

“Pray This Way...”

Matthew 6:5-21

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5 ‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever 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.

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Prayer is a strange, sensitive and often a very personal thing. So, any advice is welcome...But Jesus’ ‘advice’ comes with guidance on more than just prayer.

According to Jesus model, prayer, fasting - those things that would ordinarily mark you as someone of a faithful inclination – are not for public presentation. And, by the way, mind your words. ‘Don’t heap up empty words as the Gentiles do... This kind of advice is really hard to take as someone whose job it is to lead worship – to craft and offer prayers for worship – and at meals – and meetings...

Obviously, our worship habits and the sincere desire to express care and concern for people and the situations that daily confront us mean that we DO pray in public – we do, occasionally, pile up words in the hope of being heard, because action is beyond us. Does that mean we are going against Jesus’ best advice? ¹

Well, as always, it’s complicated, because Jesus is trying to help us shape a much different relationship with God.

Religious habit is often built around public display and specific rituals that unite people in the ‘common cause,’ and Christianity is no different, but the place of prayer in our practice is particularly important, and Jesus’ guidance on these things – starting with prayer – are less about the ‘how’ and ‘where’ and more concerned with the ‘why’ of prayer, and fasting, and connected rituals of our faith.

¹ for the record, Jesus is rarely shown praying in public. He goes away to a quiet place – he takes himself apart and ‘works out, with fear and trembling’ his own God-conversations...his ‘prayer’ in John’s gospel (chapter 17) – with/for his disciples – is an exception

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This ‘most famous’ prayer – known as the Lord’s Prayer, the ‘our Father’ - is something shared every week in worship by Christians in every corner of the globe. We sometimes differ on the words we use, but we offer them in honest faith as those who want to follow Jesus.

These words, though they stand on their own very well, help give shape and substance to all our prayers, and our worship, and our discipleship. Jesus is trying to help us follow him - to break the mold of expectation that is so often attached to religious practice.

It is very tempting to offer clear signs of our faithfulness. We want people to know that we’re trying to live according to Jesus’ example. So, we bow our heads for grace over meals – and (once upon a time) invited clergy to pray at the opening of important public events. Folks within certain Christian traditions make the sign of the cross on themselves at crucial moments (like before stepping to the plate, or after scoring a touchdown)...We wear t-shirts and have bumper stickers – we share stuff on social media – in addition to our faithful attendance at worship, and our many particular habits around the celebrations of Christmas and Easter - all of which are designed to let the world know that WE ARE CHRISTIAN.

Such public displays have always come with complications, for once you declare yourself in such a direct way, all your other activities are brought into sharper focus. In short, the world now wants to see consistency (if not perfection) in the lives of those who are so OBVIOUSLY faithful. Not many are equal to the challenge.

Jesus wants us to be faithful – he urges us to follow in his footsteps, and his faithfulness seems obvious; he’s God’s son, after all...but he doesn’t go around shouting about it. In truth, the only obvious thing about Jesus is his engagement with the people around him; his awareness of injustice; his constant call for folks to be aware of (and excited about) the nearness of God. This prayer – that has become so like an incantation for us – underscores the obvious.

Eugene Peterson’s rendition of Scripture, The Message, cuts through the mystique that has built up around this prayer (and Jesus’ surrounding commentary) and it is worth hearing)

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7-13 “The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They’re full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don’t fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. Like this:

Our Father in heaven,
Reveal who you are.
Set the world right;
Do what’s best—
 as above, so below.
Keep us alive with three square meals.
Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.
You’re in charge!
You can do anything you want!
You’re ablaze in beauty!
 Yes. Yes. Yes.

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Reveal who you are

Do what’s best

Keep us alive – forgiven – and help us be forgiving.

You’re in charge.

The point of our praying – the purpose of our faithfulness – is not to give us power or mark our importance. Our lives – our words – our work and witness are to honour God’s majesty and point others to God’s glory and grace.

The words we use in prayer – the rituals we follow in worship - matter only if they can bring our minds around to the realization that God doesn’t need those words or rituals to love us. Our prayers – our fasting – our worship are all offered in recognition of God’s love for us, not to encourage God to love us more. (or to tell others how much we are loved...)

What then should we do? Stop praying? Stop all public displays of faithfulness?

No. Not at all

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Our interaction with one another in the act of worship remains important. Our exploration of Scripture together helps us figure out how to follow Jesus. The practice of prayer - both private and in public worship – provides perspective.

We need the reminder of our shared predicament and our common purpose. Worship and ritual and prayer are what builds us up to be examples of Jesus’ love and compassion in a world that needs plenty of love and compassion. The act of praying – using the Lord’s prayer as a guide – serves as a reminder that there is order in the universe, and that it doesn’t depend on us.