

The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

Chapter 22: Christ's Teaching on Prayer

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And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him. After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Mt. 6:5-15).

In verses 5-8, Jesus gives the second illustration regarding the proper method and motivation for Christian piety. Here He deals with prayer. Once again, He contrasts the proper way to pray with the hypocrites (the scribes and Pharisees), but also adds a comparison with the prayers of the heathen. Regarding this section of Scripture, there are some important introductory comments.

First, Christ is once again applying the general principle set forth in verse one that we are not to do acts piety before men, to be seen by them so that we would glorified by them. Those who do so receive their reward now (i.e. the praise of men and self-exaltation on earth); but, they forfeit a far greater reward that comes from God. This section of Scripture is very searching and relevant because it tells us to not just be satisfied with an outward obedience to God's Word, but also to look at our hearts or the motives that lie behind our actions. This is an area that believers often ignore. It is also an area in which many professing Christians are living in self-deception. For this reason the Savior says, "Take heed."

Second, as was the case with deeds of mercy, our Lord assumes that all believers will engage in secret prayer. Those who view prayer as an external ritual may be happy when their mindless recitation of prayers is over, but genuine Christians desire to approach their Father in prayer to commune with Him. The first thing that we find Paul doing after his conversion is praying—"Behold he prayeth" (Ac. 9:11). The Savior wants His people to avoid the hypocritical manner of praying that had become the habit of the religious leaders of His day. He wants them to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees in the way they pray.

Third, this is the first recorded teaching by our Lord on prayer and Christ regarded this topic of such importance that He gives a model prayer in verses 9 through 15. Jesus is so interested in this subject that He not only tells us the proper motive and place of prayer, but also how to pray. The Redeemer, whose whole purpose in coming to earth was to open the door to heaven and bring men to God, has a special concern about how disciples approach His Father in

heaven. Clearly, there is something especially odious about perverting the instrument of personal communication with God.

The Wrong Way to Pray

Jesus describes two incorrect ways to pray. The first regards hypocrites; that is, professors of the true religion who are not sincere, who pray in order to glorify themselves. The second regards pagans or complete unbelievers who do not know how to pray at all. For the sake of clarity, we will deal with each of these errors in turn.

Christ's description of the hypocritical way to pray is vivid and similar to His illustration regarding charity. "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward" (Mt. 6:5). Interestingly, the Savior says that the hypocrites love to pray conspicuously. In other words, it is not prayer that they love. Rather, they love to put themselves in a position where they will be the most noticed while they pray.

He gives two examples of praying in a manner that points men to their great piety. The first refers to praying standing in the synagogues. The synagogues were the places of public worship. Standing as a posture of prayer is common in Scripture (e.g., Gen. 18:22; 1 Sam. 1:26; Neh. 9:4-5; Mk. 11:25; Lk. 18:3, 11, 18) and is eminently biblical. It is a posture of respect and solemnity when coming into the presence of God. It was a common posture in the early Christian churches and is still the predominant posture in the stricter Reformed churches.

Praying to be seen in the synagogues can refer to a few different things. One possibility is that Jesus is referring to leading in prayer in public worship. In synagogue services, public prayer was led by a prominent male member of the congregation. This person would stand in front of the people with arms raised toward heaven as he prayed. This public prayer would be an ideal time for a man who was full of himself to show off before the congregation his great ability to pray and his magnificent spirituality. A man could easily succumb to the temptation to pray with an eye on the congregation instead of toward God. We have all probably heard this at times. The man who fills his prayer with poetic and beautifully crafted flourishes; who has a manufactured, unnatural tone of piety in his voice; whose fervency seems too fervent. Such a man crafts his prayer with the idea of winning the approval of men. He loves the opportunity to pray in public worship because it feeds his ego.

