

Addressing God Personally

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let's turn to our Bibles and to the New Testament, to Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 6. If you have one of the blue church visitors' Bibles, page 811.

And we're going to read this evening from Matthew 6, the beginning of the chapter down to verse 15. And we're beginning a short series on prayer, on how we pray together.

I seem to have got much louder. Not praying to the Lord, he's not far away, he can hear without amplification. So that sounds a bit better.

So we're reading this evening Matthew 6. We will return to this over the next Sunday evenings. And I hope that by the end of our studies together, we will be very familiar with Jesus' words here.

Of course, very famous, containing what we know as the Lord's Prayer. But I'm going to read verses 1 to 15, just so that we're clear on the context.

[1 : 0 5] And of course, we're in the middle of what we call the Sermon on the Mount, which begins really at the very end of Chapter 4 of Matthew's Gospel, goes on to the end of Chapter 7.

So Matthew 6, verse 1. The Lord Jesus says, Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.

For then, you will have no reward from your Father who's in heaven. Thus when you give to the needy, sign no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others.

Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret.

And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others.

[2 : 1 5] Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door. And pray to your Father who sees, who is in secret.

And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles, as the pagans do. For they think they'll be heard for their many words.

Do not be like them. For your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this. Or rather, you then.

There's a very emphatic you at the beginning of that sentence. You then, by contrast. You then pray like this. 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.

[3 : 1 9] As we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. Or from the evil one.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, do turn with me, if you would, to Matthew chapter 6 and to the passage we read there, the first 15 verses.

And we'll be focusing in particular this evening, I suppose, on verses 5 to 9. And I want to speak about addressing God personally.

Not long ago, I think it was probably around this time last year, we began a study on the whole of the Sermon on the Mount. And I think we found it useful to go right back to basics, as it were, the basics of the Christian life, the practice of true Christianity, as taught by our Lord Jesus himself.

[4 : 31] And of course, as part of that study, we looked at these chapters, these verses that we read together this evening. In chapter 6, where Jesus is talking about what we might call true kingdom piety.

What that really looks like in terms of prayer, in terms of giving and fasting and so on. But I find that, quite often, I'm asked about prayer.

It does often seem to be an area of people's Christian lives that they find difficult, that they find a struggle, that they want to talk about and ask about, and so on.

So I thought it would be useful for us to return for a few weeks to this subject of how we pray. We looked at this with the folk at Queen's Park there just before Christmas. You'll know that we have in the bookstore a little book that I did some years ago called Why We Pray.

I was surprised recently when Josh discovered that it had been translated into Farsi. I didn't know that, but that's quite useful for us, especially these days with the growing Farsi-speaking contingent of the congregation.

[5 : 41] And so perhaps, in due course, this series on how we pray might turn into a sequel to that. But if you haven't read that and prayer is something that you are struggling about, you have questions about, I would encourage you to do that because it is such a fundamental subject.

And there are many, many basics that we all need to get clear. So I can leave you to do that. But over the next few weeks, we're going to be looking together not on why we pray, which is the most fundamental question, but something more practical on how we pray.

And we're going to seek some guidance, well, where better, from the Lord Jesus himself here in Matthew chapter 6, from what we call the Lord's Prayer, which is, in fact, a simple pattern that Jesus himself gave to his disciples to teach them how to pray.

And the wonderful thing is that it is a pattern of great simplicity. And in that regard, it is a contrast to so many things in our modern world.

It was said, I think, that the tax guide for the United Kingdom grew in size exponentially under the chancellorship of Gordon Brown. And I think George Osborne only added to that, and it remains to be seen what our present chancellor will add to that.

[6 : 57] But there are now tens of thousands of pages, I'm told, telling you how to pay tax to the British government. What a wonderful thing. But there are just a few lines from the Lord Jesus Christ about how to pray to God our Father in heaven.

Isn't that a relief? And it won't change in next month's budget either. But, you see, this great simplicity is important for us to grasp because some Christians want to make prayer much more complicated than that.

