

TALKING TO THE FATHER

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Our study of Matthew 5-7 has progressed around the daisy outline to the model prayer. We discussed 6:1-18 under the heading of hypocrisy. The accompanying diagram shows how the model prayer fits inside that larger portion. Jesus' comments about giving, prayer, and fasting follow a pattern that includes "they have their reward," doing their alms, praying and fasting "in secret," and "*your Father will reward you openly.*" His statements about prayer lead into the "model prayer," a subset in this format for 6:1-18.

This chapter studies the model prayer in connection with worship because prayer is an example of worship—perhaps the most distinctive example of it. Starting with a definition of worship, we line up parts of the definition with aspects of prayer and with features of the model prayer. "Worship is conscious self-expression to God as a present superior second person." Substituting "prayer" for "worship," the statement becomes, "*Prayer is conscious self-expression to God as a present superior second person.*" Each term of that statement explains prayer and correlates with something Jesus includes in his model for prayer. Worship is a special kind of communication; so prayer is a special kind of communication; at least in modern English, "prayer" refers to communication with deity in contrast to communication with people. Worship and prayer are vertically directed.

First, prayer is conscious. Jesus does not elaborate what he means by "vain repetition," but he does say that Gentiles do it because they think they will be heard "for their much speaking." "Vain repetition" can mean offering prayers again and again ritualistically without much heartfelt meaning, doing it routinely at scheduled times, doing it automatically in certain circumstances, following certain rigid formats, or repeating phrases over and over. If worship requires attention, our minds must be "on." Prayer is not something we can do without concentrating on it—without thinking about it.

Prayer as self-expression is also important because self-expression brings our character into the picture. Vain repetition is foreign to that because "vain" means "empty," which amounts to "meaningless" when applied to communication. When things are done over and over and over, they tend to become meaningless, because habit starts taking over. This problem can be illustrated by repeating a word over and over and over. After "book, book, book, book, book" is said fifteen or twenty times, it becomes a mere sound. We are not thinking anything; therefore, we are not investing the word with meaning; therefore, it has no meaning. That is the problem with any repeated, habitual activity; it is no less a problem with communication.

For this reason we must be careful about using “canned prayers”—prayers repeated at every meal, at every bedtime, at every invocation in church, at every gathering around the Lord’s table. Recitation sounds as if the ideas really originate elsewhere, and we are just taking the words and running them through our vocalizers. Even the model prayer itself can become a problem.

We are not so much objecting to memorized prayer as voicing concern that in prayer we express ourselves to God. This same concern applies to read prayers. Prayers written ahead of time can be read almost without thinking. That does not have to be the case, but reading prayers lends itself to abuses. Seldom do we read our thoughts to other people even though we can do it and do it meaningfully. Self-expression belongs in prayer because prayer is a form of communication in worship.

Self-expression includes our character, and the personal character we express in prayer affects the quality of prayer. The important thing about the quality of prayer is not the quality of its form but of its content. The issue is not how well we word the prayer or how beautifully we deliver it. As James 5:16 says, “*The supplication of a righteous man avails much in its working.*” Not only does righteous character enhance the validity of prayer, but it affects its results. James 5:16 implies that who we are is involved in every form of our approach to God, but it expressly applies to our approach to him in worship and prayer.

Isaiah 6 illustrates the same point. Isaiah is in the temple when in a vision he sees God for who he really is in glory and righteousness. God’s nature immediately reflects on the prophet: “Woe is me because I am a man of unclean lips and I live among people just like me.” But even with our relative unholiness and unrighteousness we can come into God’s holy presence. The point is that when we do so in worship, we express who we are even in our inner selves, and God overlooks any defects if our hearts are right (Isaiah 6:5-7). Worship before an all-knowing God is not something external that can be taken care of simply as a matter of form.

Conscious self-expression differs from self-negation. The ideal in worship is not to get rid of ourselves and create a vacuum so God can fill it. He does not want to get us out of the way so he can replace us. He created us for relationship; so what he wants to do is relate to us, which would not be happening if in prayer we become nothing to let him be everything. As a result, we do not strive for a sense of nothingness in prayer experiences lest our worship become vain and contentless.