Another possibility is that Christ is referring to the practice of private prayer in the synagogue. In the days of our Lord, synagogues were always open for private prayer, just like Roman Catholic churches used to be. The Pharisees thus frequently went to the synagogues, not just at the regular stated times of worship, so that their piety would be carefully noted by those in the community. Also, when they prayed in the synagogues they would deliberately go up to the front of the building and stand in a conspicuous place to be seen by men. It is interesting that in the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector who came to the temple to pray, Jesus implies that the Pharisee stood to pray in a prominent place, for when He mentions the tax collector He notes that he prayed "standing afar off" (Lk. 18:13). In other words, the publican, in his contrition and humility, chose a place to pray that was as inconspicuous as possible. In the story, the places they chose to pray were reflective of the state of their hearts. One being pride, self-exaltation and spiritual egotism; the other being great humility and a consciousness of sin before God.

The second example regards the corners of the streets or literally "the corners of the wide (streets)." The Jews, throughout the Old Testament and in the days of our Lord, had three set

times for prayer: morning, afternoon and evening (Ps. 55:17; Dan. 6:10; Acts 3:1). At the appropriate time, pious Jews were expected to stop whatever they were doing and attend to their supplications toward God. If they were not at home, they would pray at the temple or they could stop at the local synagogue which was always open for prayer. Apparently, what the scribes and Pharisees were doing was to deliberately arrange their affairs so that when the time to pray came they were not in a secluded place, but were instead on a busy street. Therefore, they held their time of private devotions right out in the open for everyone to see. They refused to hide themselves in an alley or behind a building because they wanted to pray in the most conspicuous place. They were seeking the admiration of men instead of focusing on their communion with God. Their motive and purpose was self-exaltation. "Behind their piety lurked their pride. What they really wanted was applause."¹

These examples of praying in public in an ostentatious manner to be seen by men and glorified by them are shocking and sobering. They should stand as a warning against the deceitfulness of sin in our hearts and the danger of human pride. Think of how wicked and dishonoring to God it is to use the appointed means of speaking to Jehovah as a crass publicity stunt. We must be on guard to make sure our sinful natures do not lead us away from the purity and simplicity of true gospel worship into showmanship and sensuous or man-pleasing forms of devotion. We must guard our worship from human devices that detract from true worship and instead exalt man and his ideas. Sin is so deceitful within us and has so penetrated our nature as fallen beings that even in the highest activity we can engage in, we still must watch against sin and mortify it. Even when we pray, sin can affect us and pervert this noble activity. We must guard against pride, for sin can follow us even as we pray to God. "Truth and sincerity in the heart are vastly more important than choice language or a correct demeanor. Let us seek grace to heed that exhortation, 'Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God... Be not rash with thy mouth and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon the earth, therefore let thy words be few' (Eccles. v. 1, 2). If the Divine perfections duly impress our souls, then we shall be saved from much folly."²

As was the case with deeds of mercy, Jesus says, "Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward" (Mt. 6:5). Our Lord assures the disciples that what He says is true. The verb, "have" or "have received" (*apechousi*), "is a compound, signifying to have entirely, have the whole of, have in full. The idea is that in being gazed at and glorified by men they have all the reward they will ever obtain."³ Those who pray to be heard by men will receive a reward from men; but only from men.

The second type of wrong prayer regards the praying of the heathen. "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words" (Mt. 6:7). "Vain repetitions" (*battalogesete*) is an excellent description of heathen prayer. The word means babbling, speaking without thinking or empty chattering. This type of praying is very common throughout the world. The Buddhists and Tibetans have their prayer wheels and nonsensical chanting. Hindus have their prayer beads and mantras. They believe that they can achieve bliss through chanting "ohm," "Hare Krishna" and so forth. Mohammedans, to a degree, also fall into this category of vain repetition and much speaking. They show off their piety by repeatedly banging their heads on the floor like drunken numskulls. Mohammedan dervishes spin in a circle and repeat the name Allah until they fall down in a dizzy ecstasy. None

¹ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 133.

² Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 154.

