



TIME OF GRACE®

Pray Like a Pro: How to Avoid Pretensions and Babbling

Study Notes

Summary

What makes a prayer good? What prayers have you heard that truly impressed you? In Jesus' day, many people could pray for an impressive amount of time with impressively spiritual words. Yet Jesus was not impressed. So what did impress him? And what might we learn from his answer?

- Problem #1: _____ prayers
- **Matthew 6:5:** And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.
- Solution #1: _____ prayers
- **Matthew 6:6:** But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.
- Problem #2: _____
- **Matthew 6:7:** And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.
- Solution #2: _____
- **Matthew 6:8:** Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Points to Ponder

1. Which is more dangerous for you: worrying about what people think of you when you pray or worrying about what God thinks of you when you pray? Why is one more tempting for you than the other?

2. Study the context of today's message by reading Matthew 6:1-18. Name two themes that you see in Jesus' teaching about prayer, giving, and fasting.

3. Agree/Disagree: Believing in an all-knowing, all-powerful, loving Father is the key to a strong prayer life.

Homework for Next Week

Read Luke 18:1-8.

Time of Grace Ministry
Pray Like a Pro: How to Avoid Pretensions and Babbling
Matthew 6: 5-8
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A quick show of hands. How many of you have ever packed into the back seat with your parents or maybe packed your kids into the back seats or have just gone on a road trip with friends and have driven through the mountains? Anyone done that before? Yeah, a whole bunch of you. Most of you. My family and I did this this past summer. We drove up through the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, and I would love to tell you it was this beautiful, bonding, worshipful, loving experience in the car.

But have any of you tried to drive through the mountains before? As our car was going back and forth, switching here and there, there were two things that we quickly noticed on either side of our car. On one side was a cliff. Like, look out of the side window and you can see the drop that will maim you, paralyze your children, and kill the people that you love the most. And of course, there's not like 15 or 20 yards between you and the cliff. It's like a foot or two. No guard rail, of course. And so, you want to turn the wheel and get the car over this way, but on this side of the car is a mountain. Oh yes. Did I mention that part? Actually, a lane of traffic with cars coming around a blind corner because they don't want to hit the mountain, so they scooch out over that yellow line pushing you closer to the cliff that will plummet you to your death.

And if I was going to be honest with you, because this is church, I would say that as Kim and I tried to drive up the Great Smoky Mountains, we stressed, and we squeezed the steering wheel, and we held our breath, and we gasped, and we yelled at each other and at one point, technically, we pulled over and switched drivers. And in my opinion, that's a lot like what it is to pray. I mean, prayer on paper should be this really easy, simple thing. Right? You talk. God listens. In Jesus's name. Amen. But have you ever noticed the extreme dangers that happen when you try to pray?

There are two big ones that I want to talk to you about today; these dangers that Jesus talked about in prayer, and they're not the ones that you might think. I mean, busyness is a huge danger to prayer. All the clicks and the dings and the zooms and to-dos, and you're running from here to there and back over to here and then back over to there, and the day runs out, and you just didn't get to that conversation with God. That's a real danger, but I don't want to talk about that today.

Nor do I want to talk about what your devices and Smart phone have done to your brains and their ability to pray that most of us have brains like a six-month-old puppy that chases any thought squirrel that pops into our heads and we quickly forget, like, how we got there and what we were thinking about. That's a danger, but I don't want to talk about that either.

What I want to talk to today is about "The Cliff and the Mountain." When Jesus taught on prayer, he taught that there were two things that would get in the way of your honest communication and connection with God. Well, according to Jesus, the two things that would get in the way of your prayer life were worrying too much about them and worrying too much about him. Sometimes you can never get a good prayer out of your heart and out of your lips because you're too worried about them, about the other people who might be in your presence, or you might not have that confident, bold prayer because you're a little bit too worried about him, about God.

Here's what I mean. Have you ever tried to pray when there are other people in the room? Maybe instead of just saying like a prayer around the dinner table with family or friends someone asked you to pray specifically. And you know you should just pray, but now you know that other people are listening. Has that ever happened to you where you start worrying a little bit too much about them? You ever been in a Bible study where instead of just praying quietly in our own heads someone asks you to lead the prayer and immediately you start thinking thoughts like, "Oh, is this a good prayer? Do I sound stupid? What am I saying right now? I feel like I'm babbling. Am I babbling? I wonder if people are yawning. Can I open one eye and peek to see if people are yawning. Are they sleeping? Are they bored now? Should I stop this prayer? In Jesus's name amen."

