

“GET REAL...WITH GOD”  
MATTHEW 6:5-8

It was Monday morning, August 17, 1998, and the political pundits and pollsters were hard at work. That evening President Bill Clinton would be giving a nationally televised address confessing to his inappropriate relationship with a White House intern, and seeking the nation’s forgiveness. Throughout the day these pundits and pollsters were seeking to gauge the sentiments of the American people. In particular, they were attempting to discover what it would take for the President to weather this storm and salvage his presidency.

Most all of them were agreed. President Clinton needed to address the American people directly. He needed to prepare a short, well-crafted speech in which he would accept responsibility for his indiscretions. He needed to come across as humble and sincere. He needed to display an attitude of contrition. He needed to sound remorseful about what he put his wife and daughter through.

In short, he needed to use every last one of his superb public relation skills to put on the best performance of his life. And if he could do all these things, they said, he could survive. Given his reputation as the Comeback Kid, he might even be able to maintain his approval rating which was hovering north of 65%.

That’s politics. More often than not, it seems, it’s not so much about who you are in private; it’s about the image you project in public. It’s not so much about your character as it is about how convincing you are. It’s not about authenticity; it’s about persuasiveness and popularity. After all, at the end of the day, how people mark their ballots is all that really matters.

Last week, in our exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, Cole introduced the subject of religious performance in Matthew 6. Jesus called these religious performers “hypocrites,” a derogatory term that means “fakes” or “phonies.” What was so astonishing for Jesus’ audience was that these hypocrites were their spiritual heroes. They were the Pharisees. So when Jesus called them out in Matthew 6 He was not only indicting Pharisees for their phony religiosity, He was indicting the Jews for being impressed with them, for thinking that their religious performances were the standard for God-pleasing behavior.

Without actually saying the words, Jesus reiterated God’s message to Samuel when he was about to anoint one of Jesse’s sons as the next king of Israel. *“People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart”* (1 Sam. 16:7). Man is easily impressed with external things like handsomeness, winsomeness, eloquence, and charm. God is not impressed with any of that. He’s interested in who a person is on the inside. He’s impressed with humility, sincerity, and authenticity.

And when it comes to our spiritual activities God *insists* that we do them with humility, sincerity, and authenticity. If we don’t, then God will not respond to them—He will not bless them or reward them. That is precisely what Jesus said in verse 1 of Matthew 6, *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”*

Jesus goes on to address three common ways that people practice righteousness—giving to the needy, praying, and fasting. He tells us how hypocrites practice them, and then He tells us how God wants us to practice them. But verse 1 is the key to understanding the whole passage, because Jesus tells us that when we do these things, motive is everything. If we do them to be seen by others, if we perform them so that others will be impressed with us, we might get the approval and applause of gullible people, but we won’t get anything

from God.

Last week Cole told us what Jesus said about giving to the needy. Today we are going to explore what He said about prayer. Look at **Matthew 6:5-8** <sup>5</sup>“*And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.*” <sup>6</sup>“*But when 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.*” <sup>7</sup>“*And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.*” <sup>8</sup>“*Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him*” (ESV).

Jews placed great emphasis on prayer. They viewed prayer as the supreme privilege and highest priority of God’s people. Prayer was so prominent in their culture they could set their clocks by it. When they awoke in the morning, the first thing they did was recite a prayer called the Shema—“*The Lord our God, the Lord, He is one. I will love the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind and strength.*” At the end of the day they repeated this prayer, and sandwiched in between the Shema were various set times and occasions throughout the day in which different kinds of prayers were prescribed.

A particular prayer was offered when a Jew entered a city—another when he left. A special prayer was given when certain items were purchased, or when one saw the sea or crossed a river. If you lived in the city, you would be reminded to pray on the hours of 9:00, 12:00 and 3:00. A trumpet would blow as a signal that you should stop your activity, turn toward the temple, and pause for a few moments of prayer.

That’s not a bad thing. Certainly, remembering God throughout the day and committing every area of life to him is desirable and commendable. But often, when something is prescribed, it can turn into a rote, mindless activity. It can also be exploited by people who have a propensity for self-promotion.

Apparently, there were people in Jesus’ day who made sure that at 9, 12, and 3 they positioned themselves in prominent places, so as to get the most PR per prayer. Jesus called them hypocrites. You’ve heard of play-actors? These were pray-actors. People who prayed in order to be noticed, in order to impress people. The common practice of these pray-formers was to make sure they were in the right place at the right time. And so, when the trumpet sounded they could generally be seen in one of two places.

