

Rule of Life: The Habit of Prayer

Part 1 – What Makes a Good Prayer?

Matthew 6:5-15

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ August 17, 2025 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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⁵“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever 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“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹“Pray then in this way:

**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 do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.**

¹⁴**For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.** (Matthew 6:5-15, NRSV)

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Last fall we introduced something we are calling our Congregational Rule of Life. That is language from the ancient church. The Latin word for *rule* is *regula*. It's where we get English words like *regular* or *regulation*. The image of a ruler is especially helpful because the word *regula* literally means “a straight piece of wood,” something that helps keep you on track.

Some scholars believe that the word was eventually used in the ancient world for a trellis in a vineyard.¹

That is another very helpful image. I think of John 15, where Jesus taught his disciples that he is the true vine and that we are the branches. We are therefore to abide in him, living our lives intimately connected to him so that our lives can bear the sort of fruit he wants them to bear. The life of a Christian is a life of following Jesus to become like Jesus. That's the fruit. We want to let him teach us how to live our lives as he would live our lives if he were in our shoes. This is, of course, mostly about love, loving God above all else, and loving others as we love ourselves. Love for God and others is the fruit which Jesus, as the vine and source of life, wants to see produced in every branch that remains in him. Isn't that fruit you want to see produced in your life? I hope it is.

Here's where a Rule of Life comes in, particularly when we consider the image of a trellis. In a vineyard, the vinegrower constructs trellises to help the branches better connect to the vine for maximum fruitfulness. The trellis lifts the branches up off the ground towards the light and away from destructive pests and damaging disease, so the branches can thrive and produce healthy fruit. This is what a Jesus-centered Rule of Life does in the Christian life. To be clear, a Rule of Life is not a set of *rules* which can be broken or obeyed. Instead, a Rule of Life is a set of practices, habits and rhythms we adopt and establish in our lives which, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us, help us produce godly fruit in our lives, what we sometimes call the fruit of the Spirit. Everyone, by the way, has a Rule of Life that is shaping their life in one way or another. Some people's practices, habits and rhythms are forming them to look more and more like Jesus, and other people's practices, habits and rhythms are deforming them to look less and less like Jesus. It's a choice we all have.

Our leadership here at Faith has determined that in this congregation we want to be intentional in our life together as we follow Christ. And so we are trying to build a trellis, a set of practices, habits and rhythms which help us together grow together in Christ. Last fall we talked about the habit of congregational worship, this habit of gathering in person at this time and in this space week after week to worship God together. We looked in depth at how this practice is

¹ I'm borrowing heavily here from John Mark Comer, *Practicing the Way* (Waterbrook, 2024), 160.

essential for our formation in Christ. It's good that you are here this morning. I hope you will arrange things to be here with us next Sunday morning, and the one after that. Then last winter we talked about the practice of scripture, the habit of making space daily to be immersed in God's Word as we read, reflect on, study, discuss and pray through the Bible. Many of you are embracing this habit, and it has having a powerful formative impact on your mind, heart and soul. Right now many of us are reading a chapter a day in the Gospel of John, along with a psalm. Let's keep encouraging one another in this habit.

The third practice we are going to look at then is the practice of prayer, a habit that is also essential in our discipleship to Jesus. It's been said that prayer is as human as eating, and that every human culture has embraced prayer, this effort to commune, or communicate, with the divine.² Many of our forbearers in the Christian faith have declared that prayer is one of the most essential practices for the church to embrace. The Scottish evangelist, Oswald Chambers, once wrote, "Prayer does not fit us for the greater works; prayer is the greater work."³ American theologian, Richard Foster, put it this way: "All who have walked with God have viewed prayer as the main business of their lives."⁴ It's no wonder that Jesus spent a great deal of his time with the disciples not only teaching about prayer, but modeling this habit in his own life.

