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Matthew 6:5 - 6:8



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In a discussion of the Sermon on the Mount, Steve Gregg examines Jesus' instructions on prayer in Matthew 6:5-8. Jesus warns against hypocrisy and suggests that public prayer should not be used as a platform for attention-seeking. Gregg suggests that while Jesus emphasizes sincerity and personal connection with God, he does not necessarily expect secretive prayers. Additionally, Gregg notes that while the length of a prayer is not the most important factor, consistent and attentive communication with God is essential for a strong relationship with Him.

Transcript

As we continue to study the Sermon on the Mount, we come to Matthew 6, beginning at verse 5, where Jesus says, Now this passage corresponds really point by point with the structure of the previous paragraph where Jesus was giving his disciples instructions about giving to charity, giving alms to the poor. He had said, when you give your charitable deeds, don't do it the way the hypocrites do it. He gave an example of how the Pharisees gave their alms, which was very ostentatious.

And they said, but when you do it, do it in a very private and secretive manner so that your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you openly. We see in this paragraph, which we've just read, the very same structure, but now it's not charitable deeds, but prayer that he's referring to. And he says, when you pray, don't be like the hypocrites.

And just as in the previous paragraph, he gives an example of how these Pharisees did pray. And once again, he's pointing out how ostentatious they were and how much they loved to have the admiration of men looking at them and thinking that they were very spiritual because they prayed so much and so fervently. But Jesus is saying that they are doing this for the sole reason of getting that impression across to people.

And therefore, their prayers are not really done Godwardly at all, but manwardly. They are praying in such a way as to impact man, not God. Now, one thing is very clear here.

Jesus believed in prayer. There are some who don't, by the way. I have met Christians

who say, well, you know, why bother to pray? God is sovereign.

God will do whatever he wants to do. And after all, he knows better than I do what needs to be done. Why should I bother him with my request? I'll just say, thy will be done and be on with it and forget about it and just leave it in his hands.

Well, there is something to be said for being resigned to the will of God, but there's also something to be said for obeying God. And God said that we should pray. Jesus, in another place, in Luke 18, he said men ought always to pray and never to faint.

Here, he told his disciples to pray. He just warned them against doing it the wrong way. And he said, when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites.

And he said that they love to stand in the street corners and the synagogues and have people pay attention to how they pray. It is certainly a temptation when praying in public to be mindful of how eloquent your prayers sound to those who are in the room with you or wherever you are. I say this simply as a person, I guess, who's got a problem with it myself.

And because of that, I do very little public praying, although I'm not saying public praying is wrong. It's just if you can't do it with the right motives, it might be better not to do it in public at all. And that seems to be what Jesus is saying.

That prayer is to be God-ward. Your mind is supposed to be on what you're saying to God and how your prayers are impacting Him. Because prayers do impact God.

In the Scriptures, in Revelation 5 and verse 8, and again later on in Revelation 8, there's a picture of an angel or an elder offering incense up to God in heaven. And it says the incense is the prayers of the saints. Well, incense is a sweet-smelling stuff.

And what is being said in that passage is that the prayers of the saints appeal to God. They are pleasing in His nostrils. He likes that.

And prayers do impact God. They do influence Him. The Bible says that we have not because we ask not in many cases.

It says that in James chapter 4. Though, interestingly, it goes on to say we sometimes ask and don't receive because we ask with wrong motives. That we may consume it on our own desires. So, we can see that sometimes things don't happen that would have for the simple reason that we didn't pray for them to happen.

Other times we pray and they still don't happen. And James tells us that this could be, in some cases at least it is, because we're praying with wrong motives. It is our motives in prayer that Jesus is addressing in this passage.

Jesus says when you pray, go into your room. And when you shut the door, pray to your

Father who is in the secret place. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Now, this is similar to what He said about giving alms. He said make sure you do that very secretly. So that you're not motivated to be impressing people.

Now, at the same time, we have to recognize the element of hyperbole here. That Jesus is speaking in this somewhat more exaggerated way than He would always even practice it Himself. Certainly, Jesus would rise a great deal before day, we read in the scriptures.