Prayer is self-expression to God. The model prayer accompanies Jesus’ criticism of people who display righteousness so people can see them. Their prayers, alms, and fasting were aimed at the wrong audience. Prayer should be directed to God. Whoever is in our hearing to say “Amen” can indeed “listen in,” but we do not pray toward them as second persons. We pray to him who sees us in secret or in public.

Prayer is self-expression to God as a present person. This aspect of prayer may relate to “vain repetition” again. We can suppose that Jesus had in mind incidents like that of the Baal prophets on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). God’s prophet Elijah and his fellow prophets made fun of the Baal prophets because they carried on all day yelling and cutting themselves with stones. Such behavior conceives of God as very distant, existing somewhere beyond the farthest star or traveling on a journey without our knowing he is gone. Under those conditions we could not easily get his attention, and he might not even care that much about our plight. Consequently, we would have to beg him to pay attention and listen to our needs.

That is not the correct picture of God. We think of him as present with us, especially in the Christian age, because he has given us his Spirit to be with us and in us (John 14:17). We are not orphans with an absentee Father (John 14:18). Since God’s Spirit is with us, we do not have to go find him, get his attention, or beg him. “*Vain repetition*” and “*much speaking*” are not necessary.

“*Our Father in heaven*” does not controvert this sense of his presence. First, being “in heaven” contrasts with limited to earth. He is “transcendent,” above all things. “Heaven” does not so much imply distance as different order of being. God does not have our limitations. Second, he knows everything, including our hearts; so we can serve him “in secret” and still be rewarded openly. Even if it is appropriate to speak of God as “located” far away, wherever he “is” his omniscience makes him fully aware of our needs and prayers. Thirdly, God’s Spirit is with us. We do not have to strain to get to the “Father who is in heaven.” He takes the initiative to contact us. We have then a sense of God’s presence with us even though we address him as “our Father in heaven.”

Prayer is self-expression to God as a superior person. “Superior” relates to humility before God in prayer. The model prayer begins with an acknowledgment of God’s exalted position and nature. This emphasis corresponds with the word translated “worship,” which contains the word picture of “bending the knee toward”—as when a person kneels in respect and homage in front of someone. “Hallowed” expresses respect and homage toward God. We could translate it “*be sanctified*” or “*be set apart from all others.*” The worshiper puts God in a class by himself. We recognize his hallowedness and sanctity by seeing ourselves in a category beneath him. Prayer is a conscious self-expression to God as a present superior second person.

Prayer is self-expression to God as a second person. “Second person” means more than the fact that he is another person. We mean “second person” in a grammatical sense in contrast to first or third person. First person is “I” and “we”—the speaker(s). Second person is “you” singular and plural—the one(s) spoken to. Third person is “he/she/it or they,” the one(s) spoken about.

The model prayer says, “*May your name be hallowed.*” In prayer we talk to God. That is so simple and yet so important. Prayer is not to be confused with related things. Prayer, for example, is not meditation, because meditation deals with ideas in the third person. We do not talk to ideas and ideas do not talk to us. We think about them. Though good and important, meditation is not even communication, much less communication to someone. Prayer is something we do with another person in an I-you relationship.

Prayer is not communion. We are not talking here about the Lord’s Supper, but about the sense of having someone around. For instance, a person might see a light under the door to the next room and hear people walking around in there. He would feel associated with them, but would not be talking to them. Such “communion” with God is fine; it is important to have a strong sense of God’s real presence; but we should differentiate between prayer and that sense of real presence. Prayer does not just commune with the other person; it communicates to the person.

Prayer is also not benediction, a “good word” of dismissal or blessing pronounced on the assembly of worshipers. In this case the worship leader is talking to the audience, but prayer is directed toward God. If we dismiss an assembly with a benediction, we do not bow our heads and close our eyes as if in prayer, because we are addressing the audience rather than God. If we are leading the audience, it is our word to them.

