

## Authentic Prayer

*Matthew 6:5-13 " And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. <sup>6</sup> "But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. <sup>7</sup> ¶ "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. <sup>8</sup> "Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. <sup>9</sup> "In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. <sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*

One of the most popular things to say about church goers and church is that church is full of hypocrites. We know that this reputation that church and church goers have earned has to have some basis. Where there's smoke, there's usually some fire. And we don't have to be in church or do church very long to know that there is something about religion and worship that provokes a kind of insincerity. Something about religion tempts people to pretend, to put on phony smiles, use attitudes and tones of voice they use nowhere else. For some reason, perhaps because we are dealing with things unseen, and matters of faith, there is a large amount of mask-wearing, posturing, acting and pretending.

This is the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus describes to Israel what life in His kingdom looks like, and how Israel needs to get its heart right to receive Him. As Jesus gives the sermon on the Mount, one of the things he homes in on is phony, insincere worship. He is scraping off all the false tradition and practice that had grown into Judaism, and trying to show his listeners what real life under God's authority looks like. He is showing them what kingdom life is like, and how they need to prepare their hearts to be this way if they are to live in the Messiah's Kingdom. And one thing that is not allowed in God's kingdom is playing at worship, faking your devotion, pretending at prayer so as to impress others. Jesus despises hypocrisy, and he will not have any of it. Jesus loved people who were real. He loved Nathanael for his frankness about Nazareth, even though it indicted Jesus' own family and friends. Jesus loved little children because they are so real, so frank, so lacking in pretence. Jesus, the Son of God was always preaching authenticity.

Authenticity is at the heart of true Christianity. Every false religion trades in some kind of insincerity. Some kind of fakery, pretence and gamesmanship happens in false religion, because false religion is always in some way, trying to bribe its gods. False religion is always trying to get the gods to bring good luck or good health, or protection, by either keeping a certain code, or performing certain rituals. The worshipper is always short of actually engaging the god and talking to him and being real with him. False religion is also a kind of window-display for others. The front is stocked with all these nice shiny religious acts, but if you were to go inside, you would find nothing is there.

If you have believed the gospel, it ought to have brought you into a relationship with God where faking, pretending and posturing is uncalled for and foolish. If you have believed the gospel then you believe there is nothing you can offer God to make Him love you more, to impress Him, to make him favour you. You also believe He is your Father, and knows what you need and knows your thoughts. There is nothing you can hide from Him. You believe He wants you to come to Him and welcomes your fellowship. If you have believed the gospel, then the reality of knowing Him should be far greater than impressing other people.

And yet, even though we might believe those things in principle, how often do we fail to practice them. Our prayers so often become routine, ritualised. Too often our eyes are on others, and how they perceive us and how we appear and when we do that, our prayers become performances.

The more ritualised and routine our prayers become, the more unreal and difficult it becomes to pray them. That leads to boredom, wondering of mind, and real trouble in concentrating. The more that happens, the less we pray. The less we pray, the less real God seems to us, and now we are in a vicious cycle. To break out of it, we must return to authentic prayer. Authentic Prayer is the opposite of phony, faked, pretentious, hypocritical, dishonest prayer. Our prayers must be real. The deepest and greatest interaction between you and the Lord takes place in prayer. If your prayer life feels unreal, your Christian life will seem unreal. When your times of prayer are filled with sincerity, your Christian life will be filled with sincerity.

Who of us would not be drawn to the idea of real, living, interesting prayer that keeps our interest and draws us back? Who of us would not be excited at the idea of pulling our prayer lives out of the dead marsh of empty words, and putting it in the running, clear water of sincerity, frankness, realness? This is what Jesus offers us in this part of the Sermon on the Mount. He is busy rescuing three forms of devotion to God from externalism. Jesus teaches what genuine, pious giving is like. He teaches what genuine, sincere, fasting is like. And he teaches what genuine sincere prayer is like. As He teaches us on prayer, He teaches us at least three things about sincere, unfeigned prayer. He teaches us that sincere prayer is grown in secret; sincere prayer does not just use words, it means words, and sincere prayer is woven into our lives.

## **I. Authentic Prayer Is Groomed in Secret**

*Matthew 6:5-6 " And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. <sup>6</sup> "But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.*

Jesus tells us our prayer is not to be like that of the hypocrites. The word *hypocrites* is actually a word that was used in ancient Greek to mean an actor – a stage-player. It was the actual term for people who performed roles on the stage. The New Testament picks up the term and uses it to mean someone who pretends at religion. Just as an actor plays the part of some other character, so in the religious sense, the hypocrite plays the part of a worshipper. He takes on the role. He knows the words, the gestures, the expressions, the tones of voice, the things to say, to sound like a worshipper, to appear to be devoted, to give the impression of deep piety.

