

Session 3

The Discipline of Dependence

Matthew 6:5-14

Memory Verse

But when you pray, go into your private room, shut your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

– MATTHEW 5:6, CSB



THE DISCIPLINE OF DEPENDENCE

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Prayer is a vital part of the Christian life.

CALL TO ACTION: Take a step forward in prayer. Wherever you are, seek to move forward incrementally this week.

So rarely in life do we excel right off the bat.

It takes work. Practice.

Swedish psychologist K. Anders Ericsson believes mastering a craft only comes after you put in 10,000 hours of work to do it.¹ When you think of successful figures in pop culture, you can see how this could be true.

Take Michael Jordan.

He's one of the greatest basketball players of all time. His list of achievements are too many to name here, but include things like 5-time NBA MVP, 9-time NBA All-Defensive First Team; and 14-time NBA All-Star. When he retired, he had the NBA's highest scoring average (a whopping 30.1 points per game).² He was a larger-than-life personality for basketball fans, and anyone lucky enough to be alive when he played the game.

But he wasn't always great at playing basketball. He put in a lot of hard work.

When Jordan was a sophomore in high school, he didn't make the varsity basketball team.³ Isn't that wild? That seems unimaginable in a post-Michael Jordan NBA world.

He wasn't just inherently good at basketball; he worked really hard to be great.

This is true in the Christian life, too. We don't accept Jesus into our hearts and automatically have a thriving relationship with the Lord. It takes practice, hard work, and intentionality.

One way we can put in work to grow in our relationship with the Lord (the free-throw practice of our faith, if you will) is through spiritual disciplines. These simple, transformative activities have been practiced for thousands of years by believers for a reason—they work.

We'll be exploring several of these practices (there are many more throughout church history) over the coming weeks, and today, we are starting with the spiritual discipline of prayer.

? Have you ever practiced a skill for work or in life that you have grown really good at over time? What was it?

? If there was a skill you hoped to improve, how would you begin practicing it?

Session Summary

Jesus modeled a life of regular, intentional prayer, often withdrawing to quiet places to pray. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His followers how to do this, warning them against behaving hypocritically, and rather taught them how to pray earnestly.

1. How to Pray (Matthew 6:5-8)

? What stands out to you in Jesus's words on prayer in these verses?

? Is there is there anything you find surprising or unexpected? Why?

Prayer is a critical part of the Christian life. As Christians, we are disciples of Jesus. A good disciple models their rabbi, or teacher. A good disciple learns from the words their rabbi says. They learn from their actions, and an action we see Jesus take over and over again in the Gospels is praying (Matthew 14:23; Luke 5:16; 6:12). This was a regular, important practice in Jesus's life. He didn't just pray to bless the food He ate. Prayer wasn't an "every now and then" thing. It was regular, repeated, and consistent.

Our passage today comes from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus's longest teaching on how to live. The CSB translation helpfully titles this section: "How to Pray."

Jesus started by telling us what not to do. Throughout His ministry, Jesus's teaching often illuminated the hypocrisy of some of the religious leaders of His day. Rather than being motivated by devotion to their faith, they were often motivated by power and greed.

We see this in this teaching. Prayer is about relationship. Hearing from God and talking to Him. Prayer in the right heart space is worshipful, honoring God. The type of prayer Jesus described here is different. The religious leaders prayed on the street corners because they wanted to be perceived as righteous, not out of the humble heart posture God desires.

Jesus also mentioned the babbling of the Gentiles here. This may refer to an ancient practices of "magical" incantation (think: abracadabra). Historical evidence shows that Jews may have sometimes adopted this practice, too.⁴

Jesus taught that we shouldn't be like either group. Rather, He recommended private prayer. God sees and hears us always. Our prayers don't have to be public.

Note that Jesus wasn't teaching that we shouldn't pray in public, or that our prayers shouldn't have "many words" (v. 7). Jesus clearly prayed at length because He was away praying for long periods of time. The New Testament model for the church also shows many examples of corporate prayer in the body of believers, and even prayer with many words (Acts 1:14; 4:23-31; 12:12).

The problem in both the case of the pretentious religious leader and the Gentile is the heart posture and motive. Both are selfish, seeking personal gain, rather than genuinely righteous.

? Of these two descriptions of wrong approaches to prayer, which might you be more susceptible toward? Why?

God desires an earnest heart when we pray, one that is not selfish but focused on the Lord. This type of heart posture can be achieved behind closed doors, or in public. God not only sees us whenever and wherever we pray, He listens, and He “knows the things you need before you ask him” (v. 8).

