

Lord Teach Us To Pray

"Being Alone With God"

Lesson 10

INTRODUCTION:

- I. Thus far in our series of lessons "Lord Teach Us To Pray," we've looked at the power of persistent, effective praying, and we've taken a close look at the model for prayer Jesus gave His disciples.
 - A. But knowing that our prayers must be PERSISTENT, and understanding the basic COMPONENTS of prayer doesn't make us immune from the greatest danger to prayer – and that's prayer done more out of a habitual sense of DUTY, rather than a sense of spontaneous PASSION.
 1. Prayers that are performed in a FORMAL or CUSTOMARY manner – prayers that lack fervency and vitality – should NEVER fall from the lips of a man or woman who is seeking the attention of God.
 - a. And yet, this is probably one of the most COMMON prayers we hear today.
 2. The Lord never intended for prayer to be an exercise of the LIPS, but rather an expression of the HEART.

- a. Prayers that are ritualistic and mechanical, in which we mindlessly repeat the same worn-out words and phrases we've heard all our life, are an offense to God.
 - b. They become prayers where we draw near to God with our mouths and honor Him lips, but our hearts are far from Him.
 - c. And so, these kinds of prayers become a hypocritical PERFORMANCE rather than a pouring out of our HEART to God.
- B. It's been said that, "nothing is so sacred that Satan will not invade it." In fact, it seems the more SACRED something is, the more Satan desires to CORRUPT and POLLUTE it.
1. And perhaps nothing is more vulnerable to Satan's attack than our prayers.
 - a. Satan's ultimate goal is to drive a wedge between us and our Lord – and perhaps the most effective way of doing that is to destroy our ability to effectively and fervently communicate with the God of heaven.
 2. Without even realizing it, sin follows us into the very presence of God.
 - a. We lose our sense of awe – God's holiness and majesty become ordinary and commonplace.

- b. We take His name in vain – not in the sense that we curse in connection with His name – but in the sense that use His name with little or no awareness of WHO and WHAT God really is.
 - c. As a result, our prayers lack reverence, piety, fervency, devotion and faith.
 3. When we pray those kinds of empty, heartless prayers, hypocrisy takes over our lives without our even realizing it.
- II. Hypocrisy is such a subtle and destructive power that Jesus openly exposed and condemned it every time He encountered it.
 - A. During the life of Jesus, those who were MOST guilty of hypocrisy were the Jewish religious leaders – those who became His greatest enemies.
 1. And so, to protect His followers from their evil influence, Jesus said, "*Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.*"
(Luke 12:1)
 2. Through their rabbinic traditions, the Pharisees had managed to corrupt and pervert the teachings of the Law of Moses, INCLUDING the practice of prayer – even though no religion had ever placed a higher priority on prayer than Judaism.

- B. Therefore, we want to learn as much as we can about how we can make our prayers more powerful.
 - 1. To do this, we'll first take a look at prayer from the Jewish perspective.
 - 2. Then we'll examine some of the elements Jews in Biblical times incorporated into their prayers.
 - 3. Finally, we'll look at some of the specific things Jesus said about prayer in Matthew chapter 6, JUST BEFORE He gave His disciples a model for prayer.

BODY:

- I. When we examine the Jewish perspective on prayer during Old Testament times we find they prayed because they firmly believed God WANTED them to approach Him.
 - A. In fact, the Psalms taught that God DESIRES to hear the prayers of the righteous.
 - 1. **Psalm 145:8** – *"The Lord is near to all who call upon Him."*
 - 2. **Psalm 65:2** – *"O You who hear prayer, to You all flesh will come."*
 - a. We might get tired of listening to others, but God never tires of hearing our prayers.

B. However, by the time of Jesus the Jewish perspective of prayer had changed radically.

1. Some actually taught God is so HOLY and DIVINE that He should NEVER BE APPROACHED DIRECTLY by mere men. This belief was bourn out by a misunderstanding of passages such as:

a. **Isaiah 6:1-5** – where Isaiah was deeply troubled and feared for his life because he had seen the glory of God in a vision.

