

# What Jesus Thinks About Prayer, #1

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*Prayer*

By Don Green

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It's going to seem like for the first several minutes here, it's going to seem like I'm just kind of meandering through different unrelated things as I speak, but there's actually two or three different streams leading into the river of today's message. You could call this a little bit of a refresher maybe, a little bit of a review message on things that we've talked about in the past, several years ago, and I would start it by saying this: little things mean a lot. Little things mean a lot. 1 Corinthians 10:31 says that whatever you, whether you eat or drink, do all to the glory of God. Little things of eating and drinking done to the glory of God suddenly imbued with eternal significance because of the way that you approach them and the heart attitude with which you approach them. So on the one hand, one man eats, sits down to eat and he's just satisfying his hunger; he has his sandwich and he eats his sandwich and he moves on through the day and there's nothing else more than just getting rid of his hunger pains. It's a little thing but then you think about it, you think about what the word of God says and another man comes along and he eats and he sees this little thing as something completely different. He thinks about it and he sees the gracious hand of God being faithful to him once again to supply his need and he thinks about that and he gives thanks to God as he eats his humble sandwich. The same actions externally, same basic human function being fulfilled. One man walks through as a practical atheist, another man worships as he eats and gives thanks to God. Little things mean a lot depending on the mindset with which you approach them.

Luke 16:10, Jesus said, "He who is faithful with a very little thing will be faithful in much." Jesus commends faithfulness in very little things because it's the heart attitude, it's the principle of character that says, "It doesn't matter if it's big or small, what I'm doing. What matters, what is important is that I be faithful in it." So the size of the opportunity doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if someone is preaching to 5,000 people at a huge conference or if he's preaching to 20 in the Czech Republic. The issue is faithfulness whether it seems large or seems little on the outside.

That's one stream flowing into today's message. There is a second seemingly completely unrelated stream. As I've been thinking about these things, there's another track that's been on my mind for the past several weeks. For some reason known only to God, I was invited to teach next March at a conference on prayer back in my home state of Indiana. I'm going to be teaching at this conference on prayer and so the idea of the concept, the

theme of prayer has been running through my mind for quite a while as I'm thinking about what I want to do in those series of messages when I'm back in my home state. So I've been thinking about that, thinking about the whole matter of prayer and as I've been thinking about that, thinking about that upcoming conference and what I'm going to do to prepare for it, I've been reading through portions of the Old Testament. This is all going to come together, trust me. I know it's hard to believe but take it on faith for just a little while longer. In reading through the Old Testament, reading through the forgotten book of 2 Chronicles and an almost equally forgotten book, the book of Ezra, and as I've been thinking about prayer just because of upcoming ministry opportunities, seeing how and being struck by the example of righteous leaders conducting themselves before the people of God in prayer, reading the prayer of Jehoshaphat, the righteous king of Judah in 2 Chronicles 20, the prayer of King Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 32 when the king of Assyria was breathing down his neck and threatening destruction on his nation, tempting him, challenging him, mocking him, mocking God, trying to call the people away from trusting God, Hezekiah steps into the breach and prays a magnificent prayer that I would do well to expound on at some point. Then Ezra, Ezra 9, a great prayer of confession as this spiritual leader leads in prayer and confesses the sins of the people. And as they led in prayer in crucial times, you start to see a pattern of the way these men prayed and the way that they pray is pretty lofty; it's pretty convicting, frankly, personally when I think about the way that I pray and you just see the rich love for God, the rich theology, the rich remembrance of God's past deeds as prompting their faith and trust that he'll be faithful and good and deliver them in their present crisis, calling upon his grace and mercy in faithfulness despite sin and confessing sin, confident that the Lord will hear and forgive, and just the theocentric nature of the way that they pray. So I've had these streams of thought running in my mind. Little things mean a lot. Prayer, biblical patterns of leaders praying in front of their people and privately and recorded in Scripture for our instruction, as Romans 15:4 would tell us.