This happens sometimes when we go out to restaurants. Maybe we have the custom of praying in our own homes, but now there are other people around, and they can see maybe if we fold our hands or if we pray out loud, and we get very timid because we're too worried about them. And for other people we're kind of too worried about him. You ever tried to pray and wondered deep down in your heart if God was really interested in that prayer? Maybe if you had kind of a rough spiritual day. You know, if you sinned ten seconds ago and now you're folding your hands or bowing your head, and you wonder if God's just looking at you like, "Really? Really? You're going to do that? You're going to forget about me? You're going to go your own way? Now that you need something; forgiveness, health, help, oh, now you're going to approach me?" And then you get so worried. Like, you're not worthy of prayer. You're not good enough. You're not enough. Something that simple that we would think is so easy on paper; just pray, just talk to God. It's not so simple.

The cliff and the mountain. Worrying about them. Worrying about him. There are some big dangers when it comes to the simple act of prayer, but I mean, that's why I love Jesus. Did you know that 2,000 years ago when Jesus Christ taught about prayer he talked about these two dangers? When his disciples came to him and wanted to learn what it was like to communicate with God, Jesus named these two dangers. He pointed out these problems and then he gave brilliant solutions like only he could, and today that's what I want to teach you.

I want to open up our Bibles to Matthew 6, and I want to show you how to avoid falling off the cliff or crashing into the mountain so you can make it up that difficult path and enjoy the sights and the beauty and the power of prayer. So, if you have a pen in your hand, you're taking notes on your phone, you're journaling at home, here's the first problem we're going to tackle. It's our first fill in the blank.

Jesus wants to talk to us about pretend prayers. Pretend prayers. And in Matthew 6:5 Jesus addresses just that. He says, "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward in full." Don't be a hypocrite, Jesus says. Now, a hypocrite in the Greek language is a person who hides behind a mask, someone who pretends, who fakes it, who looks like they're A, because that's what the mask is, but behind the mask they're really B.

Jesus says when you pray, don't do that. He says that some people actually aren't afraid to pray. They actually love to pray in church, in the synagogue, and on the street corners, at restaurants, and in public. Why, Jesus says they love it? It looks like because they love God, but behind the mask, did you catch Jesus's words? Because they love to be seen. They want people to notice how spiritual and religious they are, how their faith isn't private and it's not quiet. It's bold and it's public. I'm unashamed of my connection with God. They love it when people notice.

Now, why would someone do that? Why would someone use or misuse the power of prayer to get attention and praise? And the answer is actually pretty simple: because we like attention. Not everyone likes to stand under the spotlights and wear the microphone and be on the stage, but the human heart loves it. You and I love it when people notice us and they respect us and they appreciate us and they're impressed by us. Isn't that true? I mean, why do you post on your social media this picture you took of this family instead of that one? Because you want people to be impressed. Why do you wear that dress to the wedding instead of that one? Why do you pick that suit instead of this one? Why do you want to get a haircut instead of letting it grow? Well, all of us want to be noticed. All of us want to look good. All of us want people to say, "Wow!"

Why when I was a 19-year-old freshman in college back in 1999 did I go tanning? It was a thing back then. All right. No judging. Because we all want to look good. Why in America in an average year will women spend over a quarter billion dollars on Spanx? Boy, it got quiet there, ladies. Well, because we all want to look our best. We all want to look good. We all want people to say, "Wow!" And that's not always wrong. Okay, ladies. You don't have to burn your Spanx in the church parking lot, but Jesus just wants us to be really, really careful that we don't take a really sacred thing like prayer or worship or preaching or reading this book and use it not to connect with God but to get the attention of people.

A few years ago, I heard a pretty famous pastor in America tell the story of how he struggled with the same temptation. His megachurch down in Florida was hosting a big mid-week conference, and as he was working one day, he walked past the church sanctuary, and he noticed that there were a bunch of old programs from the previous Sunday. The midweek conference was coming, and the church was kind of a mess, and so he jumped in and he picked up one and then he picked up another, a third and a fourth, and soon he found himself going from aisle to aisle back and forth picking up all the old programs, and he admitted that he wasn't a row or two in before this thought popped into his mind, "I hope someone sees me."