³ John Broadus, *Commentary on Matthew*, 127.

of this pagan nonsense is new. The worshippers of Baal on Mount Carmel in their confrontation with Elijah called upon Baal using the same formal invocation from morning until noon (1 Kings 18:26). The worshippers of Diana cried out the exact same sentence of devotion for about two whole hours (Ac. 19:34).

This warning regarding praying as the Gentiles do was timely, for the Jews were influenced by the unbelieving nations around them. The Jewish religious scholars penned such sayings as: “*everyone...that multiplies prayers is heard; and whoever prolongs his prayer, his prayer does not return empty; and he that is long in prayer, his days are prolonged: and, according to their canons, everyday a man ought to pray eighteen prayers.*”⁴ The Pharisees were noted for the length of their prayers. This practice was regarded as evidence of their great piety.

In our day, Roman Catholics are perhaps the most notorious in their imitation of the heathen. Millions upon millions of deluded souls mindlessly pray through all the beads of the rosary thinking they will receive a great blessing. After confession, to make penance for their sins, they are told to say so many Hail Marys, this number of Our Fathers and so on. “In a popish prayer, addressed to Jesus, the word Jesu is repeated fifteen times, with only the words, ‘Have mercy on us, and help us’; and ending thus, ‘Give me here my purgatory!’”⁵

Among professing evangelicals, the Charismatic movement has been one of the largest purveyors of heathen-like vain prayers in the modern world through their practice of praying in tongues. Unlike the biblical practice of speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*), which were prophecies supernaturally bestowed by the Holy Spirit in real human languages, Charismatic tongues are nothing more than gibberish or non-cognitive babbling. We know this is true for three reasons. First, biblical tongues were a revelatory gift that *ceased* with the death of the apostles (1 Cor. 13:8-12; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4; Ac. 4:30; 14:3). Second, modern tongues have no resemblance to linguistic structure consistent with any languages. Third, modern tongues are a *learned* phenomenon. Tongues and ecstatic forms of devotion are common in pagan religions. This was practiced in ancient Greece, by a number of tribes in modern Africa and can be found among Muslims, Eskimos and Tibetan monks. Tongues have also been found among practitioners of the occult. Praying in tongues, which is nothing more than babbling like an idiot, is completely worthless and even harmful, for it is a counterfeit miracle that mocks the true gift.

While we are on the topic of vain repetition, we would do well to consider the danger of prayer books that are used week after week in public worship. In papal and prelatial worship services, many prayers are repeated verbatim week after week. Although the old low church Anglican prayer book contains many excellent prayers, it is unwise to use the same man-made petitions every week because a believer can easily slip into praying with the mind disengaged. Many people mumble through the prayer book while they think about football or what is for lunch. The early Puritans and Presbyterians viewed prayer books only as aids or training manuals on proper prayer and did not think it was wise or biblical to continue their use week after week. They favored a well-informed *ex tempore* praying that followed the pattern set forth by Jesus in the Lord’s prayer. They understood that the Bible authorizes using our own words in prayer and that God promises His people that the Holy Spirit will assist them when they form their prayers (cf. Zech. 12:10; Rom. 8:26-27).

Our Lord’s teaching on vain repetitions does not preclude saying the same prayer more than once, for the Savior made virtually the same request to the Father three times in Gethsemane (Mt. 26:44). Similarly, Paul pleaded with the Lord three times to have his thorn in

⁴ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:56.

⁵ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:235-236.

the flesh removed (2 Cor. 12:8). In Psalm 119 David petitioned God saying, “teach me your statutes,” seven times. The repetition that Jesus condemns is that which is not honest, sincere, attentive and from the heart. Moreover, Christ does not condemn the use of all verbatim written forms of prayer, for in Luke’s gospel He introduces a condensed form of the Lord’s prayer with the words, “When you pray, say” (11:2). It is important to recognize that even *ex tempore* prayers can be cold, formal and insincere. The idea that is common in certain evangelical circles that complete spontaneity somehow equals spirituality is simply not true. A man can come up with a completely new prayer and can sound very spiritual, yet may be babbling as the heathen do. We must be attentive and sincere whether we recite the Lord’s prayer or make up our own prayer.