And as all of those things were going through my mind over the recent past, my attention was drawn to a seemingly little thing. It's not like me to do something like this but a simple little thing of the Grace Life prayer insert in your bulletin each week, and I realized that I had a responsibility to make that better. While it might seem like a little thing to you, the truth of the matter is that the way that we approach something like this is a reflection of what we think about prayer. This is a simple little manifestation of what we believe about prayer and so we need to give attention to that to make that something that is excellent rather than something that is simply static and the same week after week. It may seem like a little thing but the truth of the matter is that it's not because this, of all things, is something in which we seek to glorify God, to be faithful to God, and to reflect a righteous biblical approach to prayer to see that reflected in this little document week by week.

Now, why that's important and how that fits into the way that we approach prayer is going to come out in today's text so all of these streams finally directing us to the book of Matthew 6. Turn to Matthew 6 and then perhaps I would venture to say that it's quite likely that the things that have convicted me over the past several days and the past few weeks as I've thought about these things, are going to have a particular practical impact

on your own thinking as you remember these principles that we've talked about in the past and as you examine your own heart in light of the things that Jesus taught on prayer. Ultimately the goal here is for you to examine your own practice of prayer, whether you use the prayer insert or not. This isn't a mandatory requirement for coming to Grace Life, this is simply an illustration, the prayer insert is simply an illustration of the way that we should think about praying and the effort and the faithfulness that we should come to God in prayer with.

For far too many of us, particularly in a fairly comfortable Western setting where we don't have the kind of external constraints on our circumstances that our brethren in other less prosperous places do, for far too many of us it's easy to become perfunctory, to fall into a pattern without really thinking about it, and to mouth words of prayer, if we're praying at all, mouthing words of prayer while our mind is running on a different track. We need to come to grips with the fact that that's wrong, that's sinful, that's not worthy of Christ, and it's contrary to what he taught us to do and to think about prayer.

So we're going to go to this book of Matthew, the Gospel of Matthew 6:5-8, and remind ourselves of what the Lord taught on prayer so that it will bring us back to the plumb line of being the kind of Christian that we are supposed to be and which our hearts will delight to be if we're truly in Christ. So Matthew 6:5-8. Jesus says this,

5 When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 6 But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. [Look at verse 7] 7 And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. 8 So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

Then Jesus goes into what's either called the Lord's Prayer or the Disciples' Prayer, his specific teaching on prayer. He goes into that but this passage here leads into it. This passage that we're considering this morning leads into the Lord's teaching on prayer and so it is vital to understand. This is foundational, fundamental teaching on the totality of our heart response to God as believers. This is to be at the very core of the way that you think and respond and react to God as you communicated your heart to him.

Now let me start by making two general observations about the passage before we get into the text in general. Notice at the start there in verse 5 he says, "When you pray." When you pray. Notice that Jesus is assuming that you will pray but he doesn't regulate the details contrary to what often happens when men get up and teach on prayer and cite examples, "Well, you know, 400 years ago So-and-so prayed for four hours a day and that's what you need to do. Or you need to pray in the morning." Jesus doesn't do any of that when he's teaching us on prayer here. He speaks generally and you need to understand that. You need to set aside your thinking on those kinds of details in order to

understand what Jesus is really getting at. He's getting at your heart approach to prayer, not the mechanics of prayer and for many of us when we realize that we've drifted in prayer, we go to fix our prayer lives by dealing with superficial matters. You say, "Oh, I need to pray longer so I'm going to pray 30 minutes a day instead of 10 minutes a day. Or I need to get up earlier. I need to get up at 5 AM to pray because I'm sleeping in too much so I'm going to get up at 5 AM to pray." And you try to fix your bad prayer life by concentrating on those kinds of superficialities. That's the wrong approach. That is totally the wrong approach and you can see it's the wrong approach because it's not where Jesus goes when he's giving this foundational teaching on prayer.

