

(God-Centered Praying) 1. How Not to Pray

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen emphasizes the importance of sincere, honest prayer that seeks God's approval rather than human recognition.

Scripture: Matthew 6:5

Topics: "Authenticity in Prayer", "Overcoming Hypocrisy"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes the importance of genuine prayer, warning against the hypocrisy of praying for the approval of others rather than for God. He highlights that true prayer should come from the heart and not be filled with meaningless repetition or long-windedness, as these do not impress God. Poonen explains that Jesus taught His disciples how not to pray before teaching them the correct way, stressing the need for honesty and sincerity in our communication with God. He also points out that hypocrisy can hinder our spiritual growth and that God desires authenticity over outward appearances. Ultimately, Poonen encourages believers to seek God's approval above all else in their prayer life.

Transcript

"When you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to 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, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay 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. Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him.

Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy 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 Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matt. 6:5-15).

This is the only prayer that Jesus ever taught His disciples. It must certainly be profitable for us then to understand it properly.

Jesus said that whenever we pray we were to pray in this way (v.9). That doesn't mean that we have to repeat this prayer each time we pray. But it does mean that all our praying should follow this pattern.

There's no harm in praying this prayer if we mean every sentence of it. But that's not easy, as we shall soon see.

Before Jesus taught His disciples how to pray, He first taught them how NOT to pray.

Not As The Hypocrites

The first thing that Jesus said in relation to how NOT to pray was that we were not to pray as the hypocrites do (v.5,6).

As you read through the gospels you find that Jesus had a lot to say about hypocrisy. He condemned the Pharisees in no uncertain terms, because they were hypocrites. The Pharisees had many good points about them. They prayed every day. They fasted twice every week. They tithed not only their money, but the dill and cummin that grew in their kitchen garden as well. They were extremely careful in following the little details of what they understood to be the laws of God. Externally they were very moral and upright. They would never miss a Sabbath service in the synagogue. They were deeply taught in the Scriptures. Yet Jesus condemned them because what they did was primarily in order to obtain honour from their fellow men. "They loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God" (Jn. 12:43).

The descendants of the Pharisees - those who love the praise of their leaders and other men, more than the praise of God - now live in the midst of every church and fellowship in the world.

The word "hypocrite" comes from a Greek word which means an actor. Think of a man who acts as John the Baptist in a Hollywood movie. In real life he may be a drunkard and a debaucher, having divorced two or three wives. But in the movie, he plays his part as a holy prophet of God. That's what a hypocrite is - one who acts a part before men, but who is actually something quite different in real life.

A hypocrite may act his part as a wholehearted Christian before other believers. But if you saw the way he treated his wife at home, or how he deals with people in his office, you'd find he's a different person altogether. Why? He is not acting there. At home and at work he is the person that he really is. He is a religious man, not a spiritual man.

An actor wants his audience to appreciate how he acts. So does every hypocrite. So did the Pharisees in the first century; and so do the Pharisees in the twentieth century. Whatever they do, even if it be a sacred activity such as praying, they want to be appreciated by men. They may pray beautifully - but it is for people to notice them.

If we are honest, we will have to confess that many a time, we have all prayed as hypocrites - more conscious that people were listening to us, than God. Maybe we need to confess to the Lord that when we pray in public we don't pray in the same way as we do when we're alone. Perhaps we use flowery or fervent language in our public prayer to impress people. Jesus warned us to beware of praying like that, for that type of prayer doesn't reach God at all.

If we want to be delivered from hypocrisy, whether in our preaching, or our living, or our praying, we need to ask God to give us such a fear of Him that we care more for His praise than for the praise of men. Until we learn to fear God aright, we shall continue to be actors playing our part before men, in every area of our lives.

Jesus condemned hypocrisy more than any other sin.

Not Giving False Impressions

The first sin that we read of in the early church was hypocrisy. In Acts 5, you read of Ananias and Sapphira.

What was their sin?

