

Dear friend,

Today I am beginning a new series of “meditations” or essays on a subject that produces guilt in most Christians: prayer. I have two reasons for doing a series on prayer. First, I want our church to pray more and better. Second, I want to pray more and better. I think you would be hard pressed to find a Christian who would say that they are praying as much as they ought to pray and they are praying as effectively as God would have them pray. Based on my own experience in prayer and 30+ years of talking with other Christians about prayer our struggles in prayer come from a variety of sources. So the best way I can think of proceeding is by considering together those passages in the NT that are directly given to instruct us in our prayers. God knows our struggles and he has given us clear instructions to help us to persist in effectual prayer. So that will be our goal for this series: we are aiming to be individuals and families and a church that persists in effectual prayer for God’s glory and our eternal joy. It will be very important as we consider God’s word together that we are prepared to evaluate our own thinking about prayer and our practice of prayer in light of what God says and to change how we think and act when we discover a discrepancy between us and God’s word.

We will begin where all discussions of prayer ought to begin with the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray; what is commonly called “The Lord’s Prayer.” Actually we will begin where Jesus begins as he gives instructions concerning not only prayer, but also giving and fasting. We will begin today with Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 6:1 concerning how we practice these “acts of righteousness” as the NIV translates it. First of all, here is a more literal translation of v. 1 which we will use: “Pay careful attention not to do your righteousness before men in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”

The first thing to notice here is that prayer is identified by Jesus as “doing or practicing your righteousness”. When we remember that this statement is made in middle of the Sermon on the Mount which begins with the “beatitudes” in 5:1-12, then we will recognize that prayer is an action that all those who have been blessed by God with his salvation participate in. To use the language of the apostle Paul in Romans 3-5, we have been counted righteous by God because of what Jesus has done through our faith in Jesus. We have been given his righteousness and thus we do or practice that righteousness we have been given. One of the ways we practice that righteousness is in our praying. Prayer does not make us righteous, rather it is an expression of the righteousness that belongs to us through our faith in Jesus. It is one of the actions in which “blessed” people participate.

The second thing to notice here is Jesus’ main concern is with our motivation for practicing prayer. This is the main concern of Jesus throughout his entire discussion regarding the practice of our righteousness in giving, praying and fasting (vv. 1-18). We can do these actions in order to be seen by men or in order to be seen by God. Notice that it is not simply being seen that is the issue but it is the reward we are looking for that is the issue. If I pray in order to be seen by men, what is the reward that I am looking for? I want people to be impressed with me. I want people to think well of me, to respect me, to admire me, to approve of me. On the flip side I don’t want people to think poorly of me. I don’t want them to disrespect me or to disapprove of me or reject me. It’s not simply that I want them to think well of me but I want to be treated well. There is a social dimension I want from this reward. I want others to accept me into their

company. I want people to want to be in my company, to want to spend time with me and I aim to obtain this by impressing them with my “righteousness.”

What is the reward I’m looking for from my unseen Father who is in heaven? We certainly are not seeking to impress God with our righteousness. The people who practice righteousness know they have none of their own as can be seen in the first four beatitudes. However, there is an analogy between the reward I seek from God and that which I seek from men. Just as the point of impressing men is to gain their fellowship, so the reason for prayer is so that I might have intimate fellowship with God and experience his favor in my life. So at the core of motivation is simply this: do I believe being loved by men or God is better? Which is more necessary to my happiness and well-being, having men accept me into their company or having God accept me into his company?

The third thing to notice in this verse is that praying with right motives requires that I pay very careful attention to my motives. If you read through vv. 1-18 it is very clear that the natural or “default” motive of human beings is to do these actions in order to be seen by men. So if I’m going to pray in order to be seen by my Father, then I must be very attentive to my heart motivations. Here is a question that I think can really help in this regard. I don’t think most of us consciously pray in private or in public in order to impress others. That is a fairly obvious thing to observe in our hearts. But how comfortable would you be if everyone in our church knew specifically how little you actually pray? I think most of us would be very uncomfortable with other people knowing the actual amount of time we pray each day. Yet, God knows exactly how much we pray. Does it bother us that God knows in the same way it would bother us if other people knew?

It seems to me that the beginning of prayer must be an open admission, a confession to God that we care more about what others think than about what he thinks. We are not as immune to the hypocrisy Jesus condemns in this passage as we normally think. So we must begin by acknowledging our fear of men and asking God to give us hearts that yearn to live in fellowship with him far more than they yearn to have people accept us into their company. Next month we will consider the course of action Jesus recommends to fight our default bad motives and what it means to pray to a Father who knows what we need before we ask.

Growing in prayer with you,