The Constitution of the Kingdom

A 33-Session Journey through the Sermon on the Mount & the Sermon on the Plain

SESSION NINETEEN — Prayer: Not Performance, Not Manipulation

Part Four: The Practices of Piety · Text: Matthew 6:5–8

The Texts

> **Matthew 6:5–6** *And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites… they love to… pray… so that they may be seen by others… But 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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> **Matthew 6:7–8** *When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

Clearing the Ground

Last session it was giving. Now Jesus turns to the second of the three practices — prayer. And before he teaches us how to pray — which he is about to do, with the greatest prayer ever prayed — he first clears away two ways of praying that go wrong. And here is the sobering thing: they are the two ways almost all of our praying goes wrong.

The first is to turn prayer into a performance — to pray for people, with one eye on the audience. The second is to turn prayer into a technique — to pray at God, trying to work on him, to wear him down, to manipulate him into giving us what we want. Performance, and manipulation. And underneath both of them, Jesus is about to expose the same quiet lie about who God actually is.

So before we can pray rightly, he has to clear the ground of how not to. And in the clearing, he says something about God that changes everything about prayer: your Father already knows.

Let's search the Scriptures together.

The Same Warning, at Prayer

The first error is the one we just met with giving: performance. "When you pray," Jesus says, "do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray… so that they may be seen by others." It is the actors again — only now they are at prayer. Picture it: the eloquent, impressive, beautifully-worded prayer, offered in the most public place available, with one eye quietly on the crowd — devotion performed for an audience. And the verdict is exactly what it was for the trumpet-blowing giver: they have received their reward. The admiration was what they were after, and the admiration is what they got. Transaction complete.[1]

[1]Unless noted, Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVue), the base translation for this course. Matthew 6:5–8 is Matthew-only; it introduces the Lord's Prayer (6:9–13), which Luke sets

Now hear one thing clearly, because it is easy to overreach here. Jesus is not banning public prayer, or praying together. He himself prayed out loud and in company; the church has always prayed with one voice, and that is good and right. What he is targeting is prayer offered as a performance — prayer whose real audience is the people in the room instead of the God being addressed.[2]

Go Into Your Room

And the antidote he prescribes is wonderfully simple: a closet with a door. "Go into your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is in secret." The hidden place, where there is no possible audience but God. Why does that matter so much? Because private prayer — prayer where no one could possibly be watching — is the root that keeps all your other praying honest. If you never once pray where no human being can see or hear you, you cannot really be sure you are praying to God at all; you might only be talking to the room. The shut door strips the audience away entirely, and what is left, when the audience is gone, is the thing prayer actually is: you and the Father, alone together.

The Second Error: Babbling at God

Then Jesus names a second mistake, and it is a completely different one. "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the pagans do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words." The first error was about the audience — praying for people. This one is about the mechanism — praying at God. It is the idea that prayer is a technique: that you get results by piling up words, by repeating the right formulas enough times, by sheer volume and length, wearing the deity down until he gives in. As if God were reluctant, tight-fisted, easily distracted — a divine official who has to be badgered, flattered, or worn out before he will act. As if the whole point of prayer were to change God's mind.[3]

Your Father Already Knows

And here Jesus drops the single line that undoes both errors at once: "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

Sit with that a moment, because it is one of the most freeing sentences in the whole Sermon. You do not need many words. You do not need the right technique, or the correct formula, or the stamina to twist God's arm — because you are not praying to a distant, reluctant deity who has to be informed and then persuaded. You are praying to a Father who already knows exactly what you need, and already wants to give it. Prayer is not breaking news to God. It is

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in a different scene (Luke 11:1–4), prompted by the disciples' request, "Lord, teach us to pray."

[2]As with giving, the target is the performance of prayer "to be seen"—not communal or public prayer as such, which Jesus and the church rightly practice, but prayer offered as a show for human eyes. See W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, and R. T. France, on Matthew 6:5.

[3]"Heap up empty phrases" (Greek battalogēō, to babble or stammer) reflects a pagan conception of prayer as technique—that the deity is moved by many words, right formulas, or sheer repetition; a reluctant God to be worn down. It is not a ban on persistence in prayer (cf. Luke 18:1–8), but on prayer as manipulation.

not talking a reluctant God into caring. Before the words are even out of your mouth, he already knows — and he is already leaning toward you, his hands already open.

Then Why Pray at All?