2. The Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13)

? Consider reading this passage in a few different translations. What stands out to you? Did you notice something new?

? What can we learn about how we are to pray from Jesus’s example here?

Prayer is a critical part of the Christian life, but one that many of us may not feel totally comfortable with. The impression that we need to be “perfect” in our words, or feelings of inadequacy (we don’t want to sound dumb when we pray!), act as roadblocks for this needed practice.

God cares more about our hearts than our words. And if you are feeling like your prayers might be messy, not fit for Sunday morning groups because they aren’t eloquent, know that, like Michael Jordan’s free-throw percentage, it gets easier, and you get more confident, with practice.

Evidentially there was some first-century uncertainty around how, exactly, to pray, too, because Jesus gave us a model in the form of the Lord’s Prayer. Notice Jesus said, “you should pray like this” (v. 9). Jesus didn’t teach that this is the only prayer to pray, but a guide we can use.

He opens with “Our Father”—all Christians are a part of God’s family. And our Father deserves all of our praise. We honor Him through our prayers.

Jesus brought God’s kingdom to earth, and it will be completely realized at His coming return. In the meantime, Jesus told us to pray for God’s will to be done, not our own. This doesn’t mean we should never pray for things we want. Jesus Himself asked God to take the cup from Him in the garden (Matthew 26:39), but we do so praying for and accepting God’s ultimate will when it doesn’t align with ours.

Note that Jesus asked only for “daily bread” (v. 11), teaching that we should be in constant dependence on God for His provision. God will provide for us today, and we don’t need to worry about tomorrow, for He’ll provide for us then, too (Matthew 6:25-34).

The Greek in verse 12 indicates that Jesus was praying for forgiveness only after first forgiving others.⁵

We know that God allows His people to be tempted (Jesus Himself was tempted in the wilderness), but God is not the source of our temptation (James 1:13). Knowing this inevitability, Jesus prayed for deliverance from the enemy’s influence. When we are tempted, God is with us.

No temptation has come upon you except what is common to humanity. But God is faithful; he will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to bear it. —1 Corinthians 10:13



Where are you encouraged by Jesus’s model prayer? Where are you challenged?

3. Forgiveness (Matthew 6:14)



Why is forgiveness a vital part of the Christian life?



What do Jesus's words in this verse indicate about the way unforgiveness in our lives impacts our prayers?

Scripture has much to say about forgiveness.

In Matthew 18, when Peter asked Jesus, "How many times must I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?" (Matthew 18:21), Jesus taught the parable of the unforgiving servant. In it, the servant owes his master an amount so large he could never afford to repay, and the master shows the servant mercy. He forgives the debt. The servant, however, turns around and refuses to forgive a small debt owed to him by his fellow servant, and when the master gets word of this act, he has the servant thrown into jail.

How relevant this teaching is for us still today! Like the wicked servant, we owed God a debt we could never have paid on our own, and through Jesus's sacrifice on the cross we have been forgiven. When we refuse to forgive one another, we are like the wicked servant.

We, who have been forgiven much, are called to forgive in the same way.

Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and dearly loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a grievance against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you are also to forgive. Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. —Colossians 3:12-13

We don't often think of forgiveness as being an important part of prayer, but here it is in the Lord's prayer!

Forgiving someone who has hurt you isn't an easy thing. Sometimes this is very difficult. When we appreciate how great a debt God has forgiven for us, this gets a little easier.




Who is God calling you to forgive based on the grand scale of His forgiveness of you?


Conclusion

Jesus modeled a life of regular, intentional prayer, often withdrawing to quiet places to pray. In Matthew 6, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave instructions for how to pray during this famous teaching on how to live.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus gave a model for how to pray. It's meant to serve as an example for us, not an exact recitation. Prayer isn't about saying the "right" thing. It's simply about coming before God with an honest, earnest heart. The Lord's Prayer is meant as an example, we can pray like this, rather than a strict ritual we must follow.

 What is your current relationship with prayer? How comfortable do you feel praying? How can you better weave the practice of prayer into your everyday life?

 How can we encourage one another in living as people of prayer?

 How does thinking about the forgiveness God has shown us help make it easier to forgive others? How should this forgiveness lead us to tell others about Jesus?

Memorize

But when you pray, go into your private room, shut your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

- Matthew 5:6, CSB

References

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⁴Charles L. Quarles, “Matthew,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1509.

⁵*Ibid.*