

“Secret Prayer”  
(Matthew 6:5-8)

Introduction: It seems as though far too many Christians today are seeking the praise of men. They are much too eager to get their names and faces out in public so that others can see what they’re doing and praise them for their works. There are too many who name their ministries after themselves, and who put their pictures on all their books and literature. Now we would have to admit that not all of this is bad. Sometimes it’s helpful. It’s helpful to know who’s behind the ministry you are considering supporting, or who has written the book you are about to read, so that you can know whether or not you can trust them. But the problem is that too many put themselves at the forefront in what they are doing, rather than Christ. The thing that we want to avoid as Christians is drawing attention to ourselves, in order that we might draw attention to Christ. Who are we? We are only fallen sinners who have absolutely nothing good in ourselves, apart from the grace of God. But who is Christ? He is the spotless Lamb of God. He is the One who is worthy of our recognition, our praise, and our worship. He is the One in whom alone is salvation. He, therefore, is the One we should seek to honor, not ourselves.

As we have seen in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord tells us not to seek after the honor of men, but that honor which comes from Him. We should not exalt ourselves in the eyes of others. Rather, we should humble ourselves. We should seek to become nothing in our own eyes that Christ may appear in us. We should seek not to let our own light shine from us, but the light of the Lord. Remember what Jesus said, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, *and glorify your Father who is in heaven*” (5:16). But there are still other things, Jesus tells us, that we are to do as secretly as we can. The first is our giving to the poor. We are to do this in such a way that only God sees it. But the second thing, Jesus tells us, is that

***We are not to make a public display of our prayers, but to do this in secret, as well.***

**I. First He says, “And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men.”**

A. Notice that here again, Jesus says, “*When you pray.*”

1. He said the same thing with regard to the giving of alms.
  - a. Remember that the Lord didn’t tell us how often we are to give, or how much, when it comes to *this* kind of giving, because God causes the needs to arise according to His sovereign good pleasure. He knows in advance when and how much we need to give, but we do not.
  - b. He simply tells us that we are to love our neighbor and be ready to help when and where the needs arise.
  - c. And He tells us that we should be generous in our giving, even if it means that we will need to pull our belts a bit tighter in order to do it.

2. Well, the same thing applies to prayer. There are no set hours for prayer.
    - a. This doesn't mean that we don't need to pray. The Lord commands us to pray. Paul, after describing the spiritual armor which God has provided for us, and which we are to put on and have in place at all times, writes, "With all prayer and petition *pray at all times* in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints" (Eph. 6:18). Prayer is essential to the Christian. Not only is it commanded, but it is the means by which we are to get the power we need to use God's armor. It is our constant source of spiritual nourishment and encouragement. It must be used, and it must be used often.
    - b. But prayer is also something which the Christian, out of love for his Lord, will automatically do. A person who truly loves God cannot help but spend time with Him. A prayerless Christian is a contradiction in terms. Prayer is the spiritual breath of the redeemed soul. If a soul does not breathe forth in prayer to God, then it is dead, just like a physical body which doesn't breathe is also dead. Jesus tells us that the Christian loves the Lord with all his heart, mind, soul and strength. You cannot love someone as dearly as that and never speak to Him. You must pray and you will pray, if you are a Christian.
    - c. But again, the Lord doesn't really tell us *when* we are to pray. He does tell us *that* we should pray, and *how* we should pray, but He does not tell us *when*, because that depends on other things. It depends on our circumstances.
    - d. It is true that Jesus tells us to pray at all times in the Spirit (Eph. 6:18), and "pray without ceasing" (1 Thes. 5:17). But this doesn't mean that there is never to be a moment when we are not on our knees praying. For example, you don't pray this way when you are asleep. You also don't pray like this while you are working during the day. There are different kinds of prayer for different kinds of situations.
      - (i) One kind of prayer which we are to cultivate is a constant communion with the Lord during the day. We are always to have our minds and hearts directed towards Him. This, I believe, is our surest defense against sin and the devil. If you've seen the movie "Cromwell," this was what he was referring to, when he prayed just before his first battle, "Lord, Thou knowest I must be busy this day. If I forget thee, do not Thou forget me." He knew that the heat of the battle might distract him from his devotion to the Lord. He only prayed that if that happened, the Lord would not be distracted from watching over him.
      - (ii) There is also the element of constancy in prayer, until we see His answer. This is another sense in which we are to pray at all times and without ceasing.
      - (iii) But I believe Jesus has in mind those times when we set everything else aside and set our hearts to seek Him for His grace and mercy. We should have them everyday. Sometimes we can't, but most of the time we can. These are those special times which are dictated, for the most part, by our circumstances.
- B. Jesus says that at these times when we pray, we are not to be like the hypocrites.
1. You remember what hypocrites are: they are those who try and make you think

they are doing something for one reason, when their true reason is really quite different.

