

Lord, Teach Us to Pray (Part 2)

Matthew 6:5-15

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Just before Christmas we were receiving the onslaught of mail that you probably received as well, advertisements for various things. And I was struck with one particular ad I received from a local church. This church was sponsoring meditative prayer using medieval form called the labyrinth. The labyrinth is simply a maze-like path similar to those that were designed into the floors of European cathedrals during the middle ages. What is a long-dead form, has come to life, has been resurrected by the emerging church. You've heard me talk a little bit about the emerging church. It's a contemporary movement spawned out of evangelicalism that rejects absolute truth, and looks for spiritual life in the mystical and experiential. It's taking evangelicalism absolutely by storm. I read an article this week about its presence in huge ways at the Christian Book Sellers Association Convention earlier, or I should say last year, but towards the fall of last year.

There was a conference in California, which makes sense, somehow. (I can say that since I was there for sixteen years.) There was a conference in California for these pastors of emerging churches, that is, who are a part of this movement. And at the pastor's conference they created a labyrinth. The path was formed by black lines on a thirty-five-foot square-piece of canvas laid on the floor. And participants were given a CD player with headphones; sort of "technology meets medieval form" here, to guide them through the eleven stations on the path.

One man recounts this as they move through this maze that's marked out on the floor, "A gentle female voice with a British accent read a portion of John 1, she told us not to rush through the labyrinth, but to slow down, to breathe deeply, and to fully focus on God. At the first stop we looked a television screen covered with complex moving electronic wave forms." (Let me just clarify that for you, in English, that's what your TV looks like and mine when the cable goes out.) "We were instructed to pray about and eliminate the noise within that interferes with God's voice. At another station we dropped small stones into water, each stone representing a worry we were giving over to God. Later, we drew on paper symbols of our hurts, prayed about each of them and then put them in a trash can. After thirty minutes, we found ourselves at the labyrinth's center where, seated on cushions, we were offered the elements of communion.

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The journey outward from the center of the labyrinth focused on how we can be used by God in other people's lives. At one station, we made impressions of our hands and feet in a box of sand, reminding us that we leave impressions on the people we touch. "My wife and I spent an hour in the labyrinth and found ourselves calmed and refreshed, our perspective uniquely restored." written by a pastor of the emerging church.

Now that's a bizarre example of the growing confusion about the true nature of prayer in the lives of believers. Sadly, it reflects the reality that most evangelical Christians don't pray much, and really don't know how to pray. But that's not the fault of Scripture; in fact, Scripture clearly teaches us how to pray. We have embarked, as we begin this New Year, on a study of the issue of prayer and exactly how it is that we ought to pray. The most thorough explanation of how to pray is of course the Disciple's Prayer, or as it is commonly called, The Lord's Prayer.

There are two versions of the Disciple's Prayer that have been preserved for us by divine inspiration. One of those is in Matthew 6. This was part of the Sermon on the Mount, probably spoken by our Lord in the summer of AD 29. The second version came a few months later in Luke 11, probably in the late fall of 29AD. What I want us to do today, and over the next number of weeks, is to examine the most complete version, the one in Matthew 6.

Now, let me just admit to you that I am fully recanting everything I said last week about finishing this series quickly. As I've gotten into it, and as I've studied it myself, my own soul has been so full and so enriched by this study; there is so much here, that I think it would be an injustice to the Word of God for me to sort of rush through it. So, we're just going to take our time, and when we're done, we'll get back to James. But I think this is so foundational for every Christian life, that I think it is crucial that we learn how it is that we are to pray.

Now let me read for you the passage that we are going to be looking at over the next number of weeks, Matthew 6:5 - 15. You follow along as I read. Christ says,

"[and] When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand to pray in the synagogues and street corners, so that they may 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; close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. And when you're praying, do not use meaningless repetitions as the Gentiles do, for they suppose

that they will be heard for their many words. So, do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who is 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 do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen. For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”

Now obviously, as I read that paragraph, it’s clear to you and to anyone who reads it that the theme is prayer, specifically “how to pray”. Let me just give you a road map of our study over the next number of weeks. Let me outline the passage for you. We find, first of all in verses 5-8 the motive of prayer; the “motive of prayer”. And then in verse 9, “Our Father who is in heaven,” we find the “attitude of prayer”. Then beginning in the middle of verse 9, down through the first part of verse 13, you have the “elements of prayer”. Prayer in its entirety is encompassed or outlined by six basic petitions. And we’ll look at them in detail in the weeks to come. And then finally, at the last part of verse 13, you have the “arguments of prayer”. The arguments for prayer, that is, the arguments you should present to God to answer the prayer that you offer.