The problem if you are a weak, superficial prayer, the problem is not going to be fixed by praying more that way. It's like going to a restaurant and getting bad food and the waiter comes to you and says, "Look, I know this food is bad but we're going to give you twice as much. How's that?" Look, you can't fix your bad prayer life by praying more if you're praying badly. That doesn't fix it. It's not a question of quantity, it's a question of quality. It's a question of how you bring your heart to prayer. It's a question of how you engage your mind and your affections in prayer, what it is that motivates you to prayer, what you're thinking about God when you pray. If you are discouraged in your prayer life, don't think that the start here is that you've got to start praying earlier and start praying more. No, the thing that you need to do is to step back and think, to meditate, to understand, because when you meditate and understand the kinds of things that Jesus says for us here in this passage, believe me, prayer will take care of itself. How long you pray will take care of itself. The way that you pray will take care of itself if your mind is properly engaged. We're transformed by the renewing of our mind, not by multiplying defective effort as we go.

So Jesus is not teaching you time management principles for a good prayer life here, and that's not going to be my focus either. You can put that stuff out of your mind today. I'm not going to ask you, I'm not going to tell you to get up earlier, I'm not going to tell you to pray longer so you can relax as we talk on prayer today. What I do want you to do is to think. I want you to understand because I know that by the Spirit of God if you understand and you embrace the things that we talk about here this morning out of this passage from Matthew's Gospel, time and other things will take care of themselves.

Secondly and by contrast, notice that Jesus here grounds your motivation to pray in the character of God. Look at verse 6, he says, "when you pray, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and do you know what? Your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." The character of God. The love and grace and mercy and faithfulness and goodness of God. Jesus says if you will just pray privately and seek your Father, you have the promise of God's blessing on your prayer life.

That is motivation to pray. If the eternal Son of God stakes his word on it and says, "When you pray like I teach you to pray, your Father will reward you, your Father will bless you," doesn't that make you want to pray? It's okay to nod your head in agreement if you think, "Yeah, I buy that." That makes me want to pray. Telling me that I need to get up at an artificial hour, telling me that I've got to set a stopwatch and go 45 minutes or it

doesn't count, that doesn't motivate me to pray. And do you know what? It doesn't motivate you either because intrinsically in your heart you know that that's superficial and it doesn't mean anything. But if we think about prayer and we start prayer with the thought that, "My heavenly Father, my Father who sent the Lord Jesus Christ into the world to be my Savior, my Father who loves me and cares for me and has secured an eternal home for me, my Father who is omnipotent and reigns over all, who orchestrates my life to fulfill his will, that Father, you tell me that that Father will see me when I pray in secret when no one else knows and that that Father will reward me and bless me when I pray, that makes me want to pray. That makes me want to come to God and run to him and seek him and to pray to him because I want his blessing. I want this reward of what Jesus speaks."

And look at verse 8. Jesus grounding this in the character of God, not in time management says, "Don't be like those hypocrites," verse 8. He says, "your Father knows what you need before you ask him. My Father knows. I come to him and I don't have to get him up to speed on the facts. I don't have to ring a bell to get his attention and to call his attention to me. His attention is already by his omniscience and his omnipotence and his omnipresence, each one of us who are believers already have his full undivided attention when we go to him in prayer." And he knows. He knows the past. He knows your heart. He knows what you're thinking. He knows what you're going to say before you say it. He knows the future. He's got it all planned out. And all of a sudden I'm praying from a position of security, a position of trust, a position of confidence. Not crying out in dark desperation that somehow someone out there might somehow intervene and get me out of my difficulty. No. No, perish the thought. That's an ungodly way to think about praying. No, the righteous way to think about praying is, "My Father already knows. He cares. He is fully engaged in what is happening in my life. He is fully engaged in every aspect of world history from the micro to the macro. He's fully engaged. He knows it all."

So when you go to prayer, your thoughts should be thoroughly engaged with the fact that, "I'm entering into something that God has promised to bless and I'm praying to one who is absolutely sovereign over all and he exercises his sovereignty on my behalf to bless me and to bless his church." That changes everything. We just have to go back to this, it seems to me, we have to just go back to this again and again and remind ourselves because as we walk in this world that we see, we forget. So we come back to the precious word of God, we come back to the precious words of our Lord Jesus Christ and we see the wisdom of God fully on display by commending his revelation to us in writing where we can go back to it again and again as opposed to having to rely on subjective thoughts and impulses and dreams and visions that aren't the way that God communicates with us anyway. He communicates through his word. This is what he wants us to think. This is the standard that we come back to again and again.

