

OpenTheo

Matthew 6:9 - 6:13 (Part 1)



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg continues his exploration of the Sermon on the Mount and focuses on the topic of prayer. He explains that prayer is requesting something known to God with supplication and thanksgiving, but emphasizes that God decides when to speak and answer. He also discusses the traditional model prayer known as the Lord's Prayer and encourages listeners to understand the meaning behind each phrase. Finally, he highlights that the method of prayer taught by Jesus differs from traditional and modern teachings of the Church.

Transcript

Today we will continue our study in the Sermon on the Mount. This is simply part of our progress through the book of Matthew. But the Sermon on the Mount occupies three whole chapters.

They are not short chapters and they are not shallow chapters. And so we are taking what might seem a disproportionate period of time going through it. These are crucial chapters.

Some of the very central teaching of Jesus is expressed most plainly here more than in most other portions of the New Testament. So as we go through the New Testament and the Gospel of Matthew, we don't want to be rushed and we don't want to skip over important things lightly. So we've been for some time now, quite a few weeks already, just going through this one sermon.

However, we did pass a milestone a few days back, and that was we got out of chapter 5 of Matthew and into chapter 6. And we are currently dealing with the first 18 verses of this chapter, which present three paradigms, or I should say one paradigm, with three subjects. Where Jesus says to his disciples, when you do something, and something is a particular activity, there are three different activities that come up. One of them is doing charitable deeds, that is giving to the poor.

Another is praying. And the third one is fasting. He says, when you do this, do not be like the hypocrites.

He tells how the hypocrites do it. Then he says, but when you do it, do it this way. And he gives his alternative, which in every case is a much more private and secretive method.

That is to say, when you give to the poor, when you pray, when you fast, be secretive, or at least be unconcerned about attention from people. Because he says the hypocrites, the Pharisees, when they do all of those things, they do them in order to be seen by men. In other words, the reward that they are seeking is not a spiritual reward.

They are not seeking a reward from God. They are simply seeking the reward of human attention and human appreciation. They want people to think of them as religious men.

And since that is the reward they seek, Jesus says they have their reward. In other words, that is the reward they are going to get. They have got it.

And that is the only one they are going to get. They will have no reward from their Father in Heaven. And so he does say, when you do these things, do them in a considerably more private manner.

And he says, your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you openly in his own way. Now the word openly in each case, which occurs in all the passages, is not found in all the manuscripts. So some would say just your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Whether that is an open reward or not is not so important as the source of the reward. It is not a reward that men will give you in terms of their own appreciation of your religiosity. It is such a reward as your Father will give you, and that is what you should be seeking.

You should be seeking to please God, your Father, rather than seeking to please men. Now we have talked in the previous sessions about what Jesus said on this topic about charitable deeds and about prayer. And of course the remaining subject is fasting, but we are going to hold off on that because there is an excursus.

It might be considered a rather long parenthesis in the middle of this section, where having said all those things about prayer that he says about these other two subjects, namely be private about it and seek your Father's reward rather than the approval of men. Having said that about prayer, he then goes off and gives some additional teaching about prayer. He says, for example, and we took this last time, when you pray, verse 7, this is Matthew 6, 7, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.

Therefore do not be like them, for your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask him. Now these are the verses we treated last time. Then he continues in verse 9, In this manner, therefore, pray.

And he gives us this model prayer, which has traditionally been called the Lord's Prayer. It is the Lord's Prayer, not that Jesus the Lord himself ever prayed it. There are certain things in this prayer that Jesus would never have to pray.

For example, forgive us our debts, meaning our sins. Jesus never had any sins. He never had to seek forgiveness.

But it is nonetheless the Lord's Prayer in that the Lord taught it. It is not a man-made prayer. It is not something that our minds or some other group of people figured out.

It is a prayer that the Lord himself gave us to pray. And, of course, I assume most of our listeners, probably all of them, are familiar with the prayer, but it goes like this, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever.

Amen. Now, as I say, this is an extremely familiar prayer, perhaps almost too familiar, in the sense that when things become familiar, songs that we sing in church, or learned prayers that we recite from childhood, and there are many, by the way, now I lay me down to sleep, and some mealtime prayers and so forth, that many people learn them from childhood, and they say them so often that they say them without thinking anymore. They say them without even knowing what it is they're saying.