The synagogue was one. It was the place they met on the Sabbath for services, but it was bustling with activity every other day of the week. The synagogue was used as a court of law, a seminary, a library, and a marketplace. It was the central meeting hall around which their community revolved. It was the place men went when they didn’t have anything else to do, so there were always crowds of men loitering about the synagogue at any given time.

Because of this, the synagogue was a wonderful place for hypocrites to hang out, because when the trumpet blew, they always had a large audience who could watch them *pray-form*.

The second place hypocrites liked to be at 9, 12, and 3:00 was the street corner. There are at least two words in Greek for “street.” One refers to a narrow lane, the other to a wide, heavily traveled avenue. This word is the latter. And notice, they didn’t just stand on the sidewalk, they positioned themselves on the *corner* where, again, they could get the most exposure, attention, and publicity.

For hypocrites, it was all about “location, location, location.” Why? Because,

according to Jesus, they wanted to be *seen* by others. They wanted people to be impressed with them and think they were spiritual.

And Jesus says, “They may get approval and applause from men, but that’s all they’ll get.” They’ve received their reward. The word translated *received* in my version was commonly used in business transactions. It was stamped or written on a receipt and given to a customer. It means, *paid in full*. In other words, that person had no obligation to give you any more, because you got what you paid for. Therefore, it’s *all* you are going to get.

Jesus is saying that God has no obligation to respond to the insincere prayers of hypocrites. He is not interested in watching performances, no matter how highly acclaimed the actor is in the eyes of his peers. And so, if you want to receive something from God, you need to take a different approach in your prayer life. **Verse 6.** *6 But when 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.*

The room that Jesus is talking about is a small storeroom (like a closet) which was the only room that offered privacy in a first century Palestinian home. It was the only room with a door that could be locked because valuables were kept there.

Jesus says, “You’ll find something else valuable in that closet. It’s there, in that private, secret place that you’ll find God’s blessing. It’s there that God will reward you. Why? Because in that quiet, secret place where no one else is listening, you won’t be tempted to show-off. You won’t be self-conscious about how you say your words or how your words will come across to others who are present. Since your only audience is your heavenly Father, you can be real. You can be absolutely sincere. You can pour out your heart to Him—and you can use words...or not. He sees what’s in your heart, He can read your mind, and He can interpret sighs and tears and silence just as well as He can interpret words. He sees in secret.

So forget this notion that in order to be an effective *pray-er* you have to say the right words with the right tones in the right setting. Eloquence has nothing whatsoever to do with effective prayer. It’s not that eloquence is bad; it’s not a factor in making prayer effective. Some people are eloquent by nature, and that’s fine, but people who are not eloquent are not disadvantaged when it comes to prayer, because effective prayer is about sincerity. God wants us to be real with Him. When we are real He rewards us.

More about that in a moment, but first, look at **verses 7-8.** *7 “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”*

The word “empty phrases” is translated “babble” in other versions, and it means *senseless chatter*. It was used to describe the activity of someone who prattles on and on about nothing.

Pagans in the first century, who prayed to their many gods, believed that answers to prayer were given in proportion to the length of their prayers. The rationale was simple: If you pester the gods long enough, you’ll get their attention and they’ll give you what you want just to get you to stop bothering them.

Do you remember the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel? In typical pagan fashion they prayed to their gods for hours and hours, repeating the same prayer over and over, hoping to arouse their attention, hoping they would be rewarded for their many words.

That’s not how we relate to our heavenly Father—the one, true God. He’s a God who

already knows everything, even before we open our mouths. Therefore, words, no matter how abundant or eloquent, don't impress Him.

In that same event on Mt. Carmel, Elijah, the prophet of God, witnessed the folly of the pagan prophets throughout the day. And when they had finished their futile babbling it was his turn. He simply prayed, "*Answer me, O Yahweh, answer me, so these people will know that you, Oh Yahweh, are God*" (1 Kings 18:36-37). And immediately God responded by sending fire from heaven.

His prayer must have taken all of ten seconds, but a more dramatic, powerful response was never seen. The point is, being long-winded is not a spiritual virtue. What impresses God is authenticity. He wants us to be real with Him, and when we are real He rewards us.

Jesus reminds us that when we pray we're not telling God anything He doesn't already know. We're not informing Him about so and so or appraising Him about such and such. Look again at **verse 8**. "*...Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*"

You can tell a lot about a person's theology by the way they pray, and when I say that I'm not so much talking about the words they use and how theologically correct those words are. I'm talking about how they address God. Some people pray for something and then proceed to tell God *why* He should give it to them, what will happen *when* He gives it to them, and *how* He should give it to them. Doesn't God already know those things? Jesus said in verse 6 that God sees everything, and in verse 8 that He knows everything. So anyone who thinks he has to inform or instruct God is a poor theologian.

