

Title: And when you pray  
Text: Matthew 6.5-8  
Theme: How not to pray  
Series: Matthew #27  
Prop Stmtnt: Prayer is one of the most effective and dangerous things we can do.

Read Text:

If I began this sermon expressing consternation and grave concern for the youth of our country because of what took place at the Video Music Awards this past Sunday night, most of you would agree with me. If I gave you statistical evidence for the sex-trafficking industry, the pornography industry, and the proliferations of gangs then you would be alarmed. If I addressed our nation's run-away debt along with the moral, financial, ethical and even medical disaster that Obama-care portends, most of you would not only agree but would also feel a sense of comfort and even resolve knowing that someone is speaking publicly about these matters.

But we are studying the Sermon on the Mount. We are studying the first sermon that Jesus preached and arguably the greatest sermon that has ever been recorded. Matthew has written this as part of his gospel in which he is displaying the amazing glory, beauty, majesty, wisdom, humility, meekness, purity and grace of our King and our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus does not work the crowd. He does not start with humor, then interject interesting anecdotes, personal illustrations, savvy quotes and human interest stories only to end with a tear-jerking account of a needy child all to prime them for the offering that he collects. The sermon, in fact, concludes almost as abruptly as it begins. This is a sermon that we can read for the rest of our lives and we will never fully grasp. Jesus could certainly have worked the crowd by complaining about the Romans and pointing out the abuses of the current tax system and the decadent immorality of the government. He is aware of all of these things as we discover later on in his ministry. However, he starts with us. He starts with us, because we tend to start with others. Do you know what I mean?

If I took a survey this morning and asked you what was wrong with our world? How many of you would say that the biggest problem with our world is our country? If I asked you what is the biggest problem with our country, how many of you would say that it is the Christians? What if I asked you what the biggest frustration you have with our church is, what would you say? How many of you would say, that it is you? We do not think like this? We assume that we are better than what we are. It seems that we are more opposed to the sinners that Jesus came to save, than we are concerned about our own sin that Jesus came to expose. If I were to ask you what the biggest problem in your marriage was, how many of you would instinctively say, "I am" and really believe it?

You see it again. You see how the beatitudes at the beginning of this sermon drive everything that Christ says in the rest of the message. He begins by saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The humble person is so concerned about his own sin that he is not inclined to come down with fury on the sins of others. Why does Jesus say, "Beware of

practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them”? Why the warning? Why the use of such an urgent word? Because we are so inclined to dress up for church. We are so vulnerable to impure motives when we are engaged in some of the most intimate acts as a believer. The big idea is presented in v.1. Christ then gives three examples of how we tend to practice our righteousness before other people. Those three examples are; giving (vs. 2-4), praying (vs. 5-15) and fasting (vs.16-18).

Why is Christ so intense about this? His language is strong! Beware! Literally, place your mind intently upon this. Watch your life carefully so that you do not do good things for the purpose of being seen by others. In other words, Christ is exposing our tendency to perform for the approval of others. If I perform well, then I am valued. My validation as a person is based upon how well I perform before you. I think that because I tend to believe that my validation as a person is ultimately based on how well I perform before God. The better my performance, the greater my validation. Wrong! I am not validated by what I do. I am accepted, I am declared righteous, I am validated only on the basis of what Christ has done. Do you see the point now? Christ is very intense about this because our behavior of practicing righteousness for the approval of others is based upon the sinful, self-centered, and gospel-denying view that my fundamental acceptance by God is based on my behavior. Now listen carefully. I am not suggesting that the way that we live is irrelevant; not at all! I am saying that our relationship with God is rooted in Christ’s performance for us, not our performance for him. We are credited with Christ’s performance (his life and death) when we trust in him as our Savior and King. Our faith in Christ will be put on display in how we live. For example...

I need to give to the needy. Giving to the needy is assumed by Christ (v.3). But, beware, when you do that. Charities have learned how to increase the amount of money they raise for their cause. If you reward big donors with recognition, you will not only get more money, but big donors tend to attract big donors. And if you get a bunch of big donors, just think of all of the good that you can do? Right? But Jesus said, “Beware!” Beware because you are so vulnerable to taking an activity that is to be for the glory of God and perverting it into an action that is for the glory of you.