(1). Isaiah said, *"Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."* (v 5)

2. But when Jesus came on the scene, He reaffirmed that God IS approachable, and WANTS to be known by men.

a. In **John chapter 14**, when Phillip asked Jesus to show them the Father, and that would be sufficient to strengthen their faith, Jesus replied, *"Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? "* (**John 14:9-10**)

- b. The very fact that God the Son came in the flesh is evidence that God is not only approachable, but that God wants to be known and understood by all mankind.
3. This is why the writer of Hebrews tells us; *"Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*

(Hebrews 4:14-16)

- C. Jewish rabbis also taught that people needed to avoid the habit of praying only when trouble suddenly comes.
 1. The Talmud, the codified writings of all the rabbinic traditions, says, "Honour the physician *BEFORE* you have need of him . . ."
(Sanhedrin 44b)
 2. That's certainly the right perspective, because God never intended for prayer to be used **ONLY** for emergencies.
 - a. **Psalm 32:6** – *"For this cause everyone who is godly shall pray to You in a time when You may be found; Surely in a flood of great waters they shall not come near him."*

- D. And so, from the Jewish perspective about prayer during Old Testament times, we learn:
 - 1. God actually wanted to be approached in prayer – although this concept of an approachable God had become distorted by the time Jesus came.
 - 2. And, that prayer was never intended to be used only when disaster and calamities strikes.
 - a. God intended for prayer to be a constant and regular form of communication.

- II. As for the elements that should be included in prayers, the Jews believed there were EIGHT key ingredients.
 - A. The Jews in Old Testament times believed their prayers should incorporate:
 - 1. **Loving Praise:**
 - a. **Psalm 34:1** – *"I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth."*
 - b. **Psalm 51:15** – *"O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Your praise."*

- c. The Psalms are FILLED with loving praise to God – evidence that prayers by Old Testament saints were LIKEWISE filled with loving praise.

2. **Gratitude and Thanksgiving:**

- a. Jonah said, *"I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving. . ."* (**Jonah 2:9**)
- b. Since God is the source of all blessings – material and spiritual – there will always be something to thank Him for.

3. **Reverence:**

- a. Old Testament saints didn't come into God's presence casually, treating Him as if He were a man.
- b. They came before Him with reverence – recognizing that they were coming face-to-face with Almighty God.
- c. Going back to the vision of Isaiah in **Isaiah chapter 6**, the prophet said he saw God, *". . . sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple."* (**Isaiah 6:1**)
- d. This is why he cried out, *"Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."* (**v 5**)

- e. In David's song of thanksgiving (**1 Chronicles 16**), he said, *"Give to the LORD the glory due His name; bring an offering, and come before Him. Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness! Tremble before Him, all the earth."*
- f. Therefore, the prayers of Old Testament saints always reflected the greatest reverence to the God of heaven.

4. **Patient Obedience:**

- a. Old Testament Jews believed it was wrong to pray if their hearts were not right.
- b. **Psalm 26:2-5** – *"Examine me, O LORD, and prove me; try my mind and my heart. For Your lovingkindness is before my eyes, and I have walked in Your truth. I have not sat with idolatrous mortals, nor will I go in with hypocrites. I have hated the assembly of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked."*
- c. Job said, *"a hypocrite could not come before Him."* (**Job 13:16**)
- d. A true Jew had no reservations – he approached God with a spirit of obedience, always desiring to please Him.

5. **Confession:**

- a. Godly Old Testament saints knew when they came before God in prayer, they had to first purge themselves of sin.
- b. That was David's perspective when he asked, "*Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart.*"

(Psalm 24:3–4)

- c. This is also why David opened Psalm 51 with these words: "*Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.*" **(Psalm 51:1-2)**
- d. Only those who have dealt with their sin have the right to enter God's presence.

6. **Unselfishness:**

- a. The Jews had a sense of togetherness that we don't completely understand.
- b. They thought of themselves as God's holy NATION – they were a chosen PEOPLE ruled by God.

- c. As a result, their prayers also focused on the welfare of the NATION rather than focus exclusively on their own individual needs.
 - (1). A typical prayer would be similar to this: *"Redeem Israel, O God, out of all their troubles!"* **(Psalm 25:22)**
- d. Many of us come to God telling Him all about OUR needs and problems without always thinking of the needs and problems of OTHERS in the body of Christ.
- e. The faithful Jew in Old Testament times realized that whatever was good for the nation was also good for the individual – and so they frequently prayed for the nation.

7. Humility:

- a. A true Jew desired to submit himself to the will of God.
- b. The greatest illustration of that came from the heart of the truest Jew who ever lived: Jesus.
 - (1). In His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, He said, *"Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done."* **(Luke 22:42)**
- c. Rather than always asking the Lord to do OUR will, we should be praying to conform ourselves to HIS will.

(1). Just as Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" **(Matthew 6:10)**

8. Perseverance:

a. True believing Old Testament Jews taught that prayer was to be persistent.

b. After the Children of Israel had worshiped the golden calf, Moses prayed forty days in a row that God would forgive them.