So by way of general observation just for you to see that the Lord Jesus Christ speaking to his disciples, motivates you to pray not by setting down rules that are external and superficial, but by pointing you to the character of the God of the Bible and in promising you what you couldn't know except by revelation that God will bless and reward you for

your faithfulness in a little thing, seemingly little thing of getting away someplace solitary and pouring your heart out before God. Little thing in the eyes of the world. In the eyes of God, faithful thing. Faithful thing that he says, "I want to bless that." That is what should drive us to pray.

So you can see as you think about these things to have a mechanical approach to a prayer insert week after week starts to be pretty unsatisfactory for a pastor to approach the way he communicates about prayer to his flock. So we want to improve ourselves in prayer. We want to pray in the way that the Lord has taught us to pray. Two main points for today. How can we do that? How do you move from where you're at in prayer? How do you move from where you're at to where the Lord would have you to be? Where? And I trust that for many of you, if not most of you, as we're talking about these things, there is something welling up in your heart that says, "You know, I want that. I want to pray that way. I want that. I realize I'm not there but I want that." Well, look, the reason the Lord taught that was so that you could. It's convicting, yes, but he convicts us in order to change us, to sanctify us, to bless us, to take us from one perhaps lower level of glory to a higher level of glory in the way that we live our lives and the way that we pray. This is designed to bless us as Jesus teaches us.

So how do you go from where you're at to where the Lord would take you in prayer? First of all, write this down, first point: that you purify your motives in prayer. Purify your motives in prayer. We see this in the first two verses and basically we'll do two subpoints here. Purify your motives in prayer, that's the main point. First subpoint: do not pray to please men. You have to purify your approach to prayer by understanding that you cannot pray in order to please men.

Look at verse 5. Jesus says, "When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that," here's why they pray, here's the purpose of all of their praying, "so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full." The Greek term for "hypocrite" originally referred to a stage actor who hid his identity behind a mask and performed for his audience. Jesus uses that word to refer to the Pharisees and their practice of praying. They looked godly on the outside. People walked by on the street corners, "Oh, there's Rabbi So-and-so. He's praying again. Wow. And look at the length of the tassels on his garment. Isn't he holy? He is a good praying man." Jesus uses that as an illustration. He says, "They love to just stand and pray in the synagogue so that they can be seen by man." The Pharisees chose public settings to pray so that men would notice their devotion and Jesus condemns it out of hand. They didn't care about actually praying. They didn't care about actual true communicating to God from the depths of their heart. They wanted to put on a show so that men would say, "Oh, you're a prayer!"

They used what should be a holy act of devotion before God in order to get the applause of men. That is sickening. That is nauseating to think about that. Imagine, if you would, imagine a man who made a big show of giving public displays of affection to his wife but in private beat her. When men are around, he looks like the model husband. Behind closed doors, his claws come out. We would universally condemn that kind of hypocrisy

and say, "What are you doing? Why don't you do the reverse? Why don't you have the reality at home and then kind of hide it in public so that the reality behind closed doors is what's really important to you?"

We would be appalled at that kind of hypocrisy and rightly so. What I want you to understand this morning, beloved, is that men and women, young people, who primary aim their approach to religion at gaining a public reputation of godliness without the private reality, they're more reprehensible than the hypocritical husband that I was describing. Jesus condemns this. He says they have their reward in full. Listen to me: when you go through – and I'm talking to you now. I'm not talking in general. I mean this "you" to be second person singular to everyone sitting in this room right now. When you go through the motions of religious devotion, of church attendance, being in your Bible study or whatever, when you are just going through the motions with an eye toward being noticed by men without a corresponding, without a heart reality that says, "I want to glorify God. I want to be faithful in this little thing." When you go through the motions like that and men notice, you have your reward. Jesus says, "When men notice, they praise you," he says, "you've gotten what you were after." There is no more to come. There is no reward for God on that kind of life. There is no providential blessing that's going to flow from that kind of hypocritical approach to Christian living. He says, "Recognize it now. That's as good as it's going to get." And when they turn their attention to something else five minutes later, it's over. You've really wasted your time when you approach your Christian life that way, beloved.

