

**Matthew 6:1, 5-12 "With Your Father in Secret"**

**Read Matthew 6:1, 5-13**

Please consider praying the Lord's Prayer together as you open and/or close your study.

Prayer, together with reading Scripture, is perhaps the most essential spiritual discipline of the Christian life. It is a practice and a topic that evokes many deep, personal reactions. Hardly anyone that I have ever met, including myself, feels great about their own prayer life. Some of our own experiences, both good and bad, with respect to prayer may have been brought to the surface by the sermon, or will be through the small group questions. You may decide to explore of these reactions with the group. If you decide to do that, and time is running short, you might focus on the first 5 questions in the study, questions 1 through 5.

1. What do you think hypocrisy in prayer is (v. 5)? What version or versions of yourself have you brought into your prayers?

*There are many kinds of hypocrisy, both external and internal. The most obvious kind of hypocrisy is external or inter-personal: someone who pretends to be one way in front of others, but is actually quite different when they are in private or in front of other people. The obvious example with respect to prayer in the church is false piety, or Christian virtue-signalling. However, as the sermon pointed out, often our greatest hypocrisies are the lies we tell ourselves. The human heart is deceitful above all things (Jeremiah 17:9), and the most persistent and destructive of all deceptions is self-deception. We tend to bring particular versions of ourselves into prayer, often our best, most gracious, and most pious selves. Instead, Christ invites us to stop playing a role or a part, and to bring our real, whole, and undivided selves into prayer to meet with Him.*

2. What can make an attempted prayer consist of nothing but "empty phrases" (v. 7)?

*The following is an edited excerpt from the sermon:*

*In verse 7, Jesus teaches us not to heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think they will be heard for their many words. Jesus isn't prohibiting lengthy or repeated prayers here. He is teaching us not to pray "empty phrases." The underlying Greek means something like*

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*"babbling," a noisy flow of sounds without meaning. Jesus is directing us not to pray mindlessly and mechanically, not to pile on words for the sake of quantity.*

*We know that the point is not mere length or repetition, because of the witness of the rest of Scripture, which must be read as a whole. In the gospels, Jesus repeatedly prays all day and all night long (e.g. Mark 1:35; Luke 6:23; Matt 14:23; Matt 26:36-46. In the parable of the persistent widow, Jesus teaches the disciples to cry to God day and night, just as the widow did to the unrighteous judge (Luke 18:1-8). Jesus not only prayed all night at Gethsemane; in Matthew 26 we are told that he repeated the exact same prayer three times (Matt 26:44).*

*As one commentator put it, the paradox of prayer is that it is only when we are relieved of the necessity of much that we can experience the freedom for much. Martin Luther read these verses as an instruction that our prayers may be brief, but must be frequent and intense. Prayer that is not intentional, that does not proceed from our whole selves, from our hearts, is nothing but empty phrases, no matter how beautiful or eloquent the words are as literature.*

### 3. What does it mean to "go into your room and shut the door and pray" (v. 6)?

*This verse, and the image and metaphor of going into the inner room to pray, goes to the heart of the sermon. In the sermon, to go into the room means to receive God with our full, real selves, to let God in to every aspect of our lives and who we are in our prayers. Our Father is in secret—he is already in the room, waiting to enter into intimate conversation with us, waiting for us to abide in Him.*

*The following is an edited excerpt from the sermon:*

*In verse 6 we are told to "go into your room and shut the door." The Greek word translated "room" (ESV, NRSV) here has also been translated as "closet" (KJV), "private room" (CSB), "bedroom" (Augustine), "storeroom," and "inner" or "innermost room." In ancient Palestine there wasn't much privacy. There were few internal doors, and perhaps only one door in the home that could be shut and locked. The "inner room" was the most private and secure part of the house.*

*The inner room is a place of intimacy, not isolation. Privacy does not imply solitude. As modern readers, when we hear "go into your room," we assume that we are to be alone there. But in the ancient world, the inner room was a place where one might receive important guests, and be with one's closest friends and family members.*

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*"Your Father who is in secret." That is a remarkable phrase. When we seek God with our real selves in the inner room, we will find him already there. He is right there in the room with us. He has always been there, waiting for us. As John Stott put it, "Behind all true prayer lies the conversation which God initiates." The most important guest that we can ever receive is our Father, and he is already in the room, waiting for us.*

4. Moses prayed and spoke to God "face to face, as a man speaks to his friend," in the tent of meeting (Exodus 33:11). Are things different for us when we go into the room and pray to our Father who is in secret (v. 6)? Why, or why not?