And go out and seek a private place to pray. And so we know that Jesus gave great place to private prayer. But we also are not without examples in the scripture of Jesus praying verbally in a crowd.

There are times in the Gospel of John that Jesus prays in the presence of His disciples. And they hear Him. And He's not trying to keep them from hearing Him.

So obviously, Jesus didn't believe that it's always necessary to be totally secretive in your prayers. Although He sounds like He's saying that here. If we would press this hyperbole too far and make it too absolute.

We would have to condemn some of Jesus' own activity in prayer. And that of the disciples in the book of Acts. Because we have the recorded public prayers of believers in the book of Acts from time to time as well.

And so we have to assume that Jesus and the disciples, notwithstanding what Jesus said here. Did not think that it's always wrong to pray publicly or in front of other people. But certainly what He was saying is that we are to pray as if there was no one there.

We are supposed to pray with a mind of not being heard by others. But with a mind of being heard only by God. And if God then hears us and He sees that our motives are right.

Jesus said then He will reward us openly. Now this is the same teaching of course that He gave about charitable deeds. And which He'll also give later on in verses 16 through 18 about fasting.

But Jesus doesn't stop there in this case. In the case of prayer, now see there's three examples given in this section. Matthew 6 verses 1 through 18.

He talks about alms or charitable deeds. He talks about prayer and He also talks about fasting. And He talks, He says almost the exact same things about these three activities.

But when it comes to prayer He expands on it. Now this expansion here in Matthew 6 might be Jesus' actual expansion. Or it might be that Matthew having remembered something else Jesus taught on prayer.

Simply imported it here and put it here because it also represents part of Jesus' teaching on the same subject. And Matthew did often collect material topically. There's much evidence of that in his gospel.

In any case, either Jesus went off on sort of an excursus here on prayer. Getting back to His point on fasting. Or else Matthew did.

But it doesn't matter because if Matthew did He was simply transplanting something that Jesus said elsewhere. And putting it in this context which would be just fine. Doesn't matter what the context is in many cases.

And it would still represent a genuine teaching of Jesus. In any case, we see in verse 7 Jesus says, But when you pray 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 that you have need of before you ask Him. And then Jesus gives the model prayer.

In this manner therefore pray, 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 this teaching on prayer then goes beyond the warning of Jesus that the disciples should not pray with the kind of motivations that the Pharisees had. Who were of course Jewish religious leaders.

He also says, Also don't be like the heathen. Now the word heathen that is found here is the same word in the Greek that is elsewhere translated Gentiles. It is also a word that can be translated pagan.

Though in our modern English we may use these terms as different from each other. Yet in the Greek this is all one term. Pagan or heathen or Gentiles.

Now Jesus has just told the disciples, Don't pray like the Jewish leaders do. And now He says, Don't pray like the Gentiles do either. The disciples are to pray in a way all their own.

And one reason that they can do so is because they have real access to God. Because they are disciples of Jesus. They can come to God in Jesus' name.

Because they are disciples of Jesus they have been taught how to approach God properly. The Pharisees had lost sight of what it means to pray sincerely. And the

heathen, the Gentiles, had never really learned who God is in the first place.

The heathen, they didn't even know that God was not made of wood. The Gentiles at this time in history were all worshippers of idols. And these idols were not even alive.

Much less were they powerful to do anything for them. And yet it was the best God that the heathen knew about. And so the heathen would pray to their idols and to their false gods.

And obviously their false gods couldn't do anything for them. So they thought, well we just better repeat ourselves. We'd better cry out more.

We'd better repeat ourselves again. We'd better be more emphatic. And maybe they'd even whip themselves into a frenzy.

We have a good example of this in the Old Testament. When Elijah, who is the prophet of God, and the prophets of Baal, the false prophets, were calling on their diverse gods. Elijah called on Jehovah, but the prophets of Baal called on the false god Baal.

And both were seeking the same thing. They had put out a sacrifice on an altar, but they had put no fire to it. And the agreement was that whichever God would answer by sending fire from heaven and consuming the sacrifice, that would be recognized to be the true God.

