

# A PATTERN FOR PRAYER

by Steve Zeisler

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Consider this proposition: It is usually more interesting to talk about celebrities than to talk to them. It's fun to name-drop, to bask in the celebrity of other people saying things like, "The other night I was at the White House with Bill and Hillary, and we talked about affairs of state...." But many people who are famous and important are self-centered, arrogant, and used to being catered to. It may be more fun to talk about some of them than to actually have to endure being with them—imagine spending an evening with someone having the notoriety of Roseanne, Woody Allen, or Barry Bonds.

The opposite, however, is true of a relationship with God. Reference to his name is reference to the most remarkable name; he is the greatest of personalities. But it is always better to spend time with God than to bask in the glory of remembered intimacies with him. It is better to pray than to be known as someone who prays. In the passage before us Jesus is going to raise the question of whether our enthusiasm for prayer is meant to impress other people, or to actually accomplish nearness to God. Matthew 6:5-15:

"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 men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 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. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think 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.

"This, then, is how you should 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 today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from the evil one."

Some manuscripts add a doxology at this point: "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever." That is not in the best manuscripts, though the language is beautiful and edifying.

"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

## **Neither hypocrites or pagans**

There are two main ideas in this teaching on prayer that we need to pay attention to. Jesus says first, "Don't be like the hypocrites when you pray," and second, "Don't be like the pagans when you pray." One has to do with whom we are concerned about when we pray. The other has to do with the words of our prayer, the content of it.

If you remember the setting, we are in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' marvelous discipleship training that

took place when he gathered his disciples to him on a hill in Galilee. In chapter 6 is a series of declarations he makes about spiritual disciplines. He says there are three aspects of religious endeavor that might concern us, two of which we looked at in the last message (Discovery Paper 4411): giving generously to the poor, because God's heart is burdened for them; and fasting, or deliberately denying ourselves something that we habitually engage in in order to be able to think of the Lord without distraction. Now the third and most important of these is before us: deliberately coming into the presence of the Lord in prayer.

All these religious activities can be done to gain the respect of the people around us so that they regard us as holy people, or they can be done because we really love and want to know God. The ancient Jews, like Muslims today and many other religious people, had set times for prayer. Devout Jews would pray in the morning, at midday, and at dusk. So you could arrange your schedule so that when the hour for prayer came you were in the market. You could drop to your knees and loudly call upon the Lord, apparent to everyone and within earshot. But if you preferred time with the Lord to be something that wasn't gazed at and commented on by others, you could arrange it so that when the hour for prayer came, you were by yourself, and your prayers were about you and the Lord rather than about you and the applause of the crowd.

Recall that in Matthew 5:16 Jesus says that lights shouldn't be put under bushels and that cities ought to be set upon hills; others should see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven. In Matthew 5:10 Jesus also says that we may be persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Observing that God is making himself known to us and that our being transformed may lead others to either glorify God or persecute us. We might ask whether that conflicts to some degree with what Jesus is saying here about being hidden in these things. But Jesus has not contradicted himself. The essential issue in chapter 6 is our motives. If we care deeply, honestly, and fully about God and long to obey him, it is going to make us different people; and others are going to notice it as a matter of course. But we should not act so that we call attention to ourselves, longing for the approval of other people. Then, as the Lord says, we will have our reward in full.

### **Being with our father**

Let's look now at the first of the two paragraphs in our text. Jesus says, "Do not be like the hypocrites...." The alternative to praying in a place where people can be impressed with your prayer is to enter your room, close the door, and speak to your Father in secret; to have a father-child relationship with God that means so much to you that you long for intimacy with him. The reason for your prayer is God, not what others see.

There is a story that William Barclay wrote in his comments on the Sermon on the Mount about an ancient emperor whose son was on the dais as a parade honoring the emperor passed by. The trumpets, then the incense, and eventually the emperor and his chariot went by. At that point the little boy leaped off the dais, ran down the street. One guard stopped him as he neared the chariot and said, "Don't you realize that's the emperor?" The boy said, "He is your emperor, but he is my Father" Similarly, God is not a celebrity, someone we seek because of the name recognition that accrues to us. We seek him because he is our Father.

Unfortunately, there are even subtle ways in which we can call attention to the fact of going into our room. Instead of praying on the street corner, we can have a life of daily quiet times, but make references to it or in some other way call attention to it.

A number of years ago Ray Stedman and I were at a men's retreat at Mount Hermon. A big football game was on television Saturday afternoon, so we drove down to a pizza place to watch the game, then returned. Because of the parking situation we had to walk some distance to get back to the conference. I later overheard some people talking about how the two of us had gone off together on a prayer walk, and how touching it was to see the senior pastor and the younger man going off together to spend time with the Lord. I was getting credit for something that wasn't really happening.

Of course, the tension was whether to interrupt this conversation and tell them what really happened, or let them keep their assumption. In any case, we must not promote a reputation for "praying in secret."