Now look, I know this is very convicting. To the extent that it convicts you and it convicts me, that's a good thing. We need to be convicted on this because particularly when you are in a large church like Grace Community Church and there's just thousands of people here on a Sunday morning, there is a particular ease of being able to live on the fringes; of going through the motions. "Oh yes, I attend Grace Community Church. You know that, right? Right? I attend Grace Community Church, you know, where John MacArthur's the pastor? I attend there, you know that?" Yeah, I get it. I get it. Okay, you attend Grace Community Church, or at least you used to 30 years ago.

What are we doing? What are we doing? Why are you here this morning? That's what Jesus' words are prompting you to examine. You wouldn't be one of those hypocrites, would you? Putting on a show, a spiritual show so that others will think you're a godly So-and-so when actually in your private life you're indifferent to Christ? You can't find your Bible because you haven't seen it for three weeks? "But I'm here on Sunday." Come on. You need to come back to fundamental principles. Don't be deceived. God is not mocked and when you are just going through the motions, he sees that, and your motions are not storing up any reward for you in heaven.

Why would you want to live that way? What is it that would make you think that there was any value in that? Isn't it irksome to you to have to go through motions to please other people when your heart's not in it? Wouldn't it be better, wouldn't it be better to go back and meditate on the character of God and think of his goodness and his grace and his power and kindle the affections of your heart so that you're pursuing these things out

of a heartfelt love and devotion to him? Wouldn't that be better than continuing in the hypocrisy that's going nowhere anyway? Jesus seemed to think so.

And understand this: even in the midst of the severe conviction that some of you may be feeling right now, understand this, come back to the Gospel. Come back to the grace of God. Come back to the reality that Jesus Christ came into this world to seek and to save that which was lost. He came to be the Savior of the world. He came to save us from our sins. And that if there's conviction, then the time is right for you to pour out your heart in confession to him and trust him for his promise to forgive. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. A heartfelt confession in repentance can wipe the slate clean so that you can move forward and say, "Okay, it's going to be different now."

You know, can we ever plumb the unsearchable depths of the grace of God? The depths of what Christ accomplished for us on Calvary? That we would be such hypocrites for so long and then in a moment of conviction, come to Christ and say, "Lord, I'm so sorry. My heart is broken because your word has convicted me of this and I confess it and I want to repent and change and to have the promise of God," that when we come to him that way, he takes our sins away as far as the east is from the west from us. I love him, don't you? I love Christ and when you love Christ from the depths of your heart, you pray differently. That's the point this morning.

So we're not worried about what men think about us. We need to purify our motives in prayer. And so if it's not to please men, what is it then? Second subpoint: you pray to please God. You pray to please God. Look at verse 6. You pray differently when the right motives animate you. Verse 6, "But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." This contrasts with the hypocrite. He's saying, "Here's what my disciples do. Here's what the one that belongs to me does. Do you know what he does? He gets some place where men can't see him." And there's a certain genius, there's a certain divine genius about that. If you consciously seek out privacy and solitude when you pray, you mortify your pride because if men can't see you, they can't praise you for it and, therefore, you can't be seeking their applause when you pray that way. And you seek out that closet, whatever it is, closet in a meadow for all I care, some place where you're alone. For you young moms, I know that's kind of a hard place to find.

Here in this verse, nine times, nine times Jesus uses the singular, the second person singular "you." He's bringing a focus onto what your personal heart conviction would be, and as you seek privacy in prayer, you're showing that you are seeking the approval of your Father, not the approval of men. And when you pray privately, look at the promise at the end of verse 6, "your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." When you go to private prayer with all of the things that we're talking about this morning fresh in your mind, animating your mind, you should go with a sense of anticipation. "Wow. Wow, I'm going to enter into, in a particular way I'm going to enter into the presence of God, I'm going to speak to him, he's going to hear me and he's going to respond and he's going to bless me as a result of this. The question is: how much time can

I spend doing this? How much time can I spend in the presence of God seeking his face, remembering his character, conscious of his love for my soul, conscious of the one crucified and resurrected for my sins? The one who has reserved a place in heaven for me and is inexorably leading my life to that place in glory? How much time can I spend with him?"