Sometimes very complicated. But not Jesus. Jesus gives us a pattern of great simplicity. And he's given it to us to help us, those who have the privilege of prayer, to help us in the practice of prayer.

And in Luke's Gospel, in chapter 11 of Luke's Gospel, we also have a version of the Lord's Prayer. And we're told explicitly it comes in answer to the disciples' questions. They came to Jesus and said, Lord, teach us how to pray as John the Baptist has taught his disciples to pray.

We're looking at Matthew's version because the context here is a little fuller, the whole of the Sermon on the Mount. And, of course, the context is always the key to understanding everything that Jesus wants us to grasp.

[8 : 16] And that's certainly true here in his teaching about real prayer. Remember, the whole theme of the Sermon on the Mount is righteousness. That's what Jesus says is essential for entry into the kingdom of heaven, remember, and for progress in the kingdom of heaven.

Now look back to chapter 5, verse 20 there. Your righteousness, he says to his heroes, your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees, the most pious people of all, outwardly, or you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

In fact, as Matthew chapter 5 ends there in verse 48, note, you must be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect. That's what righteousness means for you, my people, reflecting in every way the Father in heaven.

Well, how on earth can you and I as sinful people, can anybody as sinful people possibly have the righteousness that Matthew chapter 5 describes? Well, the answer is, if we're to have that heavenly morality, the morality that allows us to love even our enemies, to show faithfulness and honesty in every part of our life, to repay evil only with good, and so on and so on as Jesus teaches, if we're to have that heavenly morality in our lives, we must have the heavenly mentality, the outlook on life, that Jesus goes on to describe here in Matthew chapter 6.

And we need that mentality, that whole way of looking at life, that can only come through having a right relationship with God, our Father in heaven.

[10 : 02] It comes only from him, so that we can see with his eyes, feel with his heart, understand with his understanding.

That's why Jesus says down at the bottom there in chapter 6 verse 33, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

You see, in real Christian faith, everything always just comes back to that. Righteousness is never about mere religion and religiosity. The righteousness Jesus is talking about is all about right relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ the Son.

And so in a way, the first four words of the Lord's Prayer actually encapsulate everything that that means. Look at them. Our Father in heaven. How do we pray?

Well, all real prayer begins when we do just that. We address God personally. Prayer begins, you see, in a reflection of that real and live and wonderful relationship that we have with God, the Father, through Christ our Savior.

[11 : 19] And once again, what that relationship really means to us, it all flows from our understanding of what kind of a God this is that we're speaking about and to whom we are speaking, to whom we're united when we're praying.

And all through Matthew chapter 6, not just here in verse 9, all through the things that Jesus says here, all through that reading, I wonder if you noticed, is that insistent reminder that this God, that our God, is our Father in heaven.

12 times or more, I think, I've counted Jesus using that phrase just in these few verses. It is our Father in heaven, he says, who is the great rewarder of all of those who know him and all of those who therefore pray him.

Verse 1 and verse 4 and twice there in verse 6, our Father in heaven, your Father who sees. Verse 8 and verse 9 and verse 14 and verse 15 and verse 18 right down there in verse 26 and as we just read, verse 30T, your heavenly Father knows the things that you need.

Do you think we've got the message? Prayer is about praying to our Father in heaven. And that's what we need to remember above everything else as far as Jesus is concerned when we think about how we pray.

[12 : 47] It's all about to whom it is that we are praying. It's all about the one we are praying to, our Father. And we need to remember that God is in heaven, that he's not merely on earth where people are.

Our prayers are not for them but for him. And that we need to remember that God is our Father and not some fiend who wants to do us harm and whom we have to persuade to do us good.

And so just as the Sermon on the Mount teaches us plainly that real Christian righteousness is the very antithesis of earthly religious righteousness. So real Christian prayer is the very antithesis of all earthly religious prayer as you might call it.

