

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 19, 2018**

HOW NOT TO PRAY

Matthew 6:1, 5-8

Have I told you about some of my father's antics when he was in college? My dad was part of the "Greatest Generation." He grew up during the Depression, graduated from college in 1942, was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the U. S. Navy, and served in the Mediterranean Sea during World War II. I'm proud of him and his service to our country.

As his father had done before him, Dad matriculated – that is a big, fancy word that means he *enrolled* – at Grove City College in 1938. Though he was in ROTC and received his degree in Accounting, I got the feeling from the stories he told that what he really majored in was pranks. I don't know how much was true and how much was apocryphal, but Dad told some really great stories. He took pride in telling about late-night jaunts with his friends to rival colleges in that area of western Pennsylvania, like Westminster (New Willington), Thiel (Greenville), and Geneva (Beaver Falls), to paint "Welcome to Grove City College" on their official college signs. He loved telling about how he and his buddies abducted a cow from a nearby farm and managed to drag it, pushing and pulling, up to the third floor of the women's residence hall in the middle of the night before letting it loose.

Then there was the time when they conspired to disrupt the morning chapel service. In those days, attendance was mandatory for all students, and everyone had an assigned seat. So Dad and his friends were spread out in the chapel. On this particular morning, knowing a particular professor with a reputation for long-winded prayers was going to pray, they brought their cell phones – I mean, their *alarm clocks* – to chapel, set to go off at different times. So, while the professor was praying, alarm clocks began going off, seconds apart, all over the chapel.

It was one of the proudest moments of my father's college career. 😊

I hope you won't think I am suggesting that you follow my father's example in any of these things. Please don't set the alarm on your cell phone to go off while I am either preaching or praying!

Last weekend, as you know, Mary Sue and I were away to celebrate the first birthdays of our grandchildren Grant and Nora. It was a sweet celebration and a treat to be with our whole family at Erin and David's new home in Philadelphia. I am grateful to Jim Byrne for his preaching ministry here at Faith once again.

Two weeks ago, we looked at the centrality of prayer in the life and teaching of Jesus. In both His teaching and His life, Jesus makes it clear that an active, vibrant, disciplined prayer life is essential, not optional, if you are serious about following Jesus and living for Him in this

world. You've got to take prayer more seriously than my father and his friends (one of whom became a pastor 😊) did when they were in college.

In the verses (5-8) we just read from Matthew 6, Jesus addresses the question of how to pray and, more pointedly, how *not* to pray. The context of Jesus' teaching on prayer here in the Sermon on the Mount is the larger subject of how (and how *not*) to do "acts of righteousness" or to carry out our religious duties as followers of Jesus. In verses 1-18, Jesus talks about three different religious duties or acts of piety: Giving alms (2-4), which has to do with our charity and generosity toward those in need; prayer (7-15), including the Lord's Prayer itself as a model prayer for us to pray; and fasting (16-18). Since we have been talking about how to go forward in our lives as followers of Jesus and, in recent weeks, about going forward in prayer specifically, I want to focus today on what Jesus has to say in verses 5-8 about how *not* to pray.

THE PRINCIPLE

But notice first the principle Jesus lays down in Matthew 6:1 that applies to everything He says about giving, prayer, and fasting. The principle, like much of His teaching in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, is stated negatively: "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before others, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven" (NIV).

The ESV reads: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them...."

James Boice paraphrases it this way: "Do not make public display of your religion in order to attract other people's attention" (Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1, 96).

The Message paraphrase warns against "mak(ing) a performance out of" your religious acts or good deeds by "call(ing) attention to yourself" – becoming "play actors" who treat "prayer meeting and street corner alike as a stage, acting compassionate" or pious "as long as someone is watching, playing to the crowds" (Matthew 6:1-2, *MSG*).

Shakespeare has one of his characters in his play *As You Like It* say: "All the world's a stage ..." But Jesus says: "No, it isn't." All the world is *not* a stage. We are not to be like actors playing a role in order to win the praise or applause or admiration of others for our outward acts of religious devotion.

To play a role – that is, to pretend to be something other than what you really are – in this case, to win the praise of others, is the essence of hypocrisy. The word *hypocrite* comes from the world of the stage and refers to an actor who plays a role. Originally, stage actors wore masks to represent the different characters they played. There is nothing inherently wrong with an actor playing a role (depending on the role, I suppose). But there *is* something wrong with being a religious hypocrite.

The most religious people of Jesus' day were also the most hypocritical. Jesus criticized the Pharisees and other religious leaders of the Jews *not* because they were so religious. *Not* because they took the law of Moses so seriously. No. He criticized them because they were more concerned about the approval of other people than they were about God's approval. As it says in John 12:43: "They loved praise from men more than praise from God." Or, as *The Message* says: "When push came to shove they cared more for human approval than for God's glory." They devoted themselves to doing what was right – or, what they thought was right – but they did it for the wrong reasons. They had the wrong motives. They lost sight of the greatness and grace and glory of God. Instead of exalting God through their acts of piety and their spiritual exercises, they wanted to exalt themselves. Instead of pointing to God, they wanted people to be impressed with them. They loved, as we might say, to blow their own horns. As John Stott put it, "the besetting sin of the Pharisees" was "a ravenous hunger for the praise of men" (Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 128).

