



### **Matthew 6:5-8**

**5 “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.**

**6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.**

**7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.**

**8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.**

Without question, The Lord's Prayer is the most recited passage of scripture among all Christian houses of worship, all denominations, and all worship services. It has touched the lives of so very many people. We all have points in our life where prayer is what we do in desperation or gratitude, and yet we also find prayer confusing and often difficult. There are times when we simply don't know how to pray, and that is because we feel shame and consider ourselves to be unworthy in the presence of the Creator of the Universe. Sometimes, we feel like we are selfish bringing our needs before God. Perhaps our doubt gets in our way. We know that if we are having a desperate need, we should shed our attitudes of self-righteousness, shame or doubt and approach our heavenly father in a manner truly befitting our God who is our deliverer, the author of our salvation. There are those who will tell you that you need to approach God in fear; trembling before His presence and if you have never heard anything different, this can be truly unnerving. But let's start this discussion by stating with no hesitation the words spoken by Paul in Romans 8:34 - **"Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us."** If Jesus is at the right hand of God interceding for us, where is that fear coming from? For some reason we feel that God will simply zap us, when actually, nothing could be further from the truth.

Some of that fear we get comes from our upbringing. Do you remember being young and doing something that you knew was wrong? You also knew that your parents were going to find out and it was best if you admitted your guilt to them before they found out from a neighbor or friend just what you had done. Do you remember that fear that seized you as you worked up the courage to tell them? And it wasn't just a fear of punishment but a complete intimidation of the spirit because you knew you had let them down.

And then there are those times where we haven't really done anything wrong, but we know that we are on the wrong path, headed down a dead-end road. Maybe we're in a failed relationship. Or maybe we just lost a job. Maybe someone close to us has just passed away or someone we care about becomes seriously ill. You know, that dark time when we turn to God simply because we don't have anywhere else to turn. We feel a complete loss of control because we can't fix whatever needs to be fixed. And because we are not used to conversing with God, we start by trying to bargain with Him. "God, I will start believe in you if you will only... fix it." "God, I will start going to church and doing the right thing if only you will... fix it." "God, I will volunteer at the soup kitchen and give to the Goodwill Santas, if only you will... fix it."

That certainly is not the way to approach prayer. But do know, that it is the start of something else that can be... beautiful. The willingness to open a

conversation with God can be the most beautiful thing that we will ever experience; even if we do it wrong. God wants to have a conversation with us. God wants to have a conversation with you! Jesus died so that we can have the kind of relationship with God, where conversations are natural. And those conversations don't always have to be about what we have done wrong or what we think we need in our lives. Sometimes those conversations can be just sharing something good that happened to us or maybe a question about the direction we are going, or maybe a new relationship in our lives.

Recently we talked about David and how he kept digging his hole deeper because he didn't stop to get God's opinion about what was going on. Let's face it, the deeper we dig the hole in our lives, the more difficult it is for us to humble ourselves and turn to God. If we are going to take what we have done before our Lord, then we are going to have to face ourselves and admit our own culpability with what we have done and confess all of that garbage that we have created. We do not like to admit how badly we messed up. We don't want to tell the one companion that we have that could have helped us, that we didn't want to bother Him with our little issues. All this while knowing that He could have prevented those little issues from turning into mountainous issues.

As I have mentioned before, we are a stiff-necked people and a state of humility is not our default position. Pride helps us to dig our holes deeper and prevent our

acceptance of our mistakes. Pride is like the serpent in the tree whispering to us that we don't need to bring our Creator into our mess. That we can just clean it up ourselves. That it is okay to eat the forbidden fruit, bury what we didn't eat, and pretend that it never happened, because no one will know the difference. We know that this is wrong, but we do it anyway. And we just keep on shoveling until we are too tired to shovel any more or the hole is so deep that we can't get out of it on our own.

Our scripture today leads us into the Lord's Prayer. It teaches us how to pray. It teaches us what God expects from us before we even start the conversation. Think of it as "The rules of engagement."

Knowing all this and knowing that God wants to have "the talk" with us, how do we start? Jesus first tells us how NOT to have a conversation with God. Listen again to the first verse of our scripture today. **"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full."**

Nothing is more of a conversation stopper with God, than pretense. If our attempt in prayer is to impress the rest of the universe, we are just blowing air. God knows if we are speaking from our heart. After all, Psalm 19:14 tells us **"Let**

**the words of my mouth, and the *meditation of my heart*, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.”** If we are just babbling to hear ourselves babble, hoping everyone will notice how pious we are, then there is nothing coming from our heart, and it is the message from our heart that God is listening for. What reward do we receive when we pray like that? Well, if we're good at it, we might receive the praise of those around us, but you will never bend the ear of God.

The story is told of how an old retired preacher and a gifted actor were called in for a competition on who could read the Lord's prayer with the greatest conviction. Well, the actor went first and did a superb job. His speech was eloquent and beautiful to listen to. And when he had finished and took his bow, the applause in the auditorium was akin to thunder. Then the old retired preacher stepped to the microphone and spoke the words he knew so well, words emblazoned on his heart from years of striving to serve the Master he was praying to. It wasn't eloquent, but the beauty of his words were lifted by his understanding; by his years of embracing those words and finding meaning for them in his life. And when he finished... there was no applause. There was only the complete silence of the audience, sitting quietly in awe of the moment. An audience that understood that they had just witnessed an intimate conversation between an old preacher and the God that he worshipped and adored.

