



Worship – Part 14
Acts of Worship – Part 2
Prayer & Fasting
GCSP – 08/11/2007

There is an old saying that says, "Familiarity breeds contempt." I don't know if I agree with going that far, but familiarity does breed complacency and can cause you to take that which you are familiar with for granted. But there is something within us that wants something new and fresh.

If due to sin in a person's life, and let me strongly stress the sin aspect of what I am about to say – if due to sin in a person's life they allow their marriage relationship to grow stale, the husband or wife will begin looking around for someone new and fresh.

To a lesser extent, and sin can still be a part of this equation, some people grow tired of their vehicle even when it running great and still suits the basic need for transportation. This lack of satisfaction can sometimes lead to needless purchases of newer and more expensive vehicles. And obviously there are times when a newer vehicle is warranted but simply growing tired of what you currently drive is probably not one of them.

The point is that when we become familiar with someone or something we can grow weary of that thing or that person if we become selfish and take that thing or person for granted.

The passage of Scripture we will begin looking at tonight is one that is very familiar. Some churches recite this passage in their services every week. And because of its familiarity I am afraid that many Christians have never grasped the tremendous truths that this passage contains. I am also afraid that many Christians have misused this passage because of the lack of true understanding.

The passage is what many call the Lord's Prayer or the Disciple's Prayer. It is found in Luke's gospel and in Matthew's gospel – with Matthew doing a more extended and detailed account.

Turn with me in your Bibles to **Matthew 6**.

We are going to read more than just the few verses that contain the sample prayer – and it is meant to be a sample prayer, not a specific prayer to pray word-for-word – so that we can understand the context from which it comes and also pick up a few other principles about prayer in the preceding verses.

Matthew 6:1-18

"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

"When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that

they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."

"Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is 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, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.' For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."

"Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you" (NASB).

Let's pray.

As most of you are well aware, we are in the midst of an extended study on the topic of worship. We have quite honestly only scratched the surface, but as I mentioned last week, the Holy Spirit is leading me to start heading to a conclusion for this series by preaching on several of the acts of worship or the expression of our worship. This will by no means be a comprehensive list, but I hope to cover the major areas of our life where we can apply what we have already learned.

I mentioned last week that I had loosely mapped out six major aspects of how we practically express our worship to God. I also mentioned that unless the Spirit intervenes, I should be able to get through these six acts of worship by the end of September. Foolish me. My initial intent was to spend only this week on prayer. It was silly of me to think I could do one comprehensive sermon on the topic of prayer. So I am done setting dates, we will finish this series when we finish this series.

Let me assure you that even when we do finish this series, the topic of worship will still be at the forefront of my preaching. The more I study through this immense topic, the more I have come to see that worship permeates every page of the Bible. So I will be careful to incorporate true and genuine worship into everything I teach and preach as the Holy Spirit leads.

Last week we looked at the importance of God's church. We saw how we need to not be so casual in our attendance and the effect it has on the entire church when we are not there. After the service last week I promptly had two couples walk up to me and tell me they wouldn't be here this week. We had a good laugh and I told them I would pray for their pagan souls.

The point I trust you got out of that message was to not be casual about your attendance. There will obviously be times when you will be gone, but don't let the little and insignificant things get in the way of you being in your place each week. Don't schedule things that keep you from being here.

Our passage tonight is one of many that I could have focused on to help us understand the importance of prayer as an act of worship, but since it is such a familiar one and since these are the words Jesus used to teach His disciples about prayer, I thought this was the place to settle.

The context of this passage is important, and that is found in two illustrations the Lord uses prior to expanding upon several elements that should be included in our prayers. I will move rather quickly through the first illustration since it does not deal with prayer, and then we will most

likely spend the rest of our time this evening on the second illustration – saving the actual sample prayer for next time.

v. 1

"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven."

The first verse is the key to the entire passage we read, and it is also the key to true and genuine worship. That key involves checking your motives and attitudes in everything you do in your Christian life.

