

In the Secret Place

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[0 : 00] All right, we're going to read together from the Gospel of Matthew.! Matthew chapter 6, verses 5-8.

! Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

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. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases like the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. This is God's holy word. I'm not sure if Corey realizes how hard he's made my job tonight and also his job moving forward as he just preached a very powerful sermon in five minutes, which might create an expectation that we shorten sermons up here, man.

That was really, really good. I appreciate that. So, our family, we like to read. And one of the things I like to read are leadership books. And every now and then when you read a leadership book, you might get a question like this.

[1 : 35] It's, what's one thing that you could do, something you aren't currently doing now, that if you did it on a regular basis would make a tremendous positive difference in your personal life?

And I hear that question and I really try to think of like, what would that one thing be that I could just do differently that would make a big difference in my life? And every time I try to answer that question, I come back to prayer.

Prayer is that thing that if this just improved in my life, I feel like it would make a massive difference right away. But as Corey gave that great quote from Paul Miller, which I highly recommend that book, A Praying Life by Paul Miller.

I think I've read it like three or four times. It's really, really helpful. Prayer is hard. It's really hard. And we'll talk about some of that tonight. But tonight we are jumping back ahead. So, we had jumped back to chapter five last week and jumping back ahead to chapter six this week.

And there is a connection between the end of chapter five and what we're dealing with here in chapter six. And that connection is where Jesus was talking about how our righteousness must be greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees.

[2 : 48] And essentially what we talked about last week is that he is saying that it's not just about a matter of outward obedience. The scribes and the Pharisees, they focused on outward behaviors.

But Jesus says that in the kingdom, following him is about what is in your heart. And so, the end of chapter five talked about you must be perfect or whole as your heavenly father is whole.

And what we talked about is that that is where your inner attitudes and motivations line up with your outer actions and behaviors. So, it's not just enough to have the right behaviors, the right actions.

Even as Corey was just mentioning earlier with the children, it's very important that we also get it right in the heart. And that's one of the things that Jesus is talking to us about, having wholehearted inner motivations and attitudes lining up with our outward behaviors.

So, then he turns into chapter six and he says that we must not, though, practice our righteousness in order to be seen by men. In other words, what Thomas Davis talked about is that we have to not do things in such a way that we're seen by others so that people will say, oh, that guy's pretty cool, man.

[4 : 01] He must be a really spiritual person. Look at how this person gives. They must be a great pillar in the community or a great pillar in our church. We must really make sure we're not practicing righteousness in order to be seen by others.

And so, then he's going to give us three examples of giving, which Thomas talked about, prayer, which we'll be talking about tonight and a couple of weeks moving forward. And then he's also going to talk about fasting.

We must learn how to do these things in such a way that we're not trying to perform, that we're not trying to be seen by others as maybe those who have arrived, those who do such a great job in the church, but instead have a right inward motivation because Jesus is going after the heart in the Sermon on the Mount.

And tonight we're talking about prayer. We're starting to talk about prayer in chapter six, and it's one of those things that when you evaluate your prayer life, I don't think I've ever heard anyone say, you know, when I look at my prayer life, I think I'm doing pretty good.

But instead, it's the one thing that when you talk about your prayer life, you always feel like I could be doing better. And we're not just talking about time, the amount of time we do it.

[5 : 17] We're also talking about just distractions. And even, as Corey was talking about, just the want to, just even the desire to be quiet before God and to pray can be really, really tough.

Often when I hear a sermon like tonight, I will personally feel some shame or guilt. I've been trying to walk with the Lord for a long time. I've been a Christian for a long time, and I still struggle with prayer.

Seriously? It's still hard for me after all of these years? And so I start feeling the shame and guilt when I hear a sermon on prayer. Or we might hear great quotes like this one from Robert Murray McShane that says, What a man is.

He is alone on his knees before God and no more. In other words, you can look at someone's prayer life, and that tells you a lot about the person. And I hear that. I'm like, man, it just feels like it heaps condemnation on me.

Or William Law says this, Prayer is the nearest approach to God and the highest enjoyment of him that we are capable of in this life. And I just hear, man, I'm missing out on so much because I struggle with prayer.

[6 : 25] But one of the things I found out, just like Jesus said to his disciples, The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Y'all know what I'm talking about? Yeah? Okay.

So, good. I'm not alone. But Jesus tells us a little in the sermon amount about prayer. And tonight, what we'll look at is he tells us there is actually a wrong way to pray and a right way to pray.