*Just as Moses spoke to the LORD "face to face, as a man speaks to a friend (Exodus 33:11), we are also invited into the room to be in intimate friendship with God. But Joshua and all the other Israelites were all outside, they could not enter the tent to be with God (Exodus 33: 10-11). The privileged of entering the tent was restricted to Moses alone. Things did not change with the establishment of the temple in Jerusalem, as only the high priest could enter into the holy of holies to be before the LORD, and even he could only do so "but once a year" (Hebrews 9:7), on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16).*

*But now, we do not need to be on the outside looking in, as we are invited into the room, into the tent, to be with our Father. Even Moses in the book of Exodus was not called a child of God. Christ had not yet performed his redeeming and atoning work on the cross, and humanity was not yet reconciled to God.*

*"But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption." (Hebrews 9:11-12). This "greater and more perfect tent" is what we all have access to now as God's children. It is God's Church, which is knit together by the Holy Spirit in Christ. From within it, we may abide in God and speak to Him as a child speaks to a loving, perfect Father.*

5. What do you think the "reward" (v. 6) of prayer is? Have you had any experiences that you can identify as a reward of prayer?

*This question builds upon the prior one, and encourages us to flesh out what it means to have the reward and the privilege of speaking to our Father anytime, anywhere. The word "reward" evokes thoughts of something delayed, distant. It also suggests a kind of prize or compensation for performance, for piety and good works. It has been used in the context of the so-called prosperity gospel, to point to future health and wealth. But our Father is loving and gracious.*

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*The reward of prayer is not delayed, it is present and immediate. We receive it every time we pray to our Father through the eternal mediation of the Son, Christ to pray with us and in whom we pray. Our reward is that the cost of being reconciled to God, so that we can speak to him as his children, has already been paid by Christ on the cross.*

6. What does it mean to you that the Lord's Prayer is a collective prayer, bringing our worship and our petitions to our Father? What is the difference, if any, between praying the Lord's Prayer individually, and praying it as a community?

*Most of us pray or have prayed the Lord's Prayer as an individual prayer. The sermon tried to encourage us to take the pronouns in the prayer seriously, to reflect upon the meaning of praying to "our" Father for "our daily bread" and for "our" forgiveness and deliverance from evil.*

*The following is an edited excerpt from the sermon:*

*There is no "I," "me," "my," or "mine" in the Lord's Prayer. It is not my Father, but our Father. It has to be "our," because prayer to the Father is only possible together with Christ, and with all of saints. We can enter the room as sons and daughters of the living God because we participate in the prayers of the resurrected living Son. All prayer implies Christ. Even a prayer that does not invoke the name of Jesus, even wordless prayer. We can pray to the Father because Christ prays with us. All prayer is collective. All prayer participates in the prayer of Christ. And "our" does not just make the Lord's Prayer collective. It also turns our individual prayers into intercessory prayers for others, for we pray not for my bread and my forgiveness, but for our daily bread, for our forgiveness, for our deliverance—we pray to our Father, for ourselves and for others, together with all our Father's children. So awkward or not, expert or not, we are all intercessors. Whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer, we become prayers for one another.*

7. Is there a prayer that is particularly meaningful or memorable to you? Please considering sharing such prayers, whether your own, from Scripture, or elsewhere, with your group.

*This is an opportunity to share our experiences with prayer as a group. The question has been phrased broadly rather than directly personally, as some members may have unresolved pain and hurt with respect to prayer that they are not ready to share. At the same time, some more personal experiences and reflections may come up as you discuss this question.*

*One set of questions and reflections that may arise is that of who we are really praying to. What is our understanding of the God that we pray to? Often, our own understandings of God shape*

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*our prayers (e.g. the Gentile prayers Jesus describes in v. 7 and discussed in the sermon). Our understanding of God are sometimes filtered through our personal experiences, including through our parents (or other older relatives), Christian leaders or mentors, and various other authority figures. Are we really to "our Father, who are in heaven" when we pray?*

*Another set of inquiries that may arise as members of the group present examples in response of this question is this: What makes a prayer "good" or "bad"? In our contemporary context, this is not a judgment we feel comfortable in making, both in ourselves and in others. The sermon emphasized that prayers become "true prayers" not because they are long or short, eloquent or awkward, but because they are intimate conversations where we bring our whole selves to our loving Father.*