The Right Way to Pray

Having noted the Redeemer’s teaching on the hypocritical and pagan method of prayer let us examine His solution to wrong prayer. As we consider this subject, keep in mind that our Lord is discussing private prayer. We know this not only because the Greek words are singular (“But thou...”), but also because Scripture is filled with examples of public prayer in corporate worship (e.g., 1 Kgs. 8:22-53; 2 Chr. 30:27; Ez. 9:5-15).

Jesus considers two primary errors related to prayer: one by the Jewish hypocrites and the other by the Gentiles or heathen. First, we will turn our attention to the hypocritical prayers of the scribes and Pharisees. “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly” (Mt. 6:6). The “you” in this injunction is singular and emphatic. The praying of Jesus’ disciples must be different than the corrupt Jews. Christ focuses on two things that must characterize our prayers.

First, in our personal devotions, prayer is to be done in private. Our Lord brings this out in a number of ways. A believer is not to pray out on a busy street corner, but is to go into his own room and shut the door. The word translated room (*to tameion*) originally referred to a closet (“The LXX of Isa. 26:20 refers to entering *ta tamieia*, ‘the closets...’”⁶), and came to designate an inner room or private chamber of a house. We are to go to a secluded place where we can withdraw from others, shut out the world and commune with God. We are to seek out a place that is secret or inconspicuous. In our modern circumstances, we can simply go into our bedroom or office and shut and lock the door. In the days when Jesus spoke this and many people lived in a one room house, this could involve a corner of the house or even a secluded place out in the garden. Our Lord, who had no place to lay His head, would simply walk away from everyone to a secluded place, whether a mountain top (Mt. 14:23) or an olive orchard (Mt. 26:36). “A field, a garden, a mountain, may be as retired as a closet, and have all been sanctified by the Savior’s example, as proper scenes for secret prayer.”⁷ Godly Isaac retired to a field (Gen. 24:63) and the apostle Peter removed himself from his hosts by going up on the roof (Ac. 10:9).

Why are we to pray in secret? One reason is that secret prayer is unobserved prayer. In such a place there will be no temptation to ostentation or watching for the approval of men out of the corner of our eye, for no one is there to watch us pray. The secrecy of the place of prayer must reflect our heart. Humble and sincere worshippers are not interested in making a public display of their devotion to God. They are not concerned about impressing their neighbors. They

⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 142.

⁷ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:233.

understand that God not only sees in secret, but also sees the heart out of which petitions flow. God hates a proud heart (cf. Pr. 6:17). “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Jas. 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5; cf. Pr. 3:34). We need to give as much consideration to the place of prayer as we do to our posture in prayer.

Another reason is that, in our personal devotions, we do not want our prayer disturbed or interrupted. “If it be indeed to God that we pray, there can be no need for anyone else to be present; for it would hinder rather than help devotion to have a third person for a witness of the heart’s private intercourse with the Lord.”⁸ Sincere prayer from the heart requires our full attention. When we enter into God’s presence and are alone with Him, we do not want anything to distract us from this time of blessed fellowship. Perhaps this is the reason that our Lord repeatedly uses the singular second personal pronoun in this verse (i.e. eight times in only one verse). This brings out the fact that, in private prayer, we are alone with God. This is a special time for offering up our thankfulness, love and special requests to our God. Jesus treasured this special time of communion with His Father so much that, on occasion, He would pray all night to God (Lk. 6:12).

Moreover, by praying in seclusion where no one can hear us, we have a greater freedom in revealing our thoughts and concerns to God. There will be no temptation to hold anything back related to the confession of our sins and the personal battles that we have with the flesh. As people who know our own hearts, we can freely attend to the particulars of our personal sanctification without worrying about what is appropriate for other ears to hear.