A familiar prayer for kids says, “*God is great, God is good, and we thank him for our food.*” It is a nice rhyme, but it is not a prayer. It is a statement that one person would make to another about God, not what he would say to God. It could be changed into a prayer by saying, “*You are great, you are good, and we thank you for our food.*”

The last element in the definition of prayer is that it is self-expression to God as a second person. “I” as a person am speaking to God as a person. Consequently, prayer is interpersonal and serves as our central orienting experience in life.

The context of the model prayer brings up three problems associated with prayer. The first problem is the need for prayer: “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (6:8). Similarly, 6:31-32 says, “Do not be anxious, saying, ‘What are we going to eat?’ or ‘*What are we going to drink?*’ or ‘*What are we going to wear?*’ . . . *because your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.*” Why tell God what he already knows? Perhaps we have twisted the point somewhat by the way we posed the question. Prayer is not so much to inform God as to glorify him. The potatoes we eat we buy with money we earn, but God ultimately supplies potatoes. We may even plant them and take care of them, but he created them and made them able to grow; he sends sunshine and rain that make them grow. He is creator and sustainer; we only enter into his labors. Consequently, by our requests we glorify God by recognizing him as the source of everything we enjoy.

Furthermore, even though he knows our needs before we ask, we still ask him to benefit us. It is one thing for God to know we need something; it is another thing for him to supply it to us. A young man may want a young lady to marry him and she may be able to tell, but she does not say “yes” till he asks. We receive many things as a matter of course, but not everything is like sunshine and rain. Prayer is not to inform God but to benefit us.

The second question about prayer is why we need to pray if God gives his benefits anyway. The model prayer asks for daily food and 5:45 says that God sends rain and sunshine on his enemies, who do not pray to him, as well as his on friends who do. Why pray for what comes without prayer? Prayer may not be necessary for getting something, but it is nevertheless appropriate for getting it. As we said before, asking God for what normally comes anyway glorifies him. What normally happens, however, may not happen every time. There can be famine. Because of prayer for food God may intervene to change what nature would have done if he had let it take its course. When we pray for what God regularly gives, we glorify him as the source. When we pray for what he does not regularly give, we receive additionally according to his discretion.

Prayer is not so much for changing God as for changing us. Even if there were no objective difference because we prayed, there could be important subjectively differences because we did. Most people have had the experience of asking a question only to have the answer come to mind as they ask. The very process of putting problems into words helps us understand what we are putting into words. Life’s questions can solve themselves in the process of prayer.

Prayer also finalizes things. It puts closure on them. As long as some idea, proposal, or commitment is bouncing around inside your mind, it remains only a possibility. But as soon as you say something about it, it becomes a real proposal or commitment. That is a whole different ball game. Saying something to God is like signing your name on the dotted line.

Prayer brings release. Something about simply talking through our problems seems to reduce their size. That is one contribution counselors make to their clients; they listen. When a person talks through his difficulties, they become more manageable psychologically. For a similar reason we ask even if God would have given without being asked. We ask even for what he gives to all men. We ask for what might not have come without asking. Prayer glorifies God, prayer changes things, but more importantly prayer changes us.

A third question about prayer is unique to the model prayer. What does Jesus mean by saying, “*Do not lead us into temptation*”? Does God lead us into temptation? James 1:13 says, “God does not tempt any man.” The answer to this problem lies in the way scripture uses language. Hebrew idiom is not always like English idiom. For example, according to Job 1-2 Satan brought many calamities on Job, but 42:11 speaks of all those evils as things that God

brought on Job. Similarly, God tempts us by letting Satan tempt us. In a manner of speaking, God leads us into temptation in that he allows temptation to come our way. “Allowing” and “causing” are not always distinguished in the biblical use of Semitic idiom, but they are different in reality.

Jesus’ model prayer serves as a model for our prayer. We do not meaninglessly repeat it time and again, but use it as a guide for prayer elements and personal attitudes in worshipping God through prayer.

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