And he gives us a couple of wrong ways and a couple of right ways that we'll talk about. Now, he's not going to tell us everything there is to know about prayer. So we need to figure out, like, why is he telling us these things?

Like, this must be really important that these are the couple of things that he mentions right here before he gives us instruction on how to pray. So let's look at this. Verse 5, it says, And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites.

So when you pray, this is one of those things that you may have heard this before that he doesn't say. If you pray, he says when you pray. It is expected that as a follower of Christ, prayer will be a part, a natural part, of the Christian life.

[7 : 31] Prayer is something that's foundational to most religions. Whether it's talking about communication with the divine or seeking guidance or expressing gratitude. Most every religion, a part of devotion in that religion is prayer.

Today, we have teachings that are written down like in the Bible. Well, back then in those times, they didn't necessarily have it that accessible to the common people. Maybe it was only in the synagogues or the temple for the Jews.

You didn't carry it around in your pocket like you did. You had to hide it in your heart if you were to have the teachings of the scriptures, of the holy scriptures. So when you talk about prayer, you're really talking about one of the major devotional things of your faith.

Whatever that faith is and whatever that religion, prayer is a big thing. Prayer and sacrifices were the big things in that day. Those were the main expressions of devotion. So prayer is expected.

Prayer is one of those things that should just be a natural part of your spiritual life. And so Jesus, though, is going to change the way we think a little bit about prayer. Prayer. So in this passage, when he's telling us that there is a right way to pray and a wrong way to pray, one of the things he says, you must not be like the hypocrites.

[8 : 49] Now, Thomas Davis reminded us that hypocrites back then were basically stage actors. They wore masks and appeared one way on the outside, but inwardly they were different people.

They were actors. And Jesus actually coined this term to talk about those people who live one way on the outside, but their heart does not line up with that. And he says, you must not be like them.

They are pretenders and performers. And Jesus knows that we can be that way in prayer. And people in his day were that way in prayer. They do something different on the outside than what is really going on on the inside.

So he says, you must not be like these hypocrites because they love to pray in such a way that they can be seen by others. So wrong way number one to pray is praying to be seen by others.

Now, we can naturally as people think that surely being good at prayer means that our prayers are good to listen to. We've got some great language.

[9 : 55] Maybe it's flowery. It sounds very educated. It sounds very pious. Maybe even poetic. We use great, unique phrases. Maybe that's what makes a good prayer life.

And he says, that's not the way prayer is. I mean, we've all heard someone pray and thought, wow, that's good. I have to remember that one. You know what I'm talking about? You hear somebody pray and it's like, that's good.

There actually, as a confession, there are some phrases that I have actually picked up from other people. And I'm not saying that is all bad. Because I remember one time hearing a guy pray and he said something that was exactly what I had been processing in an article I'd read earlier that week.

And so it's like, that's expressing exactly what I'm trying to express there. And so I will use that sometimes in my prayers. And that's not a bad thing to pick up things like that.

But it can be when we're thinking, oh, that's good. That'll sound really good when I pray like that. That's one I should tuck away in the back of my mind. And there's a big danger in this because there's always a temptation to pray when we're more worried about how we sound, how other people are hearing us.

[11 : 11] We've all been in prayer groups where, and Corey's brought this out to us as we've been talking about how to pray in city groups and stuff. But we've all been in those prayer groups where we aren't really paying attention to what's being prayed.

But instead, we're thinking about what? What we're going to pray, right? What am I going to pray when it's my turn? Am I going to sound stupid? It's like we just do this analysis in our heads.

And that kind of leads us to a danger of are we praying in order to be seen by men instead of actually praying to our Heavenly Father? Because that's what the hypocrites do.

When we have these things going on in our hearts or in our heads as we're praying, it doesn't automatically mean that something terrible is going on. But it should be a signal to us, hey, I need to check my heart here.

Am I too worried about what others think about me? Am I praying in order to be seen by men, by others? There's always going to be a temptation to pray for recognition.

[12 : 13] And this can be very subtle. So we have to be very aware of this. And Jesus says when you do that, the hypocrites, they have their reward. They get the praise of men. Other people saying, hey, that guy's a great prayer.

And that's what they're looking for. They have the reward. Instead of the reward being maybe answer prayer or to hear the words of the Father saying, well, good, good and faithful servant.

Well done, good and faithful servant. That's what we long to hear as Christians. So there is a wrong way to pray. And that is to be seen by others.