(1). **Deuteronomy 9:25-26** – "*Thus I prostrated myself before the LORD; forty days and forty nights I kept prostrating myself, because the LORD had said He would destroy you. 26 Therefore I prayed to the LORD, and said: 'O Lord GOD, do not destroy Your people and Your inheritance whom You have redeemed through Your greatness, whom You have brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand.. "*

III. In spite of the fact that Jews in Old Testament times had such a great heritage of prayer, sadly there were several problems that slowly crept into the prayer life of the Jewish people.

A. First, their prayers had, for the most part, become ritualized.

1. The wording and forms of prayer were set. All they needed to do to pray was to simply read the prayer or repeat it from memory.
2. Prayers soon became a matter of routine – a semiconscious religious exercise – one that could be done without any emotional or passionate involvement by the individual.
3. The most common formalized prayers were:
 - a. The Great Shema – a composite of selected phrases taken from **Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 11:13–21; and Numbers 15:37–41.**
 - b. The Shemonēh ‘esray (“The Eighteen”) – which were simply eighteen prayers that were used for various occasions.
4. Both prayers were to be offered every day, regardless of WHERE the people were, or WHAT they were doing at the time.
 - a. Faithful Jews even prayed all eighteen prayers of the Shemonēh ‘esray every morning, every afternoon, and every evening.
5. As a result, there were two basic attitudes that characterized the people who offered these kinds of prayers.
 - a. They approached these prayers indifferently – mumbling their way through the words of these prayers as quickly as

possible. To them, these prayers were just a matter of DUTY that needed to be performed.

- b. Or, like the scribes and Pharisees, they recited the prayers in a very meticulous manner – making sure to enunciate every word and syllable perfectly.

B. Not only had prayers become ritualized, secondly, prayers had also become prescribed.

1. The Jews had developed prayers for virtually every object and occasion – including light, darkness, fire, rain, the new moon, travel, good news, and bad news.
2. Their original intent was to bring every aspect of their lives before the throne of God. But in doing that, they undermined their purpose by coming up with specific prayers that were to be said for specific situations.
3. Prayer became more of a habit that focused on a specific topic or situation, and were not prayed out of a genuine desire or need.

C. Third, their prayers became lengthy.

1. The religious leaders of that day loved long prayers. They believed that a prayer's effectiveness was in direct proportion to its length.

2. Because of that, Jesus warned His disciples about the practices of the scribes who, "*for a pretense make long prayers.*" (**Mark 12:40**)
 3. While long prayers are not necessarily IN-sincere, they DO lend themselves to becoming repetitious and routine.
 4. We face the same temptations today – all too often confusing the length of a prayer with sincerity.
- D. Fourth, many Jewish prayers had become filled with those meaningless repetitions.
1. One of the Jews' worst faults was adopting the pagan religions' practice of meaningless repetition, just as the prophets of Baal had done in their encounter with Elijah. They, "*called on the name of Baal from morning until noon,*" even shouting in an irrational manner, "*until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice.*" (**1 Kings 18:26, 29**)
 - a. Hour after hour they repeated the same phrase, hoping that the quantity of their words and the intensity with which they were spoken would make their god hear and respond.
- E. And finally, the prayers of many during the days of Jesus were simply for the purpose of being seen and heard by men.

1. Praying to be seen and heard by men was a serious sin – it's sinful because that kind of prayer is designed solely for the purpose of satisfying pride.
2. And any prayer with a perverted purpose of seeking self-glory is a prayer that robs God of HIS glory.

IV. It's certainly easy to understand why the Lord condemned prayers like these. But there were other reasons why Jesus condemned the prayers of others – especially the Pharisees.

A. The Lord recognized that pride was at the root of most prayers offered by the Pharisees. Therefore, the Lord first dealt with those who prayed to make a show of their spirituality before men.

1. *"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." (Matthew 6:5)*
2. You may remember from previous lessons that the term *hypocrite* originally referred to Greek actors who wore masks that portrayed the roles they were playing.
 - a. And so, hypocrites are pretenders – persons who are playing a role.

- b. You never get to know the REAL person because they disguise their real beliefs and feelings. They disguise who they REALLY are.
3. The hypocritical scribes and Pharisees prayed for the same reason they did everything else – to attract attention and bring honor to themselves.
 4. On the surface, it might seem that Jesus' condemnation of their practice of prayer was unwarranted.
 - a. There was certainly nothing wrong with standing and praying in the synagogues.
 - (1). Standing was the most common way of praying in New Testament times, and the synagogues were the most appropriate place for public prayers.
 - (2). So, as long as the prayer was sincere, it was acceptable.
 - b. Even the practice of praying on the "*street corners*" was not wrong in itself – that was actually a normal place for prayer as well.
 - (1). At the appointed hour for prayer, devout Jews would actually stop wherever they were, even if they were walking along the street.

