

In the weeks ahead, I hope to lead us through some lessons on the Lord's Prayer found in Matthew 6. Not only would I like to see my own prayer life become stronger and richer, a number of you have asked questions about prayer that Jesus addresses here in the Lord's Prayer, so hopefully we can discover some answers to those questions. I have a few questions myself: I wonder why many Christians don't pray this prayer daily? It is a daily prayer, right? The fourth petition about daily bread implies as much. I'm not asking how many recite the same words daily in some mechanical or mindless repetition. My question has to do with why so many in my tradition neglect the pattern Jesus taught His disciples to pray. Why is the petition for God's name to be hallowed so infrequently mentioned in our prayers? Why do some say "trespasses" and others say "debts?" How is it that new disciples are often told to simply to tell God whatever is on their minds instead of following Jesus' pattern of praying? Jesus didn't give that advice. Yes, of course, God desires to hear our concerns, but Jesus didn't say, "When you pray, just be spontaneous and say whatever comes to your mind." He gave a pattern and a way to organize our conversation with God, not a slavish mantra but a pattern or matrix upon which we can hang all our concerns. If you are interested in the way Jesus taught us how to pray and if you are willing to pattern your own praying after the pattern Jesus teaches, there will be much here to learn.

Before listing items to pray about, Jesus contrasts two very different motivations and bases for prayer. There is a way *not* to pray and a way to pray. Don't pray as the pagans pray. Pray as a Christian. Please don't hear me to say that if you use this right formula you will start getting all that you ask for. I'm not interested in how to get prayer to "work" for you. By praying, we are not trying to get a broken vending machine to "work." Through prayer, we are approaching almighty God who made heaven and earth. We are not trying to master a formula to satisfy our will, instead we are learning about *how to approach and honor God and His will*. To help His disciples with this, Jesus introduces Christian praying by establishing the right motivation and basis for prayer. Let's look.

First: **Don't pray like a pagan**. In verse 7, Jesus says that there is a *pagan* way to pray and a *Christian* way to pray. By pagan He doesn't mean irreligious as we might mean by the word pagan today. Pagans were religious and they prayed. Jesus said, "Don't pray like the pagans" who used many words in their prayers. The contrast is not between those who pray and those who do not. The contrast is between two very different motivations and bases for prayer. What is the cause for which you will be heard? The pagan thinks that he will be heard because of what he does. The Christian believes that he will be heard because of who God is. If you will make that one shift in your praying it will add tons of joy to your prayer time. Let me put it another way. The difference between pagan prayer and Christian prayer is the subject. In one way or another, pagan praying makes the one who is praying the subject. God or the gods may be mentioned, but the real gravitational pull of pagan prayer is the one praying not God. A good question to ask when praying is "Am I thinking more about God or me?" Who is the real subject of our prayers? The same applies to worship. Making the audience the subject, their felt needs, their comfort and preferences, the focus of worship (the way consumers are treated in order to sell product) will have a paganizing effect on modern evangelical worship. In pagan prayer— in some way or another, the one praying eclipses who God is and what God does. One may not be consciously aware of it, but pagan prayer is really narcissistic. In Greek mythology Narcissus was very beautiful and when he saw his reflection in a pool of water he found himself irresistible; he could not tear himself away from himself. Unable to consider anything but himself and consumed with himself, he died. Pagan praying puts the one praying at the center of prayer. Jesus says that some Jews, although not pagans were praying like pagans. He begins in v. 5 by saying, "Don't be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. They may not be aware that they have put themselves at the center of their prayer, but Jesus reveals their true motivation. They prayed to be seen by men. In His parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus said the Pharisee trusted in himself that he was righteous. The basis of his prayer was his estimation of his own righteousness. Listen for the cause for which the Pharisee thinks he will be heard, "I'm not like these sinners, the unjust, swindlers, adulterers, or this tax collector. I fast twice each week and pay tithes on all that I get." (Lk.18: 11) What is the basis for his prayer? It is in his assessment that he