Was it that they didn't bring all the money which they got from the sale of their property and give it to God? No. That was not their sin. If you sell your property for 100,000 rupees and decide to give only 50,000 rupees to God, that is not a sin. If you decide to give nothing to God that is not a sin either. That is really your own business as to how much you give to Him. God loves a cheerful giver; and if you don't give cheerfully, you might as well give nothing. He doesn't need your money. He has more than enough of silver and gold!

Why then did Ananias and Sapphira die? The reason was this: Ananias pretended that what he was laying at the apostles' feet was the whole of the sale-money. With a holy, pious look on his face, Ananias looked just as consecrated as the others. He was an actor, a hypocrite.

But Peter was a man of God and he wasn't fooled. God gave him discernment to see through the hollowness of Ananias' consecration. And he said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" (Acts 5:3).

What lie did Ananias say? He hadn't opened his mouth.

What does it mean to tell a lie? It means to give a false impression; and you can give a false impression without even opening your mouth.

That's what Ananias did. He wanted to get the acclaim of others that he was also a wholehearted disciple. But he was not. He had kept something back for himself. Now, as I said, that was not a sin. If only he had said, "Brother Peter, I have sold my land. But I don't feel I should give all the sale proceeds to God, like the others are doing. Here is a part of the money" - if he had said that, he would not have died. That would have been honesty, and God would have appreciated it.

But he pretended. That was his sin and that's why he died. A little later his wife came in and she acted her part beautifully too! She also pretended that she was giving everything. And she died as well.

That hypocrisy was like a little leaven that had got into the early church; and God knew that if it wasn't taken out immediately, the whole church would soon be corrupted. That's why He slew them at once.

If you don't beware of hypocrisy in every area of your life, you will never be able to overcome hypocrisy in your prayer-life. If you pray in order that other people may appreciate you, then Jesus says, "You've already got your reward" (Matt. 6:2). Your desire then is not that God should be glorified through your prayer but that other people should know how well you can pray. Then you'll get that reward.

But that's all you'll get. That's what you wanted, and that's what you'll get.

This is a principle in the Christian life that we get what we long for in the depths of our hearts, and not what we ask for with our lips. Seek and you will find what you are really seeking for!

When we stand at the judgment seat of Christ, we will stand stripped of all our outward veneer. There we shall be seen no longer as actors but as we really are. That's why the Bible says that we have to be careful how we walk today, lest we stand there stripped, naked and ashamed one day.

1 John 2:28 reads, "Now little children abide in Christ so that when He appears we may have confidence and not shrink away." The people who are going to be ashamed in that day are those who lived their life on earth as actors.

I'm speaking now to believers. To whom was the "sermon on the mount" preached? If you'll turn to Matthew 5:1-2, you'll find that Jesus spoke those words to His disciples. It was to His disciples that He said, "Beware of practising your righteousness before men" (Matt. 6:1). It was to his disciples that he said, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy." (Luke 12:1).

Walking In The Light

The Bible says in 1 John 1:7 that we cannot have fellowship with God if we do not walk in the light. If we walk in the light we certainly can't hide anything, for the light exposes everything. The man who walks in darkness is the one who has something to hide in his life. If we walk in the light, our life is an open book. We can then invite people to examine our private life, our account books and everything. There is nothing we want to hide. It doesn't mean that we're perfect. No, it only means that we are honest.

The first thing that God requires from all of us is honesty - absolute honesty. If we are willing to be honest first, many of our other problems will be solved very quickly. We will progress in leaps and bounds in our spiritual life if we live by this fundamental rule of honesty before God and men.

But you'll find that this is a battle. You may say, "I'm really going to take that exhortation seriously. I'm going to be honest from now on." But you'll find before the week is out that you're tempted to be an actor again, and to seek for the praise of men rather than the praise of God. So you have to determine to fight that battle and win.

It is a great grief to God that there are so many Christians today who have been born again for twenty, thirty or forty years, but who haven't progressed spiritually because they have not learned this fundamental lesson of being honest. We can't progress if there is hypocrisy in our life. Our prayers will not be heard. We can have all-night prayer meetings; but we are wasting our time. Our prayers will not be heard if we do not get rid of hypocrisy first.

