrisy and anxiety are very integrally related in our lives. The reason hypocrisy develops is because we have an anxiety about how we look to people and our concern is how do we appear to people rather than can we rest in all the provision of our God, and when we rest in all the provision of our God, we're not only delivered from hypocrisy, we don't need to pretend any longer, we're also delivered from anxiety because we know that the one in whom we rest will provide all of our needs. That's something always to look out for in your own heart and certainly as you seek to help others to observe in others, that anxiety symptoms and the heart of hypocrisy lie very near to one another and the marvelous thing is the Gospel delivers us from both.

Now why is that important? Because we have a tendency to think anxiety and hypocrisy, they're totally different things. I'm a very anxious kind of person by nature, hypocrisy, never. So I need a different kind of remedy for my problem than the hypocrite needs, and Jesus as he brings out one of the great central truths of the Gospel, is really teaching us and you see the apostles in their letters picking up this principle that actually the elixir that transforms the whole of life is exactly the same in every aspect of life and for all of our dysfunctions. There isn't a Gospel remedy for one thing and a legal remedy for another thing. The remedy for everything in my twisted soul is the knowledge of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So as he deals with this problem of hypocrisy and turns his attention to the question of hypocrisy and prayer, you notice he follows the same kind of pattern. Don't be like the hypocrites but instead be a Gospelsed person. Don't be a hypocrite, be a Gospelsed person. And what does it mean? This is the question in this whole section, what does it mean to be a Gospelsed person when it comes to prayer? And I want to suggest that in these verses Jesus is dealing with four things really. First of all, he's dealing with the attitude in which we come in prayer; he's dealing, secondly, with our approach to God in prayer; he's dealing, thirdly, with the petitions that we bring in prayer; and then, fourthly, he brings forward some practical application about prayer. And we're going to deal this evening only with the first two of these: our attitude, our disposition in prayer and our specific approach in prayer.

Now nobody likes to speak about prayer. You know, it's a pastoral platitude but if you really want to make somebody squirm, you ask them how their prayer life is, and all of us whether we speak about prayer per force, or whether we are regular Christian believers who never speak about prayer at all, we're all in the same boat here. Few of us, probably very few of us in our room tonight would even imagine that we approximated of being masters in prayer and, therefore, when we come to this passage, there's a great temptation for me and for you, and that is to use a passage like this as a heavy stick to break backs that are already bent down. That's the easy thing to do. The hard thing for us to do when we come to a passage like this is to be energized and strengthened and encouraged and led out in prayer, and that's what we need to try to do here because that actually is what Jesus is doing. He's saying, "Let's get the hypocrisy out of the way. I've no interest in hypocrisy, but let me get that out of the way so that by God's grace, I may teach you what it means to learn to pray."

So he begins with our attitude and you'll notice it's the same pattern, verse 5, "when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites," verse 7, "when you pray, you must not be like the Gentiles." So two errors to avoid: the error of the hypocrite and the error of what Jesus calls the Gentile. Of course, with respect to the temptation to hypocrisy in prayer, pretending to be something we aren't in prayer or pretending not to be what we actually are in prayer, Jesus focuses attention on what it is that drives us in that direction and what drives us in that direction is that although we look as though we are seeking God's face in prayer, the thing we are really interested in is whether other people's faces are directed towards us and towards our praying, and that is a very real temptation, isn't it, especially when we pray together in groups.

You know how sometimes, you know, somebody's broken a leg and there's a group of you and then, you know, somebody's had something even worse than a broken leg, and there's this kind of native tendency to top the last person and that must be one of the greatest temptations in evangelical fellowships where, thank God, people still meet for prayer, that prayer can be the place not so much of genuine intercession but the place of performance where we outdo one another in the display we make of prayer. And that's why Jesus describes this sinful tendency in this rather caricature fashion, they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and in the street corners that they may be seen by men, and you see the picture. Here is a man in the synagogue just like the Pharisee in Luke's

Gospel, and he's standing there for all to see and he's apparently in prayer to God, but he's got one eye on the guy in the corner who's beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" And actually he's got squints in both eyes because one eye is looking in that direction to say, "Boy, do I know how to pray by comparison with him." And the other eye is looking in the other direction to make sure that people see that that's the case and Jesus is warning us against that temptation.