Here is the challenge? If no one but God would ever know what you gave, would you give? Would you give generously? Well, do you? You studied this last Sunday. But, Jesus does not say all that much about money, yet. He does, however, say a lot about prayer. So, let’s consider the next challenge that Jesus is setting forth. If no one but God would ever know that you prayed, would you pray?

I. **Jesus assumes that you pray.** (5a)

*“And when you pray...”*

Prayer is simply talking to God. Prayer is the automatic response and habit of a needy person. We are needy people. We need God. We were made to be dependent on God. We were made to not trust ourselves, but to instead, trust in God. Therefore, the only reason why we do not cultivate a life of prayer is because we do not believe the fact that

we are needy people. We do not realize how dependent we are upon God for the air that we breathe.

Do you remember the term, homeostasis? Homeostasis refers to the processes used by the body to constantly achieve and maintain healthy balance within our bodies. Your body is built in with all kinds of monitors that are adjusting the delicate status of all sorts of functions. One of the contributing factors to your health is these little things called capillaries. Capillaries are really tiny. In fact they are only the size of a single cell. Many of you know that your arteries are the blood vessels that transport blood away from your heart and that veins are the blood vessels that transport blood back to your heart. For example you have a carotid artery (not a corroded artery) that supplies blood to your brain and a jugular vein that transports blood from your brain back to your heart. Arteries carry blood away from the heart to the digestive tract, to the kidneys, to your trunk and legs. But, have you ever wondered how the blood gets back? That is what happens in the capillaries. Capillaries are these series of extremely tiny blood vessels at the end of the arteries that connect to the veins. These capillaries are so tiny, and their membranes are so thin that the tiniest of particles can pass between them, like oxygen. Oxygen that is in the blood actually diffuses out in the capillaries so that it can provide oxygen to the surrounding cells. At the same time, waste material that is being discarded by the cells is absorbed by these capillaries and put into the blood, so that the blood can transport the waste out.

Ok, everyone take in a breath. Hold it for a second and let it out. Now, when you take in a breath, oxygen goes into your lungs where it is applied to your blood. Now, your blood is oxygenated, at least half of it. Your pulmonary veins (the only veins in the body that have oxygenated blood, all other veins have deoxygenated blood), that is the veins that connect the lungs back to the heart take this oxygenated blood back to your heart through the left atrium. When the left atrium relaxes, then the oxygenated blood drains into the left ventricle. Now the heart really compresses, and as the left ventricle contracts, this oxygenated blood is pumped into the main artery of the body known as the aorta. The aorta connects to the other arteries which connect to other arteries which eventually connect with the capillaries. So, you breathe in oxygen that goes into your lungs, into your blood, into the pulmonary veins, into your heart, into your aorta, into your arteries, into other arteries, eventually into capillaries, where that oxygen gets to your muscles so that your arms, hands, legs, feet, toes, ears, eyes, can function. But, even as these capillaries are dropping off oxygen they are picking up carbon dioxide where that is diffused into your blood where it is eventually transported back to your lungs, where it transfers from the blood to your lung proper so that when you exhale you rid your body of it.

Most of us live our lives oblivious to the fact that this and thousands of other tiny processes are going on inside of our bodies. All it takes for things to go sideways is for inflammation to start wrecking some havoc in there, or for some cells to start a rebellion and begin infecting other cells and other cells to the point where the body cannot rid itself of them naturally. Now, we have a tumor, and many of you can take the story from there. We are not indestructible. We are vulnerable. We are dependent upon everything working

together. And what is worse, is that we tend to live our lives oblivious to the fact that we are moment by moment dependent upon the mercy and grace of God for every single bodily process and for every single thought of him and affection for him and hope in him.

Prayer is the response of the one who realizes that I am moment-by-moment, day-by-day by day, completely dependent upon my Creator to sustain me. Jesus assumes that you pray because he assumes that you realize that you only live one breath at a time because of the mercy of God.