When we enter into God's presence, before we even utter a word, it might be helpful to spend a few moments pondering His attributes and His character. I have found that some of the most poignant times in my personal prayer life are when I am so conscious of God's greatness, His glory, His majesty, and His holiness that I cannot speak. To open my mouth and try to fill the silence with words would, at that moment, be irreverent. And so, I'm just still, but there's more communion in that stillness than when I use words.

I read a story about two of the greatest minds and most influential authors of the last century. They happened to be in the same city one day and decided to spend the evening together. They were in the parlor of a home, where they sat in chairs across the room from one another. It was reported that during the course of the entire evening not a single word was spoken by either man, except at the end of several hours when one of them rose from his chair and said with absolute sincerity, "My friend, I must go but I want to thank you for a delightful evening in your presence."

Prayer, more than anything else, is an opportunity to spend uninterrupted time in the presence of Almighty God. To contemplate His glory and majesty. To be conscious of His awesome character. And as we are conscious of Him our minds are renewed, our attitudes are adjusted, and our wills are aligned with His.

I would suggest to you that the reason we even use words in our prayers is for *our* benefit, not for *His*. He already knows what's in our minds and hearts—He knows a lot better than we ourselves. And so, as we consider Him, as we speak to Him, as we bring to Him our requests the goal is not to inform or instruct Him. The goal is to get on His frequency and think like He thinks, feel what He feels, and want what He wants.

Incidentally, Jesus is not condemning public prayer or fervent, extended prayer times. There are many stories and examples of godly servants in Scripture and in the history of the Church who prayed long and hard, and who saw the Lord work mightily as a result. Jesus is condemning pray-formances and spiritual showmanship. He is saying that God wants us

to be real with Him, and when we are real He rewards us.

Watch your motive. If there is an opportunity for public prayer, and you are tempted to add a little spice to it so as to call attention to yourself, better to not pray at all. If you're tempted to pray things just to get people to think you're a theologically conversant, godly person, better to be quiet. Those prayers won't amount to anything more than personal PR campaign. They certainly won't do anything for your relationship with God, except arouse His displeasure. Better to decline that invitation and go home and pray.

On the other hand, prayer—public prayer, has more potential for good than any other activity. So if you can do it with a sincere heart and a clear conscience, go for it. Don't quench the Spirit. The point is, prayer is sacred, and as such should be kept pure. The ingredients of pure prayer are simplicity and sincerity.

I heard a true story about a young man who had recently put his faith in Christ. He went to church and the pastor, who led him to Christ, said to him, "We're having prayer meeting on Wednesday night and would love to have you join us."

So he came, and after the Bible Study they broke up into small groups to pray. After a few minutes the new believer turned to the pastor and said, "I got a problem. I don't know how to pray. I can't say it the way you guys say it."

The pastor whispered to him, "Thank God for that!"

At some point in the prayer time the pastor could tell this young believer wanted to participate, so he reached over and tapped him on the leg. He began, "God, this is Jim. Remember me? I met you last Thursday. I'm awfully sorry I can't say it the way the rest of these guys say it, but, maybe after I know you a little longer I'll be able to do a better job. I'd just like you to know I really love you. Thanks a lot. I'll see you later."

You know what happened? Jim turned on a prayer meeting. The pastor recounted that all the veterans of the faith had been "saying" prayers. In their prayers they had been taking tours of the mission field, reviewing their theology, going over the medical charts of various ones in the church. But Jim was just talking to God simply and sincerely.

God delights in simple, sincere prayers. He wants us to be real with Him, and when we are real, He rewards us.

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**MAIN IDEA:** GOD WANTS US TO BE REAL WITH HIM, AND WHEN WE ARE HE REWARDS US

PRETENTIOUS PRAY-FORMANCES VERSUS PRIVATE PRAYER (5-6)  
THE PROHIBITION OF HYPOCRITICAL PRAYER (5)  
PUBLIC SPECTACLES

FUTILE STREET PERFORMANCES

THE EFFICACY OF “SECRET” PRAYER (6)  
THE MEANING OF “SECRET”

OUR ALL-SEEING FATHER BLESSES SECRECY

THE RELATIONSHIP OF SECRECY AND SINCERITY

LOQUACIOUS BABBLE VERSUS SIMPLE FAITH (7-8)  
THE PROHIBITION OF PAGAN PRATTLE (7)

THE EFFICACY OF SIMPLE PRAYER (8)  
OUR ALL-KNOWING FATHER CAN READ OUR MINDS

PRAYER AND WORDS

APPLICATION