The believer should pray in secret, for God’s presence is in that secret place; and, God who observes you praying in the secret place will reward you openly. God transcends all spatial limitations and His presence is everywhere, even in secret places (cf. 1 Kings 8:27; Ps. 139:7-10; Isa. 66:1; Jer. 23:23, 24; Ac. 7:48, 49; 17:27, 28). Thus to enter in your secret place to pray must be viewed as entering into the audience chamber of Jehovah, God almighty, the maker of heaven and earth. The fact that we are praying to our Father in a closet, bedroom, office or garden does not mean that such prayer is somehow less important, or casual, or off the cuff. Perish the thought! God who is light and in whom dwells no darkness at all (1 Jn. 1:5); who is consuming fire (Heb. 12:29); who created the whole universe in only six days, is there. He is present. He is watching and He is listening to everything you have to say. Consequently, it is not at all important that other people cannot hear you pray or do not even know that you are praying. If you have God’s attention, then that is all that matters. We must understand what a blessed privilege this is and take full spiritual advantage of it as Christians. By His sacrificial blood Jesus has ripped in two the curtain to the holy of holies and has given every believer direct access to God’s loving presence.

By way of application, the Savior’s teaching dispels a very common notion that certain places are holy, such as church buildings, and that God is somehow more present or more approachable in such places. No, such teaching comes from Roman Catholicism. When Christ died on the cross, the time came when special places such as the Temple were no longer significant (cf. Jn. 4:21). As Paul says, “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth does not dwell in Temples made with hands” (Ac. 17:24). Since God is not confined to man-made temples, all such buildings really hold no religious significance in God’s sight. We must realize that God “is not far from each one of us” (Ac. 17:27); that prayer to Him does not need to be offered in church buildings, or cathedrals, or “temples.” The Romanist

⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 66.

practice of keeping church buildings open for prayer is based on human tradition and is clearly in conflict with Matthew 6:5-6.

It is significant that each individual believer is told to pray “to your Father.” This is covenantal language. This indicates that Jesus has expiated our sins and propitiated God’s wrath, that God is our covenant God and friend waiting to welcome us. Many of us, who do not pray as often and as fervently as we should, often do so out of a sense of being unworthy to come into God’s presence and have a time of special communion with Him. This is one reason why we must address God as our Father. Whenever we pray we must focus our faith on Christ and acknowledge that we came into God’s presence not because we deserve it; but, because we are clothed with Christ’s perfect righteousness. If we do not meditate upon our precious Savior as we approach God, then we will sink in doubts and waiver under a consciousness of sin. Prayer can be destroyed by looking away from God to the praises of men. And it can also be hindered by not looking to Christ. God is our Father and has taken a special interest in us because we are justified by His Son and united to Him.

Like the teaching about deeds of mercy, our Lord’s instructions on secret prayer are accompanied by a promise: “your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Mt. 6:6). The men who prayed to be seen by others have the reward of praise from men. But those who pray in private must have faith that God sees them and that He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (Heb. 11:6). “It is called a *reward*, but it is *of grace*, not *of debt*; what merit can there be in begging?”⁹ Sometimes secret prayers are rewarded openly in this life when God magnificently answers our prayers in a bold, dramatic fashion. This promise, however, is in the main eschatological. It points to the time when the saints will appear in glory, in white lustrous robes before the King of kings. The hypocrites had their pat on the back in this world. But those who pray in secret will receive a reward from God before a multitude of men and angels. Is our concern the rewards and trinkets of this world which are passing away or the praise and eternal rewards that come only from God? If you are living for the here and now and your 15 minutes of fame before this wicked world, then you have no reason to believe that you are a child of God.

