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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“ACTS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS: PRAYING”**

**Matthew 6:5-13**

? Are our prayers worth the breath we spend?  
Does God delight in them?

■ {TNIV/CP} **“When you pray,”** Don Nelson, **“do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing” “in church and at public occasions” “to be seen by others. ...they have received their reward in full” (Mt 6:5).**

**“Don’t be like the hypocrites.”** Scripture identifies two strains of hypocrisy.

⊙ One is the hypocrisy of behavioral inconsistency, a considerable contradiction between *faith claim* and *action*. It is saying the right thing but doing something else.

☑ It’s boasting that you pray for an hour every morning when, in truth, it’s more like 2 minutes.

☑ It’s teaching that prayer is of utmost importance even though you pray only after you’ve run out of options.

☑ It’s saying to a hurting or anxious friend, “I’m praying for you” when actually you aren’t.

{Mt 23:2-3} Christ warns, **“Do everything” “the Pharisees” “tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.”**

? I have done that. Have you?

⊙ Then there is the hypocrisy of false motives, which is a major discrepancy between *action* and *intent*. It is doing the right thing for the wrong reasons.

☑ It’s saying grace, not to thank the Provider, but to show observers that you are a Christian.

☑ It’s praying to show your listeners how spiritual you are.

☑ It’s offering up intercessions so that others will see how well-informed you are.

{Mt 23:5} As Jesus says, **“Everything [these hypocrites] do is done for people to see.”**

? I have done that. Have you?

What hypocrites do might look and sound like prayer, but it isn’t. It is a dramatic soliloquy or a religious lecture or psychological self-talk in disguise.

Some spectators are easily impressed by a good performance:

“Look at that young boy, always volunteering to pray. He is so spiritually minded!”

“Look at that woman, bowing her head in the restaurant. She’s a woman of faith!”

“Look at that candidate, praying at the rally. He must be a man of God!”

? But what does God see? Is it a beautiful sight? What does God hear? Is it lovely to him?

Or does Isaiah 1:15 come into play? **“When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen.”** Lord, have mercy!

■ **“Do not be like the hypocrites....But when you pray”** (Matthew 6:6) **“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.”**

Keep in mind that Messiah often prayed in full view of crowds or in close proximity to his disciples. A

little later he teaches us to pray “**Our Father... Give us... forgive us... and lead us,**” which implies a group setting.

{Ac 1:14} After his Ascension the apostles will “[join] **together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.**”

The Book of Acts repeatedly describes the Church engaged in communal prayer. The Epistles explicitly command us to pray in our worship gatherings.

★ If follows that verse 6 is not a general prohibition on visible or communal prayer. It is a caution and a cure.

★ It is a caution to all of us: do not substitute public or corporate prayer for private or personal prayer.

★ It is also a cure for hypocrites: If we are praying, not to commune with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but to be observed by humans, developing a confidential prayer life is indispensable for restoration to fellowship with God.

■ Moving forward, “**And when you pray**” Don Nelson, “**do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words,**” (Matthew 6:7).

**“Do not keep on babbling.”**

Don’t go on and on as if you have to catch the ear of some inattentive deity. A pagan at prayer is like a baby bird, constantly, frantically, cheep-cheep-cheeping. It never stops because if its parents don’t hear its squawking, they will neglect it and it will perish.

{Is 49:15} But God says, “**Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!**” **“Do not keep on babbling!”**

And don’t bombard God with long lists as if he is ignorant of your needs and desires. A pagan at prayer is like a child writing a ridiculously detailed letter to Santa for fear that he will bring the wrong gifts.

God created us. God is everywhere we go. God sees the past, present, and future in their entirety and with perfect clarity. He knows what we need better than we do. **“Do not keep on babbling!”**

And don’t attempt to sway God with religious formulas, as if you are able to manipulate him. A pagan at prayer is like a sorcerer who believes he can bend a deity to his will if he just gets the words right.