The passage we just read from Matthew 6 is a great example of this. For context, these verses are taken from the middle of what we call the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' essential teaching on discipleship. Remember, the goal of a disciple is not just to know what the rabbi knows, but *to become like the rabbi*. Applied to prayer, Jesus wants his disciples, both then and now, to not just learn what he knows about prayer, but to learn to pray as he prayed.

In this particular section of the sermon, Jesus is dealing with the problem of what I will call *performative faith*. This is us doing spiritual practices as religious performance. And so he talks about things like giving to the poor, and fasting, and prayer, and teaches us how we are not to do these things as performances to impress others, but rather to do them as he did them.

This is a huge temptation when it comes to prayer because our tendency is to pray to impress others. To make my point, let me just ask how many of you would like to be called up here this morning to lead the rest of us in prayer? Show of hands? Most of you would

decline the invitation. I can't tell you how many times I have heard people tell me over the years that they just can't pray aloud in public because they're just not good at it. What's at the root of this common reluctance? Are we concerned about how we will sound before God? Maybe. Mostly, however, I think we're concerned with how we will come off in front of others. And now you see the problem. In Jesus' context, as we'll see, the problem was that people wanted to get up and pray publicly so that others would hear their prayers and be impressed. In our context, many of us don't ever want to pray publicly because we want others to remain impressed. But in either case, it's the same issue. And Jesus wants to teach us a better way.

In this short passage he has two 'don'ts' when it comes to prayer. Then he offers two practices that help us learn to pray like he prays. Let's take them one at a time.

First, in verse 5 he warns, "**And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.**"⁵ Ancient rabbinic teaching in those days allowed, even encouraged, people to offer their private prayers in public. You can still see this practice if you go to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem where people gather to pray privately in plain view of others. In that tradition, there were also certain times of the day set aside to pray, mainly before going to bed, at daybreak, and at midday. And so often times Jews would arrange to be in a public place at those times so that others could see them doing their prayers. Hopefully a good impression would be made.

It's very tempting to make prayer performative. Jesus tells us, "Don't do this." In fact, he calls such prayer hypocrisy, a word that literally means "play-acting," pretending to be something that you not, which is fine if you are playing a part in a musical at the community theater, but not so good if you're making your faith a theatrical production. And so Jesus' first "don't" when it comes to prayer is essentially, *don't use your prayers to promote yourself to others*. The great Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, once said, "Prayer is not prayer if it is addressed to anybody but God." That gets to the heart of it. When you pray publicly, don't concern yourself with whether or not your prayer is impressive to others. Similarly, don't hesitate to pray in public because you are afraid that your prayers will not be found impressive. That shouldn't even be your concern. And

² Scot McKnight, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Sermon on the Mount* (Zondervan, 2013), 162.

³ Taken from his October 17th entry in his classic devotional, *My Utmost for His Highest*. Read the whole passage at <https://utmost.org/classic/greater-works-classic/>

⁴ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (Harper, 1978), 34.

⁵ This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

so each of us should examine ourselves in this way, asking, “How are my prayers, or my unwillingness to pray, being influenced by my desire to have others think well of me?”

Jesus is clear, if we pray or don’t pray to pad our spiritual reputation, than we will have received our reward. You may get what you’re after in that people will think you are a spiritually mature person, whether that’s true or not, but that will be the only thing your prayers will produce. And is that really a reward? If people around you think you are something you are not, doesn’t that eventually begin to feel like a curse, or even a prison. When we pray in ways that try to impress others we may get the good we want, but eventually we will find out that what we wanted was not so good after all.⁶

Understand that Jesus is not against public prayer, or even praying privately in public. We will pray publicly this morning in worship. If you go out for lunch after worship you may pause to pray in the restaurant before you eat. It’s good to do so. What he’s warning us here about is motive. And he gives us a very practical way to check our motives when it comes to prayer. In verse 6 he teaches us, **“Whenever 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.”**

The word for “room” here is a word that literally means “secret chamber” or “storehouse.” Many scholars think it referred to the supply room which in houses of that day was the only room in the home which could be locked. It was also the least sanctified room in the house. Think about your junk closet at home, or your shed out back, places which are not only very ordinary, but which are also nearly almost always unoccupied. What happens when you pray in such a private place? There’s nobody else to impress. You don’t have to worry about what other people are thinking about your prayers, which heightens the chance that you can just pray to God as simply and honestly as you can manage.