It is easy for us to be hard on the Pharisees. Their hypocrisy is so obvious. (If it weren't, or if it is not, we have Jesus' scathing indictment of them to help us see it clearly.) But we are not immune to the same or a similar kind of hypocrisy. None of us is immune to it. Since "hypocrisy poisons true religion" (Douglas S. O'Donnell, *Matthew*, 146), we mustn't allow it to poison either our relationship with God or our witness to others.

One of the excuses frequently given by non-churchgoers for not going to church is that the church is filled with hypocrites. Which, in a sense, is true. To one degree or another, we all wear masks when we come to church. We try to be our best self. We hide things about ourselves that we don't want other people to know. Sometimes we pretend that we are better than we really are, that we are more spiritually mature than is actually the case, or that we are morally superior to other people both inside and outside the church. We want to give others the impression that we have it all together in our lives, when the truth is that on the inside, or maybe at home, at school, or at work, everything seems to be coming apart at the seams.

The church is a place of grace, not of moral or spiritual superiority. It is meant to be a place where you can be real – a place where you don't have to pretend to be better or more spiritual than you are, where you don't have to put on a mask or act out a certain role, a place where it is okay to admit that you are weak, that you need the Lord's help and the help of your Christian brothers and sisters. It is meant to be a family in which we love each other just as we are, because God loves us just as we are. We understand that we are all fellow strugglers, that we are sinners saved by grace and only by grace, and that we grow into the likeness of Jesus only by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

If the church is full of hypocrites, as some people say, we can at least be *recovering* hypocrites who desire to live loving, holy, faith-filled lives before God and others. In all of our "acts of religion" – when we give, pray, fast, come to church, or do anything good – let's not be hypocrites like the Pharisees who paraded their religious devotion before other people in order to be seen and praised.

Are you a *recovering* hypocrite? It is a good thing to examine the motives of your heart – to

ask yourself about the motivation of your heart for the “act of religion” you do, and to ask God to give you pure and holy motives that seek to glorify Him and not yourself. Don’t allow hypocrisy to poison your relationship with God or your witness in the world.

HOW NOT TO PRAY

Let’s look now at what Jesus says about how *not* to pray.

1. Don’t be like the hypocrites (5-6).

Look at verse 5: “When you pray,” says Jesus, “do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men.”

Or, as it says in *The Message*: “Don’t turn (your prayers) into a theatrical production.”

It should go without saying, but I’ll say it anyway: The problem is not *where* you pray. It is not a question of *location*. Jesus is not saying you shouldn’t pray in the synagogue or at church. Can you imagine Him saying that? He is not saying you shouldn’t pray on the street corner. You can pray anywhere. You can pray at home. You can pray at work. You can pray at school. You can pray at church. You can pray while you are working out at the gym. You can pray in your car. You can pray on the Metro. You can pray at the doctor’s office or at the hospital. You can pray as you are walking down the street or standing at an intersection. You can pray indoors. You can pray outdoors. You can pray anywhere. In fact, *anywhere* is the right place to pray. *Everywhere* is the right place to pray. But you don’t need to announce to the world that you are praying. You don’t need to call attention to the fact that you are praying. Unless circumstances dictate that you do it publicly, you can pray discreetly. You can pray quietly. You can pray silently. The issue is not *where* you pray.

Nor is your *posture* in prayer the critical issue. Jesus is not saying it is wrong to stand while praying, or to pray while standing. There are examples in the Bible of people who prayed standing, sitting, kneeling, and lying prostrate (facedown before the Lord). The issue is not the posture of your body – though at times one posture may be more appropriate than another, or than any other – but the posture of your heart when you pray. Posture only becomes an issue if, as with the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable in Luke 18, it exposes the self-righteous pride in a person’s heart, in contrast with the penitent tax-collector, who in his sorrow for his sin would not even look up to heaven but humbly cried out to God for mercy (18:9-14).

The problem with the prayers of the hypocrites is that they didn’t miss an opportunity to be “alone with God” while surrounded by lots of admiring observers. While supposedly praying to God, they were actually playing – or praying – to the gallery (A. M. Hunter, *A Pattern for Life: An exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 65). It was not that they loved to pray. Nor did they truly love God, to whom they were supposedly praying. The object of their love was themselves. They loved the opportunity that praying in public gave them to put their religious devotion on display. They loved the accolades they got from others.

To His disciples then and now, Jesus says: “Don’t be like them.” Here is the alternative Jesus recommends: “Find a quiet, secluded place so you won’t be tempted to role-play before

God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense His grace” (Matthew 6:6, *MSG*).