Well, when Elijah finally got around to do it, he just said a short prayer and asked God to do what he had to do, and the fire did come down. But previous to this, the prophets of Baal had spent the whole morning crying out to Baal and asking him to do the same thing. But he didn't.

So they whipped themselves into a frenzy, cutting themselves and repeating themselves and chanting their requests and so forth. Because, I mean, they weren't getting any results. They just felt like, well, if we're going to get any results at all, we're going to just have to whip up the frenzy more.

We're going to have to repeat ourselves more. Sometimes people even feel that by chanting something again and again and again, that may somehow bring it into reality. You know, the more often you say a thing, even if it's not true, some people think, the more likely it is to become true.

And so the idea that, you know, God is not really a living God who responds to prayers because of his relationship with those who are asking. The heathen, they just believe that God is made of wood or stone or whatever and can't do anything anyway, but they can't live without prayer. And so they just kind of whip themselves into frenzies and do what they have to do and repeat themselves.

And Jesus referred to these as vain repetitions or empty repetitions. And he said, when you pray, don't be like the Gentiles who use these vain repetitions. He says, they think that they will be heard for their many words.

Now, God does not hear you for your many words. He does not answer prayers more if they take an hour or two to utter than if they take a single sentence to utter. Now, I do, I am impressed when I read the biographies of some people in history, Martin Luther and John Wesley and many others who prayed for hours.

E.M. Bounds and George Mueller. They would pray for hours every day. And it's a marvelous thing, a wonderful thing that they found so much to pray about.

But there are many Christians who love God and they just don't spend hours every day praying. In fact, if they try, they just fall asleep. And it should not be thought that because you don't pray hours every day that God doesn't hear your prayers.

Jesus said, it's the heathen who think that way. It's the heathen who think that they'll be heard for their much speaking. Now, I certainly would not suggest that those who pray hours a day are thinking wrongly and thinking that God will hear them for their much speaking.

I suspect that those who pray many hours a day are praying a great number of things, praying for a great number of things. Jesus is talking about those who would extend their prayers by simply being repetitious or by adding vain repetitions. Vain means empty.

You know, we can do that kind of thing without knowing we're doing it. It's not even so much that they're repetitions, but we would stick words into our prayers that make them longer. Have you ever noticed how many Christians use the word just repeatedly in prayer when they wouldn't in ordinary speech? Oh Lord, we just want to ask you to come and bless us today and just make your presence known to us and just inspire our worship.

And we just want this and we just that. And we ask you just. Have you ever noticed that? I don't want to be too self-conscious about that having said it, but I've noticed that.

We don't use that word just so frequently in our ordinary conversation with people, but for some reason we throw it in to our prayers quite frequently. Is that a vain repetition? Are we just trying to beef up our prayers? Or is it that we're trying to sound like our prayers are a modest request? We're just asking for this and not more, God. I'm not really sure what to make of it, but it certainly is the case that we can artificially expand the length of our prayers.

I think that there can be genuine praying for hours on end. I know that that is true, but you should not judge the matter of whether God is going to hear your prayers by how long it took you to utter them. What Jesus is teaching is that prayers are heard from God

if they are prayed humbly and with faith and with a good motive.

After all, in this very passage, Jesus said in verse 9, when you do pray, pray in this manner. Then he gave, of course, what we usually refer to as the Lord's Prayer. We'll have a look at that separately next time, but let me just say this.

The Lord's Prayer, as we call it, which is here given, takes less than 30 seconds to utter. From the Our Father at the beginning to the Amen at the end is less than 30 seconds. He said, when you pray, pray like this.

Now, when he said that, I think that maybe what he's concerned mostly about is the content of the prayer and the priorities of the prayer and the heart that's in the prayer. But at the same time, having just said, don't think that you'll be heard for your many words, but pray like this, and giving a very brief and terse prayer, Jesus certainly indicates that prayer can be all that it is supposed to be without it occupying a great deal of time. Now, some of you, I hope, will be encouraged in a godly way by hearing that because you may have been condemning yourself that you don't pray very long without your mind being distracted.