We can all find hypocrites. We can all identify them. There is no shortage of hypocrites. One guy told me once that he did not go to church because of all of the hypocrites. I told him to come anyway. One more wouldn't hurt. The truth is, we all have inconsistencies in our lives and to that extent we appear to be hypocrites. But a hypocrite is not someone who is perfect. A hypocrite is someone who pretends. That is why we hate hypocrisy so much. Hypocrisy creates pretend relationships. And now, we are getting to the heart of this. Jesus is exposing pretenders. Jesus knows the truth about us. We are needy people who are used to pretending that we are sufficient people. So, here is a compound problem. Do you see it? We do not pray because we are hypocrites. We do not pray because we are pretending that we do not need God. That is a colossal absurdity! It is fundamentally hypocritical not to pray. Just as, it is fundamentally hypocritical not to go to church. Because you are pretending that you do not need others. You do not need the Word of God preached to you; you do not need the body of believers; that when you were saved, you were saved all by yourself into a kingdom where you are the only person in it.

But, what Jesus is warning against is how we are capable of taking the activity of prayer, which is to be an expression of our utter dependence upon God and pervert it into exalting ourselves. This is stunning! This is how naturally inclined to evil my heart is. My heart is capable of taking prayer (gasping for God) and making it a means to make myself look good before others.

## II. **Jesus knows how prayer can be in vain.** (5b, 7-8)

Three times Jesus is giving this warning. “you must not be like the hypocrites” (5) “do not heap up empty phrases” (7) “Do not be like them.” (8) He is serious! This is what is so dangerous. We are doing a “good” thing. We are praying, right? But, be careful. What does your prayer life look like? It was common in those days for people in Israel to stop and pray at the morning and evening sacrifice (9a and 3p). Some would do this discreetly, while others made sure that others knew what they were doing. Jesus is describing the person who at 8.58am and 2.58 pm is rushing through the marketplace in the city in order to get to the busiest corner in order to pray in front of the largest possible audience.

Prayer is in vain when...

### A. **It is done for the wrong audience.** (5b)

There are times when you pray, when you will be and you should be, heard by others. But, prayer is not ultimately to be done with the approval of others in mind. That is pretend. You are pretending to talk to God, but in reality you are talking to others. This is a helpful issue for me to address because we are called to pray publicly as a body of believers. So, what should happen when Ken prays for our new members? He says, “Will you join me as we pray?” Or he says, “let us pray.” What does that mean “us” pray? That means that all of us are to be praying. That means that all of us are to join with him as he prays as our spokesman. We listen and we agree as he prays as the voice for all of us. This is not a formality. This is the body gasping for air. If we do not have air, we die. If we do not have God, we die. We need God. Prayer is gasping for God-oxygen.

Now, what just happened when I said that? You resonated with that, didn't you? You said, ‘Yea’! Ok, when Ken is praying for our new members, we, all of us, should be gasping for God-oxygen. We should all be crying out to God that God will bless Alison, Alan, Nancy and Jeanette because we know that life as a believer is challenging. And there are many temptations and trials and that only by the grace of God will Alison and Alan and Nancy and Jeanette endure, persevere, grow and flourish. We care for them. We are desperate to God for them, because the fact that they are joined with us, is not going to guarantee that they will be fine. We are a mess! So, when Ken prays, we need to be praying with him. We are to be agreeing with Ken in prayer. Now, this is personal, so I will gladly admit that this is my opinion. I find it very helpful for me to talk out loud while another person is praying. When I am in agreement with them I find myself saying, “hmm-hmm, yes, that’s right, oh yea.” But, of course, prayer like this brings up the challenge of saying these things in order to be thought of as being spiritual by those standing next to me. And it is tempting for the one giving the prayer to say things in order to hear congregational response. The issue is the heart! Prayer is always to be done to God, otherwise it is pretend.

Prayer is in vain when...

**B. It is done for the wrong goal. (5b)**

Prayer that is done “to be seen by others” is successful in being seen by others. But, prayer that is done to be seen by others is a complete waste of time. In fact, it is worse than that. Prayer that is done to be seen by others is dangerous because it is pretending. And when you pretend, you are trying to deceive others. But, as always, the one who uses God (prayer) in order to deceive others is always the one who is deceived. So, you have your reward. What is it? It is the approval and admiration of others. How valuable and long lasting is that? Get a reward that will last!

Prayer is in vain when...