Jesus did not and does not mean to prohibit all corporate prayer or prayer in public. If that is what He intended, His disciples and the New Testament church did not understand Him, because they prayed together regularly. Jesus Himself promised to be with us when we meet together to pray. He said: “Where two or three of you come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20).

The issue is not praying with others or praying in public. The issue is our motives. It is really a heart issue. Any time you pray in public – which is something I get paid to do as a pastor – or any time you pray with another person or with a group of people, there is the inherent temptation to play (pray) to the audience, to try to impress those with whom or for whom you are praying with your spiritual erudition or eloquence, with the depth of your spiritual passion or empathy or insight into the mysteries of God’s will. You may be tempted to be proud of your personal passion for and commitment to prayer, and think yourself more spiritual than others because of it. Don’t do it. Don’t compare yourself to others. Simply seek and follow the Lord’s leading in your life. And in your praying, make sure your focus is on the Audience of One – on the Lord to whom all prayers are properly addressed.

In your prayer life, says Jesus, don’t be like the hypocrites.

2. Don’t be like the pagans (7-8).

The second way *not* to pray, Jesus says, is the mindless, mechanical, meaningless way that many pagans – unbelievers or adherents of other religions – pray. “Babbling” is the way the NIV describes it. To “heap up empty phrases” or “vain repetitions” are other ways to express it. In *The Message* it says: “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 are dealing with, and He knows better than you what you need.”

You don’t need to repeat some New Age mantra over and over in order to get God’s attention. That is not how God works. It is not how prayer works. Don’t fall for the misguided pagan idea that by using just the right words, by repeating them over and over, or by praying interminably long prayers, you will show God how serious you are and get Him to do for you whatever you want.

Prayer is not about getting God to give you what you want. Prayer is about a relationship with God Himself. Prayer is about the incredible privilege of conversing with the God of the universe, who is also your loving Heavenly Father. Prayer is a priceless privilege that allows us to share our hearts, our hopes, our hurts, our deepest desires, our longings, our needs, our compassion and requests for others with the true and living God who cares for us so much that He gave His only Son to save us from our sins.

Don’t trivialize prayer by reducing it to a magic formula or mantra guaranteed to produce the results you want. You know that is not what prayer is.

And don't confuse "babbling" or "heaping up empty phrases" or "vain repetitions" with *perseverance* in prayer, which Jesus encourages, as we know from the parables of the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5-13) and the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8). Persevere in prayer, yes. Keep on praying for the persons and concerns the Lord lays on your heart. Just don't think that by repeating certain words or using a prescribed formula you can manipulate or obligate God to do or give what you want. You know that is not what prayer is.

Prayer is not primarily about getting answers. God *does* answer our prayers. He *will* answer your prayers. In His time. In His way. But getting answers is not the primary purpose of prayer. Jesus promises a reward to those who pray sincerely and humbly. The reward is not the praises of people that hypocrites crave. The reward is not the answer you hope for. The reward is the relationship with God Himself. The reward is an intimate connection and communion with our Heavenly Father. That is the true reward. And it is available to you. It is available to anyone who seeks it. It is available to anyone who seeks *Him*.

Don't be like hypocrites who pray phony prayers in order to get praise from others. Don't be like pagans who pray frivolous, verbose prayers, thinking it is the only way to get God's attention.

3. "When you pray ..."

There is one other way *not* to pray, which is to *not* pray. Notice that three times Jesus says: "When you pray." He says it in verse 5, in verse 6, and again in verse 7. He does not say: "*If* you pray." He does not say: "Whenever you *feel* like praying." He says: "*When* you pray." Jesus expects His followers to pray. He expects us to pray. He expects you and me to pray. He expects it. Prayer is what the followers of Jesus do. It is not the only thing we do. But it is one thing we *must* do. It is one thing we *get* to do.

Why pray? The only reason we really need is that God tells us to pray. He commands us to pray. He instructs us to pray. That is really the only reason we need. God wants us to pray because prayer is one way we acknowledge God for who He is and express our trust in Him. We pray also because it enables us to go deeper in our relationship with God, to grow closer to Him. In the sovereignty of God, prayer also allows us to be involved in what God is doing, in what God desires to do, in the world. It is one of the means by which God accomplishes His will in our lives.

Sadly, many people neglect prayer. Many Christians neglect prayer. Maybe even many of us. Too many of us treat prayer like calling 911 – it is something we do only in an emergency. Or something we do when there is something we really, really want. You know that is not what prayer is meant to be.

To those of you who are true prayer-warriors, I say: "Keep on. Don't give up."

To those of us who are inconsistent in our prayers at best, I say: "Begin today to establish a new daily habit of setting aside even 15 minutes, or 10, or 5, to start with, to talk with God in prayer. Do it every day. And your relationship with God *will* grow."

If you want to go forward in your life as a follower of Jesus, you must cultivate your relationship with God in prayer. So must I.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.