

***Question: There has been a lot of controversy over a prayer led by a pastor at a sporting event recently. What do you think Jesus would say about this prayer?***

The prayer led by a pastor at a recent sporting event has brought a variety of reactions because of the unusual character of this specific prayer. Lest I sound like someone quick to judge and condemn, I do not wish to comment further on the specifics of this prayer. However, I do believe this does provide an opportunity to comment on the nature of prayer, both public and private.

Prayer is a special privilege given to God's people. Just as God walked in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day and called out to Adam and Eve, he longs for a meaningful and eternal relationship with each of us. As an expression of this desire he has invited us to come before him in prayer. Jesus said: "What man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" (Matthew 7:7-11).

However, to call upon our majestic and Holy God in prayer is always a very serious matter. In the Ten Commandments God instructed Israel: "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain" (Exodus 20:7). A name represents the person; therefore, to carelessly use God's name is to disrespect God. This is why Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Matthew 6:9). To be "hallowed" is to be set apart as holy or different. This means that we do not speak to God in the same manner we would anyone else because he is not man but God. Through the prophet God said: "For I am God, and not a man-- the Holy One among you"(Hosea 11:9). Therefore, we are warned to "worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:28-29).

To come before our Lord God acknowledging the difference of his holiness is not intended to hinder us from experiencing appropriate joy and laughter. He is "the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion

and sin” (Exodus 34:6-7). He wants us to rejoice in his holy presence and share healing laughter (Psalm 126:2; Proverbs 17:22). But our laughter should always honor and respect the holiness of God.

The special concern for one who prays in public prayer should be to help those present focus on our Heavenly Father. This means that we address God in prayer and not humans. Jesus taught his disciples that they should not pray while standing in the synagogues or street corners to be seen or heard by others (Matthew 6:5). Public prayer is not a time for preaching, making announcements, praising or entertaining an audience. It is all about the Lord.

There is nothing that should bring us greater joy than the blessing of coming before the God of all heaven and earth with our praises and requests (Philippians 4:4). But may we always remember who it is that we are coming before. Let us do all possible to honor and respect his holiness. If we can recognize that there is proper etiquette for coming into the presence of our president or the king of an earthly kingdom, we should surely understand the importance of a holy etiquette before the King of kings and Lord of lords.

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