The hypocrite is performing. When you perform, for whom do you perform? For an audience. So Jesus says that hypocrites choose the places where they will have an audience. They go to the synagogues. They choose the corner of the streets, which in biblical times was the place where all the people would pass.

What are the hypocrites looking for? Admiration. Praise. Awe – all from men. They want to sound like, appear like, seem like people with great prayer lives and Jesus says they have their reward. What is their reward? The attention and admiration of men. They were seeking that – they got it. No more. But inasmuch as they are seeking to appear a certain way, and sound a certain way to men, they are not dealing directly with God.

*John 12:42-43 Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees*

*they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; <sup>43</sup> for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.*

Insincere prayer is not really praying to God. And insincere prayer thrives on impressing others. You want your prayers to remain unreal, then focus on how you can sound prayer-like to others.

If praying for an audience provokes fleshly man-pleasing, what does Jesus recommend? Remove the audience. Get away from the crowd, and go into your room. Shut the door. What is Jesus simply telling us? Get alone. Get alone and pray to your Father in the secret place. The secret place just means a place not revealed, a place not public and seen by others. A place of being alone with God. If you do that, Jesus said, God's reward to you will be obvious, revealed, manifest. God will not hide Himself, or His blessing on you.

Question: why will praying alone develop sincere prayer?

Answer: When God alone is your audience, you have to speak to Him. That's when it can, and should become real. There is no one else, no one else to impress; no one else to watch or judge. It is simply you and the Lord. He knows everything about you. He knows what you have done and will do. He knows what you need. When you are alone with the all-knowing God, all the masks should come off. It is simply Him and you. In private, you become open with God. In private, you become frank with God. In private, you pray intimately with God. You speak of your hopes, your fears, your disappointments, your frustrations, your joys, your desires, your needs, while submitting them all to Him, and to His glory.

Is this really necessary? Do I really need to get alone and pray with God? Can't I just pray while I'm driving, pray while I'm walking, pray while I'm shopping? Well, it is certainly good to pray during those times. But let me ask you something. If a husband and wife only spoke to each other in the car, or while shopping or at other times on the go, would they have a healthy relationship? No. Everyone knows that quality relationships come from some time spent alone. For love to grow, there must be an undistracted, one-person focus.

What I find amazing is that of all people, Jesus Christ would be the one I would think would not need to be alone with His Father. Jesus was God in the flesh. If anyone could say, I don't need to be alone with God, I just commune with Him everywhere – it was Jesus! He was God! But what did Jesus do?

*Mark 1:32-37 At evening, when the sun had set, they brought to Him all who were sick and those who were demon-possessed. <sup>33</sup> And the whole city was gathered together at the door. <sup>34</sup> Then He healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and He did not allow the demons to speak, because they knew Him. <sup>35</sup> ¶ Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed. <sup>36</sup> And Simon and those who were with Him searched for Him. <sup>37</sup> When they found Him, they said to Him, "Everyone is looking for You."*

Jesus Himself spent time in the secret place. Jesus needed to focus on one person at a time. Jesus needed to be with His Father. Jesus needed to be immersed in His identity in His Father. Jesus knew in His humanity He was totally dependent – he needed strength, direction, wisdom, power for the day ahead.

When we spend time alone with God, it can force us to get real with God. If you are not used to it, you may feel very uncomfortable, like getting to know a relative you have neglected. Start with baby-steps. Don't try to have a half-hour time with God if you have never done that before. If you

can only think of truly sincere and real things to pray to God for five minutes, then that's fine. Start there. Five minutes of sincere praying today will probably lead to seven tomorrow, eight the next day, and so on. Don't focus on how long you pray for. Focus on consistently meeting with your Father each day. Get to bed early enough. Set your alarm and give yourself enough time. Find a quiet and comfortable place. Someone who meets with God alone, and uses that time to speak to God sincerely, will find the authenticity of his prayers growing.

Once we are alone with God, we need to start praying. But what do we do when we pray? How long should we pray for? That's the next thing Jesus is going to teach us.

## **II. Authentic Prayer Means Its Words, It Doesn't Merely Use Words**

*Matthew 6:7-8 "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. <sup>8</sup> "Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.*

Jesus once again gives us the practice of phony religion. The heathen – the unbelievers have a habit in prayer which Jesus says we should not adopt. Jesus says do not use vain repetitions. That translates one word in the original which just means to babble. It means to keep using words. It means that you treat prayer like an inflatable dinghy: you just keep pumping air into it, until you figure there's enough in there to make it float. Jesus says, They think they will be heard for their many words.” In other words, they think that the more they say, the better. The longer the prayer, the more impressive to God. The more the prayer seems to go on and on without a break, without a pause, like a hundred sentences thrown together without a full-stop, the better.

