

Habit 5: The Practice of Prayer

⁵ And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹ Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread, ¹² and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. ¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Ma 6:5-15

Discussion

When talking about prayer, the first thing Jesus implies is that the Father knows what we need, even before we ask. He also tells his disciples to avoid using “many words”, because that is how you pray if you don’t know the real God. Does that mean prayer is not so important? Jesus himself, on the other hand, spent countless hours in prayer...

1. What does that teach us about the importance of prayer, and the way we should approach it?

Paul said: “pray without ceasing”, but he most certainly did not mean a continuous repetition of requests and asks, but a continuous attitude of living as if you were (and you are) in the Father’s presence. Should we stop asking for things? No, we should not... but that is not the most important thing.

Prayer is less about talking, and more about learning how to listen to God. Prayer is less about setting God in movement in our favor, and more about learning what God is doing, and acquiring from His heart the desire to engage with Him.

2. When talking about prayer, Jesus implies that the attitude towards prayer is as important as the words we say. What does the passage tell us about that?

First, that when prayer is not a pure expression of your heart, of your true feelings and desires (whatever “bad” they might look), then it is just an act (hypocrite means actor in greek). Jesus asks that we pray in the small room (at the time, it meant something like the pantry we have today). It is interesting how in the smallest of physical spaces, our lives can be expanded to the grandest of spiritual experiences.

Prayer is too important to be faked, there is no time for performance in front of a God that knows you better than yourself. Also, there is not a better place to be yourself like in the secret. It is really not about secrecy, but about being able to present your true self before God.

3. Maybe praying proud words in front of a crowd is not a temptation for us today. But what could be the equivalent of that in our lives? And how can we adjust our prayer lives to reflect Jesus’ words?

Everything that we do as a performance to others and to ourselves, going to church, having a “good behavior”, even maintaining a devotional life, could turn into empty prayer if our uttermost intentions are ‘rewards’ we can receive from others, or even God.

Going to the secret place means being honest with yourself, and God. That’s how you start. It also means making time in your busy life to listen to God, to be taught by Him. This does not come naturally, as we tend to forget the spiritual dimension of our existence to focus on the immediate and material. That’s why Jesus starts the Lord’s prayer emphasizing that heaven is real, that’s the place where the will of God is fully realized, and that the Father wants us to connect with it now (and not only after we die).

4. The disciples are told to pray in secret. Does that mean that prayer is a habit that belongs to the private realm? Only between you and God?

No, not really. Here we focus on the words of the Lord’s prayer. We’re told to do it in secret, but it is basically a communal prayer. Our father... give us... forgive us...deliver us... every aspect of our relationship to the Father is connected to our relationship to others, to our neighbor. In the secret is where we’re pushed to act on behalf of others, and maybe, to become answer to our own prayers. ‘...and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors’

5. How can your community group be a channel to help you lead a prayer life like the one Jesus talks about?

‘There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, ‘All right, then, have it your way.’

C. S. Lewis

‘Maybe it’s time to become the answer to our own prayers.’

Shane Claiborne

‘Prayer is a mighty instrument, not for getting man’s will done in heaven, but for getting God’s will done on earth.’

Robert Law