This morning I want us to begin by looking at the first four verses, verses 5 - 8, and examining the motive of prayer. In these four verses, Jesus identifies two wrong motives for praying, and He gives us a prescription for correcting our behavior and our thinking about prayer. Two wrong motives, let’s look at them together.

Wrong motive number one is in verses 5 and 6. It’s gaining a reputation with others, gaining a reputation with others. Now to fully appreciate Jesus’ comments in verses 5 and 6 you have to see them in their context. So, let’s step back up to verse 1 of chapter 6. Jesus says, “Beware of [or be on guard against] practicing your righteousness before men.” Now what exactly does He mean? Well He explains “practicing your righteousness” in the verses that follow. In verses 2 all the way down through verse 18, Jesus explains that He is talking about righteous actions. Actions and conformity to God’s law are what we might call spiritual activities. And He says in verse 1, be on guard against doing legitimate spiritual activities before men to be noticed by them, otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

You see God isn't merely concerned that we do the right thing, but that we do it for the right reason. Giving to the poor in verse 2, praying in verse 5, fasting in verse 15: those are all legitimate spiritual activities, but Jesus says that when you do them, if you care more about people seeing you than you do about God seeing you, then don't expect it to accomplish anything. You see you can't do both. You can either care that God sees and seek His reward, or you can seek to build your reputation. You have to choose which of those is important to you.

Now that's the general principle. And in verses 5 and 6, Jesus applies this principle to the spiritual activity of prayer. Notice, first of all, He writes, or He says, and it's written here for us by Matthew: "when you pray," when you pray. You see Jesus assumes that all of His disciples will pray. In the Greek text the pronoun "you" can be either singular or plural. We use one pronoun in English, "you", and we use it for both one and more than one. But in Greek there is one for singular and one for plural. Here He uses the plural, we can paraphrase it this way, in English we might say, "When you [all] pray, [and I'm assuming that you will,] that's sort of what's understood here,] "you are not to be like the hypocrites."

Now, you can no longer say that you don't know Greek, because if you know the word hypocrite you know at least one Greek word. This is actually a Greek word that has been transliterated into English. This word was originally used in secular Greek to describe an actor or a stage player. In the Greek and Roman theater the actors would put large masks over their faces, so that the people could distinguish which character they were playing, also because there was no electronic amplification of their voices. Buried within the mask was often a mechanical device intended to help amplify the speaker's voice. And so, the word came to describe someone who wears a mask and someone who plays a part. That's a "hypocrite", "someone who pretends to be what they in fact are not".

Now, how is it that those who wear masks and those who play a part, how do they approach prayer? Verse 5, Jesus says they love to stand and pray in the synagogues. Now the synagogues in that period of time were the center of community life and they were also the place of worship, much like the church is for us in New Testament times. It's both the center of our lives, our lives are interweaved here, and we interact with one another, as well as the place in which we worship, or I shouldn't say the place, the church isn't so much a place, we are the church, but we come together to worship. And so, these who wore masks, who played parts, they loved to pray in the synagogues.

Now there is nothing wrong with praying in synagogues, in fact in another place and during His ministry, Jesus said that synagogues were, in fact, houses of prayer. So that's not what He's rebuking here. He goes on to say they also loved to pray on the street corners. It's interesting that the word for street in verse 5 is a different Greek word than the word for street in verse 2. The word here in verse 5 refers to broad, wide, spacious streets, or in English we might say a main thoroughfare. And they find not just a main thoroughfare, but the corners of a main thoroughfare. In other words, they picked the busiest, largest streets, and then they find a corner where they can be seen from all four directions.