- a. Last week we saw how men can be hypocrites even while doing something as helpful as giving to the poor. Those who saw them, not really having the discernment to know why they were doing what they were doing, really believed that they wanted to help those whom they were helping. Maybe they really did, at least in some degree.
  - b. But their real motive was to bring attention to themselves. “Look at me, how benevolent I am, how gracious I am, how holy I am, that I would give my hard-earned money to a complete stranger.”
  - c. This is hypocrisy. It’s only an act. It’s not real.
2. Well these men, Jesus speaks of here, not only gave to the poor in public, but also made their prayers in public.
- a. In the synagogues, they would stand praying. They would even go out and stand on the corners of the open streets and pray.
  - b. Well, what’s wrong with that? Was it their prayer posture? They shouldn’t be standing, but sitting? No, standing was a very common way of praying, which was acceptable to the Lord. Was it that they shouldn’t pray in the synagogues? No, the Lord wants us to pray in the places we gather for worship. Was it that the Lord has forbidden us to pray out on the open streets? No, there are situations where even this is appropriate.
  - c. Again, the question needs to be asked why were they doing this? Was it to honor God? Was it to bring glory to His name? No. It was to honor themselves. Jesus says they were doing this, “In order to be seen by men.” Even such a holy act as prayer can be done hypocritically.
  - d. The problem was that they were doing these things to receive honor rather than to give it to God. Jesus says that when we seek after the honor of men, we may receive it, but that is all we will get.

## **II. But what does Jesus tell us about the right way to pray? He tells us two things this morning.**

- A. First He tells us that far from making a display of prayer, we are to pray in secret. “But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you” (v. 6).
  1. Now does Jesus mean that it is never appropriate to pray in public?
    - a. No. He gives us several examples of public prayer in His Word.
      - (i) What did Jesus do for His disciples just before they left the Last Supper to go out to the Mount of Olives? He prayed for them. It was one of His most moving and powerful prayers (John 17).
      - (ii) What were the disciples doing just before the Spirit was poured out upon them at Pentecost? They were gathered together in the Upper Room for prayer (Acts 1:12-14).
      - (iii) What did Peter and John do immediately after they were released by the priests and Sadducees? They gathered together with the rest of the disciples and prayed (Acts 4).

- (iv) What did God's people do when Herod killed James and then had Peter arrested and imprisoned? They met together for prayer.
- b. What should we be doing as a congregation as we see our country falling farther and farther away from the Lord and from His truth?
- (i) What should we be doing as we see more and more corruption in the church? What should we as the people of God do to see the His glory revealed to this generation and His kingdom extended throughout the world? *We should be gathering together to pray.*
- (ii) I don't mean *only* during the worship services on the Lord's Day. We should be gathering at least weekly as a congregation to pour out our supplications to God that His kingdom would come and that His will would be done on this earth, as it is in heaven. We should be gathering *daily* as families in times of worship and prayer to do the same. This nation and God's church are rapidly decaying. The reason the nation is because the church is. I can't imagine what this world will be like for believers, or for our children, if things continue as they are now. All around us wickedness is increasing. If you don't believe me, just turn on the news.
- (iii) We need to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send the Spirit of revival, to renew His church and to bring this nation to repentance. We have got to stop thinking about our own comfort, and start thinking about the Lord's glory. The Church is to be God-centered, not man-centered. We think too much about what we would like to do and what we would like God to do for us. We need to put things back into their biblical perspective and ask the right question: What should I, as a servant of the Lord, be doing for my Lord and Master who redeemed me? How can I be an instrument in His hands to build up His kingdom?
- (iv) We need to gather together as a congregation for prayer. We should because it is our Lord's will, but also because it is the place of greatest blessing, for as we yield ourselves to His will, He will bless us far beyond all we can ask or think. The way to God's blessing is not by living for ourselves and demanding that God wait on us. Rather, He blesses us as we wait upon Him.
- c. Public prayer is not discouraged, but is even commanded by the Lord.
- (i) But we must take into account what Jesus says here: we need to realize that when we do meet for prayer, and others are present, that we pray to be heard by the Lord, and not by men, otherwise, we have our reward in full.
- (ii) It is much better to have the Lord hear us and obtain the reward of answered prayer, than to have honor in the eyes of others because we pray so eloquently.
2. However, Jesus reminds us here that the majority of our prayers should be in private.
- a. Jesus tells us to go into our inner room and shut the door. He wants you to find a quiet and secluded place where no one else will hear you, but God. If

there is no one else around, you will be must more apt to say what is really on your mind, what is really in your heart.