You see, prayer is about intimacy. Everything is stripped away and laid bare before God. How else can it be? God knows what we are going to pray for and why we are praying for it before the words even leave our mouths. Which is where the next verse comes in: **“But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”** Do not think that this is a condemnation of public prayer. When we pray together as a people, we are being true to what God expects of us as community.

I want to say this with all the compassion that I can. If we cannot pray to God in our closet, if we cannot bare our souls when we are in a private place, then we will never be able to pray in public and have God’s ear. I don’t mean that to sound harsh. Being intimate with God in private, where no one else can hear us, where it is just us and The Almighty, gives us the understanding and ability to bring that intimacy into a public place. Praying publicly is not a performance. It is a continued conversation that carries over from the time that we spend with God in private.

Brother Lawrence was a Lay Brother that lived with the Barefoot Carmelites in Paris in the 1660’s. He was involved in a series of “Conversations” a friend that had once been a cardinal. It was this friend, Mr. Beaufort, that recommended that “The Conversations” were published. They were published under the title “The

**Practice of the Presence of God & the Spiritual Maxims.” Most people today refer to the book simply as “The Practice of the Presence of God” by Brother Lawrence.**

**The book is not long, about 70 pages, but it follows the journey of Brother Lawrence as he seeks to find that perfect balance in his life where he is always in the presence of God. We all know that God is everywhere, but Brother Lawrence wanted to find that place in his spirit where he could be in constant conversation with God no matter what he was doing. He wanted to take the conversations that he had with God in the closest and make them a part of everything that he did wherever he went. It is a fascinating book and I highly recommend it.**

**We do not know if Brother Lawrence ever achieved what he set out to do. But in truth, it wasn't so much about actually succeeding, as it was about the journey. I'm not sure there can ever be an end to such a journey to perfect one's faith any more than there can be an end to the journey to be a better person. Can we ever truly say that there is no room for improvement in our lives? That we are the best people we can be? Can we ever say that we pray too much? That we are too close to God? If we find ourselves thinking in that way, we might want to re-examine our position and see if maybe we aren't haven't prematurely ended our growth and by doing so, regressed into something less than we hoped for. We can't all be like Brother Lawrence but there is no reason that we can't strive to**



find a way to bring our conversations with God out of our secret places and into our public lives.

Paul says in 1Thessalonians 5:16-18, **“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”**

Pray continually! Other translations say, “Pray without ceasing”, “Never stop praying”, “Pray Constantly”. It’s like brother Lawrence is focusing all of his energy on these words by Paul and then showing us how to “Pray continually.”

The last sentence in our scripture today explains why we need to start with the closet. **“for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”** Did you notice that it does not say “for your Father knows what you WANT before you ask Him?” God knows your wants as well as your needs, but He desires to discuss your needs. Wants and needs are not interchangeable. God is not a vending machine that gives us what we want just because we put some money in the plate and then pray for it. He takes care of our needs because He loves us. He provides, we give thanks. Our prayers should focus on things that will bring the world into a better relationship with God, whether that be for the many things we need to thank God for, the health of those around us, the needs of the people we encounter, our own personal growth, our need for resources to advance the ministries that we are involved in and the means to lift others in need of help.

God knows all of this. He just wants to know that we know it. That happens through conversation. So, it is important for us to learn how God perceives that conversation, which is why we see an example of that conversation in the passage of scripture that we know as “The Lord’s Prayer.” Jesus taught us how to approach God in prayer and how to frame our requests.

Over the next three weeks, we are going to take a closer look at the Lord’s prayer. When we repeat something often, it tends to lose meaning and substance and becomes something of a rote act. This is not something that we want to have happen to “The Lord’s Prayer.” Every time that we recite it, we should find new meaning and substance. We must keep it fresh in both minds and our hearts. We should not let the message get lost in the reciting, nor should we allow the meaning of the words of our Lord become stale over the course of time.

I’m going to give you a little homework this week. It may seem a little trite, but I truly think that you will find it worthwhile as we move through this study. I’ve given each of you a small notebook. The purpose of this notebook is three-fold. On the first page, in your own handwriting, I want you to write down the Lord’s prayer. You all know it so I know your can do it from memory. That is all I want you to put on the first page. The other two things that you will want to put into this notebook are any notes bring you a better understanding of “The Lord’s Prayer” from our discussions this month. The third thing I want you to put into

these notebooks is your own personal notes that come to mind regarding “The Lord’s Prayer”. You can do this wherever you are when you think of something. It might be a question. It might be a random thought. Just jot it down so you have it. My prayer is that you will find new meaning and depth about this passage of scripture; how you can find new ways to apply it to your lives. I do recommend that you keep the notebooks on you simply because it will allow you to jot down what you are thinking when you need to. I am not going to look at these notebooks. They are for you to do with as you will.

I am excited about this study of “The Lord’s Prayer” and I am praying that each of you will find new meaning in your prayer lives through it. I am so very grateful that God has brought us together. God bless you all.

Amen