

Sermon Notes of Rev Dr Ivor J.W.Oakley (3-9-2000 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Matthew 6 v 5-8

Additional Reading Luke 18 v 1-14

Introduction

Matthew 6 deals with religious practices common to Jews, and Jesus assumes his followers will continue. These involve our relationship to neighbour in giving, our relationship to God in praying, and our relationship to self in fasting. But motive is his main concern. If these things are done only to earn men's applause, they are a waste of time. God has to be in central place so that obsession with self gives way.

Jesus not only speaks of motive in prayer, but also tells us how to pray, and in fact gives a model prayer to help and guide us. Somebody has said prayer is the "highest activity of the human soul", and the ultimate test of a person's true condition. Nothing tells the truth about us more than our prayer life. It is easier to be generous than to pray. Much easier to preach than to pray. Easier to speak to others than to speak to God. Usually we have less to say to God when on our own than when in presence of others. We make many mistakes, and hence our Lord's warning here.

Situation in the Lord's day which he addressed

No nation had higher view of prayer than the Jews. It was the highest of their priorities. Private and also family prayer was stressed. Rabbis regretted they could not pray all day long. A good Jew prayed the Shema, set of three prayers from the Old Testament which began: "**Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one..**" (Deuteronomy 6:4ff). They recited these passages of Scripture always before 9am and again before 9pm. Jewish liturgy had a prayer for all occasions – meals, about the fire, seeing the new moon, seeing the sea, using new furniture, leaving or entering the city. Every event was brought into the Lord's presence. Three set prayer times every day, 9am, 12 noon, 3pm. Prayers were elaborate and designed to extol God's greatness, speaking of him as blessed, glorified, exalted, magnified, the Holy One. One Jewish prayer had 16 adjectives describing God and his glory.

All was well in theory, and in some cases in practice. There were pious, earnest, sincere Jews. But there were plenty who were not. Prayer was gabbled through at break-neck speed, with no thought of God. They knew the words so well that they never thought of the meaning. They misunderstood the purpose of prayer, thinking that the longer they prayed, the more likely they were to batter down God's door and get an answer. The Jews and pagans almost hypnotised themselves by repetition of same phrase over and over again, becoming intoxicated with the words, till they were meaningless and mechanical.

Then they had a desire to show themselves off as pious and God-fearing. They prayed standing, with hands stretched out, palms upwards, heads lowered, often on busy street corner to get the largest audience. Or on the top step of the Synagogue.

These failures and weaknesses were not confined to Jews and pagans. They were also true of the first century Gentiles, and equally common today. How many times we fail here. So often we point at the meaningless gabble of liturgical services in churches where the prayer book is used. And indeed so. Or we point to the empty prayers of unconverted people when they pray. But are we blameless? How easy it is to use the same empty meaningless phrases in private devotions or public prayer, words that meant a great deal when first used, but mean nothing now. It can be a disturbing exercise to examine the words and phrases we commonly use, and ask what we actually mean by them.

Then the idea that the longer we pray, the more likely we are to be heard. How easy it is to kill a prayer meeting dead and discourage young people, when someone prays for a very long time. There was once someone who prayed for 40 minutes solid, and had to be cut short, and he said "But pastor, I was just getting into the spirit of prayer". It is told that once in Edinburgh, D.L.Moody had to interrupt "While our brother finishes his prayer, the rest of us will sing hymn number...". I have always taught students that in leading public worship, two prayers of three minutes is better than one prayer of six minutes. The first three minutes the congregation pray with you, the next three they pray for you, the next three they pray against you.

Then, as we saw last time, we like to cultivate the impression that we are people of prayer, and slip the fact into conversation. Like to impress people with our turn of phrase or Biblical knowledge. Or we use prayer to get at people or preach to people. Always conscious of other people. Always anxious to know what they think of us. We can say things in the prayer meeting and the pulpit for all sorts of wrong self-centred motives. The Lord's words reach us today as much as his contemporaries twenty centuries ago.

Practice of true prayer

So we move from negative to positive, from the wrong way to the right way. **When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray** (Matthew 6:6). We need to get on our own with God. This is not ruling out praying together in church prayer meeting, but concerned now with private devotions. Get on your own with God. The Lord himself got on his own by getting up early before anyone else, or going into desert places to pray, or up a mountain to spend all night with God (Mark 1:35, Luke 5:16, Luke 6:12). The main thing is being on our own with God. No distractions. This often requires planning and discipline and inconvenience. But we will do it if we mean business with God. D.L.Moody used to pray in the coal shed. One of my past students was a sailor on aircraft carrier, and had to get up at 5.30am to pray, half an hour before the ship's company got up. Dr Macintyre tells story of an old woman in Glasgow who had little privacy, and threw her apron over her head so as not to be distracted. On our own, quiet before God.