is worthy to be received by God. Comparing himself to the tax collector, he judges himself worthy to be heard by God and the tax collector unworthy. It does not occur to him that he could be swollen with pride or that his assessment is wrong. Jesus concluded that it was the tax collector who said, “Be merciful to me a sinner” that went away justified. Both were praying, but one was praying like a pagan making himself and his own estimation of his righteousness the basis or the cause for which he expects to be heard, as well as the focus of his prayer. Here in verse 5, the same focus on self is evident in the hypocrite at prayer. He thinks he is being heard because he is such a righteous person. He is honoring God publically and perhaps even thinks he is witnessing for God, when all along, Jesus says that he is praying to have an effect on other men, not God! Ostensibly praying to God, approaching God was the last thing on his mind. What he really wanted was to be seen as a praying person to gain a reputation among people. Jesus said that he got that reward but while doing so, *he* became the basis and focus of his prayer, not God. Now I suppose we’ve all been guilty of praying to have some effect on others. Have you ever felt like you were hearing a sermon as you listened to another pray? Preachers like me can be pretty adept at this. When I pray, am I approaching God or am I attempting to have an effect on others? Pagan prayer has its basis in the one praying and the one praying inevitably becomes the center of the prayer.

Once again, Jesus reveals the true basis of pagan praying in v. 7, “When you pray don’t use meaningless repetitions the way the pagans do, for they suppose they will be heard for their many words.” The cause for which pagans think they will be heard is their many words. Since that is the cause, inevitably the one praying becomes the subject of the prayer. “God, you must accept me on the basis of the many words I have submitted to you.” When the basis is wrong the subject changes to the one praying. The pagan thinks that the efficacy of his prayers depends on the length or the sacrifice he makes to bring prayers to God. He thinks that God is duty-bound to hear because of the enormous sacrifice made. Pagans make deals with God; Christians do not. Don’t misunderstand; you may want to spend many hours in prayer. You may want to set aside all night to pray, but when you begin to think that the cause for which your prayers are heard is the length of your prayer, you are praying like a pagan. Jesus spent an entire night praying prior to choosing His disciples, but He was not heard because of the length of His prayer. God heard Him because God is His Father. The significant time Jesus spent with the Father was the loving response of a Son who found one day in the presence of His Father more enjoyable than a thousand years elsewhere. When we make our righteousness the basis or cause for which God hears us, we are praying like pagans. If you are struggling in prayer ask, “Where is my focus?” Is it on the record of your righteousness and your obedience? Are you at the center of your prayers? If so, where does that put God?

Okay, that’s pagan praying. What about Christian praying? What is the basis or cause for which God hears our prayers? Here it is, “Our Father.” For those who have trusted Jesus as Lord and Savior, the cause for which we are heard is in the adopting love of the Father. In other words, the basis of prayer is not in what we have done to gain God’s approval or blessing, the basis is in what God has done by adopting us as His children or who God has become for us. In these few verses on prayer, three times Jesus calls God our Father. It’s in verse 6, “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 in secret will reward you.” This basis is so counter-intuitive that you have to shut some things out to lay hold of it. If you don’t get alone with God as your Father and if you don’t shut out the thought that God is against you, that God is between you and what is best for you...if you don’t exclude and shut out the thought that God is holding back, withholding His blessings and holding back His love, you might begin to change your basis for prayer. If you don’t shut out the temptations to pray in order to effect change in others about you, you can miss the true basis and cause for which God hears you. That cause for which He hears you is that *He has adopted those who believe in His Son as His adopted children*. Again in verse 8, “So do not be like the pagans, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.” He’s not telling them not to ask for things because God knows what they need. He’s telling them that their praying doesn’t inform God and isn’t the basis upon which He answers their prayers. Again in verse 9, He mentions God as their Father, “Pray this way: say, ‘Our Father, who art in heaven.’” Three times, Jesus gives the Christian basis of prayer and the cause for which God hears our prayers. And that is that God, in His great mercy has adopted those who believe in Jesus as His children. He could have called for us to pray to Him as God, King, Lord, Master, Almighty, all of which are true and appropriate ways to address God. But it is this one way—as Father—that God is for us, which

communicates the basis and cause for which He hears us. The grace and mercy that makes us His adopted children is the cause for which He hears us. Jesus Christ did for us what none of us could do for ourselves. He made us acceptable before God by living the life we should have lived and dying the death we should have died. Through faith in Him, on the basis of His righteousness, we have now become the children of God. The contrast with pagan praying could not be more stark and distinct. Jesus is asking them the question, “Why do you think you are being heard?” And the only answer we can give is that we are heard because of who God has become for us in Jesus Christ...our heavenly Father.