In a way, this treats words in prayer like magic spells treat words. If I say the right thing, the right amount of times, in the right combination, then the spell happens. Every false religion trades in this kind of thing. Chant the OHM for an hour. Say 15 Hail Marys and 10 Our Fathers. Pray the Amidah, Kaddish or Hallel, and pray them as fast as you can.

Prayer is magic. But how often do we gospel-believing Christians fall into the same trap? We repeat a phrase again and again. We pick up prayer clichés from others and start using them. Perhaps we have a prayer list and we robotically chant off every name on that list every day, hoping it will bring good luck and good fortune to them.

Now notice how Jesus responds to this kind of praying. He says: “ *For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.* “

Why would He say that? What does that have to do with vain repetitions? Let's imagine you knew that I had a deep need of R1000. You already had the R1000 and had decided graciously to give it to me when I ask. Now I come to you and I begin my request by first talking to you as if you aren't there, like you are some idea I'm talking about. And I keep saying your name every three or four words. Then I start mentioning the financial request, but saying it in odd ways, and in several different ways, and for 30 minutes, with hardly a pause. I keep reciting phrases and statements about money and about you. Wouldn't that be odd? If you know my need, and I know you know, and I know you have what I need and are generous, what should the conversation sound like? If your Father knows what you have need of before you ask Him, you do not need to chant it to Him, say it to Him a thousand times, bribe Him, flatter Him with things you don't mean or understand.

Phony prayer seeks to impress God. It is a kind of deception. It actually thinks it can impress God

with a particular combination of words. If I praise Him enough, then I'll have Him on my side." If I don't sound too selfish, then He will answer me. Your Father already knows. Authentic prayer seeks to express. Father, this is my need, as you know. Will you please give me this, and I will glorify you.

I wonder if one of the biggest causes of wondering minds in prayer, is that we are trying to sound a particular way, instead of saying a particular thing. If you focus on how you are sounding, your mind is not in the conversation. Pretty soon, it will be somewhere else. But if you focus on what you are saying, like any normal conversation, your mind will stay on the topic.

All this is to say that real and sincere prayer does not just use words. It means its words. It believes it is dealing with a real Person, and when you talk to a real Person you mean every word. You don't waste them, or unnecessarily increase them, or just keep jabbering away. You talk, as one intelligent being to another.

What would happen if you decided to use your words in prayer like you do when you communicate to any other person? What would happen if you spoke to Him like when you are having a conversation with someone close to you? Well, firstly, it would help you to focus. Secondly, it would draw you closer to Him. Third, you may find such a freshness and revival coming into your life simply because the mask is off, and we are dealing with God in reality, in authenticity.

A great Christian of the past broke out all at once into a place of such radiance and victory as to excite wonder among his friends. Someone asked him what had happened to him. He replied simply that his new life of power began one day when he entered the presence of God and took a solemn vow never again to say anything to God in prayer that he did not mean. His transformation began with that vow and continued as he kept it. (A.W. Tozer)

Here are two practical tips for meaning your words when praying.

- 1) Try to pray out loud at least some of the time. It adds a concreteness to your words.
- 2) When you don't have anything to say, don't say anything else. Perhaps read some more of the Word. Sing. Nothing makes your prayers seem unreal than saying things you don't mean because you think you should go longer.

We learn authentic prayer by getting alone with God to pray. Once we are alone with God, we speak to Him as a person, saying what we mean and meaning what we say. But what do we say? What do we talk about? That's the third thing Jesus is going to talk about here.

### **III. Authentic Prayer is Your God-Centred Story**

*Matthew 6:9-15* <sup>9</sup> "In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. <sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. <sup>14</sup> "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. <sup>15</sup> "But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

I am not going to try to unpack the meaning of the Lord's Prayer. Instead, I want you to notice something about it as a whole. The Lord's Prayer is a prayer for God's glory, God's rule, God's will to occur in our lives. It is a meeting of heaven and earth. The first few lines are all about God's

glory. His name is to be set apart. His kingdom is to come. His will is to be done.

But then the next requests are all about our lives - our daily provision, our need for forgiveness and unity; our need for grace not to fall into temptation; our need of protection from the evil one. And then the focus returns to God – for Yours in the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever.

This model prayer is all at once completely God-centred and yet completely bound up with our everyday lives. Jesus is teaching us by example, prayer is relating to God your story – your needs, and fears, and wishes and desires, prayed through the lens of God's glory – His will, His kingdom, His name - your story for His glory.