Now, Jesus says that they are standing. This is not a prohibition against standing while you pray, as we saw last week that is one of the legitimate postures of prayer. Most of the time in Scripture when you find people praying, including our Lord, you find Him either standing, you find Him kneeling, or you find Him on His face, prostrate before God. Those should be our primary expressions and postures in prayer as well. There's nothing sinful about sitting when you pray, but certainly there is an attitudinal thing that is reflected in humbling ourselves before God.

So, He's not really dealing with that because He Himself prayed standing, neither is this a prohibition against praying in public, Jesus Himself often prayed publicly, instead what Jesus is forbidding here, is our loving to pray publicly, and our loving it for a particular reason. Notice what He says, "so that you may be seen by men". What is forbidden here is the kind of prayer in which the motive is not to talk to God, but so that those around you will think well of you.

Augustine put it clearly, he said, "It is not the being seen of men that is wrong, but doing these things for the purpose of being seen." This is common in other religions; you know that in Islam there are obligatory prayers performed five times a day, at dawn, at noon, late afternoon, at sunset and at nightfall. And these five prescribed prayers contain verses from the Koran and they are said in Arabic. And although Muslims often pray together in a Mosque, they are also encouraged to pray wherever they are when the prayer time hits: in fields, in offices, in factories, in universities, in fact, it's designed to be public.

We've all been in public places and witnessed that, especially if you've traveled overseas at all, you've seen this. It's designed to be public. When I was in seminary there was a Western Sizzlin' Steakhouse just down the road. That was a popular haunt for some of the students, you know, that was the date night thing or the, theological discussion thing to do. I wasn't there, I didn't see it with my own eyes, but someone who was there, told me that there was a man who

went into this Western Sizzlin' Steakhouse, ordered his food, went to the salad bar, got his salad, brought it to this table, put it on his plate, there on the table in front of him, and then he proceeded to stand in his chair in the middle of the restaurant and pray at the top of his voice to thank God for his food. Now I'm not sure, but it would seem to me that that might be a violation of the spirit of what our Lord is describing here.

Now, most of us have never been tempted to do that, we've never been tempted, I hope anyway, to stand in our chair in the middle of a restaurant and pray at the top of our lungs so everyone can hear us. By the way, nothing wrong with praying before your meal. The issue Christ is addressing here is loving attention.

However, even though we've not been tempted to do that, there are some very subtle forms that this takes in our hearts and lives as Christians. Let me share just a few with you that I jotted down. Here are some ways we try to gain a reputation in our prayers.

Have you ever, number one: have you ever actively pursued opportunities to pray publicly in order to impress others?

Number two: have you ever purposely prayed a longer prayer in order to seem more spiritual to the people you were praying with? Jesus talks about this in Luke 20 verse 47. About the Pharisees, He says they love to make long prayers for a pretense.

Thirdly: are you tempted to pray more in public than you do in private? If so, it's just a show, it's to gain a reputation.

Number four: do you find yourself just slipping into casual conversation how much you pray? Or about your prayer time or about your prayer place or anything about you're praying as sort of a way to make people think you are more spiritual?

Number five: do you choose words or phrases in your prayer that are designed to impress people and not God? You know, you can hear it in new Christians, you just hear these people talking to God, it's really refreshing to hear just them opening up their heart and talking to God, but then they are around Christians a little bit; and they hear the lingo; and they begin to pick that up because that'll make them sound more spiritual, more mature. Do you do that?

A sixth subtle form I think that this temptation can take is: orchestrating our schedule so that we can be seen praying. By the way, this is what was happening in Christ's second example here. Those who prayed at the street corner, you see if there was a set time for prayer each day, you could work it out so that at that prescribed time you'd just happen to find yourself in the middle of the busiest intersection in town, and oop, time to pray, so everybody could see.

At the Christian college I attended, there were a lot of genuinely spiritual young people. But it was both hilarious and sad to see how overtly others disobeyed this command. I remember getting up at 5:30, and I have to admit to you usually it was to study, and getting up at 5:30 and walking out in the hallway and seeing dotted through the hallway, the central hallway of the dormitory, these men sitting or on their knees or lying down with their Bibles obviously having their time in the Word and prayer, so that everybody would have to walk over them and see just how spiritual they were. Or you know they would announce to their roommates, you know if anybody needs me, I'm going to be in the prayer room for the next six hours, you can find me there. They would linger then outside the door of the prayer room there in dormitory, hoping that somebody would see them going in.