Which raises the question every honest person eventually asks: if God already knows what I need before I ask, and already wants to give it — then why pray at all? What is the point? Here is the answer, and it quietly changes what prayer is for. Prayer was never meant to inform God, or to persuade God, or to change God's mind. Prayer is meant to change us. It is the conversation in which a child gets to be with their Father — where our hearts are slowly re-aligned to his, where we are made, over time, into the kind of people who can actually receive what he already longs to give, where we are re-formed simply by being in the presence of the One who loves us. We do not pray to move God's hand; we pray to be with God — and we are remade in the being-with. Prayer, in the end, changes the one who prays.[4]

The Word That Changes Everything

And notice, running through this entire passage, the one word that makes both false ways of praying not just wrong but absurd. Father. Not "the deity." Not "the Almighty" — though he is that. Father: the intimate family word, the word a child uses at home. This is the frame for all Kingdom prayer, and in one more verse it will become the very first word of the prayer Jesus teaches. And once you truly see God as Father, both errors simply fall apart. You do not perform an eloquent speech to impress your own father — he already knows you, all the way down. And you do not manipulate your father with a barrage of words to make him care — he already loves you, already wants your good, already leans toward you before you say a word. Prayer, for Jesus, is nothing more complicated, and nothing less astonishing, than a beloved child talking with a Father who is already listening.[5]

The Threshold

So Jesus has cleared the ground completely. Not a performance for people. Not a technique on God. And now, with the false ways swept away, he says three words that open onto the greatest prayer ever prayed: "pray then in this way." And watch how the prayer he is about to give will answer everything he has just said. It will be short — not many words. It will be intimate — it begins "Our Father." And it will be about the things that truly matter — God's name, God's Kingdom, our real daily bread, our need to forgive and be forgiven — rather than a technique for prying loose the things we crave. We are standing at the very threshold of the Lord's Prayer.

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[4]"Your Father knows what you need before you ask" (6:8): prayer neither informs nor persuades God, who already knows and already inclines toward giving. Which raises why we pray at all—not to change God's mind but to be changed, formed by being with the One who loves us. See Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy.

[5]The governing word is "Father" (Abba), the intimate family term that frames all Kingdom prayer and becomes the first word of the Lord's Prayer. It is relational, not merely titular—the language of a child with a loving parent, which is the whole reason both performance and manipulation are out of place.

Freedom for Others

Put it to our thread — and watch how Jesus turns even the most private act outward. Prayer can seem the most inward, solitary thing in the world: just me, alone, in my room. But the prayer he is about to teach is relentlessly plural — our Father, give us, forgive us as we forgive. Kingdom prayer is never simply "me and God behind a shut door"; the door shuts precisely so that our hearts can be re-formed for the neighbor waiting on the other side of it. And there is a real freedom here: because the Father already knows what we need and already means to give it, we are released from the anxious, grasping, all-about-me praying that treats God like a vending machine — and freed to pray with open hands, for others, for the world, even for the enemy we learned to pray for two sessions ago. So ask with me: is my praying a performance, or a technique, or a real conversation with a Father who already knows? And does it stay curved in on myself — or does it open outward, toward "our Father" and "as we forgive"? *Freedom for others may cost us the self-absorbed prayer that is all about me — what can we lay down?*

Around the Table — For Discussion

- Jesus names two ways prayer goes wrong: performing for people, and manipulating God. Which one do you recognize more in yourself?
- "Go into your room and shut the door." Do you have a hidden place where you pray with no audience but God? What would it mean to make one?
- "Your Father knows what you need before you ask." How does that change the way you pray — and does it comfort you, or unsettle you?
- If God already knows, why pray at all? How does it land to hear that prayer is meant to change us, not God?
- Freedom for others may cost us something. Is your praying mostly about you — and what would it look like to pray "our Father"?

This Week — A Practice

Two movements. First, pray in secret. Find a room, a car, a quiet corner — somewhere with a door you can shut — and simply be with the Father each day this week, briefly, with no audience and nothing to perform. Notice what it stirs to pray where absolutely no one can see. Second, pray fewer words and more trust. Try praying without the pile-up of phrases — rest instead in "my Father already knows what I need" — and let the prayer be short, plain, and honest. And turn it outward at least once: pray, by name, for someone other than yourself. Then bring back what you found. This Kingdom, like all the rest, is learned in the doing.

Looking Ahead

Next session, at long last, the prayer itself — the one Jesus taught in answer to "Lord, teach us to pray," the prayer the church has prayed in every language and every century since: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name…" It is the beating heart of the whole Sermon, and it

is rich enough to hold us for more than one session. We'll walk it slowly, phrase by phrase, beginning next time.

