

**"The Secret Nature of the Spiritual Life"
Matthew 6:1-18**

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According to a Gallop poll, 88% of Americans pray. Over 50% of people in that poll said that they pray every day. One-fifth of the atheists polled said they pray, as well. How and to whom they pray, I am not really certain.

Prayer. It is so basic to the spiritual life and so essential to a meaningful life that Jesus offers some candid advice about where to do it, and how to say it, and even how to make it work. Intimate conversation with God is best done behind closed doors with simple words from sincere hearts! Will you come with me for a few moments this morning as we explore this teaching of Jesus in the heart of the Sermon on the Mount on the business of prayer?

Prayer is secretive. John Peterson in his translation of this text in *The Message* puts it this way: And when you come before God, don't turn it into a theatrical production. All these people making a regular show of their prayers are hoping for stardom! Do you think God sits in a box seat? Here is what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.

Prayer is private communication. Maybe that's why it is so hard. I've spent my life in the public arena. I pray in public. I preach in public. I lead public worship. I conduct public weddings and public funerals. By nature, I am a social person. I'd rather be with people than to be alone anytime. I think best, dream best, and plan best when I'm in a trusted community. Therein lies my spiritual dilemma. I'll keep an appointment with a person any day over my

appointment with God. I'll let church meetings supersede a meeting with God. Feasting at a friend's table seems more nourishing to me than feasting at God's table. Silence for me is a real disturbance. As I listen to your shuffling Sunday after Sunday during silent moments, I think that you struggle with it as I do.

In America, we have made prayer a public political debate. Conservatives want to put spoken prayers in public schools. Liberals, many of whom see no purpose in prayer at all, seem unusually determined to eradicate any kind of praying on school property. Meanwhile, I like the cartoon that says, "Prayers will cease in public schools when teachers stop giving exams."

Jesus said, "When you pray, go to your room, close the door. Talk to your Father who is in secret." You see, regardless of how we might practice it, essentially prayer is intimate conversation. It belongs in the privacy of our souls and the depths of our beings. Language so often fails us. Romans 8:26: We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

Someone asked Mother Teresa, "When you pray, what do you say to God?" "I don't say anything," said Mother Teresa, "I listen." "When you pray, what does God say to you?" "He doesn't say anything," said Mother Teresa, "He listens." There's something about prayer that is beyond conversation. No words could ever express our deepest prayers. That's why prayer is so intensely private.

Confessions expose us. Praying is like going for an x-ray. You strip off your bodily coverings and expose your chest to the piercing rays of divine light. We come to God unto whom all desires are known and from whom no secrets are hidden. Yet the affirmation of the Protestant Reformation was that not even the priest needed access to these private parts of our lives for forgiveness and absolution to take place. In a culture of peeping Toms who can't wait to expose and report the latest indiscretion of another public figure, we would do well to breathe the fresh

air of private prayer. Even in church prayers, we must walk the fine line between prayer concerns and gossip dissemination. Wise are Christians who know the difference.

Jesus was quite explicit in saying, "When you pray, close the door." Get private about it.

In the second place, in Jesus' mind, prayer is simple. Matthew 6, verse 7: "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need already before you ask him. So pray then in this way: *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors and do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.*"

Prayer is more relationship than it is research. In a *Family Circus* cartoon, Dolly is in worship with her mother. She looks up to her mother and says, "Is our pastor a friend of God's or do they just know one another through business?" Good question, Tom Wilson. There is a rising clinical interest in prayer these days that I find most interesting and disturbing at the same time. Larry Dossey, a physician, a few years ago, wrote a book called *Healing Words*. He has followed it up with a couple of other books. His original book includes twenty pages of controlled experimental medical trials demonstrating the healing effects of prayer on patients suffering from all kinds of diseases.

Sharon Begley in the May 7th issue of *Time Magazine* reports that complicated changes occur in our brainwaves as a result of meditation giving birth to a discipline known as Neurotheology. Well, the list goes on. I find such studies positive but not very powerful. Let me say to you, prayer will never be reduced to a science. Prayer is a relationship. It is out of our relationship to God that we learn to pray.

I know there are many high achievers sitting in the pews. Because we tend to be high achievers we think that

we have to get everything just right in order to do anything including prayer. So we enroll in the school of prayer as we might enroll in a liberal arts college hoping to master the discipline of praying. Jesus said prayer is just not that complicated. In fact, Jesus said if you want to pray, pray like a child who is coming to his or her father. Pray like this: *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.* That's not too hard to understand, is it, really? After all, no small child can draw a bad picture for a parent. No small child can bring a bad present to a parent. So it is that no child of God can offer a bad prayer.

