

THE SECRET PLACE OF PRAYER

Matthew 6:5-6

Intro: It has been eight weeks since I last spoke to you from the Sermon on the Mount. Little did I know, or anyone else on earth know, what was ahead for me in the weeks to come, but especially for Lucille. And at that time none of you knew what you would experience in the following weeks. It applies the same to all of us, as Solomon said so long ago, “Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth” (Prov. 27:1).

The same is true of all of us for the time ahead. We never know what a day holds for us.

But we do know who knows because He has planned our lives, and the future to Him is just as clear as the past. David said in Psalm 37:23 that our very steps are “ordered by the Lord.” And day by day He unfolds the outworking of His marvelous plan. David, who suffered like few men have suffered, also wrote for our encouragement,

As for God, his way is perfect: the word of the LORD is tried: he is a buckler to all those that trust in him (Psa. 18:30).

We often say to each other, “I don’t know what I would do if I didn’t have the Lord,” and then we often add, “I don’t know what people do who don’t have the Lord.”

Trials always mean testing. We discover things about ourselves that we probably never knew before. Our faith is tested. We know that we need to trust in the Lord, and yet the longer the trial goes on, the harder it is for us to trust in the Lord. We know that we need to pray, and yet we can be confused by the fact that many of our prayers are not answered.

Therefore, I feel that it is providential that when I come back to the Sermon on the Mount, I come to these two important verses on prayer. Really, they are very basic verses. We might speak of them as giving us from the mouth of our Lord Himself, *some of the basic don'ts and do's of prayer*. And yet we can't set down absolute rules for prayer because prayer is heart-work. And the Lord was indicating this by what He said. There is something very wrong with a person's heart who prays where and in such a manner that he will have the praise of men. One way we might distinguish between verses 5 and 6 is that verse 5 deals with public prayer, while verse 6 deals with private prayer. And there is no question but that the Lord's emphasis is upon private prayer. This does not mean that there is anything wrong with public prayer, or even praying with someone else.

But we need to be aware of the dangers connected with public prayer. And that is just where the Lord began in His teaching on prayer. And His opening remarks were on:

I. THE PRAYER OF THE HYPOCRITES (Matt. 6:5).

As I have said many times, the word translated “hypocrite” is the Greek word for *an actor*. An actor portrays someone he is not. And his performance has to do with what people see, and what they hear. In verse 7 of this chapter our Lord said that “the heathen ... think that they are heard for their much speaking.” But that is not just true of the heathen. It is often true of pastors and others who lead in public prayer. There is a subtle temptation to draw attention to the words we are using rather than guarding ourselves against anything that would be hypocritical in the eyes of the Lord.

So our Lord warned against praying in public places (and church would be one of them) where our purpose is not to come in true humility before God to seek His blessing, but to impress the people around us as to our piety – which may not be there at all.

Another thing that we need to guard against in connection with public prayer is the possibility that that is where all, or most, of our praying is done. This is a common sin among pastors, or anyone who prays in public. There is the danger that “they love to pray,” but to be seen and heard “of men,” not to be seen and heard by the Lord.

Perhaps the Lord mentioned this first because He knew how prevalent this was among the Jews of His day, particularly the Jewish leaders. Their preference was to pray, either on the street corners, or in the synagogues, where they could be “seen of men.” It seems that it is always true that the effectiveness of public praying always rests upon private praying, and that the person who prays publicly, but never, or very seldom, prays privately, is one whose prayers probably go without the reward of answered prayer.

Now there are many who never pray publicly, but rarely, if ever, do they pray privately, as our Lord described it in the following verse. It behooves every one of us to ask ourselves about the place that prayer, true prayer, has in our lives. But let me pass on to the second verse of my text for today.