Benediction

So go this week and pray — not for the room, and not at a reluctant God, but to a Father who already knows your name and your need and your heart, and who is already leaning toward you with open hands. Shut the door on the audience. Set down the pile of anxious words. And say the simplest, truest thing there is to say to the One who loves you — and then listen, and be changed. Blessed are those who pray in secret to the Father who sees in secret, for they will discover that they were never talking to a stranger, and never once alone.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Blessings,
Pastor Mick Finch

SESSION NINETEEN

Introduction Video Script

Single presenter, to camera · target 5–6 minutes · warm, steady, unhurried

[Begin still.]

Welcome back to the table. Last session it was giving. Now Jesus turns to the second practice — prayer. And before he teaches us how to pray — which he's about to do, with the greatest prayer ever prayed — he first clears away two ways of praying that go wrong. And here's the sobering part: they're the two ways almost all of our praying goes wrong.

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[The performance.]

The first error is the one we met with giving — performance. "When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray so they may be seen." The actors again, now at prayer — the eloquent, impressive prayer, in the most public spot available, with one eye on the crowd. And the verdict's the same as the trumpet-blowing giver: they've received their reward. Now hear this clearly, because it's easy to overreach: Jesus is not banning public prayer or praying together — he prayed out loud, the church prays with one voice, that's good. He's targeting prayer offered as a performance, whose real audience is the room instead of God.

[Go into your room.]

And the antidote is wonderfully simple: a closet with a door. "Go into your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is in secret." Why does that matter? Because private prayer — where no one could possibly be watching — is the root that keeps all your other praying honest. If you never pray where no one can see you, you can't really be sure you're praying to God at all — you might just be talking to the room. The shut door strips the audience away, and what's left is the thing prayer actually is: you and the Father, alone together.

[Babbling at God.]

Then Jesus names a second mistake, completely different. "Don't heap up empty phrases like the pagans, who think they'll be heard for their many words." The first error was about the audience — praying for people. This one's about the mechanism — praying at God. It's the idea that prayer is a technique: pile up words, repeat the right formulas, wear the deity down until he gives in. As if God were reluctant, tight-fisted, distracted — someone you have to badger or flatter or exhaust before he'll act. As if the whole point of prayer were to change God's mind.

[Your Father already knows.]

And here Jesus drops the line that undoes both at once: "don't be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." Sit with that — it's one of the most freeing sentences in the whole Sermon. You don't need many words. You don't need the right technique or the stamina to twist God's arm — because you're not praying to a distant, reluctant deity who has to be informed and then persuaded. You're praying to a Father who

already knows exactly what you need, and already wants to give it. Before the words are out of your mouth, he already knows — and his hands are already open.

[Then why pray?]

Which raises the question every honest person asks: if God already knows, and already wants to give — why pray at all? Here's the answer, and it changes what prayer is for. Prayer was never meant to inform God, or persuade God, or change God's mind. Prayer is meant to change us. It's the conversation where a child gets to be with their Father — where our hearts get re-aligned to his, where we're slowly made into people who can actually receive what he already longs to give. We don't pray to move God's hand — we pray to be with God, and we're remade in the being-with. Prayer changes the one who prays.

[The word Father.]

And notice the one word running through the whole thing that makes both errors absurd. Father. Not "the deity," not "the Almighty" — though he's that. Father — the intimate family word, the word a child uses at home. Once you see God as Father, both errors fall apart. You don't perform a speech to impress your own dad — he already knows you. And you don't manipulate your dad with a barrage of words to make him care — he already loves you. Prayer is nothing more complicated, and nothing less astonishing, than a beloved child talking with a Father who's already listening.

[The threshold and practice.]

So Jesus has cleared the ground completely. Not a performance for people, not a technique on God. And now he says three words that open onto the greatest prayer ever prayed: "pray then in this way." It'll be short, intimate — "Our Father" — and about the things that truly matter. We're standing right at the threshold of the Lord's Prayer.

So here's our question this week — freedom for others: is my praying a performance, a technique, or a real conversation with a Father who already knows? And does it stay curved in on myself — or open outward, toward "our Father," "as we forgive"? Two things to practice. First, pray in secret — find a door you can shut, and just be with the Father each day, briefly, nothing to perform. Second, pray fewer words and more trust — rest in "my Father already knows," keep it short and honest, and pray at least once for someone other than yourself.

Next time, at last, the prayer itself — "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." The beating heart of the whole Sermon. We'll walk it slowly, phrase by phrase.

[Slow. Land it.]

For now, go and pray — not for the room, and not at a reluctant God, but to a Father who already knows your name and your need and your heart, and is already leaning toward you with open hands. Shut the door on the audience. Set down the pile of anxious words. Say the simplest, truest thing there is to say to the One who loves you — and then listen, and be changed.

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