But then there's a right way to pray. Here's how you should do it. Look in verse 6. So he says, go into your room, shut the door, pray to your Father who is in secret.

Now Jesus is not saying that we should not pray in public. That corporate prayer is bad. I mean, we know his disciples practiced corporate prayer. Jesus prayed among his disciples and among others.

[13 : 24] In fact, they must have heard him pray a lot because they're like, Jesus, you've got to teach us how to pray. They knew he prayed. They observed him. He's not saying you've got to just every time pull away, get in secret.

He's also not saying that you've got to find a literal closet or a private room. Jesus went outside to pray all the time. Jesus is not giving another law to obey.

It's one of the things we keep talking about in the Sermon on the Mount over and over again. He's not just giving us a new law to obey that's like, oh, he says, I've got to go find a closet to pray in. That is not what he's saying.

But what is he saying? He's saying, and this is right way number one to pray, pray in a way that is privately talking to God and not to be seen by others. Pray in a way that's privately talking to God and not to be seen by others.

We should have a regular practice where in our hearts and in our minds we are getting alone with God. It doesn't mean you always have to be physically alone where no one else is present.

[14 : 25] But it does mean that we need to figure out how to pull away, even if it's on the bus, on the way to work, even if it's walking across the meadows.

How can I pull away in my heart and in my mind and focus those things on God talking to my heavenly father? Because prayer is talking to God where my mind and my heart are engaged, that they're focused on him.

And one of the things that we see from Jesus, we see this in his life where he would, as Luke 5.16 talked about, that he would slip away to pray.

It says in the ESV, but he would withdraw to desolate places and pray. The New American Standard said that he would slip away. And the language there is this idea that there's something that's going on in my head and my heart that I'm wanting to do.

And I'm just looking for an opportunity to slip away in order to do it. Kind of like when Celtic Ranger are playing and you want to pull out your phone and look and see the score.

[15 : 28] Or your favorite team is on and you're just, oh, I want to slip away to see a little bit of it, just to check it. Or maybe you're in a good book, like I just was recently, where it's like I'm standing in line or I'm on the bus or whatever.

And I'm just trying to find a way to read this thing that my heart and my mind are just longing to just pull away for a minute. Just even if it's just a little glimpse, just a little bit, just a little touch, I just need that thing.

That's what it's describing here of Jesus and his prayer life. That he would habitually just slip away, withdraw to a place where he could be alone with God.

Is this what our hearts long to do? Are we longing to find that secret place where it's like, even if it's just a minute, I need to just pull away and be with my Heavenly Father.

Do we have a regular practice of getting alone with God? Sometimes we do need to, maybe even regularly, pull away physically in order to get along with God.

[16 : 30] Sometimes prayer is just as I go. In fact, we need to learn that practice wherever we are, as we go, that there's just a spirit of praying continuously, as Paul talked about.

But there's also a sense that we need to have those times where we are specifically pulling away in order to be alone with God. I like to think about it like this. Like, as Kelly and I are doing the dishes, it is very important for us to communicate with each other.

We need to have times where we're talking as we're driving, as we're walking, as we're just doing the things in life. And if we're not talking during those times, we may not have a very good relationship.

But our relationship also suffers if we don't have date nights every now and then, right? If we don't have a regular time to pull away, away from Hannah Ryan and other listening ears, and spend some time communicating together, our relationship is just not going to be quite as strong.

And that's the way it is with God. We need those times where we're regularly pulling away just to be with Him in the secret place. It's this point where I start feeling more and more guilty.

[17 : 45] Because, again, prayer is hard for me. It's something I struggle with. I often tell guys in accountability or whatever. It's like getting in the Word, reading my Bible, is not as hard for me as it is to just be quiet before the Lord and pray.

And focus undistractedly with Him in prayer. Now, it's also one of those things where you hear me talk about pulling away and spending alone time with God.

And you might be thinking, you just don't know my situation. And what we do realize is there are seasons in life where it's just hard to do that regularly.

Maybe that you are in a season where you have young children and you have no energy, you can't focus, you cannot get time alone. It's hard to do that, isn't it?

What about the times where work is so busy that you just don't seem to have time to do anything but maybe eat, sleep, and go to work? The Lord knows what's going on in your life.

[18 : 51] This is not a rule to obey where it's like, okay, let's put it on the calendar. Every day I've got to do this and this. You can be like a Pharisee in that, like a scribe that's just checking it off the list.