And that's why Jesus begins his teaching on prayer here in Matthew chapter 6 with two enormous negatives. Two of what I call necessary negatives that come on again and again all the way through the teaching of scripture.

Two negatives about what prayer is not and how not to pray before he teaches his true followers how we should pray. So first of all look at verses 5 and 6.

[14 : 03] Here's the first great negative. Real Christian prayer is not not the fraudulent prayer of pious religiosity.

when you pray you must not be like the hypocrites for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners that they may be seen by others.

Truly I say to you they have received their reward but by contrast when you pray go into your room shut the door and pray to your father who's in secret and your father who sees in secret will reward you.

don't treat your prayers as a theatrical production is how one translation translates verse 5 I think very vividly because that is what pious religiosity so often does.

It's so called prayer is actually about manipulating the attitudes of other people right here on planet earth. That's what Jesus says. It's all about seeking an earthly reputation for piety among other people.

[15 : 09] But that is not real prayer that engages with God. It's a pious fraud Jesus says. Hypocrisy. Strong language verse 5.

But it is look it is very religious. It goes to so called places of worship the synagogues the church in public and so on.

And the context of course in first century Palestine was indeed a very religious culture a very ostentatiously religious culture and ostentatious religion was admired by people. And it still is of course in many parts of the world today.

Go to Israel today you'll see very pious Jews ostentatiously doing their prayers right out in public. You'll see the same in very religious Islamic countries and so on.

Catholic countries perhaps. Now of course in our secular western world today where we live it's rather different. We're very quick aren't we to jump on religious hypocrisy.

[16 : 14] In a sense that's right isn't it? That's why there was such a furore over child abuse situations in the Catholic Church or indeed in any other religious grouping.

There does seem to be a very perverse delight doesn't there among the press and our secularist rulers lampooning anything to do with Christianity today. They love it when there's something to hold up against the church or any Christian organization.

It's rather ironic because there's plenty of hypocrisy also in public life and in political life and in the media. All sorts of pious talk isn't there on the hustings the political hustings but the expenses claims are still going in there and all kinds of things come to light that really reek of hypocrisy.

The same thing in the media. It's interesting isn't it sometimes listening to these television presenters these inquisitors boring down on the politicians or the business leaders shouting about the fat cats and so on but BBC salaries of their very star presenters to be published and my goodness me they don't want that.

So there's hypocrisy everywhere isn't there even in those who like to expose hypocrisy. But you see to come back to religion it's very easy even for religion for religiosity even for Christianized religion perhaps especially that to eclipse that real relationship with God and that is exactly what the Lord Jesus was facing in first century Israel a people of the Bible but whose real relationship with God had become choked and choked off by ritual by ceremony by religiosity and by deception says Jesus he says they were deceiving themselves because what they were really doing in their prayers ostentatious as they might be was seeking to impress other people to be seen and to be heard by others says Jesus and that isn't so different really today take the misguided religiosity in much of institutional

[18 : 33] Christianity with all its pomp and ceremony with all its robes and colors and incense and processions and all that sort of thing it's very religiously impressive to the world I'll never forget some of you will remember watching the funeral of the last Pope John Paul II from the Vatican in Rome and what an extraordinary display it was deeply impressive to the watching crowds to the millions billions I suppose of people all around the world with all these cardinals in their red hats and their robes processing through the Vatican crowds of people ceremony pomp so on but you see with those kinds of ostentatious religious displays of piety and pious prayer and ritual and so on is that what impresses God in heaven is the Lord sitting up there in his theater box looking down at the stage and giving rapturous applause well done not according to

Jesus here no says Jesus look at verse 6 our father sees in secret and he sees what is really aimed at him and equally sees what is just in fact self promotion and what's there just to impress the crowds of other people and of course before we are content with lobbing grenades at other branches of the church it's just as easy for evangelical religiosity to be a desire just to be seen by other people and a sense of showing off our sense of righteousness which is just self righteousness righteousness I'm always at the prayer meeting not like him well of course you should be at the prayer meeting taking your part in prayer with the rest of the church and so should he but the question is why are you there whose eyes and ears are you drawing when you go there whose praise are you seeking is it