Here's the senior pastor. All right. Here's the leader of the church, and he's doing what the church custodian normally does. He quietly hoped that someone would walk by the door and say, "Pastor, why are you doing that?" Oh, the human heart. So many of you know that it's really hard

to do the right thing; to make it to church, to sing instead of being quiet, to give an offering, to volunteer, to boldly pray, but Jesus knows what's even harder is to do the right thing for the right reason. Not to join a church, not to give an offering, not to serve, not to pray so that people will love and be so impressed with us, but simply to do it unnoticed and unrecognized and unpraised because we love God.

But I want to be real with you today that Jesus knows this is an issue, and he hates it. The word hypocrite or hypocrisy shows up 17 times in the New Testament. Every single time comes from the lips of Jesus and every single time Jesus isn't speaking out about pagan people out there in the world, but people like you who attend church. And Jesus never ever, ever wants us to put on a mask. He never ever wants me to stand up here and to open this book and to act so nice and holy if my heart isn't in the right spot. He never wants us to fold our hands or bow our head at Applebee's just because we want the waitress to notice how religious we are because Jesus knows that's not good. It doesn't bring us close to God. I can't communicate with God if I'm thinking about you and not him. And if people find out that this is just a show and we're faking it, they won't want anything to do with this book or this Jesus.

If you're taking notes, here's Jesus's solution to pretend prayers. The answer is private prayers. Here's how he teaches it in Verse 6, "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." Now, just to be clear, praying in public isn't always wrong. I'm about to do it. I hope my heart will be in the right spot. Jesus did it. The apostles did it. It's not a black and white issue, but Jesus is saying if you find yourself too worried about them, what you should do is go into a room that has no windows, close the door so no one can just happen to walk by and see you, and talk to your Father because in that room where no one pays attention and no one sings your praises, you will find God. God.

If attention seeking is your temptation, never ever, ever, ever again Instagram your religious coffee cup with your Bible and your prayer journal just so perfectly positioned as the sun comes up. You don't need it. Don't do a YouTube tour of your war room where you have all your prayers up. You just pray, and you don't tell a soul about it. And Jesus gives this promise, "Your Father will reward you." Do you know what he'll reward you with? His attention. God's attention.

I mean, maybe because it's "I'm a softie because I have two daughters that I adore", but I love the fact that Jesus says twice, "Your Father." "Your Father will reward you." Your Father in heaven. Not just some king and not just some judge, but God. The reason that Jesus Christ lived this perfect humble life, the reason He died on the cross to take away all of our masks and hypocrisy and sin is so that when we fold our hands or we lift up our hands, when we do whatever with our hands, and we pray, God is not just some God up there pushing buttons and pulling levers and making decisions. He calls Himself our Father. And I think about the love that I have for my kids. I think of how I would do anything in my power that was good for them. That's me, an earthly father. Jesus says that God is our Father in heaven.

If you're still taking notes, I'll just talk about the second problem Jesus is going to address: babbling. Listen how Jesus puts it in Matthew 6, "And when you pray," He says, "do not keep on babbling like pagans. For they think they will be heard because of their many words." Now, Jesus said there's this mountain of an issue that can happen in our prayer lives that we talk and we talk and we babble and we babble and we go on and on and on, and we think that God's going to hear us because of all these words that we speak, but it's not just true.

But it's actually pretty logical, and it makes sense because how many of you when you were kids and you wanted to get your dad's attention, and he was super busy you had to babble just a little bit? "Hi, dad. Hey, dad. Dad. Dad, can I have your attention, dad. Dad, can I talk to you?" "What?" dad finally says. And in Jesus's day, a lot of pagan people thought that same way about God. You know, the non-Jewish people, the pagans believed in all these Greek and Roman gods and Zeus and Poseidon and Aphrodite, and in their view, the gods were really busy running the world, and you were kind of a bother if you wanted to interrupt the gods. And so what did you have to do? You had to babble. You had to talk a lot. You had to prove that you were worthy of their attention and maybe if you prayed for 30 minutes or 60 minutes or two hours, the gods would be impressed and they'd pay attention to your prayer.