John MacArthur relates the following account in his commentary on Matthew's gospel:

"The story is told of an eastern ascetic holy man who covered himself with ashes as a sign of humility and regularly sat on a prominent street corner of his city. When tourists asked permission to take his picture, the mystic would rearrange his ashes to give the best image of destitution and humility."

MacArthur then comments, *"A great deal of religion amounts to nothing more than rearranging religious 'ashes' to impress the world with one's supposed humility and devotion"* (The MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Matthew 1-7).

Jesus warns us to **"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them."** In other words, beware of hypocrisy.

If we could rank sins from bad to the worst in God's eyes, the number one most heinous sin would be idolatry. God spends more time in His Word with the sin of idolatry than any other. Based on how often God dealt with this next sin in the life of His people Israel, hypocrisy would slide in right behind idolatry.

Both sins are on the opposite end of the spectrum when it comes to true and genuine worship. Idolatry is worshipping every and anything besides God, and hypocrisy is in essence worshipping yourself, or at least presenting yourself as being worthy of being worshipped by others.

Jesus says to beware of hypocrisy. He warns us to be so very careful when we are moved to do good things. Check your motives for doing them in the first place. Are you hoping to impress someone? Are you trying to earn some brownie points with God?

It is obviously a good thing to do good deeds. James admonishes us to express the genuineness of our faith with our good deeds (**James 2:14-18**). He goes so far as to say that our faith is dead if it is not accompanied by works.

So check your motives. If you are doing the good deeds or acts of righteousness for the purpose of exalting yourself, if you are looking for a pat on the back, if you can't stop yourself from telling others about what you did, then you probably need to get things right with God before you continue doing these acts of righteousness – or at least realize that you are not impressing God or your fellow Christians and that the praise you receive on this earth is replacing the priceless rewards you would have received in heaven for the same deeds.

And let me make one clarification before we move on: Sharing your testimony for the purpose of encouraging, edifying, or even admonishing the church is not the same as sharing what you did for your own praise. Again, we must check out motivation before we speak or do.

v. 2-4

"So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

Jesus then goes on to His first illustration of this principle – giving to the poor. When you give to the poor it should be done in secret so you are not tempted to give for the wrong reasons. We are definitely commanded to give to the poor, in this and many other verses, but it should be done in with as few people knowing about it as possible.

Let me point out a few quick observations so that we do not pervert this principle. First, by the use of the phrase, **"When you give to the poor"** in both **verse 2** and **verse 3**, it is implied that this is an activity that all Christians should be involved in; otherwise Jesus would have said, "If you give to the poor" not "when you give."

Second, Jesus is specifically talking about giving to the poor in this illustration. He is not saying your giving to the church or anyone else has to be in complete secrecy. It's okay to be inconspicuous in your giving but you cannot use this passage to warrant doing so.

We won't take the time to go there, but in **Acts 4:32-37** we have the example of Joseph giving a great sum of money to the church in a very open and public way. Joseph had the right motivation and the right heart attitude, and because of this his public generosity was an encouragement to the church. So much so that the Apostles changed his name to Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement."

So your giving to the church can be public if your motives and attitude are righteous and you are hoping to spur others on in the grace of giving as well. If giving to the church is a source of pride and you are seeking the praise of men, then you need to keep reading in the Book of Acts, when in chapter five, Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead by God for going down that road of giving to the church in order to receive the praise of men.

Well let's move on to the primary topic for the next several weeks – prayer.

v. 5

"When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full."

The very first observation in regards to prayer is it is expected. Just like our giving to the poor, Jesus again uses the phrase, "when" not "if." We are expected to be involved in the worship activity of praying. Prayer should mark your life as a Christian just like loving one another, encouraging one another, teaching and equipping one another, and all of the other "one another's" listed for us in the Bible. We should all be people of prayer. We shouldn't have to seek out the one or two people in the church who are known to be prayer warriors – we should all be prayer warriors. We should be able to grab the first person we find in the church or call the first number our eyes fall on in the church directory when we need someone to pray for or with us. Our lives should be marked and identified as a person of prayer.