Meet him in the secret place. He is our Father; he loves us and cares for us. Indeed, he knows all our needs before we ask, but like any father, he wants us to talk to him, and when we do, we express our need and dependence, submit to him, line ourselves up within his will, trust him, honour him. It empties us of self-conceit and self-importance, turns us into little children.

Prayer is the means appointed by God to obtain the blessing he longs to give us. So we come before the Father in heaven, on our own, face to face. Others are shut out. In a sense, our self is shut out. We are not listening to self to congratulate selves on prayer. We recollect who and what God is, and that we are in the audience chamber of the Almighty, eternal and ever-blessed God. He is utterly holy. The light in him means no darkness at all. We need to come to him, the high and lofty one, in reverence.

Yet also – if I belong to Christ – he is my loving gracious heavenly Father. He knows my need, knows all about me, concerned, interested, desires to bless me more than I deserve, counts the hairs on my head, has a plan and programme for me transcending my thoughts and imagination. Nothing can happen to me apart from him. **Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine** (Ephesians 3:20). He does not have to be bullied or badgered or pestered, for he is not standing between me and my desires. He is looking forward to my speaking to him. The Father seeks people who worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23). “Seeks” – not puts up with, or tolerates, or endures – he seeks.

As I approach him, am I right with him? Is there anything I am tolerating or doing which is displeasing to him? **If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened** (Psalm 66:18). Till I get right with him, the Lord will not hear me. And when something is wrong in my life, which I have not confessed and forsaken, I will lose the desire to pray anyway. **Surely you desire truth in the inner parts** (Psalm 51:6). So I need to confess and admit and forsake anything I know is wrong.

Then, knowing his smile on me once again, I can worship and praise and thank him, tell him how wonderful he is, and how much he means to me. Then he says, as Jesus said to James and John long ago, **“What do you want me to do for you?”** (Mark 10:36). And as a child I can speak to him, simply, definitely and precisely. Tell him the particular blessing I need, the particular burden and anxiety I bear, ask for his strength in the particular problem I am facing. And remember that others will have the same needs, pray for them too. If I mean what I say, I shall be in earnest. Really want this blessing. Not say it out of duty or because it is expected. Pray with heart, and mean it. Some people can say the right things, but be cold and listless, with no real burden, desire, hunger, urgency. When prayer is a dull empty routine, it does not get far. Demosthenes, the Greek orator, was asked by someone to plead his cause in a law court, but they asked in a cold, matter-of-fact way, and Demosthenes took no notice. The man realized it, and cried out “Look, what I’ve said, its all true”. The reply came “I believe you now”. We need to pray as if we shall perish if not heard. John Knox prayed: “Give me Scotland, or I die”. **You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart** (Jeremiah 29:13).

Then, because God tests whether we are really in earnest, we may have to ask him again and again. Jesus prayed several times for the same thing in the garden of Gethsemane. Remember how Jesus treated the Canaanite woman with the devil-possessed daughter. At first he was off-hand with her and replied about not giving bread to the dogs. She came back at it, saying that even dogs eat the crumbs under the table. Jesus was delighted that she did not take “no” for an answer. **Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted** (Matthew 15:28). **They should always**

pray and not give up (Luke 18:1). We will find as we keep on praying that our motives are purified and our desires are deepened.

Then pray in confidence and faith. We are not there to dictate to him. Ask him to answer according to his will, his time and his way. **If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us** (1 John 5: 14). Indeed the answer may come some time after we are dead. This has happened often before. He sees the end from the beginning, and knows when and how he will answer. When we leave it all with him – what peace floods our hearts. He will not be dictated to.

Finally with prayer goes myself. Use me to answer prayer. “Speak to someone through me”, “Help someone through me”. There is the promise that God will reward us. God desires us often to talk to him. He has blessings stored up for us as his children. Alas his complaint to us – you do not have because you do not ask. How often we are paupers when we could be princes. God is not an ogre. He is not a reluctant miserable miser. Listen to his words: **Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know** (Jeremiah 33:3). **He will call upon me and I will answer him. I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him** (Psalm 91:15). **If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given you** (John 15:7). **Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us** (Ephesians 3:20).

He is much more anxious to bless you than you are to be blessed. He can bless you with all the blessings of heaven. He has put them all in Christ and has put you into Christ.

*“If our love were but more simple
We would take him at his word
And our lives would be all sunshine
In the sweetness of our Lord”*