I have a friend who told me, I'd better not name the city, he became a student in a particular city in the United States and he was looking for a church and one Sunday night he went downtown, it was a large American city, went downtown to a church and he had heard something about the minister there. Actually, I'm ashamed to say the minister was a Scotsman, although this is not a story about me so it's a different Scotsman from me. And he said the minister processed down the aisle at the beginning of the evening service, the lights were kind of low, and then he prostrated himself at the front of the church and in his Scottish brogue prayed this magnificent prayer, "O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob..." My friend who loved this kind of thing, actually, you know, he loved drama, he was absolutely enraptured by this. You know, for the rest of the week he just can't wait to get back to this church where this minister is just so, he's so overwhelmed by the sense of the presence of God that his soul bursts out in eloquence. So he turns up the next Sunday night, exactly the same thing happens. Exactly the same procession. Exactly the same prostration. Exactly the same words. It was all just a little show and that was the last time my friend went to that particular church. Now most of us don't have that kind of opportunity, we ministers do, and the more gifts we have, the more able we are to parade them, but we're all prone to this kind of thing Jesus is saying.

I think in 1880, Charles Spurgeon preached a sermon on prayer in which he said he had read or heard about a newspaper report in one of the Boston newspapers in which Spurgeon said, according to what he says in his sermon, the reporter said about the minister's prayer, "It was undoubtedly the finest prayer that had ever been offered to a Boston congregation." And Jesus says the man had his reward. His name was in the newspapers which was really what he was looking for.

So the real issue here, of course, in Jesus' teaching is at the end of the day when we pray to God, where are the eyes of those who are listening to our prayers glued in the prayer? Is it, "Listen to my theology." Temptation, you know, and we ministers are by no means immune to this to give little theological lectures to people, you know, to teach people in our prayers when our audience is a multitude, but in prayer our audience is God alone and that's why Jesus says now here is both the principle and the privilege. He says, "Now when you pray, forget about all that stuff. When you pray, go into your room." Now if you know anything about houses in Jesus' time, the one thing you probably know is they were open planned. Period. Everything was open planned. So "room" here probably means something like broom closet or because this, I'm sure I'm not the only one for whom this has been true, if the rest of your family were not Christian believers, you knew there was one place you could go that nobody would disturb you, and actually the old language for that too was the closet, wasn't it? You went into the privy to find a place

where there would be no prying eyes and there would be no possibility of you being tempted to put on a display.

This is actually, the language that Jesus uses here is absolutely marvelous. He says, "Now when you pray, dear disciples," notice the language he uses about the one to whom you pray, verse 6, "when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray." Now just notice the way God is described here. It's very striking. "Pray to the Father who is in secret." And you see the kind of deliberate contrast Jesus is drawing. The hypocrite, the Pharisees wandering around there, he's concerned to pray in public and to his public God which is his public, but Jesus is saying, "God's not there." Of course he's there in the sense of being omnipresent but he's not there in the sense of being covenantally present. He's not there at all. He is absent covenantally from this man because he is the Father who is in secret.

That's an interesting way to speak about God, isn't it, the Father who is in secret, and he says, "And the Father who sees in secret will reward you." Just allow those words to percolate into our whole being, he sees in secret. You know, any moment I'm tempted to hypocrisy, all I need to say to myself is, "My Father sees in secret. Who am I kidding here?" You know? Is he impressed? Doesn't he see through me? And you see, when this dawns on me, this is Jesus, when this dawns on me, it stifles, suffocates pretense. False piety and pretense simply can't breathe where the individual believer understands that their heavenly Father sees in secret.

We come to the one before whom all our hearts are open, all our secrets disclosed, and it's wonderful really, isn't it? And this is where prayer's encouragement begins, this is where liberty in prayer and integrity and honesty in prayer begins, when we know we've got no secrets from him. I mean, even those of us in the room with the most intimate marriages, I hope we have secrets from each other. I hope you don't tell your spouse every awful sin that's in your heart. I hope you've more care than that, to unburden every foulness in your soul. Of course you have secrets but there are no secrets before him. Not a one. Not one single secret. He knows it all.

And you see, there are two ways, two possible ways we try to deal with this pretense we have, we try and beat it out of ourselves, "I must stop being like that." It's no use because the only reality that will deliver me from it is to know, "I know he knows. I know he knows." And then there's no point in secrets with him and prayer becomes honesty and integrity.

And you see, the great thing about the Lord's prayer which is to follow, is it's actually the Christian life being described in terms of prayer, isn't it? You can't pray that way without living that way. If you live that way, you'll pray that way and the heart of the matter, if I can put it this way, the secret of the matter is this secret, that the Father is in secret, the Father sees in secret, and the Father knows all of our secrets. And you know, he's really just in that sense like a father. You know many of us in this room are fathers and we've seen our children and we know there's something amiss and we take our time, don't we, if we're wise. There's a time for every purpose under heaven, even your child disclosing the

secrets, but eventually there comes the time when you say, "Now tell me. Something's bothering you, isn't it? Something's bothering you." And if you've got the right time, it all comes out. And that's really the heart of prayer, isn't it? It's it all coming out and you only need to read the Psalms to know that that's okay. He actually has been waiting for that so it's none of this kind of stiff upper lip nonsense here as we come to the Father who is in secret.