Or, if their roommate always came back from work at about 10 o'clock at night, they would just coincidentally start their praying about five minutes before and just happen to still be praying five minutes later when he arrived. Lloyd-Jones writes, "It is possible for a man to pray in secret in such a way that everybody knows that he is praying in secret, because he gives the impression that by spending so much time there he is a great man of prayer."

Now you know, you and I can sort of smile, at least I can, at that kind of behavior because, let's be honest, we are all tempted at one time or another to do exactly the same kind of thing. And Jesus says here; if we succumb to thinking more about the people around us than about God when we pray, notice what He says at the end of verse 5, "Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full." You got it all, in other words, God figures we have already got what we really wanted. And so, we don't really need anything from Him. Phillip Reikin writes in his excellent little book on prayer, "By the time the hypocrite says amen, he has already received everything he will ever get for his prayers."

So, how can we avoid being one of the pretenders, one of the people with masks, and being swept along by the motive of gaining a reputation with others by our praying? Jesus tells us how in verse 6. Here Jesus turns away from the plural to the singular, and He addresses each of us individually. It's as if He speaks to you and to me individually, and He says, "But you, when

you pray, go into your inner room.” If the circumstances demand that you pray publicly, fine, pray publicly. But whenever it’s within your control, do everything you can to make your prayer private.

The Greek word for “inner room” here is “private storeroom”, refers to a specific room in all likelihood. The average first-century home was not very secure, in fact many poorer homes didn’t even have a door to speak of, they just had a piece of fabric or an animal skin that hung over the entrance. And even those homes that had an exterior door, that door was not always able to be locked or secured. And so, it was common in the first century to have a small room near the center of the house and away from all the exterior walls, because of course the exterior walls were mud brick, which could be easily broken through, so in the center of the house there was often a room that had its own lockable door in order to store the family valuables. In a first-century house you couldn’t get more private than this room.

Notice Jesus adds verse 6, “close your door.” That’s an interesting statement, isn’t it? “Close your door.” You see not only are we to pray where people outside of our household can’t see us, we’re to go in an inner room, but we’re also to shut the door so that even those within our own household can’t see us. This is the common way people have prayed, if you were to take the time, and we won’t, but turn back to 2 Kings 4:32 and 33, you run into the story of Elisha. And Elisha, in finding that the young man is dead, you remember the miracle, raising the young man, he shuts everybody else out and he goes in alone, closes the door, and prays. In Acts 9:40, Peter does the same thing with Dorcas, he sends everybody else out, he closes the door, and he prays.

By the way, by saying that you need to go into your inner room here, Jesus is not forbidding other private places, even outside your home. He often went up to a mountain, or the wilderness, He didn’t really have a house, didn’t have a home. He often found His inner room in the mountains. In Matthew 14:23, After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. But don’t miss Jesus’ main point here. Look at the end of verse 6. Here’s the point He wants to make, “And pray.” And, by the way, this is a command, it’s an imperative in the text. Christ says I want you to pray. It’s not an option. “Pray to your Father who is in secret.” I love that, you know, how often do you and I pray, and the heavens just seem like brass, we don’t feel, or that God is near, or we don’t have a sense of His presence, everything feels artificial. In the middle of this command Jesus buries this little statement that gives us great hope. He says, “Your Father who is in secret.” Listen on the promise of Jesus Himself, when you find a private place in which to set yourself apart to prayer, the Father is there. “And your Father who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

I don't care how much time you spend in prayer. If you do it all to gain a reputation with others, I can tell you on the authority of Jesus Christ, God isn't listening, and He will not respond. Commentator Philson writes, "Prayer does not exist, prayer does not exist where man's aim is self-promotion, such parade is not prayer to God, but self-worship." If you are tempted to pray so that others will notice you, and we are all tempted to do that, here's how to change: find the most private place you can to pray, and secondly, don't talk about it. Don't tell everybody else what you are doing. How spiritual you are. Keep it between you and God, and God has promised that He who sees in secret will reward you. Wrong motive number one is gaining a reputation with others.

