

A Prayer that Pleases God

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[0:00] Thank you very much, Mike. As the service leader steps up to open the service, the congregation suppress a smile of satisfaction.

! This guy is one of the good ones.! He balances reverence for God with impressive words and turns a phrase.

Compassion for the needy oozes out of his every word as he entreats God's favour. The service leader knows he is good.

He's talented and he's just better than other people at doing this. Plus, he loves serving God in this way. He loves the chance to flex his vocabulary and to inspire others to pray like he does.

This is where God wants him to be. Up front and using his gift. Anywhere else and his talent would be wasted. And if you had been at church that particular morning, you might agree that that guy's prayer sounded really good.

[1:31] And you might have even added your amen at the end of it. But did you notice any red flags? We are going to be asking ourselves this morning, what kind of prayer pleases God?

What kind of prayer makes God smile? And I'm going to suggest today that the kind of prayer which pleases God is prayer which remembers who God is and who we are in Christ.

We are in Matthew's Gospel. We are in a section known as the Sermon on the Mount, which runs from chapter 5 through to the end of chapter 7.

And in the Sermon on the Mount, in this particular section that we're looking at, in this bit from verse 1 to verse 18 of chapter 6, Jesus is calling out the sham worship that he sees all around him.

And he warns his followers not to practice their righteousness in front of others. So they're kind of outward means of worshipping God. So they're giving, they're praying, and they're fasting.

[2:44] They're not to make a big show of these things so that people would give them the glory. Instead, Jesus wants them to be giving God the glory as they do these things.

So this week in our passage this morning, Jesus is calling out prayer which doesn't please God. And he's teaching his followers how they can pray in a way which truly pleases the Father.

But as we begin to think about prayer this morning, we must remember that prayer is not about bringing things to God's attention. It's not about making him aware of certain needs.

When we pray, we are saying things to God that he already knows. Prayer is not essential for God, but it is essential for us because it reminds us that God is God and we are not.

So this is our structure this morning. We are going to be remembering three things about who God is, and we're going to be thinking about remembering two things about who we are. And these are particularly important things for us to be remembering as we come to God in prayer.

[4:03] So first of all, remembering who God is. So the first thing that we must remember about who God is, is that he is all seeing.

So I hope you've still got your Bibles open, but if you look back at verse five and six again, it says this, And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others.

Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your father who is unseen.

Then your father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. What Jesus is doing here is that he is calling out the hypocrites who love to be seen while they pray.

When they prayed in the synagogue, everyone would have been there, and everyone would have been there to witness them do it. Like the service leader in my made-up story, they loved the attention of praying in public.

[5:29] But the street corner is maybe a bit of a less obvious place to find someone praying. Why might they have wanted to pray on the street corner? Well, in Jesus' day, the Jews had set times of the day, which they would set aside for prayer.

So, nine in the morning, midday, three in the afternoon, and in the evening as well. And if these folks timed it just right, as they were walking along through the streets, they would arrive in the busiest places with the maximum attention when the clock struck and it was time for prayer. Praying on the street corner, if you think about the corner, it means that folk could see you and hear you from two different streets, all the way up two different streets. This was all for maximum attention.

Jesus tells his followers, and that includes us today, if we are following him, that when we pray, we should pray in secret, but remembering that God is all-seeing.

God sees our unseen prayers, and he rewards them. He pays no attention to the prayer which was uttered to get the attention of men.

[6:53] Instead, kingdom people should move from the street corners into their houses and into their room and shut the door behind them. The Greek word used for room, the translation of the Greek word, it literally means storeroom.

A windowless inner room, probably with a locked door. Jesus says, your prayer should be so unseen that not even your family in the house notice.

When we pray quietly, so sometimes we pray in our heads or we whisper our prayers to God, when we pray, do we believe that God sees those unseen prayers?

They look really weak to the world. What is whispering in a locked room really doing? Well, do we believe that God sees our unseen prayers? Can we trust that our prayers whispered in the storeroom are being declared aloud in the courts of heaven?

I think there's some wisdom in this teaching from Jesus as well about drawing away from the busyness into a quiet room, closing the door behind us.

[8:15] I think this is an exceedingly helpful thing for us to do. When we pray, are we letting distractions compete for our attention?

Or are we seeking out quiet spaces in our day to pray to our God? How often does our phone join us in our prayer times?

And I think husbands and wives, you can maybe facilitate this for one another as well. Maybe you could say, why don't I entertain the kids for 20 minutes while you take a moment in the storeroom? God is pleased when we earnestly seek him out and put our distractions to one side. When I used to work for an engineering firm, there were moments in the office when I needed to take a time out and talk to God about a stressful situation that I was facing.

So I would take refuge in the loo. That was where I would go. I would lock myself in the cubicle and pour my heart out to God with no distractions.

[9:26] Nobody in my team knew any better. They just thought I was off to the loo. But I could take great confidence that my all-seeing God was taking notice and he knew exactly what my needs were.

Now, it's important to note here when Jesus is talking about secret prayer, he's not condemning corporate prayer. He's not telling Mike off for praying in public like he did.