This is what it means to be a Christian. Through faith in Christ, you have been adopted; you have been given the legal right to be the child of God. John says, “As many as received Him, God gave the right to become the children of God.” (John 1:12) Adoption is not the result of the child’s efforts. In most cases, the child doesn’t even seek the parent who adopts him. Moreover, in Jesus’ day, adoption was an act of the father. And the moment a child was adopted, his status changed and the relationship changed on the basis of what the father did and became to that child. This had nothing to do with what the child did. Moreover, if an adopted child rebels or misbehaves, the adopted father doesn’t send the child back to the orphanage. The legal status – of one adopted– is that of a member of the family if you misbehave or not. I’ve watched a number of adoptive parents love their adopted children even when those children failed to bond and failed to return the love in any worthy manner. Except in the rarest of circumstances, adopted children are forever in the hearts of the parents who adopted them. They do not get sent back because they misbehave. Don’t misunderstand. Loving parents will make their children’s lives miserable if they misbehave and that is so because they love them. Proverbs says that He who spares the rod “hates” the son (Pr. 13:24). Painful discipline is a sign that they are loved. But when you adopt a child, you are legally promising to regard that child with all the commitment, all the love and acceptance you would give to your natural child. Jesus implies this about the Father’s commitment to us in John 17:23. And it is absolutely staggering. He says, “Father, you have loved them even as You have loved me.” You will never hear better news than that. Jesus teaches us that God loves us as much as He loves His Son! How much love do you think is in that? When you are adopted into God’s Fatherhood you have crossed over by divine fiat into the love of God given and committed on the basis of what the Father, Son and Holy Spirit determined to do from eternity past and that is to make you God’s child. John says, “See how great a love the Father has given us that we should be called the children of God and that we are!” (1Jn.3: 1) God is as committed to you as He is to His own Son Jesus. Amazing Grace how sweet the sound!

I hear Christians say, “God is not answering my prayers.” You can’t possibly be thinking clearly and say that. If you are a child of God and if God has committed to love you as He loves His own Son, do you think He does not answer your prayers? Does He not answer Jesus’ prayers? There is a difference. He may answer your prayers by saying “No” or “Not yet.” But God always answers your prayers! The problem is that we want our will to prevail. If it does not, we say, “God didn’t answer my prayer.” I wonder if have we forgotten to make the Lord’s Prayer the pattern of our own. He does say to pray, “Thy will be done.” If God says, “No” to a request, isn’t it possible that He is answering you by saying that His will is better for you than yours? Again, who is the Subject of Christian prayer? God always answers your prayers. He doesn’t neglect His children. He treats His adopted children as the natural child. The difference between the pagan and the Christian is not between those who pray and those who don’t, it’s between those who know the true basis of prayer and the true cause for which God hears us and those who don’t.

Now, something more needs to be said. Having received such love and grace does not mean that we are not expected to honor Him. There are expectations of an adopted child as there is with a natural born child. These expectations are not the basis or the cause for which you are heard, but there are demands and expectations of children. In Mal. 1: 6 God says, “If I am your father, where is my honor?” Your effort is never the basis of prayer...but you have a duty to pray, because God deserves the honor. Such love deserves and even evokes submission, honor and recognition. And if you don’t give it in return, it is doubtful that you have ever received it. If you had, you would return it. A love as wondrous, extravagant and beautiful as the love of God that makes us His children, if received, if seen and embraced, must change the heart. You can’t really see a beautiful sunset and not respond with wonder or hear beautiful music and not honor it with praise. True love and beauty compels a response or it has simply not been received. There is a difference between the cause for

which we are heard and the honor that cause has compelled in the hearts of those who receive the Lord Jesus and see the beauty of His grace.

May God teach us to pray like Christians and not like pagans. Through the mercy of God and through faith in Christ, may we learn to shut out the thought that God is against us, that He is between us and what is best for us, that He is withholding blessings, that He doesn't answer our prayers or is holding back. May we shut out the thought that we could ever be a sufficient basis or cause for which God hears us. May we be open to behold the manner of love the Father has given unto us, that we are called the children of God, adopted by a God who, like a father, has compassion for His children, who knows every need before we ask Him for it, a Father who has good plans for us that transcend our every thought and imagination. May we be open to know that He cares for us and has counted every hair on our head, promising that nothing can happen to us apart from Him. The great almighty God and King of the universe has called us in Christ, to come to Him as our Father in heaven to receive His grace and to honor His extravagant love. His Son Jesus has made all of this possible for us. Beloved, don't pray like a pagan. Pray like a Christian.