

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Ash Wednesday
Wednesday, March 6th, 2019

Sermon: How *Not* to Pray

Text: Matthew 6:5-8

Focus: God promises to hear and answer our prayers.

Function: That they would not be bombastic or showy in their prayers.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: “I should be certain that these petitions are pleasing to our Father in heaven, and are heard by Him; for He Himself has commanded us to pray in this way and has promised to hear us. Amen, amen means ‘yes, yes, it shall be so’” (SC, Conclusion of the Lord’s Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. In tonight’s Gospel reading, Jesus teaches us how *not* to give, how *not* to pray, and how *not* to fast. We will focus on prayer:

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when *you* pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matt. 6:5-8, ESV).

At first blush, it would seem that Jesus warns against two things: public prayer and lengthy prayers.

Public prayer is highly controversial in America these days, especially with how our culture has moved beyond secular to outright *anti*-Christian. Ever since the 1960’s, when the United States Supreme Court banned compulsory prayer in public schools, many conservative Christians have unsuccessfully lobbied for its reinstatement. Even voluntary prayer by high school football coaches and players before games came under scrutiny in the 1990’s. I must admit that I am okay with not having compulsory public prayer in the public schools. After all, I believe that, as a parent, it is *my* responsibility to teach my children to pray—not the

government's. And as soon as the government sticks its nose into the business of teaching the faith, I become concerned about which version, specifically will be taught. IN GOD WE TRUST may be our national motto, but it requires catechesis and confession of the Creeds to know of which God we speak. Sometimes I wonder if those Christians who decry the banning of prayer in public schools are as diligent in their own family devotions at home as they would have others be in the classroom. That's certainly not the way to pray.

The other primary forum for public prayer seems to be in restaurants. When your family goes out to eat, should you pray and give thanks before the meal, or is that contrary to what Jesus commands in our Gospel? Christ's concern with public prayer is not that he doesn't want other people to hear us pray. His concern is whether or not we are trying to call attention to ourselves so that other people think that we are holier-than-thou. Prayer isn't supposed to be about us; it's supposed to focus our hearts and minds on "things that are above, where Christ is" (Col. 3:1). A short prayer of thanksgiving is entirely appropriate when you dine out. You might tell your server that you are going to pray before your meal and ask him or her if they would like to be included. (Just do everybody in the Church a favor, okay? *If you pray in public before you eat, be sure to leave a sizeable, generous tip. As a former waiter, I can attest that Christians are among the least generous tippers. They stay the longest, expect the most refills, and often don't even leave 15%. According to my father, an old preacher, if you pray in public, leave at least twenty percent if you pray, in order to makeup for the stinginess of fellow believers and to overcome the stereotype. Otherwise, if you're not going to be a good tipper, don't pray; because that's not the way to pray either.*)

The problem in Jesus' day was that religious hypocrites made a big show of their prayers. They thought that if they prayed in public with the loudest, most wordy prayers possible, that

others around them would be impressed and consider them to be extra spiritual and closer to God. But who cares what other people think? Our job as followers of Jesus is not to impress other people, but to serve the Lord. And God is not pleased with our supposed good works. He knows that we have nothing to offer him. We surely deserve nothing that we pray for and only receive what we ask for by his grace and blessing.

That is why Jesus says that when we pray, we should go into our own little, private room “and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Matt. 6:6). God is our heavenly Father. You can speak to your Father about all matters on your mind and heart, including those that are most embarrassing and shameful to you. You would not have an important family meeting in a school classroom or city square or restaurant. Families talk about family matters privately... together... in secret. It’s not that we, as the children of God, have anything to hide from others. Indeed, we recognize our fallen, sinful condition. That’s why we bear these ashen crosses on our foreheads tonight as a reminder that we are dust. But our Father remembers our frame; he knows that we are dust (Ps. 103:14). Yet he has mercy on us all the same and welcomes us into his divine counsel. “And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:6).

Jesus does not tell us what our reward will be. Oh, how our sinful flesh and selfish nature would like to know! It makes our blood rise to imagine prizes and presents. Yet elsewhere in Matthew’s Gospel, when Jesus speaks of reward, he speaks of it being laid up in heaven for some later time. “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven...” (Matt. 5:12). “And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward” (Matt. 10:42). The reward is not defined. And here, Jesus says, “And your Father who sees in secret will *repay [apodidōmi]* you” (Matt. 6:6b, CSM). How will we be repaid? Jesus does not spell it out, but I surmise that our “reward” or

“payment” is simply the answer to our prayers, or, perhaps even greater, the intimacy of fellowship with the Father himself.

People who make a pretense or performance out of prayer miss all that. It’s not a matter of what you say, or how you say it, or where you say it; it’s a matter of the heart. You don’t have to use fancy words or liturgy or stand or sit or kneel to pray the right way. You don’t have to sound a horn and let all the world know you’re about to pray. You don’t have been seen by others. You just have to be seen the way that your loving, heavenly Father sees you: as a child who needs *him*. “For your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matt. 6:8). And what we need, more than anything, more than breath or bread, is God himself. And to have *Him*, you need only *pray*. As children of the heavenly Father, we may pour out our hearts—nay, our very *souls!*—to God in prayer (cf. Ps. 42:4). And he hears us and answers us for the sake of Jesus Christ, his Son, who prayed for us on the cross (Luke 23:34) and prays for us now (Rom. 8:34). “And your Father who sees in secret will *repay* you” (Matt. 6:6, CSM). You can pray to God anytime, anywhere! “Pray without ceasing,” writes the apostle Paul (1 Thess. 5:17). Never stop praying.

Tonight we learned how *not* to pray. In the coming weeks, we will meditate on the Lord’s Prayer to learn *how* to pray rightly. For, as Jesus says in the verses omitted by tonight’s reading:

“Pray then *like this*: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil’ (Matt. 6:9-13).

“Pray then like this...” Pray in this way. The Lord’s Prayer is the way we ought to pray. Jesus commands us to pray in this way. He gives us the very words to speak to him. So we dare not

take it lightly or brush it off as “rote” or unimportant. “Pray then like this...” Thank you, Jesus!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.