You must ask yourself some searching questions related to your heart and the place of prayer. Do you have a secret place of prayer where you regularly go to commune with God? Do you pray more frequently and fervently in your private place than you do at church functions (e.g., prayer meeting)? Do you love to pray in secret to your heavenly Father? Is private prayer a habitual practice in your life or something you only do once in a while? When you pray at a prayer meeting, is your public prayer an overflow of your private devotions? These are serious questions, for in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is describing what a true disciple really is and is not. If you are deficient in this area of private prayer, then you must repent at once. If we do not obey Christ in this crucial area of piety, then we need to question our commitment to Him. Let us be diligent in this area, so that we are not classed with the hypocrites.

Second, our Lord warns us not to babble and use empty repetitions like the heathen. “And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words” (Mt. 6:7). Earlier we looked at some modern examples of vain repetition in prayer. Here we will look at some practical ways to avoid vain repetitions. Matthew Henry writes,

When we go to pray, we must not give the sacrifice of fools, that think not either what is to be done, or what is to be gained, but speak the words of the wise, who aim at some good end in

⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:71.

what we say, and suit it to that end.... This is directing the prayer, as he that shoots an arrow at a mark directs it, and with a fixed eye and steady hand takes aim aright. This is engaging the heart to approach to God, and in order to that, disengaging it from everything else. He that takes aim with one eye shuts the other; if we would direct a prayer to God, we must look off all other things,—must gather in our wandering thoughts,—must summon them all to draw near, and give their attendance,—for here is work to be done that needs them all, and is well worthy of them all: thus we must be able to say with the Psalmist, “My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed.”¹⁰

Consequently, one thing that we must do is focus our minds upon God and what we want to say without wandering or daydreaming. A prayer can be vain or empty even when we are not repeating the same words over and over. Prayer that honors God requires concentration. When in conversation with other men, we are offended when it is clear that the other person is not paying any attention. Yet how many times do our minds wander far from God in private prayer and even during public prayer. We must watch ourselves and not allow such a dishonoring thing to happen.

If we do use composed prayer on occasion, we must use prayers that are biblical and do not use repetitions in a vain, superstitious manner. The various professing communions that say the same words or phrases over and over like a mantra or chant, obviously are violating Jesus’ teaching. Further, if we read a composed prayer, we must read it not only with our lips but also with our hearts. If we say something to God but are not even aware of what we say or do not mean what we say, then we are wasting our time. Such prayers are vain. Empty words are ineffectual. “[T]he superstitious rehearsing of a tale of words, without regard to the sense of them, as the papists saying by their beads so many Ave-Marys and Paternosters; or the barren and dry going over of the same things again and again, merely to drill out the prayer to such a length, and to make a show of affection when really there is none; these are the vain repetitions here condemned.”¹¹ When people treat prayers like magic formulas that merely need to be said over and over again, they treat God as an impersonal machine rather than a personal loving Father.

We also must avoid prayers that are long simply for the sake of being long. There is a tendency among pagans and Romanists to regard long prayers as automatically better and more efficacious. “There was—and still is—a kind of subconscious idea that if men batter long enough at God’s door, he will answer; that God can be talked, and even pestered, into condescension.”¹² Our Lord’s statement does not automatically exclude all long prayers, for He Himself prayed all night and the Bible contains a number of lengthy prayers (e.g., 2 Chr. 6:14-42; Neh. 9; Ps. 18, 89, 119). Sometimes long prayers are necessary, such as in extraordinary times. Moreover, in the parable of the unjust judge (cf. Lk. 18:2-9), the Savior commends persistence in prayer. Once again, the main focus of this passage is on the motive behind long prayers. Pagans think that praying longer and louder will increase the possibility that their gods will hear and respond. The priests of Baal kept praying, shouting, dancing around and cutting themselves because they thought their god would be impressed (cf. 1 Kgs. 18:25-29). Therefore, we must not multiply words in a superstitious way. We must not think that a multiplicity of words can force God’s hand.

¹⁰ Matthew Henry, “How to Begin Every Day With God,” in *Works*, 1:204-205.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:195.