My grandson has just turned two years old. You don't have enough time for me to tell you everything wonderful about him. I got to see him for a few hours this week. At best, he can only put two or three words together in a sentence. But I guarantee you, when Caleb says, "Poppy come" this old man with all of his mind, and heart and soul and body is at his disposal to do anything that he might imagine in any moment of time. A few of you understand what I am saying, right?

When it comes down to it, some of our most effective prayers are not long lists of theological understandings and ramblings about life. They come down to those simple powerful words: Lord, have mercy. Jesus, help me. Thank you, God. I love you, Lord. Have you prayed like that lately? With the expression of the heart, as simple as it may be, God comes running in our very midst. God longs to be in relationship with you more than you long to be in relationship with God. This is the nature of God. So when you pray, come as a child to a parent appreciating the relationship because ultimately prayer is that relationship.

Prayer is more like a conversation with a friend than convincing a deity. I believe in intercessory prayer. But the notion that we have to mount an army of prayer warriors to beat down the doors of heaven in order to get the attention of God is troubling at best and heresy at its worst. God doesn't have to be convinced. We don't need to storm

heaven's doors. God is listening, even in this moment he is listening. Prayer for me over the years has become more like a conversation with a good friend, a kind of ongoing dialogue with God through the day and the night. My God and I go down this road together. We walk and talk as good friends should and do. I tell him what I want. He gives me what I need. We laugh and cry and argue and agree, and sometimes we agree to disagree.

I guess that's why I love the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, so much. Tevye has that kind of relationship with God. God and Tevye seldom agree but have this continuing conversation. "Lord who made the lions and the lamb, you decreed I should be what I am. Would it spoil some vast eternal plan if I were a very rich man?" I like that kind of relationship. Isn't that what Jesus was suggesting in the model prayer? When you pray, say: *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Ask for what you need: Give us today our daily bread--don't pile up pancakes for tomorrow. There will be enough for today. Tomorrow you will continue this relationship and conversation. When you pray, just keep it simple. God will understand.*

One more thing, Jesus says, when you pray, make sure you are sincere. Prayer is not performance. This is no game we are playing when we are talking with God. This is real life, the most intimate of life. A woman deeply enmeshed in the soap operas, asked her prayer group to remember her favorite character in prayer. "You know, Jessica has been going through a really hard time on the TV the last few weeks," she said. Prayer is not a show. Prayer is longing to know the will of God and the power to do it. The message of Jesus' teaching is profoundly clear-- when it comes to giving, fasting, and praying, separate yourself from the hypocrites. Separate yourself from the actors and actresses. You don't need acting classes to pray. You just need to be real with God. After all, prayer means profound change. I learned a long time ago that prayer may not

change things but prayer will dramatically change you. Jesus was explicit about it. I wish He hadn't put this in the Bible but here it is: verse 14: "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your father forgive your trespasses." You get it? Like love and marriage, a horse and carriage, prayer and forgiveness go together. You can't have one without the other, says Jesus.

If you believe in always getting even, if you go for the jugular at every injustice, if you demand your pound of flesh for every hurt endured, then you've got a real problem with prayer, said Jesus. In fact, you can forget about prayer except to ask for God's mercy to help you forgive.

For years after her survival of a concentration camp, Corrie Ten Boom traveled the world preaching forgiveness. Then one day, after speaking at a church in Munich, Corrie Ten Boom found herself face to face with an old SS guard who had personally inflicted his share of pain and shame on Corrie and others. Beaming and bowing, the old soldier came up to Corrie Ten Boom and said, "How grateful I am for your message Fraulein, to think that as you say, God has washed my sins away." Then he extended his hand to her in friendship. Corrie Ten Boom writes: "Instantly all the degradation, disgrace, and dishonor of my captivity flooded my body and soul. My hand froze at my side. I began to pray, 'Jesus, I cannot forgive him, forgive me for not being able to forgive him.'" And then she says, "It was by grace and by grace alone, that my hand raised until it touched his hand and reconciliation took place."

Prayer is not magic. It's not a wand that we wave to get what we want. Prayer is deeply serious business. Those of us who pray ought to be willing to pay the price for our prayers to be answered.

Prayer—it's the most intimate, private thing that a person can do.

Prayer—it's so simple we need no degrees to master it.

Prayer—it's not a game we play, it's a life we live.

Prayer—Don't leave home without it!
Amen.