We must recognize that our true spiritual worth is what we are before God and nothing more than that. Our spiritual state is not determined by our knowledge of the Bible, nor by how much we pray, nor by how many meetings we attend, nor by what the elders or others in the church think of us. On the contrary, ask yourself, "What does God, Who can see into every area of my life, think of me?" The answer to that is the real measure of how spiritual you are. We need to remind ourselves of this daily, or else we may find ourselves becoming actors again.

I love those words that Jesus said about Nathaniel, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile" (John 1:47). If Jesus could say that about you and me, that would be a greater commendation that almost anything else. Nathaniel was not perfect. He was imperfect. But he was honest about his imperfections. He didn't pretend to be something that he wasn't. That's where he was different from Ananias and Sapphira.

Not With Meaningless Repetition

A second thing that Jesus warned us against was the use of meaningless repetition in prayer, as the Gentiles do when they pray.

It is not the number of words that we use that God sees as much as the longings of our heart. Real prayer is the longing of the heart. That longing is what ascends to God and gets an answer.

Repetition of words is all right, if you mean what you say. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed three times using the same words (Mt. 26:44). But His words were not empty repetition. Each time He prayed, the words came with a burden from His heart. You can pray with the same words ten times a day, and God will hear you, if you pray sincerely from your heart each time.

Christians are guilty of telling more lies to God on Sundays than on any other day. You know why? Because it is on Sundays that they sing so many hymns - such as, "All to Jesus I surrender", "Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold", etc.,

You may sing those words because they're in the hymnbook. But you don't mean them. And you don't realize that you're speaking directly to God when you sing such hymns. Maybe you are more conscious of the tune than of the words. That's when you tell lies to God.

Jesus said that we would have to give an account to God in the day of judgment for every careless word that we spoke (Mt. 12:36) It's because we live in a generation of Christians who do not fear God that such warnings of our Lord are not taken seriously.

Vain repetition is the mark of the heathen who come into God's presence carelessly and say things that they don't mean. That should never be found in our praying or our singing.

Not Trusting In Long Prayers

Jesus also said that the heathen thought that they would be heard because of their many words.

Some believers feel that if they have an all-night prayer meeting, God is bound to answer them, just because they prayed for so long. That type of praying is characteristic of the heathen.

You remember the time on Mount Carmel when Elijah stood on one side and 450 prophets of the heathen God, Baal, stood on the other side and they both tried to bring fire down from heaven to find out who was the true God. The prophets of Baal had a long prayer meeting. They prayed and prayed and prayed; and then they jumped and danced and shouted. But there was no fire. God saw their hearts and He wasn't impressed by their emotional outbursts or their noise (1 Kings 18:20-29).

There are Christians who pray like that too! They think God will hear them because of all their emotion and their shouting.

And then Elijah prayed. His prayer was over in less than a minute but it brought the fire. That's the test - not whether you pray for a minute or all night, but whether God answers or not!

"Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart" (1Sam. 16:7).

"The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16). James goes on to refer to Elijah's example there. Elijah's prayer was answered, not because he shouted for so many hours but because he was a righteous man. It's the life behind the prayer that makes the prayer effective. Let's never forget that.

These are some of the fundamental lessons that Jesus taught His disciples, before He taught them how they should pray. We can never learn to pray aright if we don't first learn how not to pray.

Let me add one last word here, lest I be misunderstood.

Having an all-night prayer meeting is certainly not wrong. Jesus Himself prayed all night on one occasion (Lk. 6:12). What Jesus condemned was not much praying, but trusting in many words. There is a lot of difference between many words and much praying. If our praying is only many words then it is a waste of time. Jesus could spend a whole night in prayer effectively because His heart was right and He had a God-given burden.

However, it's not the length of time spent in prayer that determines whether God answers or not. It's the life of the man who prays that determines that.

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