{1 P 3:22} God is not a deity; God is *THE* Deity. He is YHWH, the eternal I AM, King of the Universe, LORD Almighty, to whom the “**angels, authorities and powers**” are “**in submission.**” **“Do not keep on babbling!”**

■ Matthew 6:8: “**Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.**”

This spotlights the character of the God to whom we pray. Through the ministry of his Son, God is our Father who loves us, knows us, and desires what is best for us.

It spotlights our proper attitude in prayer. We are encouraged to make requests. Requests, not demands! God is generous; but just as it is wrong for a child to boss around his or her biological father, so it is equally wrong for us to try to dictate what our heavenly Father will do.

It spotlights the nature of prayer: it is a personal interaction, a conversation, an exercise of faith, hope,

and love as we speak and listen to God. Conversely, prayer is not a perfunctory ritual or commercial transaction.

■ **“This, then, is how you should pray** (Matthew 6:9-13):

**“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts”**  
– or **“trespasses”** or **“sins”** –  
**as we have also forgiven our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from the evil one”**

We say **“but deliver us from evil.”** The Greek can be translated either way without changing the basic meaning.

Some less ancient manuscripts add: **“For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”** Messiah probably did not include it in this teaching; but it is true and it is in character with the rest of the prayer.

¶ {Lk 11:2} Christ Followers are called to recite this prayer word for word. In Luke’s account (which describes a similar teaching on a different occasion) Jesus says ‘Ὅταν προσευχησθε [‘Otan proseuchēsthe], **“when”** (lit, **“whenever”**) **“you pray, say.”** This qualifies as “vain repetition” only when we ourselves speak vainly, that is, in an insincere or meaningless fashion.

Christ Followers are also called to use the Lord’s Prayer as a template for free prayers. But in order to use it as our guide, we must understand it.

Let’s look at it with fresh eyes, as though for the first time.

✈ 1<sup>st</sup>, to whom is it addressed? **“Our Father in heaven.”** Prayer that delights God is a warm conversation between children and their Father and a reverent act of worship by creatures to the Supreme Being **“in heaven”**.

✈ 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Lord’s Prayer has a communal orientation. Every human pronoun is plural. Prayer that delights God demonstrates unselfish love for the Body of Christ.

✈ 3<sup>rd</sup>, it consists of six petitions: (i) **“hallowed be your name”**; (ii) **“your kingdom come”**; (iii) **“your will be done...”**; (iv) **“Give us...bread”**; (v) **“forgive us...”**; (vi) **“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us...”**

Have you noticed the balance? The first three are God-centered, and the second three are human-centered.

Have you noticed the sequence? We begin with our God-centered petitions, and then move on to the human-centered set.

Prayer that delights God reflects love for him as the center of our life.

✈ 4<sup>th</sup>, the Lord’s Prayer is fundamentally missional.

**“Hallowed be your name”**: God’s Name is already perfectly holy; it cannot be any holier in and of itself. What we do with it is another matter entirely. These words are a commitment to sanctify God’s Name.

**“Your kingdom come”**: God’s kingdom has been established and it will fill the universe – with or without our help. The question is, will we live in it? These words are a pledge of allegiance to the King and his realm.

**“Your will be done”**: God’s cosmic will is unstoppable. However, we are able to defy his specific desire for us. These words are an act of personal surrender to the Lord’s mastery.

**“Give us today our daily bread”**: God has provided enough resources to meet the basic material needs of all humankind. Yet many are hungry and naked. These words are a pledge to work hard, be generous, and seek justice for the poor.

**“Forgive us”**: God’s forgiveness is a gift, pure and simple. Still, refusing to pardon others is proof that we are not empowered by God’s grace. These words are a commitment to share his undeserved mercy and generosity.

**“And lead us not into temptation”**: God does not tempt us to sin. He does allow us to be tested, and we can be defeated. These words are a humble plea for strength and protection.

Prayer that delights God grows out of and facilitates active worship, loyalty, obedience, dependence, repentance, and humility.

Christ Jesus warns against hypocrisy. By his grace, our prayers can be authentic!

Christ Jesus warns against a pagan approach. By his grace, our prayers can be a conversation with the Living God!

Our prayers can be worth every breath. God can take delight in them and in us! May it always be so.

Matthew 6:5-13 is the word of the Lord.