There's a second wrong motive for prayer here in verses 7 and 8. It's gaining merit with God; gaining merit with God. Look at verse 7, "And when you are praying do not use meaningless repetition." The Greek word for "meaningless repetition" is an onomatopoeic word. That is, it's a word that sounds like what it means. It means, "to stammer; to speak without thinking". Or here's a good translation, "to babble". Jesus says when you're praying don't keep babbling on, don't keep speaking without thinking.

Now this doesn't mean you can't say the same thing more than once to God. Jesus Himself did that you remember in Matthew 26 on the night of His crucifixion, three times He went beyond the three disciples to pray, and we're told in verse 44 of that chapter that He prayed the same thing each time. So, it's not a prohibition against that. The rest of verse 7 clarifies the point. He says don't use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, in other words as those who don't know the true God. Now when Jesus said this, the disciples would have had a very clear picture come into their minds, both from the Old Testament Scripture, as well as their own culture.

Let me take you to my favorite example. Turn back to 1 Kings 18. I'll show you what meaningless repetition looks like, First Kings 18. And we find ourselves here in the middle of the story of the confrontation between Elijah and the 400 prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. You remember the rules of engagement have been drawn up, they were to make an altar, put a sacrifice on it, and the God who responded with fire was the true and the living God. So, in verse 26 of 1 Kings 18 it says that,

"... [the prophets of Baal] took the ox [that] ... was given them and they prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, and here was their prayer, 'O Baal answer us, O Baal answer us,' so they just kept in repetition crying out, but there was no voice and no one answered. And they leaped about

the altar which they made, and it came about at noon that Elijah mocked them and said, ‘call out a little louder, maybe he doesn’t hear you, maybe he’s occupied, or maybe he’s gone aside’ which is a euphemism actually for going to the restroom, ‘or he’s on a journey, or perhaps he’s asleep and needs to be awakened. So, they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their customs with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them. When midday was past, they raved or babbled on until the time of the offering of the *evening* sacrifice, until about three in the afternoon, but there was no voice, no one answered’ [and I hate it when this happens,] ‘and no one paid attention.’” [This is what babbling looks like. It’s repetition, assuming that somehow that’s going to gain a hearing.]

The same thing happens in the New Testament, you remember in Ephesus in Acts 19:34. Sheila and I have had the chance to be there in this great theater, we had a meeting, with Christian singing and praising God in this same theater where for two hours these people shouted, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians.” You say yeah, but that’s what happened in the past. It doesn’t really happen today, does it? Well that kind of repetition and prayer is still very much in fashion today.

I read an article this week about Tibetan Buddhists, and as you know there has been a push by some in Hollywood to encourage the acceptance of Buddhism. The Tibetan Buddhists have adopted modern technology to strengthen their prayer and their use of prayer wheels. They can now, and they are doing this, put a million prayers on microfilm, and then attach that microfilm to a prayer wheel; and then station that prayer wheel where the wind will blow it and make it continue to circulate. And in their theology, each time that wheel turns one revolution, they have prayed however many prayers are attached to that prayer wheel. So, they will have prayed a million prayers every time the wind blows that thing around one time. I love windy days, like today. You make such progress in your prayer life.

I recently watched the Catholic network as a group of nuns said their rosaries, and I have to be honest with you, it wasn’t exactly compelling television. But it interested me, and I watched. The rosary, of course, is in honor of Mary. It consists of a number of specific prayers. After the introductory prayers comes the meat of the rosary, called the decades. There are fifteen decades in a full rosary. It takes about forty-five minutes to say, and each of those fifteen decades is composed of ten “Hail Marys” bracketed between one “Our Father” (which is the Lord’s Prayer), and one “Glory Be.” So that each decade actually has twelve prayers. So, in a full forty-five-minute rosary the Catholic faithful will say more than 150 Hail Marys.

Now why is it that people practice this sort of mindless, meaningless repetition. Well Jesus tells us in verse 7 of Matthew 6. Here's why they do it: "For they suppose," here's what they think, "they think that they will be heard for their many words." In other words, they think that something they do in prayer will obligate God to hear. In other words, prayer simply becomes another way to earn merit before God.