Certainly, there are some practices, especially of the Roman Catholic Church, that have actually encouraged this kind of mindless repetition of the prayer. This prayer is sometimes called the Our Father, at least in Roman Catholic circles. And the recitation of this prayer, many times in a short space of time, has been encouraged many times, because when you go to confession in the Roman Catholic Church, it is not uncommon that a person who has sinned and confesses their sins are told, well, in order to get right again, you need to say this many Hail Marys and this many Our Fathers.

Let's say a dozen Our Fathers. Now, a dozen Our Fathers means you say this prayer and you repeat it a dozen times. Now, it's hard to know how this practice could ever have entered the church in view of the immediate context of the prayer itself, because just before the prayer is given, Jesus says, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do.

Now, I do not believe it's vain to repeat yourself in prayer necessarily, or to repeat the same prayer over and over again every time you pray, to pray for the same thing. That's not necessarily vain repetitions. But certainly, if you utter words with no heart, that is vain.

And if you repeat those words over and over again with no heart, then that is vain

repetitions. And it would be very hard, I would think, for somebody to be told, okay, say 20 Our Fathers, and for them to rattle off 20 repetitions of this prayer, and not at some point in that tedium have their heart somewhere else or their mind somewhere else. It's so easy to memorize this prayer.

You can say it practically in your sleep. And certainly, if you were told to say it 20 times in a row, you would soon be saying it practically in your sleep. At least your mind would be somewhere else as you rattle it off.

Again, in most cases. So it seems to me that the very practice of the church with reference to this prayer, in some respects, may be a violation of the very teaching of the context in which this prayer is found. And that is that you should not use vain repetitions.

If you say this prayer, you should say it with sincerity, meaning it. Now, when Jesus say, when you pray, pray in this manner or in this way, he is not necessarily saying that this particular prayer has to be said word for word as it is given. He says, pray in this manner.

That is, pray a prayer like this. Now, I find nothing wrong with praying this exact prayer word for word. It's a great prayer.

But I believe that it is intended to be a pattern prayer, a model prayer. It is not necessarily something that has to be memorized to be recited verbatim. Though, once again, so long as you are able to recite it verbatim and be sincere about it, there is nothing wrong with doing so.

I, myself, became very fascinated with this prayer many years ago. Like most Christians, I felt that my own prayer life can always use improvement. And I'm always convicted when I meet someone who prays more than I do, and I always want to be more prayerful.

And I, years ago, became aware that if I'm going to pray more, it has to not just be more, it has to be the right way. Because I don't want my prayers to be vain repetitions. If I'm going to pray more, I want to pray as I should.

So I looked in the teaching of Jesus to find instruction about prayer. And although there are other places in the Gospels that Jesus teaches things about prayer, yet there is no better place than here, where he says, pray like this. And so I've always been very fascinated with the study of this prayer, and I have recited it on many occasions.

What I'd like to confess to you is that when I do recite it, it is extremely hard for me to recite it without running ahead in the speaking of it, ahead of my thinking. In other words, to rattle it off faster than I'm even thinking about what's in it, because it is so familiar. And therefore, while some may be able to do this, I have found it necessary to take it one phrase at a time, and think, what does this phrase mean? What am I really saying here? And possibly expound on it a little bit, and understand the kind of thing that

this prayer is teaching me to pray for.

You see, it's not so much that I have to pray this exact prayer, but that this prayer teaches me what prayer should contain, what prayer should be concerned with, and how different it really is from most of our prayers. For example, many of us begin praying with thanksgiving, by thanking God. Now believe me, I think thanksgiving is a very important activity.

It's certainly part of our relationship with God that we should be thankful and express our thanks. But notably, there is no thanksgiving in this prayer. Perhaps the reason is that prayer and thanksgiving are two different things.

They certainly can be practiced at the same time. In fact, we are encouraged to do both things at the same time, or at least in association with each other. For example, over in Philippians 4, we have this classic exhortation.

In Philippians 4, verse 6, he says, Be anxious for nothing, that means be worried about nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. Now notice how Paul understands thanksgiving and prayer. You make your requests known to God by prayer and supplication, and you add to this thanksgiving.