But it's about our heart. You may live in a small space where it's really, really hard to just physically be alone. Again, Jesus is going after the heart.

He's not just giving us a new law to obey. And when we talk about this, getting along, talking with God, not being seen by others, this does not mean that when you're at a place in your home and your family member walks in and they see your eyes closed or they may see your hands in an open posture, maybe even see you on your knees, and you're like, oh, I've got to get up.

They can't see me doing this. That's not what Jesus is talking about. In fact, I just remember several times, actually. You know how your parents, when you're a little kid, your parents close the door for some reason and you just barge in without knocking or anything like that and you don't think anything about it.

Well, I would do that as a kid, believe it or not. And I remember walking in sometimes, seeing my dad on his knees with his face to the ground, and I'd go tap him. Hey, what are you doing?

[20 : 06] What are you doing, right? The reality is, like, that's burned into my memory, seeing my faithful father praying to his heavenly father, right? He was not doing that to be seen by his son.

He was trying to pull away, and son wouldn't let him. But it's the desire of our heart to try to find that secret place. Because look at what he says here.

When you pray, go into your inner room, shut the door, and pray to your father who is in secret. Does anybody else find that language a little bit odd?

What do you mean he is in secret? Jesus is telling us when we pull away to that secret place, we might call it a quiet place, God is there.

He is there ready to meet with us. In case you aren't understanding what I'm saying there, the creator and sustainer of the universe is there and ready to give you his focused, intimate attention.

[21 : 16] Do you understand that? The one who holds all time in his hands, even when we try to spring it forward, he holds time in his hands, and he's ready to meet with you.

Intimately, personally, like a good, loving father, he's ready to give us our attention whenever we want it. Jesus says here, and your father who sees in secret will reward you.

There is reward. And sometimes that reward feels like it's the answered prayer, but ultimately, that reward is we get more of God. We get to know our heavenly father, the one who satisfies the very longing of our souls.

We get time with him. Psalm 73, 28 says, the nearness of God is our good. Psalm 16, 11 says, in your presence, there is fullness of joy.

And at your right hand, there are pleasures forever. Fullness of joy, our good, just by pulling away and being with him. The Israelites had some incredible promises in the Old Testament, like Jeremiah 29, 13, you will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

[22 : 37] Or Psalm 50, verse 15, that says, call on me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver you, and you will honor me. And there we see that when we pray, we get what we need, and God gets honored for it.

He gets the glory by answering prayers. Psalm 145 says, the Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him.

He hears their cry, and he saves them. The one who satisfies the very longing of our souls is found in that secret place. So what an incredible privilege it is to be with our Father who is in secret.

Wrong way number two to pray. Jesus says in verse seven, 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.

Wrong way number two, thinking you will be heard because you use a lot of words. Now, this word empty phrases in the ESV, some of you may have grown up like me and hearing it as vain repetitions.

[23 : 47] Anybody else heard that interpretation? Vain repetitions. This word, it's made up of a couple of words that we're not really sure exactly where it came from, but it's just this idea that it could be talking about these pagan chants that are repeated over and over, just using the same phrases, thinking that if I just repeat this over and over, God will hear me.

It could simply imply that you're using drawn out, tedious, and even wordy sentences. But it basically goes back to verse one again, where you're practicing your righteousness to be seen by others, or just thinking that you can manipulate God.

You think you can manipulate Him by using the right words. Like there's this right way to do it, using words that may sound impressive, or may sound, if I use these words, that will really express how devoted I am.

I remember one time hearing a preacher talk about this, and he was using the translation of vain repetitions. And one of the things he talked about is the danger of using filler words in prayer.

And that just heaped condemnation on me. When we were praying, it was like, Lord, just do this. And that was the example he gave. I would say, just do this. Or one that we hear a lot, I do it, I hear other people do it, that's like, and yeah, God, just do this.

[25 : 10] Yeah. And he's saying, it's applying to those filler words, but I think that's just creating a new law, that we're trying to avoid certain words. But what is in the heart?

Am I trying to manipulate God, thinking that if I just find the right words, he'll then answer my prayer? But Jesus says, don't be like them.

For your Father knows what you need before you ask him. If the wrong way, number two, is thinking you'll be heard because of your many words, the right way, number two, is pray simply for what you need.

Prayer is something so simple that children do it. It's simply pouring out our hearts to God. Jonathan Edwards said that prayer is as natural an expression of faith as breathing is of life.