Jesus' prayer template that we find in this passage, we know it's the Lord's Prayer, it's a corporate prayer. I wonder if you notice that. It's full of plural words like our and us and we.

Jesus is not condemning corporate prayer here. When we gather as God's people like we do on a Sunday at church, we pray together. And when we pray together, so either here in the service or at pizza and prayer or in our growth groups, we must keep an eye on our heart posture.

Is there even a sniff of trying to impress other Christians when we pray out loud with each other in public? The second thing that we must remember about God is that he is all-knowing.

[10:52] So we're going to look at verses 7 and 8 again. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Jesus says, don't be impressed by the way that the Gentiles pray.

using many words. He says that such prayer is babbling, nothingness, empty. And God is not hard of hearing.

We do not need to use big words. We don't need to use loud words for him to hear us. He is not impressed by overly wordy prayers.

God's grasp of the human language is much better than our own. Jesus prayed the repentant tax collector who simply prayed, Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

[12:04] Jesus praised such a prayer. don't pray like this. Don't babble. I used AI to tell me what all the really big words in the Bible are just very quickly.

And then I got it to write me a prayer using all those words. Great if you can, great if it helps you to really come before the Lord, but I would recommend you, he doesn't need to hear all these big words to hear you.

We don't need to use, pray prayers like this. We don't need to pray prayers like this because God already knows what we need before we ask. We read that in the passage.

Isn't that amazing? God already knows what we need before we ask. And if God already knows what we need, then we don't need to use big words to get his attention.

We don't need to repeat our prayers again and again in case he didn't hear us the first time. When we pray, we should remember that he is all-knowing.

[13:18] God, you are aware of this specific need. We lift it before you now and we ask that you would provide in your perfect timing.

So we must remember that God is all-seeing. We must remember that God is all-knowing. And the third thing that we must remember about God when we come to pray to him is that he is holy.

This then is how you should pray. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Jesus' prayer template doesn't begin with specific requests.

I wonder if you noticed that when he says to his followers, this is how you should pray. The first thing he does is he casts the eyes of his disciples all the way up as high as they can go.

He wants them to focus and remember the holiness of God. When we pray, we must remember that God is holy.

[14:23] He is cloaked in unapproachable light. He is white hot and radiant. He is perfectly pure. However, because he is holy, it means that he can't tolerate sin in his presence.

We cannot approach God without Christ because we're absolutely cluttered with sin. Sin has affected us radically.

deeply. It has affected us deeply, all the way down to the atomic level. And if we were to approach God as we are, his holy presence would burn us up.

If you think about the sun for a minute, I learned some fun facts about the sun this week. I knew this fact before I looked it up, but it is so hot that if you were to approach it, you would vaporize before you got anywhere near the surface.

If you got one million miles from the surface of the sun, you would melt and vaporize. One million miles away. Because we are by nature dirty sinners.

[15:37] We cannot draw near to our holy God. And this is really bad news. It is completely impossible for us to enjoy the embrace of our heavenly father without some sort of intervention.

But the good news of the gospel is that Jesus has performed a holiness switch. That's what I'm calling it this morning, a holiness switch. And he did this when he went to the cross.

When Jesus went to the cross, God cloaked him in all of our unholiness, in all of our dirty rags of sin, Jesus was cloaked in that.

And he suffered the death penalty for it. That was the first half of the switch. Then, when we trust in the sufficiency of his death for our sin, remarkably, we are cloaked in his holiness.

That's the second half of the holiness switch. Though we continue to struggle with sin in this life, God sees Jesus' holiness covering us.

[17:00] And because of this, we get to call the God who rules over creation and shines like the sun, we get to call him our heavenly father and enjoy his embrace.

When we pray, we should remember that God is holy and magnify him for the holiness switch that he has performed through his son, Jesus.

Remembering the holy and saving nature of God is radically reorientating for us because it reminds us that he is God and we are not.

remembering his holy and saving nature keeps us from praying self-interested prayers. It keeps us from half-hearted prayers, but it fills them with worship instead.

So, that's three things that we should remember about who God is when we come to him to pray. But what are two things that we can remember about ourselves when we approach God in prayer? [18:08] Well, the first one is related to the one that we've just looked at and it is the fact that we are forgiven. Did you notice how much emphasis Jesus places on forgiveness in this model prayer?

Jesus tells his followers in verse 12 to seek God's forgiveness for our sin. sin. And we just saw that when we trust in the Lord Jesus and his death for our sins on the cross, we are forgiven and we are cloaked in his holiness once and for all.

Jesus has cancelled the debts of our sin on the cross. And Jesus wants us to have a posture of repentance as we remain in this world.

So, throughout the rest of our lives, Jesus wants us to be repentant people. We are not yet freed from the presence of sin. We will still sin. But Jesus wants us to come quickly to him every time we do and ask for his forgiveness.

And we know that he will. But I wonder if you were paying attention to the passage, you might say, not quite so simple, Craig. Isn't Jesus saying that our forgiveness is conditional on us forgiving other people?