You see, prayer and supplication is one thing, thanksgiving is a different ingredient, but you're supposed to have the whole mix. In your relationship with God, you need to have thanksgiving. But prayer is the making of requests.

By the way, this is an important thing to note, because there are many people today saying that when we pray, prayer should be a two-way conversation with God. They say, you know, why do you do all the talking when you pray? Why don't you just be quiet for a while and let God talk to you? Well, that sounds very pious and very spiritual, really, but I'm afraid that kind of teaching, A, is not what the Bible teaches about prayer, and B, has led to a great deal of frustration from people who really want to be close to God and want to have the right kind of prayer life, and they are told that prayer is a two-way conversation with God. And therefore they think, of course, you know, I don't want to filibuster here, I'll say a few things, and I'll be quiet and let God say a few things, and then I'll say a few things more, just like I do in an ordinary conversation.

But people who try this sometimes don't hear anything from God at all. They may be quiet for an extended period of time, but sometimes they just don't get any words from God. And then, of course, a number of things could happen.

One is their mind begins to drift, and their prayers really tend to be over at that point. Or they may begin to afflict their conscience and say, there's something wrong with me, that God isn't talking with me, I wonder what's wrong with me, etc., and so forth. You

see, the problem is we will always judge our own prayer life by what we are told is normal prayer life.

And if our preachers and our people who write books about prayer say, well, the normal prayer life is a two-way conversation between you and God. You talk some and He talks some. Then we, if we don't have that experience, we're going to say, my prayer life is subnormal, I guess my relationship with God is on the rocks or whatever.

The fact of the matter is the Bible nowhere says that prayer is a two-way conversation. Now, before you get me wrong, I want to make something very clear. I do believe that God speaks to us.

I do believe that hearing from God is a normal phenomenon, both in the Old and the New Testament, and also in the Christian life, the normal Christian life today. I do believe the Holy Spirit still communicates with us. I do believe that we do hear from God.

Now, having said that, let me clarify for myself. When we do hear from God, I don't think that's part of what the Bible calls prayer. It's another aspect.

It would be wrong to think that prayer is the only thing that the Bible says about our relationship with God. God speaks to us, and we speak to Him. When we speak to Him, if we are presenting requests to Him, we are praying.

If we are thanking Him, then we're doing something else. We're thanking Him. If we are praising Him, then we're doing yet something else, praising Him.

And when He speaks to us, that's something else, too. That's not prayer. God does not pray to us.

We pray to Him. And therefore, prayer is not two-way communication. The Bible nowhere uses the term prayer in that way.

Notice Jesus giving the definitive teaching on the subject of prayer in this passage. Nowhere says a thing about listening to God, letting God have His say in the conversation. Jesus has just a very short filibuster here.

You start with Our Father. You end with Amen. You can say the whole thing practically without taking a breath.

And where is the teaching here? That this is supposed to be a two-way conversation. In fact, where is that teaching anywhere in Scripture? I'll save you the time, although I would encourage you to look up for yourself and not just believe me. Nowhere in the Bible is prayer ever referred to as a two-way conversation.

In fact, Paul made it very clear. By prayer and supplication, we make our requests known to God. That's what prayer is.

It's making our requests known to God. This in no way denies that God speaks to us. God does.

But that's not what prayer is. That's something else. And it should also be understood that there's nothing in the Bible that says that God ought to speak to us just about the same amount as we speak to Him.

That is, you shouldn't think, well, my, I've been praying for the last half hour. I'd better be quiet for a half hour so God can speak to me. Now, the problem with that is God may not have as much to say to you as you have to say to Him on a given occasion.

Furthermore, He may not have anything to say to you on that particular occasion that you have something to say to Him. God does not speak when you ask Him or tell Him to speak. Nor can you manipulate Him to speak to you.

It's really a sad thing that it's become very popular in the modern church, especially the Charismatic Church, of which I'm a part. It is a sad thing that we are often told that you can get a word from God by doing X. You know, there's books about hearing from God, how to hear from God. First you need to do this, then you need to do that, and then you have to do another thing.

Where is this teaching in the Scripture? Where do you find anyone in the Scripture going through some procedure in order to hear from God? In the Bible, God speaks, and in our lives He speaks too. But biblically, the norm is that God speaks to people when He wants to speak to them. They may or may not be trying to hear from Him.