Then we're not to pray as the Gentiles do. I'll just take a moment on that because I think it's pretty clear what Jesus means here. Think about the prophets, the prophets of Baal gibbering on in prayer all day long, heaping up words, trying to, as it were, wrestle Baal's arm behind his back so that at least he would spit out some fire on the altar. Or some of the world religions and their neurotic focus on repetition in prayer. Or, alas, sometimes within Christendom. When I lived in Philadelphia, sometimes if I was speaking somewhere on a Saturday night, I would look for something to listen to on the way home in the car and I don't know how many Saturday nights I would get this program that went on for half an hour in which there was a group of people out, I don't need to tell you who they were, they spent the whole half hour saying, "Hail Mary, full of grace," etc. etc. "Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," etc. etc. for half an hour. God, is God that kind of God?

You know, that's the kind of thing my mad school teachers told me to do when they were punishing me, say so many times, write so many times, "I have been a bad boy." I remember I went to do that for Mr. Craig, my Russian teacher, when as a senior schoolboy I left the homework class when all the children, they were younger than me so I call them children, were still in the room and I switched out the light and ran off, and somebody must have clipped on me, as they say in Scotland, and Mr. Craig came round the classes the next day and into my class and spoke to my chemistry master and my chemistry master said, "Mr. Craig has an announcement to make, class." And Mr. Craig said, "I believe the boy who perpetrated the awful crime of turning out the lights last night is in this room, and if so he will now stand in his place." I confess to you, I was already a Christian believer and one of the few boys in the school that was a Christian believer and so I stood at my place and my chemistry master who was standing just opposite me, I never saw his eyes twinkle with so much delight as they did and I had to write out for Mr. Craig 100 times, "It can do fellow students great damage to turn out the lights when they're still in the classroom."

So the very idea that God would say, "It will please me wonderfully if you say 100 times..." "No," says Jesus. Why don't you do that? Because he already knows what you need before you ask him. Do you think he's deaf? Do you think he doesn't want to give you what you need and therefore, as it were, you've got to try and persuade him to give you what you need?" He knows exactly what you need before you pray. You are there not because he is ignorant of your need but because you are burdened and you need his help. That often is true, isn't it, with our young children? They come and tell us something, we already knew what the problem was. We are waiting for them to come not because we don't know, nor because we don't know what to do, but because we want them to know we know and that we intend to do something.

Now, of course, people, cynical people would say, "Well, if God knows, why should I pray? If God is going to do it, why should I pray?" Well, for two reasons. One is that in God's sovereign purposes, your prayers are part of those sovereign purposes, and the other is, and this is the marvelous thing, that he wants actually to catch us up into those purposes so that he will use us as part of his purposes in advancing his kingdom so that although we are tiny and small in the grand scheme of things, he wants us to have a place in that. That's his delight because he is our heavenly Father.

I always enjoy occasions when I can embarrass Dorothy, and she's sitting in the back row. I think she's fair game for embarrassment, but when she was a little girl, I think probably long before I knew her, you know there were a whole train of boys lining up before I ever knew her I had to beat back. Her dad used to take her driving, you know, totally illegally, of course, quite illegal, terrible family, you know? And her dad would sit her up in his lap, you see? Some of you naughty dads may have done this as well and there's little Dorothy driving the car. Now we all do that kind of thing. Don't do it illegally, of course, you know? You ought to watch these Aberdeen families, incidentally, and whoever's dealing with this tape better scrub these comments from the tape. But that's how it is with the father. We can't, we're not old enough to drive, we're not big enough to reach the steering wheel of the universe so what does he do? He says, "Now come on, sit in my lap. Hold the wheel."

He holds our hands. He employs our energies and, you see, when you begin to grasp this, you're not gonna go back to the Gentile way of praying, are you, even although sometimes that... You know, we are Gentiles and we're not immediately delivered from these sinister notions, you know, if I shout louder he'll maybe hear me. So here's the key and maybe the illustration about Dorothy, although I'm obviously not gonna get any supper tonight, but it was worth it. You know, that illustration really brings us to the secret, doesn't it? That what Jesus is emphasizing here is the key to prayer, the secret of prayer is the Father who is in secret and who sees in secret. It's this knowledge of God that is the big idea here that I can come to him because he is my heavenly Father.

