

I heard about two men who were talking. They were pretty rough characters - but one of them had just started going to a small group bible study for the first time in his life. He was encouraging his friend to give it a try, but the friend wasn't interested. This friend challenged him, *"If you are so religious now, let's hear you quote the Lord's Prayer. I bet you \$10.00 you can't."* The second man responded, just watch me, and then said, *"God is gracious, God is good, now we thank him for our food."* The first man said, *"I'm impressed, I didn't think you could do it!"* and then he pulled out his wallet to pay off the wager. Both of those men had room for improvement in their prayer life - and so do I - and so do you.

My prayer life has been improving during this pandemic in direct proportion to how often I wash my hands. Let me explain. We've all been trying to do a better job of washing our hands more often, and more carefully over a longer period of time. We've been told to wash our hands for at least 20 seconds (before I started counting I realized my average time was 10 seconds or less). I read that if you sing *"Twinkle, twinkle, little star"* as you wash, the time will be about right. However, that felt silly to me. I also read that you can also say "The Lord's Prayer" as you wash, so I tried that instead. I speak fast, but it still takes me about 24 second, but I started doing it anyway. As a result, I've said the Lord's Prayer more in the past 2 months than in the past 2 years, and it has become one of my most helpful habits. So I commend that practice to you - but it has also made me think more about this prayer and prayer in general.

I've also been praying more because this pandemic is causing such hardship to so many people that I care about. I need the Lord to help them, and me, and to give us His perspective. A friend and church member recently shared this on social media, *"My heart is heavy tonight. There are so many reasons. So many friends who have lost family in the last weeks and so many with critically ill family they can't be with. I cannot even imagine. So many people alone in nursing homes and hospitals. So many friends and family that are anxious about losing their jobs, feeding their families and other life disappointments."* We could all add to that list.

In Luke 11 the first disciples, were evidently having struggles of their own. They came to Jesus, who'd just been praying, and said, *"Lord, teach us to pray..."* Jesus responded by giving them what we call "The Lord's Prayer" as a special model or outline to guide them. So I believe that looking at the "Lord's Prayer" very carefully will help us grow in our life of prayer. For the next several weeks we are going to talk about prayer using Jesus' model for prayer and made some applications and references to this challenging season in our lives as we go along.

First I want to give a more general introduction to why it is so important to pray, and also one of the most essential things we need to know as we start to pray and as we grow in prayer.

The Bible talks often about prayer. Why? Because prayer is vitally important and it goes to the heart of the Christian faith. You see, Christianity isn't just about morality, or good works. It's not just about how much you know, or how often you go to a church building, or being in a small group, or leading some kind of ministry. **All of those are important things.**

But before you can do any of those things well, you must learn to live out the truth that Christianity is about a relationship; a love relationship between us and God through Christ.

Of course, Christianity is also about relationships with others in the body of Christ - and this season is helping us realize how important those relationships are or are supposed to be. But before we even get to those relationships, we must first have a solid relationship with God.

Prayer is both the expression of that relationship, and it is also a primary way by which we maintain and deepen that relationship. We also need to spend time reading and studying the Word of God - and learning and knowing the basic story of Jesus so we can know who it is we are praying to and what we can expect from our prayers. But I will talk about Bible study another time - I want to talk about prayer. If there's no prayer, then the most likely reason is that there is no relationship - or at least there is only a very weak and unhealthy relationship.

God wants better for you than that. Think about it for a moment: why does God desire our prayers? He already knows what we need. If He wants to bless us, He can certainly do it. No one's stopping Him, and no one can stop Him. God knows perfectly well what's in our hearts and minds. He doesn't need to hear us tell him. He knows what we're going to ask before we even ask it. Nor does God need our thanksgiving, or our praise, or our worship to bolster His self-esteem. God can get along just fine without any of those things from us.

Acts 17:24-25 says, "The God who made the world and everything in it, is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all people life and breath and everything else."

Then why does God want us to pray? What's the purpose of it all? It's about a relationship. Our God is a personal God, and He interacts with us on a personal level, primarily through prayer. If God simply acted in our lives without prayer, there might be no relationship. But instead, as we pray and God responds, as we ask and He answers, it builds our trust and it deepens our faith. There's a personal interaction taking place. That process helps us to grasp His love for us; it helps us to know that God is the source of all the good things in our lives. We come to know that God wants to bless us, and He takes great pleasure in doing so.

God invites us to pray because in that process we might come to love Him and trust Him more. That's why I believe prayer is so important, it is because it builds our relationship with God. To me that is what the Christian faith is all about, it is about enjoying a relationship with God through Christ. God wants us to pray because He wants our hearts. God loves us, more than we can imagine, and He longs for us to experience His eternal love. God is our heavenly Father, and He wants a relationship with us, and that relationship is built through prayer.

But still, as I said at the beginning, we often struggle and have difficulty in prayer. Today I want to focus on one of the most important things we need to know about prayer - and it is this - we need to be REAL when we pray. We need to be REAL with God when we pray.