God wants to give us much more than even the best human father would give us. So Jesus says if we are

captured by knowing this Father who is better than we can imagine and who longs for us more than we will ever understand, and it is he waiting for us in the quiet place, we will go there to be with him for his sake, caring not at all about whether anybody else notes it.

Jesus says we shut the door; we close off distractions around. We don't allow the calendar that sits on the desk to yell at us about doing what it says. We shut the door on the phone, TV, radio, and newspaper and go to be with him.

Our Father sees what is done in secret, but he himself is unseen. That is, when we enter into his presence we don't see his form or hear him. So we can't read his body language when we pray. A lot of conversations are predicated on the response we're getting, aren't they? If you're talking to someone and they smile in an engaging way and lean forward, showing that they want to hear more, then you're stimulated to say more. You tailor what you're saying to get the response you want. If they're yawning and rolling their eyes and the body language is negative, you try some other tack.

But the Lord says we don't see our Father's response, so praying to him is an act of faith. His invisibility leads to honest expression on our part.

The final point to note about this intimate prayer is that our Father rewards us. He who sees what is done in secret and is himself unseen is not critically judging our prayer, sifting it for errors, looking for some way to be done with us. So often I find myself hesitating or detouring around prayer because I don't think I'm very good at it, and I hate the feeling of being inadequate at things. I like doing things in which I have a sense of competency. Yet the Lord longs to reward every effort we make, even the stumbling ones, the non-religious language, the shallowness of the things we pray about, and returning with the same problems over and over again. This is our Father we're speaking to, and he wants to do good to us.

## **Real communication**

The second major point Jesus makes is that we should not be misinformed about the things we're saying in prayer. He says, "Do not keep babbling like the pagans (idolators)," that is, those who are neither Jews nor Christians. Their problem is that they think the formulations of the words are of supreme importance. They memorize phrases and learn certain types of prayer to be spoken in specific settings; for instance, one type of prayer at meals and another type at sunrise. They say the words over and over again. Their prayer succeeds based on the degree of intensity or frequency with which they pray. Yelling it is better than speaking it. Saying it fifty times is better than saying it ten times. The words are nothing more than formulas. But what God really wants is conversation, real communication between Father and child.

Prayer that depends on formulas is not real prayer. The concern God has is not how we say it, but what is behind the words that is giving them voice. I know many people who hesitate to pray because they think they sound squeaky and childish or not very religious in prayer; they feel a bit clumsy in their language, and surely God deserves better. They're concerned that they're saying things inadequately because they don't know the right words. But God doesn't care about the quality of the language.

I was at a prayer meeting not long ago with a person I respect very much, a great prayer warrior who prays often, well, thoughtfully, and theologically. This person's prayer went on at great length. The folks that had met for prayer didn't know each other well and came from different traditions. There were young Christians present, and one person probably wasn't even a Christian at all. By the time the prayer warrior was finished, everyone else was too intimidated to say anything; in view of this long, beautiful prayer they had lost the hope that what they had to say to God would mean anything. But we can overcome such feelings. The words we use are not as important as whether we are saying something real and meaningful to us, something that a father would want to hear from his child because he loves them, not because he wants them to get it right.

Now Jesus goes on to give a pattern or outline to use for prayer. He is not advocating just saying the words of the Lord's prayer over and over again. The point is that this is a place to start. It shows us an order for prayer, the kinds of things to talk about. We can include our hopes and struggles-our circumstances, our thoughts, and our feelings-within this pattern.

In Luke 11, in a different context, there is another version of the Lord's Prayer. Jesus' disciples saw him praying and said, "Lord, teach us to pray." I think he taught this often as a good outline for people to use to learn to pray.

### **He already knows our needs**

We're going to look at this pattern in a moment, but there are two other points, one prior to and one following his prayer, that we should look at first by way of context. He says even before he tells them how to pray, "...Your Father knows what you need before you ask him." So we are to begin our prayer with that clear recognition. Our prayer is not informative. God is not waiting to find out, "What do you really think? What are your real priorities? What matters to you?" He already knows.

We can see this point by imagining a three-year-old child trying to be tricky. Christmas is coming, and in their Sunday school class they've made a gift for their mommy or daddy. They sneak it home and try to go in their room and wrap it so the parent won't see it. But it's completely obvious what is going on, and the wrapping is so badly done that the parent knows what's inside before it's opened.

And yet the effort on the part of the child to give a gift is pleasing to their parents and received with complete enthusiasm. They love the effort not because the gift is a surprise to them, but because of what was behind it. The child is saying, "I need you, I love you, and I appreciate you." We make our requests known to God not to inform him, but because it reminds us where life really comes from, and because God can then communicate his love and approval to us.

### **The gift of forgiveness**

What Jesus says following the prayer in verses 14-15 is also important: "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." In the prayer itself Jesus talks about being forgiven and forgiving. If our forgiveness is going to be as full as it ought to be, if we are going to receive real grace and mercy from God's heart, it is not going to be because we earned any of it. We didn't, we earned his enmity. But if we receive his forgiveness, necessarily that will issue in our becoming the kind of people who forgive others; it will free us to be gracious to them.