And your motivations are completely different than having the latest pastor browbeat you because you need to spend an hour in prayer a day or whatever. I don't care what a preacher says, how many minutes I need to pray. That's not in the Scriptures like that. Listen, if you will just take care of the heart affection side of this, the other stuff takes care of itself. And if you try to focus on the externals and meet time clocks and all of that without a corresponding heart reality, you are wasting your time. Go watch television. Go do something else. Don't insult the holiness of God by going through the motions in the presence of an omniscient God. Don't waste your time. But better yet, take your heart affections around this flaming coal fire of the love and grace and goodness of God and warm your hands there, warm your heart affections around the character of God, and when you do that, you're going to find you don't want to leave in the first place. When you do that, prayer is no longer a duty, it's a delight. It's what you want. And when you pray out of that kind of heart, Jesus says your Father will see you and reward you and bless you.

Don't you want that? Believer in Christ, don't you want that? The way out of your mediocrity in prayer is not found in saying I've got to get up earlier. I've got to pray longer. No, no, you start, you purify your motives and you say, "I'm going to set my heart on seeking God in private, conscious of Jesus' promise that the Father will bless me."

Well, look, I'm halfway through my notes. I can either try to finish this in two minutes or come back to it next week. I'm going to vote with my majority of one to come back to this next week and keep our hearts focused on that. Listen, you are precious people to me. To be called the pastor of Grace Life is the greatest honor that I have had in my life and I am encouraged constantly and daily by your faithfulness to Christ and the way that you serve and the way that you manifest your love for Christ in a myriad of ways in the places that he has put you on.

So this is all designed to help you further that even more because this is where Christ leads us. He leads us to a place of grace and liberty in prayer, of grace and liberty in walking with him. And if prayer has been an irksome duty to you, it's been a source of irritation, I've been there. Look, this is the way forward out of that morass that we so often fall into. So we'll come back to this next week. Spend some time thinking about this in the week to come and we'll come back next week and we'll wrap it up and put it in a package that sets a course for us to go forward from, okay?

Let's pray together.

*Lord, the wonder of coming to you in prayer is unspeakable, a privilege that is beyond all that we could ask just to come and to speak without you turning us away because of*

*sin. That in itself, Father, is amazing. The fact that you would hear us when we pray, that our sin-stained stammerings, our mixed motives in prayer, our history of failure in prayer, and yet you would still receive us when we pray, you would hear us when we pray, Father, we see a depth of goodness that no line could measure. It's unfathomable how good and how gracious you are, Father. We thank you for that. But to go even further, for Jesus to say that you will reward us when we pray to you in secret, when we pray from hearts that love you and trust you and seek your hand, you'll reward us? Us that were once rebels against you? Us who so quickly go to a cold and indifferent heart even as believers? You would still reward us when we turn from our indifferent ways and seek you with all of our hearts? Father, the magnitude and the majesty and the monument of your grace is beyond anything that we can begin to imagine. We can see it in your word. We can't grasp the fullness of it but we can grasp it truly and we thank you for it.*

*And Father, I pray for these dear brothers and sisters in Christ that those who have been discouraged in their walks with you, I pray that you would meet them in this time, meet them through these words of Jesus in Matthew 6 and encourage them to come back and to seek you afresh once more; to dig wells of spiritual searching for you that you would be pleased to bring water forth from that would refresh their souls.*

*And Father, for those that are faithful, those who feel affirmed by these words, would you strengthen them all the more? Ultimately, Father, would you make us like Christ? Would you make us people, would you shape our hearts, Father, so that our lives would reflect the spirit of what Jesus has taught us here through his word? We're so grateful, Father. We love you. We praise you. We adore you with unlimited and unreserved devotion. And as you have promised, Father, now we ask you that somehow in your wisdom and goodness that you would reward us for seeking you here today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

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