Years ago I was leading a Confirmation class and I asked the youth to give me their definition of prayer. One 13 year old youth said, *“Prayer is just speaking and listening to God - it is having a conversation with the Lord like you would with your best friend or parent.”*

To this day, it remains one of the best definitions of prayer I’ve ever heard. But if you’re going to have a true conversation with anyone, including the Lord - you need to be real in that conversation - but so often we are just pretending with God and with others.

Following a great sermon on lifestyle evangelism one family thought they had better do something to witness for Jesus. So they invited their neighbors to dinner the following Friday night. When it came to the meal, the hostess wanted to put on a show to convince them of the great Christian standards in their home. So she asked their 5 year old son to say the table grace - which they rarely did. The boy was a bit shy and said, *“I don't know what to say...”* There was an awkward pause, followed by a reassuring smile from the boy's mother. *“Well darling,”* she said, *“just say what Daddy said at breakfast this morning.”* Obediently, the boy repeated, *“Oh God help us, we've got those awful people coming over to dinner tonight.”*

In our text, from Matthew, Jesus begins by saying that when we pray Jesus says that we should not pray like the hypocrites or the pagans.

The word hypocrite in this text is actually the Greek word for actor, and it literally means one who wears a mask. So Christ is saying don’t pray like someone who is playing a part. Have you ever heard someone with a very definite prayer voice, some people call it a “stained glass voice,” or a prayer vocabulary that has no relationship to their every day language?

Christ knew people like that. In His time they stood on the street corners and prayed so that others could hear them. Please know that Christ is not denouncing public prayer, He is just condemning the purpose for which these people prayed in public. These people picked a prominent spot so that many people could see them and hear them pray their flowery prayers. People probably said, in amazement, *“Wow, I wish I could pray like that!”* The praise of people is what these men wanted most and that’s all they got. The only problem, is that the praise of people is so much less valuable than really connecting with God in prayer.

Jesus also says we are not to pray like gentile pagans who babble on using many words. The KJV, uses the phrase, *“vain repetition.”* I believe that means, in part, praying without paying attention. Some people pray the same prayers so often, and for so long that they can say them without really thinking about them at all. I think it also refers to the need of many to use fancy or unusual words for the sake of making our prayers beautiful or impressive. Jesus tells us to cut to the chase. He says that your heavenly Father knows what you need, before you ask Him (in other words, who do you think you are trying to impress!?) Since God is our Father, and He knows us, and our needs, it means we can use plain language as we speak to Him.

In Matthew 6:9 Jesus says, “This, then, is how you should pray:”

Christ went on to teach the most famous prayer in history, what we call "*The Lord's Prayer*." Here is where some irony comes in. Most of us could reel off the Lord's Prayer by rote without even thinking about it. I often wonder if it's come to the place that it's just a vain repetition of words, one word after another without any thought. The very thing Jesus warned us not to do when we pray! We ought to pray it, but mostly it is meant to be a model for prayer.

I've often wondered why so many people pray on auto-pilot, without thought, or with some kind of phoniness or pretentiousness. Of course we could just say that some people are sinful and selfish and that they are actually trying to avoid God for some reason, or they don't want to submit to God's authority. Any and all of those are surely true in some cases - but if that is the case, it probably applies to each of us as well, because "sinful and selfish" includes all of us at some level. So I believe that there is more here we need to think about.

Instead of writing this off as the bad practice of a some bad people - let's consider something that many of us struggle with as we pray. I think many people pray like this because they are afraid. They are afraid to really get close to God.

There are many reasons people might be afraid. I know I was afraid of God when I was a kid. I was afraid to trust God because most, if not all, of the authority figures in my life broke my heart and betrayed my trust. I was afraid that God might turn out to be like them, and if your last resort is closed - then you are really without hope. I was also afraid that God wouldn't want to waste His time with a ragamuffin kid like me and my lame prayers.

I read a good book on prayer called, How to Pray After You've Kicked the Dog, by Terry Teykel. Teykel says that many of us carry around a load of fear, guilt and shame. Some is simply baggage from our childhoods. Some is the result of actual sin or rebellion. But much of our fear, guilt and shame, is based on a nagging sense that we are not worthy of a relationship with a righteous and almighty God. We still sense our need for God, but in fear, we settle for "religion" and religious prayers instead of "relationship" and real life conversation with God. Often, we don't think we're righteous enough to talk to God as one of His very own children.

Sometimes when we pray, we think about a Bible verses we'd like to forget, James 5:16 is one of those for many people. It says, "***The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective,***" well, most of us think that leaves us out, we're not very righteous, so why bother, why expect our prayers to be "powerful and effective"?

Whether we admit it or not, most of us feel hopelessly inadequate when it comes to approaching God in prayer. So, we think we'd better stick to the script or put on a show or use the prayers of other Christians who are "better than we are" because if we don't, our prayers - our unrighteousness prayers - are likely to crash into the ceiling and land back on our heads.