Now, before we're too quick to jump on the Buddhists and the Catholics, let me ask all of us some penetrating questions. Do you think that there is something you do in prayer that will make God more likely to hear you and to respond? Your posture, for example; maybe the words and phrases you use; maybe the length of your prayers. You know we're all tempted, because godly people prayed a long time, we're tempted to think that that means if we pray a long time then God will be impressed. Listen, godly people pray a long time not because they think they are earning something with God, but because they enjoy communion with God. Don't get it backwards. You think you have anything to do with God's hearing you, you have missed the point. There is nothing wrong with being in a respectful posture; you ought to be. There's nothing wrong with choosing your words carefully in prayer, there's nothing wrong with praying a long time. But if you think anything you do will make God more predisposed to hear you, you have completely missed the reason God listens to our prayers. God listens to our prayers because of His grace.

Paul says we stand in grace, every good thing you and I ever receive from God we do not earn, we cannot earn, and in fact we deserve exactly the opposite. Everything, including God hearing our prayers, including His answer to prayer, comes not from what we are, but from what He is. He is gracious, and He has lavished His favor upon us in spite of what we deserve. If God hears our prayer, it's not because we've earned it, it's because of Christ. Because Christ made us accepted before God, because Christ stands in God's presence as our great High Priest representing in the presence of God and bringing our prayers and making them acceptable to Him. It's because the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. It's because God is our Father. Thomas Brooks, the Puritan writes,

"God looks not at the elegance of your prayers to see how neat they are, nor yet at the geometry of your prayers to see how long they are, nor yet at the arithmetic of your prayers to see how many they are, nor yet at the music of your prayers, nor yet at the sweetness of your voice, nor yet at the logic of your prayers, but at the sincerity of your prayers, how hearty or filled with heart they are. There is no

prayer acknowledged, approved, accepted, recorded, or rewarded by God but that wherein the heart is sincerely and completely.”

Ultimately God doesn't care about your words; He wants to know what is going on in your heart.

Now why do we use thoughtless repetition in our prayers? How do we get into that? Well, it's intended to accomplish one of two things. Either it's intended to cut through God's indifference and make Him hear, somehow force Him to hear by sheer volume; or another goal of repetition in prayer is to earn God's response. By the number of times or the length of time to earn His reward I should say by our merit. Now, we don't need to do the first, He's our Father, and God is more concerned about us than we are ourselves. In fact, He already knows what we need, we're told here. He knows what you need, verse 8: “do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.” God knows what we need and He has promised to provide all those needs. So, we don't need the labor with many words. That doesn't impress God. And as far as the second goal, we can never merit God's response.

So, as we approach prayer, Jesus tells us that our motive cannot be, number one, to gain a reputation with others. And if you want to avoid that, take every step you can to make sure your prayer is private.

And number two, it can never be to gain merit with God. So, what should our motive be? Why should we pray?

Well really that raises a crucial question, doesn't it? Why pray at all? If it doesn't gain any merit with God, if prayer doesn't give God any new information, if God has an eternal plan that He is working out in time, if He's already decided what He's going to do, then why do I need to pray? Well it is true, and it's crucial to understand that prayer doesn't change God, God is by nature immutable, that is, He doesn't change. And God has a plan that He made in eternity past that He is working out in time, and He's completely sovereign, everything is under His control. That's all true. You've heard the saying, “prayer changes things.” Far better to say, “prayer changes me.”

You see, as Richard Baxter said, “Prayer is like being in a boat and casting a hook at the land, at the bank,” unfortunately I've done that a few times unintentionally. What happens, you begin to reel in that hook, and it feels like you're pulling the land to you. But, what's happening in reality? You're pulling yourself to the bank. That's how it is with prayer. Prayer changes us;

prayer brings us into line with God and His eternal plan. But that doesn't mean that God doesn't respond specifically in answering prayer; He does.

In fact, James will tell us, and we'll get to this passage in a couple of months, James tells us, "You don't have. Why? Because you don't ask." So how does that fit with God's having a sovereign eternal plan? Here's the key; listen carefully. The same sovereign God that in eternity past determined the ends, also sovereignly determined the means He would use to accomplish those ends. And one of the means God uses is prayer. Prayer is a way that you and I can cooperate with the sovereign God in accomplishing His eternal plan. Yes, God has determined sovereignly what will occur. But He also has sovereignly determined to use your prayer and mine as the means through which He accomplishes that.