Saul of Tarsus was on the road to Damascus to persecute Christians when Jesus appeared to him and spoke to him. He wasn't going through some kind of hearing from God technique, nor really was anyone else in the Bible that I know of when they heard from God. God in the Scripture is the sovereign one in the relationship.

He decides when He will speak. He knows when He has something He needs to say and when He does not. And if He does not, then doing the steps will not get Him to speak just because you want Him to.

We have a classic illustration of this principle in the life of the Old Testament Saul. He wanted to hear from God, but God didn't have anything to say to him. And Saul, it says that he couldn't get a word from God through the Urim and the Thummim, which was a fairly ordinary way to hear from God in those days, or through dreams or through the prophets.

God wasn't giving any words to Saul. Well, Saul wasn't content with that. He determined that he was going to hear.

So he went to a medium, a witch, and had her conjure up the spirit of the dead prophet

Samuel. Why? Because Saul was determined to get a word from God, whether God wanted to give him one or not. Now that's a very instructive story.

Because in a sense, those who determine when God will speak to them, and do not let Him determine when He will speak to them, those people are doing something very much like going to a witch. I don't mean to insult, but let's put it this way. What is the difference between witchcraft and Christianity? Or let's just, instead of witchcraft, just say occultism in general.

Both Christianity and occultism have some of the same phenomenon. Namely, supernatural things happen in the occult as well as in Christianity. And, in many cases, information is communicated from a supernatural source in both.

In Christianity, the supernatural source is God Himself, communicating through the Holy Spirit. In the occult, it is from some other source, probably demons. But the point is, both Christianity and the occult affirm the need to hear from a supernatural source.

And, of course, Christians want to hear from God, who is their supernatural source. The occult practitioners, maybe they identify the one they're seeking as God or something else. But the point is this.

The difference between Christianity and the occult in this respect is that in the occult, that information is sought by gimmicks, by procedures, by spells, by chants, by incantations, by methods. In other words, the practitioner in the occult is the one who determines when they will get the word that they want, the information they want. All they have to do is do this procedure that is prescribed in their particular occult art, and they expect to get what they want.

In Christianity, we do not conjure up a word from God. God speaks when He has something to say. And He does not speak at other times if He doesn't have anything particular to say.

Now, for a Christian book to say, do this and do that and do this, and you'll get a word from God, is more or less teaching something similar to the occult. Namely, you do the procedures, and you will get what you want, a word from God. And the essential difference between Christianity and the occult is in Christianity, God is sovereign.

God is in charge. God makes the decisions about the relationship. In the occult, the practitioner makes the decisions and controls everything.

No wonder the occult appeals to many people more than Christianity does. People who want to be in charge and control things will be attracted to the occult. Those who are willing to submit to God and let Him control things, obviously, are much more fit to be Christians.

But the point is that the Bible does not teach that when you go to prayer, you can guarantee or should expect as normal that God will necessarily speak to you at that time. And that if He does not, then you are not having proper prayer because it's a one-way conversation. Yeah, maybe it is a one-way conversation, but you speak to God when you have something to say to Him, and He will speak to you when He has something to say to you.

And that doesn't have to be at the same time. Do not think, in other words, that your prayers are subnormal or sub-biblical if they are one-way conversations, because there is no other kind of prayer in the Bible than that. Even when Jesus taught His disciples to pray, it was all about, say this, He didn't say, and then listen and see what God says back.

You know, the Bible doesn't even tell us we have to listen to God. God speaks loudly. Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus was not listening to God, but God knew His number.

God knew how to reach Him, and God knows how to reach you. The real issue is, of course, whether you're willing to obey God, and if you are, then God will speak to you when He wishes to do so, when He has something to communicate. In the meantime, you need to be regular in prayer.

And Jesus gives us the model here of prayer, which we will have to take, actually, a closer look at next time, because we've just about used up our time for this broadcast. The point I would make, however, is that the method of prayer that Jesus teaches, in many ways, disagrees with some of the traditional or the modern teachings of the church. And therefore, we need to look to Jesus to know how it is we are to approach God, and what it is we're supposed to do, and what it is we're supposed to say once we have done so.

We will examine that in closer detail next time, when we look at the details of this so-called Lord's Prayer. I hope that you will be able to join us at that time. Tune in tomorrow, and we will do so.