The truth is we are partly right - but also grossly mistaken - when we think about our unrighteousness this way.

We are correct when we think we are too unrighteous to approach and draw close to a holy God on our own. But we are mistaken when we think that we're the only ones in that condition. Sometimes we imagine there are super celebrity Christians who get to go in the express lane, and because of their great goodness and impressive prayers they can walk straight up to God and get whatever help they need - while the rest of us struggling believers just go without what we need because of our weakness. Hear me - that is just not true.

The Bible says that in God's eyes, by God's standards of holiness, there is no truly righteous human being on earth - not even one (Romans 3:10). It says that the best righteousness that any person has, is like filthy rags to God (Isaiah 64:6). The truth is we don't go, we can't go to God trusting in our own goodness, or our prayer formula or vocabulary, or our theological wisdom, or religious credentials, or liturgically tested prayers.

But we CAN go to God in prayer on a whole other basis - we can go to God without fear of rejection BECAUSE OF WHO WE ARE IN CHRIST. If we trust Christ, we can go to God in prayer, because we are now clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

The bible says it this way in 2 Cor 5:20-21, *"... be reconciled to God. God made [Christ] who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that in [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God."*

When we trust Christ, we're in a whole new position before God - we're are in a new place from which we can pray - with the right of access and intimacy that Christ has created for us.

That is why I believe it is so important for us to pray always, "In Jesus name..." Not as a formula - but as a reminder. When we pray *"In Jesus' name,"* it reminds us that only He is the righteous One - it is Christ alone who enables our prayers to be powerful and effective. We pray in His name, we pray claiming His righteousness which He shares with us by His grace.

- **Ephesians 3:12 says,** *"Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence."*
- **Hebrews 4:16 says,** *"So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most."*

Because of Christ - when we pray, we have no reason to fear because we are accepted and loved unconditionally, just as we are, because of what Christ has done for us. When we trust in Christ we are adopted into the family of God as brothers and sisters of Christ, children of God.

Now, what that means is that we can risk being real with God in prayer.

That is what Jesus is calling us to do in this passage - be real. God is not so impressed with degrees or theology or ordinations. He takes very little notice of eloquence or drama or how well you've memorized traditional prayers. God responds to those who are real with Him.

When we get to the part of the Lord's Prayer, about "*thy will be done*" we'll discuss why God often says, "No," or "Not yet" to our prayers - even when we pray in Jesus's name. So sometimes being "real" includes lamenting about waiting, or not yet understanding God's plan, which is hard for everyone. If we press on and we're real with God, eventually our trust will grow to help us in such times. So the power and effectiveness is really seen in how much it deepens our relationship with God instead of particular outcomes or "answers" to prayer.

Like most parents, one of the qualities I value most in my children is honesty. I want them to be secure enough in my love to know that I will never reject them just because they messed up somehow - so they might as well be real with me. God is the same way with us.

God would rather you come to Him in all of your humanity than to dress yourself up and try to hide what might displease Him. Besides, it impossible to hide anything from God. As your Father, He can handle your sin better than you can handle any false pride or pretense.

Awareness of your humanity before God results in an attitude of humility. When you go before God with all your "garbage" in tow, you humble yourself and say, "*Here I am, God. I know it's not pretty, but it's [really] me. I want to spend some time with you.*" Just like I would do with our children if they came to me like that, He will gather you to Himself and say, "*Let's talk.*" He will listen and speak, and He will love you, if only you will be real with Him.

Mother Teresa said, "*Prayer enlarges your heart for God.*" It is your **heart** that God is most interested in when you pray. That is why the prayers of children are so sweet, because their heads don't often get in the way of what their hearts need to say. Heart is about passion and a desire for intimacy - it is about really wanting a relationship with God. It is about love. As God told us through His prophet Jeremiah, "*You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.*" (Jeremiah 29:13) Why? Because it is love that connects us best with God.

I love the story Howard Hendricks tells of a man who was led to Christ by a friend after many years of a sinful living and after suffering through the painful consequences of such a life. After his conversion this man went to his first prayer meeting. Many people were getting up and uttering these flowery and fancy prayers. He felt so ignorant he was almost too embarrassed to join in - but he just needed to talk with God. Finally, this new convert stood to pray and he said, "*Lord, this is Mel. I'm not sure whether you remember me or not... I just met you last Tuesday night. I just wanted to say - well - thank-you for changing my life. I love you. Amen.*" And then he sat down. The simplicity and honesty of that prayer brought tears to the eyes of many and I suspect it brought a smile to the face of God as well.

Over the next several weeks - I encourage you to pray, more and more (and wash your hands more and more while you're at it! Or do both at the same time!).

In this new sermon series, we will use the Lord's Prayer as a point of reference, as a model to guide us, but first, I encourage you to take time just speak with God and to listen to God more. As you do, just be real, be yourself, and know that God loves you - so just talk to Him. What you and I need most of all, is a closer relationship with God, and prayer will help with that.