Now, I have a hunch that not many of you prayed to Zeus today, that not many of you worship Aphrodite or Artemis anymore. Talk to me afterwards if that's one of your issues, but I wonder if some of you struggle with the same issue deep down in your heart wondering if maybe, just maybe you're a little bit of a bother to God. You know, maybe He's not ready to listen to your prayer just yet. Maybe He's a little disappointed in you after everything you've done or failed to do. Maybe God doesn't have his ears and his eyes and his arms wide open. Maybe his heart isn't paying attention to you because of all of your story and all the stuff that you've messed up.

I mean, who are you and who am I to approach a God like him? And there's this mountain of evidence that makes sense. Why would God pay attention to people like us? I mean, if you're asking God for forgiveness for being impatient just like you did yesterday and last week and last month, why would God be eager to hear that prayer? And it's so easy to wonder if we're worthy of the simple act of prayer. Jesus has an answer to that struggle too.

That's our next fill in the blank. Jesus's answer instead of babbling is this: believing. Here's how he puts it in our final verse. He says, "Do not be like them, the pagans. For your Father knows what you need before you ask him." Don't be like the babblers, Jesus said. I'm not worried about your word counts. You don't have to go on and on for an hour until I listen. No. He says, "Your Father knows what you need."

And when my daughters need something from me, they don't have to submit a three-page essay that not like some of you in college were trying to add extra adjectives and adverbs just to meet the word count of the professor. Right? God doesn't work like that, and Jesus tells us why. He says it again. He says, "Your Father." He knows exactly what you need. It's one of my favorite songs in the whole world that we sing in church. It says, "Boldly I approach your throne." I'm not coming timid, God. I know I don't deserve to be here. Angels should be afraid to stand here, but

I'm coming with boldness, and I'm going to ask for everything because you have said that you are not just my judge. You're my Father, a perfect Father.

And if a dad like me can adore his little girls, imagine a Father in heaven who has never sinned, who has never been impatient, who has never been disgusted. He's never been done with us and if we believed in a God like that, in a Father in heaven, then we would pray, and we wouldn't worry about the words or how they sound or how many we've got. We would just simply pray.

And Jesus knows if we can remember the two things that through his death and resurrection God's arms are open wide, and he loves to hear our prayers. His face is shining upon us, and it's gracious to us, and we don't have to hesitate in the name of Jesus to pray. Remember that, friends, and you will avoid the cliff and you won't crash into the mountain. Instead, you'll just pray.

And if you need proof, just come back to church. You know, almost every Sunday here at our church, we speak the very next words in Matthew 6. I won't preach them today, but I just taught you this section of the Bible, and the Lord's Prayer is this section of the Bible. In the original Greek of Matthew 6, do you know how many words are in the Lord's Prayer? Fifty-seven, and the other version of the Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Luke only has 38 words total. I timed myself. I can pray it at a slow pace in ten seconds which means Jesus is trying to teach us when we pray to our Father we don't have to babble. We just believe that through his death, the Father is always for us. The power of prayer is not in our many words. It is in the mercy of God.

So, put the teaching all together, and you can pray quietly and confidently, succinctly and boldly. You can just pray like a dear child does to his Heavenly Father. Oh, by the way, we didn't die going up the mountain. We avoided the cliff. We didn't crash into any of the oncoming cars, and I took a picture of when we got to the top of the beautiful Smoky Mountains, the trees, the smell of the fresh air. The drive was difficult, but it was worth it, and prayer is a lot like that. It's not easy, and Jesus knows it, but keep praying and when your Father hears and rewards you, you will have the most beautiful sight of all.

Let's pray.

Gracious Father, thank you so much for the chance to talk to you. You say that we can cast all of our anxiety on you; all of it. So, if we're worried about the same thing we were yesterday, you're still listening, and you still want us to pray. You say that we can call upon you in a day of trouble. So, whatever is troubling us today, you want us to talk to you, and you promise to deliver us so that we can worship you in return.

Heavenly Father, we're so grateful for your love, for your grace, and for your forgiveness. Thank you for listening to people like us even though we don't deserve it. Thank you for responding with such incredible power and grace. We love the opportunity to pray. Help us to do it more than ever, and we ask it all in Jesus's name. Amen.