II. PRIVATE PRAYER (Matt. 6:6).

I don't know that we have the record of any time that our Lord prayed in

public. We don't even have the record of any time that our Lord prayed *with* His disciples. He took Peter and James and John with Him into the Garden of Gethsemane, but when He prayed, He left them and went farther into the Garden to pray by Himself. There might be some basis for saying that the prayer found in John 17 was prayed *for* His disciples, *in their presence*, but that is not certain. But by far when it came to prayer, the Lord practiced what He preached on the subject of prayer. Prayer to Him was a matter involving the Father and Himself *alone!*

I want to take every part of this verse, and examine each one for our instruction and edification.

First, notice how this verse begins. Our Lord said, "But thou."

At least two things are important about these two words. The first is that they are emphatic. The Lord was indicating that regardless of how others pray, and what their motives might be, you need to be careful that you pray as the Lord wants you to pray. In all things having to do with God there is always a lot of pressure to do what everyone else is doing. We find that is true today. There is a tendency among professing Christians to be very informal, and casual, and often irreverent, in prayer. There often is little awareness that we are approaching a living, eternal, holy, sovereign God. To hear some people pray you would think that God is not much higher or better than we are. As I have said before, don't learn to pray by listening to people pray, unless the people you listen to give evidence that they know the Lord and have the greatest reverence for Him. Learn to pray from your Bible, and supplement those prayers with the prayers of godly men and women. Don't succumb to the ways modern church people pray. *When you pray make sure that you pray as God wants you to pray.*

But the second point I want to make about those two words at the beginning of the verse, "But thou," is that although the Lord was talking to His "disciples" (plural – see 5:1), "thou" is singular. This meant that He was speaking to each and every disciple. No one could say, "The Lord was talking about you, but He wasn't including me." *The Lord was speaking to every single one of them just like each one was the only one who was there! And that is the way each one of us should take this verse today. The Lord did not just mean this for you, but not for me, or for the person sitting beside you, but not for you. This is for all of us!* The KJ translators tried to help us distinguish the singular from the plural of the word *you* by translating *you* in the singular as "thou," and *you* in the plural with "ye." And that is a nicety about the KJ that you ought to recognize.

So let us take this personally today. Read this verse like it was spoken originally just for you! That is the way the Lord intended that it should be taken.

But notice that the next words to come from our Lord were, “when thou prayest.” The first question this should bring to our minds is, “When do I pray?” Or, “How often do I pray?” Or, “Do I pray at all?” Oh, we all probably pray before we eat our meals, or do we? And normally Christians pray as they go to bed at night. But could we really tell the Lord that prayer has a larger place in our lives than just before our meals, or just when we go to bed at night? I have told some of you about a Russian Christian who spoke at Multnomah when I was on the faculty there. He had lunch with us after chapel. When we were all finished with our lunch, he said to us, “Would you mind if I led us in prayer?” And then he went on to explain that in Russia the Christians pray before they eat, and then they pray again after they eat. I remember what a blessing his prayer was to me on that occasion.

“When thou prayest.” When do you pray, how often do you pray, and how do you pray? With everything else that you and I do in our waking hours, where does prayer come – last, or first, or practically not at all? Think about that for a moment. The Lord knows the place that prayer has in each one of our lives, but it might be that we wouldn’t be very comfortable letting other people know how much we pray. The Apostle Paul said that we should “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). He didn’t mean that we should be on our knees all of the time, but that prayer should be as natural and constant with us as breathing is. He meant that our lives should be characterized by prayer. This is another point that we all need to give attention to.

The next thing the Lord said was, “when thou prayest, enter into thy closet.” When we think of a closet, we think of a place where we hang our clothes, or where we store a vacuum cleaner along with other household items. But the Lord was speaking of *a storeroom*, or of *some inner chamber* in our homes.