[19:35] I wonder if you noticed that in verses 14 and 15. For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. Hmm. What is that talking about? Jesus is turning his disciples' attention to the people who have wronged them and the people who will wrong them.

People have sinned against us and people will sin against us in our lives. And how we think about these people is important to God.

God's forgiveness is for those who have recognized the lengths that Jesus has gone to to absorb the cost of our sins.

God's forgiveness is for those who choose, in response to what Jesus has done, to freely forgive others, absorbing the cost of their sins.

[20:47] us, remembering that before the cross, we are just as sinful as the people who have wronged us. If we are unprepared to forgive others, then have we truly grasped the cross?

Forgiving people who have wronged us is really, really difficult, especially if they've really, really hurt us. forgiveness. Forgiving others is a form of voluntary suffering.

It involves absorbing the cost of the sin that's been committed against us, absorbing the pain of it, and not seeking to make the perpetrator pay for it, not seeking to cancel them from our lives.

We mustn't let bitterness brew in our hearts. We mustn't let unforgiveness remain in our hearts unresolved. Forgiving others who have wronged us is really difficult, but it honors God because it mirrors what Jesus has done for us, absorbing the pain that we inflicted on him for our sins.

And I appreciate this is a difficult area for us. It's a sensitive topic, and I have breezed through it. We could spend a whole sermon series thinking about forgiveness.

[22:20] But I found Tim Keller's book, *Forgive*, quite helpful in this area, and I know others that have found it really helpful as well. And I'd recommend you grabbing it.

It's got some really, really helpful things to say about how we can forgive others. But as a church family, we can help one another with this. We can share the things with each other that we find hard to give.

We can tell each other the stories from our past that we really, really struggle with. And we can pray for each other and carry these things in prayer for one another.

When we pray, it is good for us to remember that God has forgiven us, and it is good for us to bring our hurts to him, and to ask him to help us to forgive those who have sinned against us.

The second thing that we can remember about ourselves when we come to pray is that we are needy. We are needy. If you were here last week, you might remember that we spent some time thinking about needy people, who needy, the needy people are that Jesus is talking about, and how we can give to help them.

[23:38] But as we look at verses 11 to 13 now, so the kind of second half of the prayer, I think Jesus is suggesting that we are needy people.

Now, we depend on God to provide everything that we need to survive, everything. And I wonder how often we take his providence for granted.

The daily bread that Jesus is encouraging us to ask him for is anything and everything that we need to survive. It's not just bread.

When we pray, it is good for us to remember our specific needs and to thank God that he is pleased to supply us with these things.

things. I wonder how often you take your breath for granted. The Bible tells us that God holds our breath in his hands.

[24 : 41] We are dependent on a process that God has programmed into our brains, which allows us to breathe automatically. If we were to take responsibility for our breathing, we would forget pretty quickly and we would die.

How often do you take your food for granted? Yes, we can go and buy food in the shops to sustain us. We could even plant our own vegetables, but you don't cause them to grow.

All the elements of our Sunday roast, they only grow because God causes them to grow. How often do we take God's protection for granted?

Verse 13 speaks about our spiritual neediness. Even as Christians, we still need God's help. Jesus tells us that we should pray to God and ask him for his help to resist sin and to deliver us from the schemes of the evil one.

When we pray, it is important for us to remember that we have an enemy who wishes to derail us and make us curse God.

[26 : 06] And we must ask for God's help to resist temptations to sin. And we must ask for his armor which protects our heart and our soul and our mind and our bodies.

When we pray, it is good for us to remember that Jesus was victorious over Satan on the cross and emptied him of his power. Yes, God allows us to be tested.

He allows temptations to come our way. But because Jesus has won, Satan is on a leash and time is ticking before he is banished forever.

When we pray, it is good for us to remember our physical and our spiritual neediness before him.

And we must ask God for sustenance and spiritual protection as we live through these lives on earth, waiting for Jesus to return as our all-conquering king.

We're now going to pray and I've scripted this prayer, just taking some of the things that we've been thinking about, some of the things that God wants us to remember as we pray.

[27 : 27] But please join me as I pray these words. Our Heavenly Father, we glorify your name because you are our holy God.

We remember today that you are all-seeing, you are all-knowing, and you are holy. You know what we need and you hear our whispered prayers.

We magnify you because you were pleased to send your son Jesus to suffer on the cross for our sins. Thank you that Jesus has performed a holiness switch, taking our gross sins upon himself at the cross and giving us his holiness.

Help us to trust in his sacrifice for our sins and the sufficiency of it. Thank you that we can now stand before you, completely forgiven and completely perfect in your eyes.

We can draw near to you through Jesus. And we can bring our requests before you. Lord, we remember today that we are needy people.

[28 : 54] You know our greatest needs. God, we need you. And we ask that you would please sustain us with what we need this week.

Please protect us from the evil one and his temptations. Thank you that we can look forward to the day when Jesus will return to reign as the king and rid us forever of the influence of sin.

Thank you for your precious word and please impress on our hearts the things that you want us to remember today from this passage and put them into practice.

We ask all this in Jesus' wonderful and holy name. Amen. Amen.