- b. And there you are to bombard the throne of grace with your worship, praise, adoration, thanksgiving and requests. You are not to pray only for what you want. You must give God what belongs to Him first. You must love Him, praise Him, and glorify Him for who He is, and thank Him for what He has done, before you do anything else. Then lay your petitions before Him. But remember that even when you are doing this, you are not to be seeking your own comfort and your own honor, but the glory of the Lord. Jesus will tell us a little further on in the Sermon on the Mount, “Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things [that is, all the things that you need] shall be added to you” (6:33).
  - c. And as you seek in secret to put God’s honor and glory first, your Father, who sees you in secret, will reward you openly. Certainly His reward is far better than anything you might gain from man.
- B. But there is one more thing Jesus tells us we should not do when we pray, and that is we should never pray without meaning. He says, “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. Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him” (vv. 7-8).
1. The words “meaningless repetition” can mean to babble, or use meaningless words, or it can mean to say the same thing over and over again, or it can mean simply to speak too long.
    - a. It appears that Jesus has in mind here prayers that are too repetitive or too long.
    - b. He says that the Gentiles, or the heathen, believe that God will hear them if they say something enough times. The Hindus have their mantras, which, when said enough times, brings about a state of altered consciousness. Those who are of the Islamic religion also have repetitious prayers.
    - c. But this isn’t limited to the heathen. According to the Hebraic scholar, J. B. Lightfoot, the Jews had a maxim, which said, “Everyone who multiplies prayer is heard” (*JFB Ages NT1:82*). The tradition also developed in Roman Catholicism that saying the Lord’s Prayer several times would earn more merit from God. This is why they incorporated it into their Rosary.
  2. But we may also be guilty of this.
    - a. Sometimes we use meaningless repetition by praying without thinking. It is very common, when we pray, to fall into using certain words or phrases all the time. Sometimes it might be because we can’t think of any other words to use. But other times it might be because we aren’t thinking. Isaac Ambrose once wrote, “Many times a musician’s fingers will run over a song which he has been used to playing, although his mind is otherwise occupied; so many in prayer will run over that form of words they have been used to speaking, though their minds are wandering about other matters. Oh, let the absurdity of this fault produce in us a loathing of it.” God isn’t interested in listening to our words, if our hearts aren’t also engaged.

- b. Another way we might do this is by asking God for something, but using far more words than we need to. Now Jesus is not telling us that we should not pray long or often. Sometimes prayers need to be long because there are so many things to pray about. And sometimes they need to be often, because of the urgency or importance of the situation we might be faced with. But mustn't think that God will be more likely to hear and answer us if we use more words.
- c. Our Father already knows what we need before we ask Him. Therefore, we don't need to pray very long about anything.
- d. We're not giving Him any new information. He already knows about the situation far better than we do. He even knows what He is going to do about it. We don't even need to give Him directions on how to solve the problem.
- e. All He wants us to do is to bring those things to Him in prayer, so that we will recognize our inability to do anything about them, and His ability to glorify His name in them. He also wants us to come to Him so that we will give Him the praise when He answers our prayers.
- f. But let us be encouraged that the Lord does tell us to come and pray. It is an open door of grace that He gives us. We desire as Christians to tell the Father and Jesus that we love them. Prayer opens for us a way to do it. We also want to worship and adore God for who and what He is. Again, prayer is the way in which we can. We know it would be ungrateful for us not to thank God for all of the blessings with which He blesses us. Prayer is the way to thank Him. We know how much we need help everyday to live according to God's will. God offers us this help through prayer. We also know that we need daily need forgiveness for the many ways in which we break God's commandments. God offers it to us, if we will come to Him through Christ in prayer. Whatever we need, the Lord holds it out to us, if we will ask and receive it by faith.
- g. But in closing, if there is anyone here this morning who does not know what it means to delight in communing with the Lord in prayer, if you do not have the desire to spend time with Him, to worship and adore Him, then you need prayer far more than you could ever realize. If you know in your heart that God is really not your Father, but the devil is, I would invite you to turn to the Lord now. Take hold of Him in prayer, and receive His life this morning. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Turn from your sins. Jesus will give you eternal life if you will. But if you are not willing to come to Him, then realize that you will perish eternally apart from Him. He is the only One who can make you willing. If that is the case with you, then pray and ask Him to take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And keep asking until He does. Jesus is the only way to eternal life. Enter through Him and be saved. Amen.