Let me show you this, turn back to 2 Kings 20. Second Kings 20:1; you'll remember the story from Hezekiah.

In those days, Hezekiah became mortally ill, [terminally sick, he was going to die.] "[Then] ... Isaiah the prophet ... came to him and said to him, "thus says the LORD, 'Set your house in order for you shall die and not live.'" Then ... [Hezekiah] turned his face to the wall and he prayed to the LORD ,saying, "... [Lord,] Remember [all that I have done in loving and serving you." And he says, "rescue me; deliver me from this deadly illness." Verse 4, Before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, [hadn't gotten very far,] the word of the LORD came to him saying, go back, and say to Hezekiah, the leader of my people, thus says the LORD the God of your father David, I have heard your prayer and I have seen your tears, behold I will heal you on the third day. You shall go up to the house of the LORD , [and] I will add fifteen years to your life...."

Now let me ask you a question. Did God in eternity past know that he was going to give fifteen more years to Hezekiah? Absolutely, He did. Did God know that Hezekiah would pray? Yes, He did. God sovereignly accomplished His eternal purpose not apart from Hezekiah's prayer, but through Hezekiah's prayer. And that's exactly how our prayers work as well.

So, what's our motive in prayer to be? It's not to be to gain a reputation; it's not to be to gain merit. Let me give you the three-fold motive for prayer.

Number one; it's to bring ourselves in line with God and His great eternal purpose. By the way, we'll see that when we get to the first three petitions, to bring ourselves in line with God and His great eternal purpose.

A second motive for prayer is to cooperate with God by making our request. We actually participate in the great eternal plan by praying and God responding to those prayers. And thirdly, prayer gives us a way to express our absolute dependence on God for everything. Prayer is a way in which we can say, "God, we have nothing without you, we can do nothing without you, and we depend on you for everything in this life and in eternity."

Let me show you this, this spirit of dependence; turn to 1 Peter 5. First Peter 5:6, Peter writes, "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time." But how do you do that? How do you humble yourself? How do you acknowledge your utter dependence on God's greatness and God's goodness for everything in life? Notice the next verse, verse 7, "casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you."

Now in English as in Greek, casting is a participle. If you remember a little bit from your English when you were in school, a participle is not the main verb of the sentence; it modifies the main verb of the sentence and somehow clarifies its meaning. So, here the main verb of the sentence is "humble yourselves", humble. Humble yourselves by casting all your anxiety on Him. "Casting" tells us how we humble ourselves: by bringing everything in life to God. It's by not living on our own. Let me tell you something. The measure of your dependence on God, the measure of your humility before God, is what you bring to God in prayer. And the measure of your pride and your independence is the measure of what you don't.

Prayer is a wonderful way for us to cast ourselves on the goodness and greatness and mercy of our God. Lord, teach us to pray like that.

Let's pray together.

Father, that is our prayer: teach us to pray. Teach us to pray with the right motive. Lord, we confess to you that we are often tempted to do it, even subtly, to gain some reputation for ourselves. Lord help us instead to find the most secret, the most private place, unburden our souls before you. And you, who meet us in the secret place, will reward us.

Father forgive us for desiring to gain merit from you, as if we could obligate you in any way. Father, everything we receive from You is a flow of your grace toward us. Forgive us for ever thinking that the length of our prayers, or the style of our prayers, or the posture of our prayers, or anything else, anything we do in our prayers, could obligate you. Father, we are beggars, and we come before you as beggars.

Father, I pray that you would help us to pray with the desire to bring ourselves into line with You and Your purposes. To cooperate with you in your great eternal plan, and Father, to express our utter dependence on You for everything in this life and eternity. Lord, we cry out: teach us to pray.

I pray as well, Father, for the person here this morning who is really just listening in on our Lord's words because he's not a disciple of Christ, he's not committed himself to follow wholeheartedly Christ as his Lord and Savior, still sits here this morning as your enemy, under your wrath, awaiting only eternity. Father, I pray that this morning you would use something that's been said, some part of Your Word that's been read, some prayer that's been prayed, some song that's been sung; and that You would use some truth to open his or her eyes to see their lost condition before You, to cry out for forgiveness, for cleansing, for a new heart.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.