But if forgiveness is earned by us, then we will be the kind of people who say, "Of course God will forgive me-I deserve it. My sins are small; I'm the type (unlike you) who ought to be forgiven." As long as our forgiveness has any kind of merit attached to it, then we will not really be forgiven of God; we will not have received forgiveness as a gift from his heart. We will discover that by how we treat other people.

It is real prayer, really entering into God's presence, that is going to make us the kind of people who live based on the truth we're receiving. I hope that you will be encouraged to pray by this look at the Lord's Prayer, that the result will be a deep and lasting enthusiasm to become a man or woman of prayer.

### **Our father in heaven**

The prayer starts, "Our Father in heaven...." A number of things are gathered together in that phrase. First of all, the possessive pronoun is plural: *our* Father in heaven. Jesus has just finished talking about private prayer in your closet by yourself. But it is also true that God has more than one child. When we pray to our Father we are recognizing that not only are we in relationship with him, but we are brothers and sisters with one another, part of a community of people who know and love him, who have received his love. He is Father to us all. It builds community immediately just to begin prayer this way.

He is, again, our loving Father who cares for us-not an ogre, judge, policeman, or peer.

The statement that he is in heaven makes a couple of helpful points. One is that he is not a local god. The gods of the ancients were the god of a hill, a stone, a lake, a region, etc. As long as you were in a god's locale, they might bless you or not. Everywhere you went in the world you had to find out who was in charge of the

region, the weather, or the battle you were in, and make sure that this god was on your side. But our Father is Lord of all, transcendent in heaven. He reigns above every authority. We are never outside of his care.

Perhaps as well, by speaking of him in heaven, we are reminding ourselves that heaven is our home too; we're going to be where our Father is some day. This world is not the main thing, just the preliminary.

### **Re-ordering our priorities**

There are three petitions that follow that are about God, and three others that are about us. Both sets are important, as is the order they come in. Having addressed God as he really is, it is very important to speak of the things that matter to him first, to enter into his mind and heart, to re-order ourselves around his priorities and his values. But it is also very appropriate, having done that to speak to God about the world as we experience it.

The first petition made about God is that his name should be hallowed or holy. Names for Semitic people, especially Hebrews, were always a profound thing. Your name was who you were. For your name to be honored, or ruined, or ruined was for you yourself to have that experience. The word breathtaking might be a good synonym for holy here. Saying God (acknowledge him as he is) ought to take our breath away.

The second petition is that his kingdom should come, meaning that all rivals should be banished from the stage. He is Lord and King and Sovereign of all, and wherever any idea is raised in opposition to him-whether love of money, love of pleasure, confidence in technology, or human strength praising itself and denying the Lord-these should be thrown down.

The third petition, "...Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," reminds us that there should be no halfheartedness in our response to God. We should enter into his will, what he intends for us and calls us to, with an absolute abandon, thrilled to be given the opportunity to obey him. In heaven, the angels adore obedience. They long to know what he thinks so they may do it instantly. The prayer is that on earth we will long to obey that way, too.

We can use our own words to say and think these things. We can pray the psalms, for instance. We can pray any number of ways that come out of our real world, asking God to order our thinking about himself in this way.

### **Bringing our needs to him**

Having thought with our Father about himself, it is very appropriate for us to say, "Lord, regarding my needs, may I have today's bread?" This is a request for the most ordinary of things---sustenance. I have prayed for coffee at times. It is appropriate to pray even about things that don't seem at all religious, but that matter to us-our physical bodies and physical lives. I have prayed, "I really think this car is going to run out of gas. Lord, please allow me to make it to the next off-ramp where there's a gas station." God cares enough about us that it is appropriate to speak to him of those things.

The second petition about us is that our debts or sins be forgiven: "Please, Lord, remove the weight of failure from me. Cancel out my failures and I will forgive others as well."

The last petition concerns the future: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." This is saying, "I don't trust myself for the future. I am naive and easily fooled. I could be taken advantage of by the evil one by this afternoon unless you will lead me."

I have had occasions when I was away from my family for two or three weeks. On these trips I always took a picture of my family with me. And I would take out the picture often in the evening and think of them. I would pray for my children and remember their smiles; think of my wife, and pray gratefully for her. But the striking thing to me is how often I fail to communicate when I'm home. Conversation with the kids often amounts to no more than, "Take out the garbage," "I don't want to do my homework," and so on. The conversation with my wife will often be about our routines and responsibilities. When we're apart we think about the real, deep,

heartfelt things. When we're together, having every opportunity every day to have those kind of conversations, we don't.

In many respects we're like that with the Lord. There is nothing preventing us from praying except that we don't get around to it, we don't value it enough, we're too embarrassed about it, or we feel inadequate for it. But none of that needs to impede us; this conversation with our Father can happen anytime. I hope that as we hear Jesus' words here, we will become prayerful people as a result.

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