We don't have to overthink this. Maybe you guys aren't as bad as I am, but it'll be like, oh, am I expressing it the right way?

[26 : 12] Am I meaning it enough? It's like, don't overthink it. Just get alone with your Father and pray simply from the heart. Jesus is not giving us a new law to obey.

We don't have to feel intimidated because our prayers don't sound as good as someone else's does. Prayer is simply about growing in our relationship with our Heavenly Father.

As much of that as anything else. One of the things I think about is like, when I'm trying to pray right or in the right way, it's like, I'm just reminded, because of the work of Jesus on the cross, my identity is now in Him.

And even if I'm praying wrongly and using the wrong words, I've got an advocate who is praying for me. Even the Holy Spirit is translating our groans into the words that they should be.

So just letting my heart overflow to God. And many of you may know that Kelly and I, we have one of our sons is deaf. And so when he got a cochlear implant at age four, he was learning how to speak.

- [27 : 24] And we're doing a lot of speech therapy and trying to teach him a lot of things. And one of the first things that we're trying to teach him how to say is daddy. Okay. But he couldn't.
- He'd been without hearing for four years. He was deaf. And he was learning how to speak. And there was one time I remember very distinctly that I remember him saying, I-E, I-E.
- And he was calling out to me, I-E. And I was just like, I ain't going to, you get this right. You got to learn how to say daddy. Was I like that?
- No. I got up out of the bed and I took off sprinting toward my son who had called out to me the best he could. I'm ready to do whatever he needed me to do because he was mine.
- Do you view God that way? That he is ready and willing and desires that communion with you in prayer because you are his.
- [28 : 27] Not because you get the words right. Not because you say it right or use the right combination of phrases. Prayer is an overflow of the heart.
- So the right way to pray, number two, is to pray simply for what you need. And then verse eight, I think gives us the key to prayer. And I think it's the climax of this paragraph or this passage.
- And that is that the Father knows what you need before you even ask him. In prayer, we can count on the fact that God is a good Father.
- And he not only knows what we need, he cares about what we need more than you care about what you need. He knows it deeply and he cares deeply about every need that we had.
- Romans 8.32, Paul says it like this, He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all. How will he not also with him graciously give us all things?
- [29 : 29] If God didn't withhold his only son from you, what else will he not give you? How will he not also along with him graciously, graciously give us all things?
- Our heavenly Father knows what we need before we ask him. He cares. He knows and he cares even more than we do. Now we're going to be talking in the coming weeks about Jesus shows us how to pray, how to approach God.
- But you have to understand that the basis of prayer is that God is your heavenly Father and he knows what you need before you ask him. And we'll hear things in the Sermon on the Mount like, if you're evil and know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give what is good to those who ask him?
- He is a good Father who knows what we need. The secret place of prayer is essential for the Christian life. We might think that prayer is for the super religious people, but this is exactly what Jesus is warning against.
- It is for children of God. And it is for everyone who is a child of God, those who are in Christ. So we must learn to go to our Father in prayer.
- [30 : 48] Go be with him in secret. And we might, after going through the Sermon on the Mount, we might have a renewed sense of just a passion, a desire.
- We're going to do it, a determination. And you're still probably going to blow it. But that's okay. Go to your heavenly Father who is in secret. He knows what you need, and he will give you everything that is needed.
- J.I. Packer says this, one day we will see that nothing, literally nothing, which could have increased our eternal happiness has been denied us.
- And that nothing, literally nothing, that could have reduced that happiness has been left with us. He knows what we need, and he is a good Father.

Let's pray. Father, just the fact that we can even address you as Father, you are the creator and sustainer of the universe who does not need us, yet you gave Jesus to us so that we might have a relationship with you.

[31 : 57] And through Jesus, we can boldly approach the throne of Christ through the blood of Christ. We can come to you as our Father, intimately, personally, in the secret place, knowing that you are there, ready to have communion, fellowship with us.

Father, the Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. We feel it, Lord. We're prone to wander. We're prone to distraction. I mean, even if our lives and outward behaviors aren't wandering, there's so many times that our minds just do wander and our hearts are longing for other things, and we ask for help that you would give your Spirit to us in a way that would allow us to focus on you and to love you more and to go to the secret place more as we're going, that we would go to that secret place to meet with you in prayer.

Help us to believe and trust deeply to our very core that you are our Heavenly Father that knows and cares about what we need before we ask, and let this fuel us to go into the secret place of prayer.

And we pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.