But, this reputation of being a person of prayer had better not come from a hypocritical spirit. Our public prayers need to be presented with a humble spirit. Your public prayers need to be spoken in the same manner as they are when you are in private. Just because other people will have the privilege to hear what you are saying, you are still praying to God, not to man. When you begin praying with the primary thought in your head that other people need to hear what

you are saying, you have stopped praying to God and you have crossed the line into being hypocritical.

Jesus says the reward for this kind of prayer will be the praise of men not the answer and blessing of God.

v. 6

"But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

Again, just as there is not a prohibition against giving in a public manner if your heart is righteous, this is not a prohibition against public prayer. We will get to this next week, but what are the very first two words in the Lord's Prayer? – **"Our Father."** If Jesus were teaching against public prayer He would be teaching His disciples to say, "My Father" instead of **"Our Father."**

Going back to the primary context we looked at in **verse 1**, the issue is not so much public versus private prayer, as it is the motivation for your prayers when in public. Our primary motivation when praying in public is to honor God. Yes, there may be room for speaking out words that others need to hear, as long as those words are meant to encourage and edify, not so others will praise you or be impressed with you.

But we cannot ignore the fact that Jesus is teaching us to pray in secret. I believe the primary application could be that the overwhelming majority of our prayers should be in secret. The amount of time we spend in private prayer should so outweigh the amount of time we spend praying in a public setting that the public portion should be insignificant in scope.

So find a place to pray often. It doesn't have to literally be a closet as some translations put it, and it really doesn't even have to be an inner room as others translate it. It can truly be anywhere as long as it is a place for you and God to be alone together. Just make sure it is a place where you can focus completely on your time together with God. Yes, you can pray while driving your car but your attention is going to be divided. Don't make your car your private place to pray. Don't multi-task when it comes to being alone with God. Choosing your primary prayer time while also doing something else would be like trying to have an intimate conversation with your spouse while watching the game or some other show on television. Focus!

v. 7

"And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words."

"Meaningless repetition" or **"Vain repetition"** is probably best translated by the NIV in regards to what it actually means. It simply means, **"babbling."** The pagans or heathens who worshipped false gods in the time Christ was on the earth would chant mindless gibberish and/or have these long rehearsed prayers that contained specific words that they had attached some special credence to, or even believed they held some magical power that forced the gods to answer their prayers.

The repeating of words, or chanting, or any other specific posture, or time, or place of prayer could all fall into the essence of what Jesus is saying. If we attribute any specific thing that man can do, apart from the habit of purely and simply and humbly praying, to getting our prayers heard and answered, we are babbling in the context of this verse.

v. 8

"So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."

Jesus sums up this teaching with a profound truth, even though it is a truth that can cause your brain to do some mental gymnastics. God already knows what you have need of – before you even do!

Some may ask the question, “Then why pray?” The simple answer is because God commands us to. A deeper answer is that God has chosen to use the prayers of His children to accomplish His will. And while that may not satisfy all of your curiosities about the dynamics of how prayer actually works, the Bible doesn’t give us any more explanation than that. So we are left with the fact that prayer does work and prayer does change things, and we will have to leave the details of how and why to God. Maybe He will sit us down and explain it when we get to heaven.

One other thought and strong possibility is that our prayers are more for our own benefit than they are God’s. God doesn’t need us to pray to accomplish His will, but He has chosen to do so through our prayers to allow us the privilege of taking part in His will on earth, and the privilege of seeing our faith and spiritual maturity grow because of answered prayer.

Worship the Lord with your prayers. Get in the habit of praying without ceasing as **1 Thessalonians 5:17** says; which simply means living your life in constant communication and communion with the Lord. As our body breaths oxygen to survive physically, so our souls need to breath prayers to survive spiritually.

Let’s pray.