- (2). The real EVIL of these hypocritical worshipers was not the LOCATION of their prayers, but their desire to *"be SEEN by men."*
5. The scribes and Pharisees made a point of praying where a crowd was most likely to gather.
 - a. Wherever they were most likely to find the largest audience, that's where you would find these hypocrites.
6. In their desire to exalt themselves before their fellow Jews, the scribes and Pharisees were guilty of pride.
 - a. They were like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable who *"stood and was praying thus to himself." (Luke 18:11)*
 - b. As a result, Jesus said these Pharisees would have *"their reward in full."* Since they were only concerned about receiving the praise of men, that's all they received.
- B. In contrast to the hypocritical practice of the Pharisees, Jesus told His followers: *"But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly." (Matthew 6:6)*
 1. Notice that the Lord NEVER prescribed either a specific TIME or a specific OCCASION for His disciples to pray.

2. All He says is, "*When you PRAY.*" The Lord's isn't concerned about WHEN we pray or WHY we pray, but HOW we pray.
3. Therefore, to make as GREAT a contrast between the prayers of the Pharisees and God's pattern for prayer, Jesus says that when you pray, "*go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray.*"
 - a. The LOCATION for prayer isn't Jesus' point rather it was our ATTITUDE in prayer.
 - b. To avoid the temptation to show off, the true worshiper may need to find a secluded, private place to pray.
 - c. And when he gets there, he should "*shut the door*" – which is simply another way of saying he should close out all distractions so he can concentrate on God and pray to Him and Him alone.
4. Most of our prayer life should take place in secret. Jesus frequently left His disciples so He could find a place to be alone when He prayed.
5. Certainly there are times when public prayer is appropriate, especially since praying publicly can edify those who hear it – as long as the prayer represents their feelings and needs.

6. But even when we pray in public we should be directing all our attention toward God. So, in a sense, even when we pray publicly, we should be communing with God as though we were all alone in a private place.
 7. When we pray with that kind of attitude, "[our] *Father who sees in secret will reward [us] openly.*" **(v 6)**
- C. The hypocritical prayers of the scribes and Pharisees were not only done to draw attention to themselves, they were also filled with meaningless words – they had no substance, no significant content.
1. To be acceptable to God, prayers must be genuine expressions of worship, and genuine expressions of our heartfelt requests and petitions.
 2. The practice of using meaningless repetition in prayers was common in many pagan religions in Jesus' day.
 3. Therefore His warning was clear: "*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.*" **(Matthew 6:7)**
 - a. The phrase "*use vain repetition*" in the Greek text refers to idle, thoughtless chatter.

- b. The Jews had picked up this practice from the Gentiles, who believed that the value of prayer was largely a matter of quantity, supposing *"they will be heard for their many words."*
 - c. They believed their deities had to first be aroused, then begged, and finally badgered into listening and answering.
 - d. They were more concerned about getting the attention of their gods than they were of the content of their prayers.
 - e. There was no REAL, MEANINGFUL communication with their gods – just a lot of words.
4. We need to heed our Lord's warning here. We have all been guilty of repeating the same prayers over and over – with little or no thought of God or what we are saying.
- a. Prayers like that are offensive to God.
5. Repeating our genuine requests to God isn't what Jesus was condemning here – just those that are mechanical, cookie-cutter prayers offered without heartfelt meaning and purpose.
- D. In contrast to those who use meaningless repetition, Jesus says, *"Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him."* **(Matthew 6:8)**

1. God doesn't need for us to inform or persuade Him to respond to our needs, but merely to communicate with Him out of a devoted heart.
 - a. More than anything else, prayer is sharing the needs and burdens of our hearts with a God who cares.

CONCLUSION:

- I. How should you respond to these words from the Lord?
 - A. There are several things we can do to make our prayers more effective and meaningful.
 1. If you want power and passion in your prayer life, pray with a devout heart – with a pure motive seeking only the glory of God.
 2. Also, pray with a humble heart – seeking only the attention of God, not men.
 3. Finally, pray with a confident heart knowing full well that God has heard your request and already knows what you need.
 - B. Do your prayers have power and passion?
 1. If you're a faithful child of God, they do.
 2. But, if you've never obeyed the gospel of Christ, or if you've turned away from the Lord, you're prayers lack power and passion

because the Christ you've denied is the only vital link between you and God – He's the ONLY mediator.