



## WEEK 1: HOW NOT TO PRAY

**TEXT: MATTHEW 6:5-13**

### **Introduction:**

Jesus assumed that we would pray. Prayer had always been a way of life for the people of God and had never been seen as an “optional-extra”. So when he responded to his disciples on how they should pray, he did not start his teaching by trying to convince them that prayer was necessary. That was already assumed. The disciples must have seen something different in the way in which Jesus prayed that caused them to want to learn to pray differently to how they had done previously. Many of us instinctively know that there is more to the Christian’s prayer life than we ourselves have experienced, and so we can identify with the disciples’ desire to know how to pray.

In teaching them how to pray, Jesus first started off in teaching them how NOT to pray, which is a helpful starting point for us too.

### 1 BY *NOT* PRAYING

Many of us do not have an active prayer life for a variety of reasons. Some of the things that keep us from praying are:

- i. **Busyness** – we do not spend the time we need to spend with God because we are so busy and do not take any time for quiet moments and reflection. We tend to fill up our ‘down-time’ with activities that keep our minds engaged.
- ii. **Spiritual Dryness** – during periods when we do not experience God in a very tangible way, we tend to neglect our prayer life because we are so reliant on our feelings in order to pray. In so doing, we neglect our very life-line to God, and over time we tend to feel further and further removed from God, and to project those feelings onto him, as though our lack of desire to communicate with him is reciprocated. The great irony is that we drift away because we don’t pray, and yet the only way back to intimacy with him is to pray.
- iii. **Guilt** – our own sin causes us to separate ourselves from God’s presence. Instead of running to God for help and forgiveness, we wrongly believe that God desires the separation from us. Christ died in order to free us from condemnation, and yet instead of hearing that God is pleased with us in Christ, we keep telling ourselves that we are too guilty and deserve to be punished. No wonder we find it difficult to pray then. As a result of our guilt, we hide from God and we live in shame, instead of coming into the light, and finding forgiveness, acceptance and freedom.
- iv. **Unbelief** – when we stop believing that God answers prayer, we have essentially stopped believing in the God of the Bible. The way we build faith in these times is to see God answering prayers. But in order to see God answer prayer, we have to pray more, not less.
- v. **Anger** – some of us have experienced pain and suffering on a very deep level, and often, to make sense of it we cast blame, which usually results in us being furious at and distrustful of God. This anger has the power to shift our theological position to the point where we even stop believing in God’s ability to answer prayer or to intervene in our situations. The only way we can trust God again in this space is to get to know him again, for who he is, through prayer, and to then be willing to abandon the self-made image of him that we created during our suffering in order to deal with our emotions.

*“The only solution to prayerlessness is prayerfulness”*

- ❖ Q: What is your prayer-life like? Describe what your prayer life looks like in a typical week (briefly).
- ❖ Q: What is your primary excuse for not having the prayer-life that you really want, and what changes are you going to make now that you are aware of it?
- ❖ Q: Why are our excuses for our poor prayer-lives at some level an indication of unbelief?
- ❖ Q: Why is it true to say that the only solution to our prayerlessness is prayerfulness?



## II. BY PRETENDING TO BE BETTER THAN WE ARE

- Read Matthew 6:5

Jesus condemned prayer that was selfishly motivated or prayers that made the people praying appear to be something that they were not. Some people prayed publically in such a way as to gain the respect or admiration of others within the Jewish community. Others prayed holy sounding prayers while their hearts were far from what their words expressed. Prayer is supposed to be about communing with God alone, and not about what other people think. God wants us to come to him in prayer just as we are, authentically, without any pretence, whether praying privately or publically. He is concerned about our heart-attitudes when we pray and not about what we say or how we say it. If we are praying for any other reason but to commune with him, then we are probably praying for the wrong reasons.

- ❖ Q: When you pray in a group setting or with people you do not know well, why do you feel the pressure to pray in a certain way?
- ❖ Q: Have you ever found yourself inwardly criticizing someone for the way they pray publically? What does this attitude indicate about our own wrong view of prayer?
- ❖ Q: How can we be sure that we are free from selfish motives or hypocrisy when we pray in a group (or any other public forum)?

### Community change:

- ❖ If you have never felt comfortable to pray out loud in a group because of the fear of what people will think, would you be willing to change that in the group tonight?
- ❖ Or, if you are one of the culprits that have caused people to feel insecure about praying out loud because of your attitude or your need for approval from the group by praying in exuberant ways, would you be willing to step back for a few weeks and remain quiet in the group prayer times?  
(This would allow the space and time for those who need to take bold steps in praying publically, and give you the opportunity to support and encourage them to be free to be who they are when leading others in prayer, while allowing yourself the time to assess your own needs and motives in your public prayer.)

## II. BY THINKING GOD HAS TO BE COERCED AND APPEASED

- Read Matthew 6:7-8

The other type of prayer that Jesus condemned was the prayer of the gentiles who believed that prayer was a means to appease the gods, who were cruel and capricious. Though we do not view God in the same way, many of us have fallen into the trap of praying out of obligation, and have forgotten the purpose of prayer. The warning for us would be against praying prayers that are devoid of our hearts. Many religions have this form of prayer that assumes that there is some sort of power in the repetition of certain words and phrases. But Jesus condemned this type of prayer, and said that it was not the way his followers should pray.

Mindless repetition of words, even in a religious form, has no value or power whatsoever. Sadly, we have, over the years, developed Christian versions of these types of prayers, which we pray out of habit and not from the heart. Yet it is the prayers offered to God from the heart that are the only prayers that will create intimacy and fellowship with him, which is of course the primary purpose of prayer. We should therefore take stock of how we pray and assess whether or not we are communing with God or simply uttering words out of obligation and ritual.

Many of us tag the phrase "*in Jesus name*" to the end of our prayers because at some point we were taught that we had to do that in order for our prayers to have any power. This is a classic example of our hearts not being fully engaged in our prayers. When we truly consider what we are saying when we pray in Jesus name, we consider that, without Jesus, we would have no business praying to a holy and powerful God in heaven. But because Jesus died and paid the price for our sin in order to reconcile us to God, we are absolutely dependent on him in order to speak to God. Praying in Jesus name is a profound statement of belief and dependence on him, every time we pray, and so it should not be taken lightly.

- ❖ Q: Have you become aware of prayers that you pray that are mindless and repetitive, stemming from a place of obligation or tradition?
- ❖ Q: If so, what changes to your prayers can you make so that you engage with your heart?
- ❖ Q: Why do we need a correct view of God in order to pray earnestly from our hearts?  
General:
- ❖ Q: What is one big take-away that you are going home with from this message? How are you going to make sure that you do not just forget about it and move on, but rather apply what God has shown you this week?