God's or is it that you'll be seen by your fellow Christians by others in the church and they'll be impressed by your presence or your prayers or whatever it is there's nothing so annoying is there as the kind of person who is persistent in name dropping I can think of two or three people I know like that and the name dropper is somebody who just wants to be with other people so they can be seen with them in order to impress other people so they can drop their name and say I was speaking to so and so and so you must be a very important person and he's speaking to so and so and you see religious prayer is to the Lord exactly like that you're praying to the Lord really so that others will see and be impressed others will hear and be impressed with you and your piety and your religiosity and your righteousness and Jesus says here in verse 5 if deep down and that is really why you are praying then you have your reward you've got your reputation people will think that of you oh what a pious person he is what a man of prayer you've got your reward but Jesus says it's all a pious fraud it's just religious prayer it's not real prayer it's not real relationship with the Lord real relationship with somebody wants to be with somebody just because you love them just because you love their company and just being with them in secret is the reward look around at any of our newly engaged couples that's what they want to do isn't it to be with one another that's the reward and you see the the problem with the prayer of the pious religious person is that it forgets that God is not on earth but in heaven he's not there on the street corner to be impressed by your prayer and he's forgotten that it's heaven's praise that we really need and that it's only heaven's praise that matters one whit in this world not earthly praise not at all and Jesus says look down to chapter 6 verse 24

Jesus says you can't have both it's one master's praise or the other it's treasures in heaven or treasures on earth you cannot serve God and money says our translation mammon the things of this earth including the praise of this earth it's one or the other and that's hard for us isn't it because all of us crave recognition we do but real Christian prayer says Jesus is the antithesis of the prayer of pious religiosity it's not about earthly reputations with God it's about the heavenly relationship with God being real and true so that's the first necessary negative the second is in verses 7 and 8 real Christian prayer is not the fraudulent prayer of the pious religiosity but nor is it the frantic prayer of pagan religions verse 7 when you pray don't heap up empty phrases as the pagan

Gentiles do they think they'll be heard for their many words don't be like them for your father knows what you need before you ask him if pious religiosity is seeking to manipulate people's attitudes so that you will get a reputation for godliness for righteousness for piety then pagan religion is seeking to manipulate God's attitude to us in order that we will get rewards from him here and now on earth the things that we want things that we think we need pagan prayer is about desperately trying to get God to give us what we want and what we think we need and what we think we deserve here on earth now notice do you see how all through this chapter and it repays careful reading if you read all through this chapter 6 you'll see that Jesus is really showing us how hyper religiosity on the one hand and total paganism on the other hand are in fact in essence exactly the same thing the pious fraud and the pagan one and the same neither of them are truly praying they're all seeking to use God to give us what we want for the pious religious person what they want is a reputation for righteousness for morality for piety among others they want the praise from men that's their treasure on earth and the pagan religion well he wants riches to bring liberty to bring autonomy to bring power

[25 : 58] Jesus says in verse 32 it's the mark of the pagans that they seek after things that's our world isn't it that's the world we live in the shopping centers of our city those are the great temples of our consumer society aren't they people seeking after things but the pagan prayer uses God as a tool to get him those things that's what we want and Jesus says everyone in the world really falls into one or other of these camps either we're chasing reputation or we're chasing riches boils down to just that and both of these are utterly opposed to the real way of life that Jesus is proclaiming here a real relationship with God the Father in heaven and the frantic prayer of pagan religion is all around us and it can look either very religious or it can look very secular as I've indicated you go to