Now this is what I want to emphasize in our last few minutes tonight, how staggering this is and if it was staggering to those who heard Jesus that it was possible for them to have a deeper righteousness than the Pharisees, what Jesus is saying here, that's small fry by comparison with what Jesus is doing here by saying, "When you pray, say Our Father..." This is a moment for the ages and maybe the best way for me to communicate that is if you look, for example in verse 1, Jesus speaks about not having a reward from your Father who is in heaven, and then in verse 4, your Father who sees in secret will reward you, and then again in verse 6 twice, pray to your Father, your Father who sees in secret will reward you, again in verse 8, don't be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask him, and again in verse 9, our Father in heaven, in verse 14, your heavenly Father. Just do something for me if you've got a Bible, pick up your Bible, just pick up your Bible and take the lefthand page of Matthew 5 and the righthand page of Matthew 6 and stick a couple of fingers in there and just probably preferably with one hand just do that for me, just humor me. Do that. Okay, right. Now turn to your blank

page just a page or two back, okay, and do the same thing with the rest of your Bible, okay. It's really hard to do this in public. Okay, in this, in this book here in my left hand, there's not a single individual who says to God, "Heavenly Father." There is something like 800 times the word "Father" appears here. If I had time, I could take you through a number of passages that we probably all would think about where there is a reference that believers make to God as Father, and with the exception of one, they are either references to the way in which Near Eastern kings thought about themselves as sons of God, and therefore David was, in that sense, son of God, or they're descriptions by and large of how God has brought Israel into being. There's one possible exception because God has spoken as the Father of the fatherless in one of the Psalms, and I actually think that there that is being used as a metaphor. Now in my right hand, in there there are, I think, 17 or 18 references to having God as your heavenly Father. If you wanted to summarize the difference between knowing God in the Old Testament and knowing God in the New Testament, that's it in a nutshell, that not Abraham, not Isaac, not Jacob, not David, not Isaiah, not Jeremiah, not Ezekiel, not Haggai, Malachi, Zechariah, but these humble believers were the very first people to whom God in his progressive economy of revelation said, "Now when you come to me, I want you to say to me, Our heavenly Father."

Now how is that possible? For this reason: that Jesus never himself addressed God in any other way except by calling him Father. Every single time Jesus prays, he prays to his Father with one exception, Calvary. "My God." When one might say he was for our sakes disinherited that we might be inherited; when he was excluded that we might be accepted. On every other occasion, he as the Son of God comes and whenever he prays he says, "Father." And that's what lies behind this. This is Jesus beginning to show his disciples that what he is doing through his coming into the world, his dying on the cross to bear our alienation from God, and especially his revelation of who God is, he then put it this way at Matthew 28 as I sometimes say of baptism, what Jesus is doing when he gives baptism to the church is teaching the church for the first time how God's name is to be properly pronounced. Actually, people quite often ask me, "How do I pronounce your name? Where does the accent fall?" And here Jesus is saying, "Listen, you pronounce God's name Father, Son and Holy Spirit." And what he's doing here, although clearly the disciples wouldn't have been able to put all this together the way the New Testament helps us to put all this together, what the Lord Jesus is doing is saying, "From now on when you pray, you use my name," so that it's when we come in the name of Jesus, in fellowship with Jesus as the adopted children of God, that we are bold enough as John Chrysostom loved to say, to call God our heavenly Father. And you know from Romans 8, Galatians 4 where Paul speaks about the Spirit so working in our hearts that when we pray we say, "Abba, Father," it's just a little indication that right from the very beginning of the early Christian church this was the delight of the early church in prayer, that through our Lord Jesus Christ we can come to the Father and call him our Father too.

Now think about it like this: our Lord Jesus had no secrets from his Father. Actually John tells us that at the beginning of the Gospel, he says, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was," excuse the Greek lesson, *pros ton theon*, which means "towards; face-to-face" with God where there were no secrets, and Jesus is saying now, "What I'm doing is

bringing you into fellowship with my heavenly Father where there are no secrets. So bring your burdens, bring your cares, bring your weaknesses, bring your perplexities and when you come to him, be sure that he who sees in secret will reward you."

So this is our great encouragement that because he is our Father, he promises to provide for us, because he is our Father, he promises to protect us, and because he is our Father, we need have no secrets from him. That doesn't mean to say that we spill out all our secrets to others. That would be unwise. It does mean there is absolutely nothing that we need to feel embarrassed about bringing to him as though God were some kind of, you know, Victorian who covered the legs of the table with the tablecloth in case anybody should be tempted in some strange way. He's our Father and, therefore, we can come to him in prayer. And more of that next week, God willing.

Heavenly Father, we come to you tonight, we delight in your goodness to us. We thank you for who you are and we, too, because of your encouragement, are bold to call you our heavenly Father, and we pray as we spend time this evening in prayer, that you would help us to come with confidence and joy and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.