**C. It is done in the wrong way.**

Heart-exposing phrase – “*they think that they will be heard for their many words*” Wow! Why are we prone to think that if we use many words, that we are more likely to be

heard? Do we seriously think that God is hard of hearing, or is ADHD, or is stingy, and reluctant to respond to us? When you pray, do you think that you are informing God of anything? Obviously not! (8) God knows before you ask. Ask, not to inform him, but to acknowledge your need of him. But, in your asking, you do not need to say the same thing fifteen different ways. Jesus prayed long prayers at times. And we should pray long prayers when there is a lot to pray for. But, we should not pray long prayers, if we think that the length of our prayer will determine God's answer.

Let's say that Monday is trash day in your neighborhood and this afternoon your wife says, "Honey, will you put on your shoes, making certain that they are tied carefully, so that you do not trip on the strings, and then step through the kitchen being mindful of the chairs that you do not stumble and make your way toward the door in order to grasp the knob firmly with your right hand and then turn the knob to the right on the door leading into the garage, where, after closing the door behind you, making certain that it closes completely, you lift the lid of the trash container and placing both hands around the outer edges, you carefully release the edges of the trash bag from the plastic trash container and then slowly lift the bag of trash from it, when you then pull the draw strings of the trash bag and tie them neatly before you lift it up. Then will you lift it up with one hand, making certain that it does not leak and with the other supporting it on the bottom so that the bag does not rip, will you carefully carry the bag of trash out of the garage, watching the car on your right and the lawnmower on your left, and edger after that and the weed whacker after that, and make your way down the driveway, carefully stepping over the crevices so that you do not trip, until you get to the sidewalk, and then look both ways for any children on their bikes or neighbors walking their pets, so that you do not run into them, will you then proceed to the curb, carefully making certain that no cars are coming, because if you were hit by a car while carrying the trash, they might argue that it was your fault because the height of the bag that you were carrying could possibly impede your ability to see clearly, and then set the bag down at the curb and watch for a minute to see whether it leans too much to one side or the other, for if it does, you may need to adjust it in such a manner so that it neither falls over, and so that the top of the bag is easily grasped by the trash guys tomorrow morning. Then walk mindfully back up the driveway ... "DO YOU THINK I AM AN IDIOT?" Do you do that? No! What do you say? "Honey, will take out the trash?" Do you see what Jesus is saying here? Do not pray as if God's an idiot.

God does not need to be informed. This means that I do not need every detail about someone's situation, or medical condition in order to "pray intelligently". Seriously, shorten the amount of time that you spend sharing requests, so that you can lengthen the time that you actually pray.

### III. **Jesus knows how prayer is supposed to be.** (6)

There are times when we pray by ourselves. There are times when we pray in groups of two and three and a bit more. There are times when we pray as a church. When you pray by yourself, do not pray in order that others might see you praying. When you pray in a small group, do not pray as a small group in order to be seen by others. When you pray as

a church, do not pray as a church in order to impress others. Prayer, even as a community of believers should be done with a sense that we, as a body of believers, are talking privately with God. We are as one body, meeting with God.

Cornerstone, we have much to learn about prayer. We have a great deal of growing and maturing in this area. We tend to live as if we do not need God. Therefore, we are not only going to concentrate on this prayer in the sermons over the next couple of months but we are going to be intentional about applying what we are hearing. A praying church is characterized by people who have a vibrant prayer life, both individually and in groups and as a body. In the next few days, we are going to be sending to you, by email, a prayer survey. This will be anonymous, but will help us know the areas where we need to address. Our small groups are going to be focusing their times of discussion, not only on prayer because that is what the sermons will be about for the next couple of months, but will also be more intentional in praying together. And then on Friday night October 4, from 7 PM to midnight we are going to be gathering together for a concentrated evening of instruction, worship and prayer. Much of the prayer focus of the evening will be on praying for people who need to come to faith in Christ. We plan to do these two evenings per year. Praying for people around us who need Christ and for the desperate need in the Detroit area for healthy gospel churches and then in the other evening praying for global missions and the persecuted church. I am asking God to use the teaching of Christ in Matthew 6 to be a catalyst that helps us see that we are a people who are gasping for God, and that he is a God who gives us pure oxygen.