Christ gives two reasons why vain repetition and useless long prayers are to be avoided. First, that is the way the heathen pray. Believers are never to imitate the ways of the heathen in their worship, whether in public or private. Syncretism between the true religion and the surrounding pagan culture was the downfall of Israel throughout its history and has also resulted in the apostate Roman Catholic Church. To model our approach to God on practices invented by unbelievers is a rejection of *sola Scriptura*. It is insulting to God, who gave us His Word. When Jesus gave this warning, the Jews despised the Gentiles and did not think that they had adopted their ways. The Pharisees, who were “the separated ones,” were praying like pagans. True disciples must return to *sola Scriptura* and, thus, have a righteousness that surpasses the scribes and Pharisees. As individuals and churches, we must examine ourselves and see what we are doing in our worship that comes from God and what we may be doing from the mind of man.

Second, our Lord appeals to God’s omniscience. He knows the things that we need before we even ask Him. The pagans believed in finite gods that were corrupt like men. Thus, their prayers needed to be long, so their finite gods could learn all the details. Their prayers were designed to twist the arm of an unloving, corrupt deity. But we pray to the true and living God who is not only fully aware of all our needs, but also who cares about us as a loving Father. Therefore, we can be concise in our prayers. Indeed, many “of the most striking and fervent prayers recorded in Scripture are brief and pithy; such as that of: Moses (Exod. 32:31, 32); Solomon (for an understanding heart, I Kings 3:6-9); Elijah (I Kings 18:36, 37); Hezekiah (II Kings 19:14-19); Jabez (I Chron. 4:10); Agur (Prov. 30:7-9); the publican (Luke 18:13); the dying thief (Luke 23:42); Stephen (Acts 7:60); and Paul (for the Ephesians, Eph. 3:14-19). To this class belong also the many one sentence prayers or ejaculations of Nehemiah (Neh. 4:4, 5; 5:19; 6:9, 13:14, 29, 31). Christ’s high-priestly or intercessory prayer, too, can hardly be called lengthy (John 17), and the Lord’s Prayer, which he taught his disciples to pray, is certainly marked by brevity (Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4).¹³ To go on and on in prayer as if God was ignorant, or as if Jehovah did not have our best interest in mind, shows a lack of knowledge of, or faith in, God’s attributes. In fact, the Almighty knows our own needs better than we do. “[H]is eyes run to and fro throughout the earth, to observe the necessities of his people (2 Chron. xvi.9), and he often gives *before we call* (Isa. lxxv.24), and *more than we ask for* (Eph. iii.20).”¹⁴

Some may object saying, “If God already knows everything, then why pray at all?” Aside from the fact that we are told to pray to God throughout Scripture by precept and example (e.g., cf. Dt. 22:5; Zech. 12:10; Mt. 6:9; 1 Cor. 11:13-15; 1 Thess. 5:17; Phil. 4:6; Heb. 13:18; Jas. 1:5), prayer is essential to our sanctification and daily communion with God. The primary point of prayer is not simply to relate information, but also to confess, to love, to reverence and to commune. It is the appointed means to secure God’s help and blessing. It reveals our consciousness of complete dependence on God. It is the uplifting of our hearts to the throne of grace. It is children by adoption, through Christ’s blood, crying out to a loving, merciful Father. God has instituted prayer for us, for our Spirit-given desire to cry “Abba, Father.”

Do you regularly pray to the One who sees you in secret and knows your heart? Do you honor Him as the Father of all mercies and the giver of every good and perfect gift? Do you enter into secret prayer and pant after the only wise God, who lifted you out of the mire of sin and saved you from yourself? Do you have faith that God wants you to ask for the things you need and that He is willing to bless you? God wants you to come into His presence. If you neglect

¹³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 324.

¹⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:72.

prayer, then you neglect your own sanctification and blessing. Let us pray and bless “Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:21).

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