India today as I do most years and as some of you have just been out of the Delhi Bible Institute you'll back this up Andrews wherever you are you'll tell us as well in India Hinduism is full of the frantic prayers of verse 7 you see it everywhere there are shrines there are offerings there are endless words endless mantras endless works endless wailings holy men with all their rituals and so on and so on all of it is to try and manipulate the gods to bring me good karma good luck wealth a good life all the things that I want it's very obvious to us as westerners because it's so different to our culture but our secular culture is not actually so different not at all in a crisis it's amazing isn't it how many people suddenly turn to prayer it's the old saying isn't it there are not many atheists in a foxhole and when the chips are down when your boat is sinking when the guns are trained on you it's amazing how you discover prayer and there's a disaster when there's an atrocity some kind of national calamity outpourings of this kind of pagan prayers nowadays it's accompanied always with bunches of flowers isn't it

I think that began about 20 years ago with the death of the princess of Wales didn't it remember flowers everywhere my goodness it was a bonanza for the florist but everywhere people were putting flowers in shrines and it's become part of our paganized national culture now it's part of the rituals the frantic rituals of pagan prayers not quite knowing how to pray what to do but wanting to offer to God words of prayer it's the same personally in people's lives when people are struck with illness or calamity in the family or something like that that's when people say we want you to pray for us that's the frantic pagan prayer that Jesus is talking about and people revert either to their traditional rudimentary folk religion in our country they'll go into churches they'll light candles they'll have vigils or that sort of thing or in different situations they'll seek dramatic signs and wonders ministries looking for miracles for them to cure their illness their cancer or to heal their loved one or whatever it is or all around us today in our confused post-Christian mixture of new age spirituality and so on people will be turning to mantras to chants to crystals to gurus to you name it or to various religions that

Buddhism which seems to be the in thing among some of the great and the good today the stars the film stars and so on these are all forms aren't they of the same thing you can see that trying to manipulate God or the gods whoever they may be to give you what you want and what you think you need the earthly treasure that you've set your heart upon that you must have here and now that healing from cancer or that marriage that dream marriage that you long for or the job the career the family you want whatever it might be but again Jesus is saying to us that that kind of prayer is a thousand miles away from the real prayer that speaks of a real and living relationship with God the Father through Jesus because it forgets doesn't it that God is our Father and that he knows already what our needs are and that he cares for us so that we can trust him because we know he will provide for our real needs verse 32 pagans seek after all these things but your heavenly father knows that you need them all but seek first the kingdom of

God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you Christian prayer knows that we really can depend upon God because he is our heavenly father and he will provide for all of our needs we had lunch today with Kieran and Kaz Dodds and the two little ginger nuts were asleep and the time came on and Kieran said we have to get them up they need their food he's so focused on these little ones getting what they need they couldn't sleep too long they need their food he'll probably grow out of that eventually but at this stage at least he's a loving caring father knowing what his little ones need and that's our heavenly father he knows what we need he will provide what we need not necessarily everything we want little children often want candy for breakfast don't they a loving father knows they need cereal we'll give them candy but he knows all of our needs and frantic prayer forgets that forgets that

[32 : 13] God is our father that he's not a fiend that we don't need to try and manipulate him in order to give us good things and we can forget that can't we even as Christians must be true otherwise Jesus wouldn't be warning us here not to be like that we can be like that in our prayers haven't you resorted to frantic prayer like that at times in your life I certainly have and Christians often do want to have great prayer marathons a frantic desperate prayer for some crisis or other or prayer marches in special places and all that sort of thing as though somehow God would be impressed by our magnificent stamina if we can march around the city and pray or if we can last all night in prayer and then just spend the next three days staggering about trying to catch up walking around as zombies is that what impresses God our heavenly father no says

Jesus look at verse 7 that's what pagans do they think they'll be heard for their many words for their extraordinary stamina and wonderful works don't be like them we need to take those words really very seriously so Jesus says to us don't be fraudulent Pharisees with a high view of your own righteousness with an eye for your reputation here on earth no be a humble seeker after heaven's righteousness and your father's praise and don't be a frantic pagan either with high hopes for all your own riches for the rewards you might be able to coax out of him in prayer no be a contented child seek heaven's treasure be content with your heavenly father's good provision for your life that's the double negative that Jesus begins with here don't be that way and then comes the positive verse nine you then by contrast you then pray like this our father in heaven real