Prayer is giving to God the details of your life, your family, your ambitions, your hopes, your wishes, your health, your burden for missions or ministry, the events of the previous day, your day ahead of you, and giving them to God, and relating them to God, in light of His name, His desires, His sovereign rule. When you read Jesus' words on prayer, you keep finding Him saying, "Ask". Ask more. The reason you don't have is because you're not asking. Ask in My name and you will receive. Ask more persistently. Ask more boldly."

And because of the prosperity gospel teachings and the self-centred Christianity around us, I have sometimes wanted to modify Jesus' words to say things like "Praise more. Thank Me more." But He doesn't say that. He keeps telling us to ask more. And the reason for that is that prayer is our story given to God for His glory. God is glorified by our dependent prayers that begin where we are.

*Psalm 50:15 <sup>15</sup> Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me."*

For years I held to and taught others that the way to pray is to use A-C-T-S. Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. And indeed, those are very much parts of biblical prayer. But the problem I found was this. Firstly, most of the prayers in the Bible don't follow that pattern. Think of the Psalms. Think of prayers like Nehemiah's, Ezra's, Solomon's, even Christ's. Some of them begin with adoration, but some of them don't. Some of them start with pure desperation. Some of them start with questions? Some of them begin with confession. Biblical prayers usually end up including elements of confession, praise, thanksgiving, but not by imposing an artificial structure like that upon the prayer. Instead what you find is that the men and women in Scripture would talk to God about their lives, their situations, their needs, with God's glory in view - their story, God's glory.

The second problem I found when doing that was that I always struggled. The things I wanted to talk to God about I tried to postpone so I could get through the 'A' section or the "C" section of my prayer. And the more I tried to shove those thought down, they came back by themselves, and I ended up thinking about them. I found that my praise and thanksgiving seemed rehearsed and not spontaneous. Prayer became the burden of rattling off things I felt God needed to hear, instead of things I needed to say to God.

You see, we fear that if we just start our prayers where we are, that we will be selfish or 'gimme, gimme' Christians. But if we do not start our prayers where we are, then where we are will come creeping back into our minds. Read the psalmists and you will find they start where they are, and by the time they have finished, they are praising God, thanking God. Read the psalmists and you are sometimes shocked by how frank they get with God.

*Psalm 42:9 <sup>9</sup> I will say to God my Rock, "Why have You forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"*

*Psalm 13:1-2 A Psalm of David. How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? <sup>2</sup> How long shall I take counsel in my soul, Having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?*

*Psalm 22:1-2 Psalm 22:1 To the Chief Musician. Set to "The Deer of the Dawn." A Psalm of David. My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, And from the words of My groaning? <sup>2</sup> O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; And in the night season, and am not silent.*

Apparently, God prefers the realness of people talking to Him from where they are, rather than trying to sound like they think they should.

If you have God's glory as your ultimate aim, it doesn't matter where you begin, you will end up confessing, praising, thanking, interceding. But if you try to sound a certain way, tick off certain letters in your mind, your prayers will seem increasingly unreal, and more and more difficult to get through. Your prayers are not supposed to sit in isolation from the story God is writing – the story of your life.

This is how this might look. I wake up, not so early that I need seven espressos to stay awake, but not so late that the children are up and the house is noisy. I find a quiet spot. I kneel, or if that is uncomfortable, I sit. I begin where I am. I'm bothered by my son's wilfulness, and my wife's many pressures. I thank the Lord for a new day, and begin to talk to Him about my son. As I talk to Him about my son, Scriptures come to mind, which comfort me. I realise God is working in me and through me, not just about my son, but about me. I end up confessing my sin, asking for help. A scripture comes to mind about help. I look for it. I read it – it's Psalm 121. I think about what it is saying. I talk to God about what I see in it. I praise Him for being my ultimate Help. Then my heart is moved towards the many other people and situations in my life – my wife and daughter, my associate pastor and his family, my deacons, my fellow church members, my own friends. I use cards with people's names on them and a few Scriptures and needs. I don't linger over each one. I just pray a few things for each one and move on. Soon, my time is up and it is time to get going. But because I have been praying for God's glory in my story, I have not battled with endless wandering of mind, frustration with myself, or a deep sense of the whole thing being dead and unreal. I go into my day looking for the ways God will continue to write the story and I am more mindful of Him as I go into it.

I have met God without an audience. I have said what I meant. I have considered my own life, and prayed for God's glory to be known to me in my life. It is real. Some days it might feel more real than other days. That doesn't matter, because I am not chasing an experience, I am pursuing God Himself - for God to be glorified in my life.

What can you do differently to pray more sincerely? Perhaps it's committing to a modest time of meeting Him each day. Perhaps It's saying only what you mean – praying out loud if you can. Perhaps it's breaking away from some structures that have made prayer seem like something you do to benefit God, instead of praying your life's story to God, for His glory.