At the same time, I would certainly not wish to put you off of a desire that you might already have to pray longer because even if it's true that God doesn't hear for our many words, yet to enjoy the presence of God for a protracted period of time every day, for hours, to be alone with God in a spiritually way, just to share a request with God as they come to our minds, or whatever, that is certainly a wonderful thing. But it's very important to note that doing that, spending hours set aside for prayer, is not necessarily commanded in Scripture, and Jesus made it very plain, it's not how much you speak, it's your motives in speaking that will make the impact with God in prayer. Now, when we're not supposed to be like the heathen, there's a very good reason for that.

The heathen worship dumb idols, and therefore when they speak to their gods, they never hear back from them. They're speaking to rocks, they're speaking to stones, and their gods don't talk back. With them, prayer is simply a ventilation of frustrations, or desires, or requests to an agent who cannot hear them and cannot respond in any way.

However, with the Christians, when we pray, we are praying to a real person. Not a human person, of course. We're talking to a personal God.

A God who is far superior to all other persons, but is a person nonetheless. He has personality, he has feelings, he has thoughts, he has preferences, he has a will, and he's a real person. What's more, he is a person with whom we can relate, because he wishes for us to have a relationship with him.

Thus, Jesus says, when you pray, say, Our Father. In other words, the Gentiles, they can say, My stone idol, or My rock, or My wood stick, but you don't have a relationship with a

stone or a stick. You have a relationship with a Father, though, and Jesus is saying here that prayer is nothing if it does not arise out of a real relationship with the one you're talking to.

The Pharisees, they prayed hypocritically. They knew there was a real and personal God, but they kind of ignored that fact and prayed with other people's ears in mind. But the heathen, they didn't even know there was a living God who would hear and wanted to be in a relationship with them.

And so they just made a lot of noise and they didn't pray in any way that was effectual because they didn't know God. Jesus says, listen, you don't have to be like the heathen. They think they'll be heard for their many words, but He says, therefore, don't be like them, verse 8, for your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

That is, you have a God who's alive even before you pray. He knows what you need. He'll be somewhere later on.

But the point here is that this is an attentive God. This is a concerned God. This is a real God.

This is a God who hears and answers prayer. And your prayer should be directed to Him knowing that you don't have to convince Him of anything. He knows what you need before you even ask.

Now, you might say, well, then why ask? If God knows what I need when I'm old or young. But that doesn't mean I don't enjoy them coming to me and asking me for things. As a matter of fact, I could just kind of set things up like you do with the dog.

You know, where you have an automatic feeder, you're going to be gone for a week and every day it deposits just a measured amount of food in the dog food dish, enough for that day. You know, you could set up some kind of contraption to have a relationship with your children. And that relationship is one where they are dependent upon you, and they express that dependency.

And they come to you with requests, and you can consider their requests, and you can respond to them personally. This is what God desires. He could just provide everything we need automatically, but His desire is to have a relationship.

And one of the best ways for that relationship to happen is for Him to withhold things until we ask for them. Because we would forget God, and not speak to Him at all, if everything went right all the time automatically. I mean, admit it, most of you, I would have to say this for myself, if God always provided everything I needed without my asking, I probably would never ask.

In fact, I would probably forget to pray altogether. In fact, I might even forget that I need

God in any way, because everything keeps showing up right when I need it. And God might be the invisible person behind it, but there'd be very much less motivation to pray, and to seek God, and to commune with Him, and to approach Him, if I didn't have things that were concerns of mine, needs that I wanted to present to Him.

And the Bible encourages us to make our requests known to God. And it's not that God doesn't know until we ask what we need, and it's not that He's reluctant to give either. It's that He wants us to be in the habit of coming to Him, and presenting our requests to Him.

For one thing, not only does that keep us in relationship with Him, but it makes it more obvious that it is He who provided it. If something comes to us automatically, it's not so obvious that it was from God. But if something isn't there, and we ask God for it, and then it comes, it's much more obvious that God is the provider.

And it keeps Him in the picture, in our lives, in a way that it would not be if we weren't required to pray. We're going to have to take the Lord's Prayer, as we call it, another time, because we're out of time for this broadcast. I hope that you'll join us next time, and we'll talk about that famous, well-known prayer, commonly called the Lord's Prayer, though there are reasons to object to that label.

We'll talk about it next time.