Christian prayer you see is the filial prayer of personal relationship we pray as sons of our father in heaven using Peterson translates verse nine like this with a God like this loving you you can pray very simply I think that captures the thought very very well you see the simplicity of real Christian prayer reflects the simplicity of real personal relationship that we have with God our loving father the better you know somebody the fewer words are needed isn't that so in a letter if you're writing a letter for the first time to somebody you don't know then inevitably it'll be a much more formal lengthy letter won't it you introduce yourself you talk about what you're saying and so on that's not how best friends write to one another it takes just a few words doesn't it these days are very few words just on text or email or something like that you don't need to worry about the nuances when you know somebody very well there's no risk of you offending them because you know them and they know you you can just send a few words and it won't be misunderstood

I got some friends that when I communicate with them like that we just send each other a one liner we know exactly what we mean sometimes it's just one exclamation mark and that says it all that's the way it is isn't it between close friends the better you know someone in your life the less verbosity there has to be and when you know somebody inside out like your marriage partner of 30 or 40 years or whatever you know what they'll think you know what they're going to say they don't even need to say it sometimes do they you hardly need to ask them and sometimes you don't even need to be speaking just to be with them is enough and reams of words and meaning can be conveyed wordlessly that's the simplicity isn't it of a deep and real relationship when our kids were very young when we lived in

London I was away very often a week at a time for conferences 10 or 12 weeks of the year and I'd usually come home well most nights as well come home for work and the kids were already in bed and I would just go in and kiss their foreheads sometimes they would just stir a little bit semi wake up gaze up at you and just say dad and that's all I wanted to hear that was enough it did the dad that was a long time ago the dad now is dad and that one word can equally convey a host of utter contempt and embarrassment and all these other things as all you fathers know but you see that's that's what our father in heaven means when we utter just these few little words to God our heavenly father even if we are too tired sometimes to say much more than that when it comes from the heart it's enough it's all he needs to hear

[37 : 49]

William still once put it this way he said real prayer means that all my thought life is tinctured with his presence all my thought life is tinctured with his presence every thought of God our father every word of God the father filling our minds and our hearts and every thought of ours responding with a resounding yes our father in heaven I am devoted to you alone and all I am is is for your honor that's how I want to live and all I need is dependent on you alone it's from your hand from your hand alone comes everything I need our father in heaven and that's real prayer according to Jesus I wonder if you know that simplicity that simple joy in your prayer life

I hope you do that's it's really it's really just another way of asking do you really know God our father through his son our Lord Jesus Christ do you know that do you know him let me close by reading Eugene Peterson's translation of verses 7 to 9 look at these verses and listen to how he paraphrases it the world is full of so called prayer warriors who are prayer ignorant they're full of formulas and programs and advice peddling techniques for getting what you want from God don't fall for that nonsense this is your father you're dealing with and he knows better than you what you need with a God like this loving you you can pray very simply like this our father in heaven amen let's pray together heavenly father how we thank you the wonderful simplicity which we can come to you as your little children whom you love so that for us to articulate your name even in our hearts and certainly on our lips brings joy to your heart help us to understand that you are in heaven that you are the one who sees in secret it's to you alone that all we say and all we do matters not the people of this world free us we pray from the conceit and the deceit of hypocrisy seeking the praise of men may we seek your praise and your praise alone and find your great reward and remind us ever again oh God that we need not and must not ever chase you as the pagans in their ignorance chase for the gods you are our loving father who has made your love known to us forever in your son the Lord

Jesus help us we pray to come to you always rejoicing in your love rejoicing in your name
and trusting in your goodness that we may be people who truly pray and we ask it our
father in the name of Jesus your beloved son amen son son son son son son son son
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