**Prayer**

**August 16, 2020**

*Matthew 6:5-13*

*“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today 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 the evil one.’”*

What is your definition of prayer? People generally don’t like to pray out loud around other people. I’m not sure what the real reason behind that is. I think a huge piece of it is prayer can feel like public speaking, and any fumbling of words or saying something “incorrect” will earn a low performance grade. Maybe praying out loud, or prayer in general, makes people anxious because they aren’t sure what to say. Maybe they’ve heard prayer in church or seen it in the media and think to themselves, “I don’t think I can pray like that.” Whatever the reason, people seem hesitant to pray.

I believe there’s something deeper going on, too. According to this passage in Matthew, prayer is a discipline that God values when done in secret. In other words, I’m not sure He is thrilled with that “fancy out-loud big words” prayer. Don’t get me wrong, there is an important place for corporate prayer within the body of Christ. But, along with many other things in Christianity, I think we’ve overcomplicated what prayer is, and even how to do it!

According to Jesus in His most famous sermon, prayer is a personal, simple, genuine experience between Father and child. It is a point of connection and also a point of release. It is meant to be something done with nobody else around, and filled with sincere requests, gratitude, and even laments. It’s not something that needs a time limit or a platform. It doesn’t need to be formal or convincing. It just needs to be honest recognition of God’s work in your life, even if it’s earnest desire to see Him work more.

If that doesn’t help – well looky here in Matthew 6:9-13! Jesus gives us an outline of a good place to start! His prayer is something we pray together in church every week, but it’s something we should all communicate with God *every single time* we approach Him in prayer! Jesus’ prayer is simply an affirmation of statements that God has already promised to us in Scripture. He says, “when you pray, your prayers should be filled with these things: A recognition of God’s goodness and holiness, a hope and belief that God’s plans and Kingdom will happen, trusting in His provision, seeking forgiveness, and giving us His strength to resist sin.” That’s all. No showiness, no fancy words, no hard-to-understand concepts, no asking to get good grades. Simplicity, hope, trust, and a communication of those things.

Prayer is a discipline, which means the more you practice it, the easier it happens, and the more meaningful it becomes. My *personal* prayer for you is that you dive deeper into prayer for yourself, and your connection with God grows because of it. Keep it simple, trust that God is listening, and know that His desire is to grow in deeper relationship with you.

*Questions for Reflection and Discussion*

1. What is your opinion of prayer? Is it something you practice on a regular basis, or something that causes uncertainty and hesitation? Why do you think people find prayer difficult or not meaningful?
2. Do you believe that God answers prayers? Later on in this Sermon, in Matthew 7:7-8, Jesus says, *“ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.”* What happens when you pray and ask God for something, and you don’t feel like He is listening or answers you? What do you think the point of that is?
3. According to the NIV study bible, in the original Greek language, the words *ask, seek,* and *knock* found in Matthew 7 use the present imperative form of these verbs. In other words, the language implies that asking, seeking, and knocking should be persistent – not just a one time thing. Why is it difficult for us to be persistent and patient in prayer? What do you think the point of persistent prayer is?
4. What is the purpose of praying in secret?
5. Read Matthew 6:7-8 – *“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”* – How does this instruction pair with persistent prayer talked about in question 3? What is the importance of God knowing our needs?
6. In the devotional, we mentioned that corporate (with other people) prayer is still a positive and important thing. What do you think that should look like? Why is it still important to pray with others?