With the Lord it was often a garden, or a mountain. Peter found his closet in different places. On one occasion it was on a roof top. Elijah might be found under a tree. Where is your closet? Mine is my study, or sometimes our downstairs family room. With Lucille, it is our bedroom. Perhaps that is your closet, your bedroom. We all need a place where we can pray, *and pray alone!*

However, to have a closet, and to use it, are two different things. We need

not only to have *a secret place of prayer* where we can be alone with the Lord, but we need to go there, and enter, and shut the door. And those are often the most difficult things that we have to do. Life is busy for all of us. We never get everything done that we need to do, and so it is very easy to go about our business instead of heading for our closet. It perhaps is helpful if we have a certain time, or certain times, when we go to our closet to meet with the Lord. But once we are in our closet, we are to make it inaccessible to anyone else. We are there to be with the Lord, and only with the Lord. There should be times when husbands and wives pray together, and when families pray together, and when we pray with each other in church or with friends in other situations. *But the Lord was indicating here that we need to give the greatest priority to our time in our closets, alone with the Lord. This will set the tone for all other praying.*

Shutting the door often involves shutting out other things that crowd into our minds when we are meeting with the Lord in prayer. We need to do away with all distractions, by the grace of God, so that we can focus on the Lord during this special time of fellowship.

And then we are *to pray!* It is always good to read our Bibles first. This helps us to get the door shut. But it is also easy to spend our time reading, but not praying. The Lord speaks to us through His Word, and then we respond in prayer. And this is where we will find Him. “Pray to thy Father which [Who] is in secret.”

Often you will here well-meaning Christians say something like this, “Oh, I pray as I am driving my car, or as I am going from one place to another. But I am just too busy to take time out of my day just for prayer.” What that person is saying is that he, or she, just doesn’t have time for the Lord. No person can truly pray who does not have a closet, enter it, shut the door, and talk to the Lord.

This brings us down to the last part of the verse. And, like so much that we have seen in the Sermon on the Mount, we come to another wonderful promise, and, as usual, the promise is to encourage our obedience to what the Lord has been saying. This is the promise: “And thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.”

The words which are translated “openly” do not appear in all MSS, but it is an interesting expression and personally I don’t think that we should overlook it. It does not mean that there will be “bells and whistles” announcing that God has done something outstandingly great, but it does mean that it will be very apparent that *the Father has answered prayer.*

We have an illustration of this idea in one of David's Psalms when he was particularly exercised because of the opposition of his enemies. I am speaking of Psalm 109. The whole Psalm is well-worth reading, but the part I have reference to is in verses 26 and 27 where you have these words:

26 Help me, O LORD my God: O save me according to thy mercy:

27 That they may know that this is thy hand; that thou, LORD, hast done it (Psa. 109:26-27).

For a long time when the Lord was judging Egypt in the days of Moses, the plagues were attributed to magic, but not to God. Finally the day came when the magicians of Egypt themselves told Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God" (Ex. 8:19).

Here in our text is the firm promise that, having met the conditions, the disciples can expect to see the Father working in answer to their prayers in such a way that it will be very apparent that the Lord has done it. What He does He does in pure grace, and He does it that He alone might have all of the glory.

Concl: Doesn't this encourage you to want to get into your prayer closet, and to pray? The Lord Jesus did not say that the promise would be immediately be fulfilled, and our prayers answered. But He did promise that our prayers would be answered.

We need to see prayer answered in our nation. We need to see prayer answered in our church. And we all have burdens for which we need the Lord's answer in such a way that it will clear that it is from Him! Then let us go to our prayer closets, wherever that might be in your case, and let us enter, and shut the door, and then pray. This is a word for all of us who know the Lord. Even you young people who know the Lord, and you children, it is not too early for you to have your own prayer closet where you can go to spend time enjoying fellowship with your heavenly Father, and where you can make your needs known to Him. Such faithful, daily praying would really mean great changes in our lives, and certain would bring blessings from the Lord which we have never experienced before. May the Lord Himself enable us to be obedient. It will always be up to the Lord to give us the blessings that He wants us to have. But may it never be true, as James taught the Lord's people in his day that they had not, because they asked not, or because they asked amiss. God is not only our God, but also our heavenly Father.

A lady in Little Rock, Arkansas wrote to me this week to inquire about Lucille, and she gave me this verse from an old hymn, and with this I

close:

Say not my soul, 'From whence can God relieve my care?
Remember that Omnipotence has servants everywhere.
His method is sublime, His heart profoundly kind,
God never is before His time, and never is behind.