Jesus says there is reward here. Maybe the reward is that as our focus shifts from impressing others to simply communing with God, we begin to actually commune with God. This, in itself, is a priceless reward. Furthermore, it’s been said that the person who prays more in public than in private is less interested in God’s approval than in human praise.⁷ In other words, the more we pray in private, the more we

learn to pray with the right motives, both in private and in public.

But this is not enough, because even when we pray in private there are still pitfalls, which is why Jesus offers a second warning in verse 7: **“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.”** Warning #2: *Don’t use your prayers to promote yourself to God.*

You see, in the pagan world of Jesus’ day, and probably ours as well, the belief was that the gods would only pay attention to your prayers if you paid your dues. Mostly that was about word-count. Longer prayers were better prayers. The gods would see how hard you were working to plead your case and then reward you accordingly. And let’s be honest, this thinking is still pervasive in our day. Maybe you’ve heard that Martin Luther once declared, “I have so much to do today that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.” That’s admirable, and there is something we can learn there, especially that prayer is our primary work. But when I hear that quote I am often left feeling discouraged that my prayers may not be pleasing to God because they are not long enough. Surely God would pay more attention to a three hour prayer than he would a three second prayer. Right?

To be clear, I don’t think Jesus is against long prayers. He himself prayed long prayers. Sometimes he went off and prayed all night long!⁸ And there were times when his prayers were quite repetitive.⁹ He even taught his disciples to persist in prayer, often for the same request over and over again.¹⁰ So just as was the case with his first warning, I think Jesus’ concern here is mostly about motive. When you spend a long time in prayer, or when you keep praying for the same thing over and over again, what is your reason for doing so? If that reason is that you think by doing so that you will impress God, somehow manipulate him into giving you what you want, then you have gotten off track in your prayers.

His corrective comes in the next verse when he reminds us, **“Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”** Notice that he doesn’t say that God knows *what* we will ask him before we ask him, only that he already know what we *need* before we ask. The implication is that not only does God know what we need, but that he loves us and is ready and able to give us what it is that we need. That, of course, may be different from what we *think* we need, for God knows us

⁶ McKnight, 165.

⁷ C.A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew* (Zondervan, 1984), 165.

⁸ “Now during those days [Jesus] went out to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God.” (Luke 6:12)

⁹ “So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words.” (Matthew 26:44)

¹⁰ See Luke 18:1-8 and Luke 11:5-8.

better than we know ourselves. The point is, while pagans pray to a God they think can be manipulated, Jesus is teaching us to pray to a God who knows better than we know what it is we need and so can be trusted to hear our prayers and respond lovingly.

I absolutely love that passage in Romans 8:26-27 where Paul declares, **“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”** Think about what it is we are being promised here. Have you had times in your life when you want to come to God in prayer but you just can’t find the words? Maybe the pain, or the grief, or the disappointment, or the discouragement is just too heavy. Or maybe the joy or gratitude is so overwhelming you are left speechless. And so all you can do is groan, or sigh, or hold your hands to heaven. Do you know those times? What a beautiful thing to know that in those moments the Holy Spirit acts like a divine interpreter, knowing exactly the deepest hurts and joys of our hearts, and then brings those before our Father in Heaven. What a beautiful gift! Talk about the opposite of heaping up words. Sometimes all we have to offer in our prayers are groans, and that is enough.

Commentator Dale Bruner points out that the paradox here is that once we realize that God is not some taskmaster demanding us to perform for him in our prayers by praying long prayers, we may then end up actually praying long prayers, but for an entirely different reason. As he puts it, “When prayer is relieved of the *necessity* of much, people will experience the *freedom* for much. When disciples know they don’t have to pray *much*, they will, surprisingly, desire to pray more.”¹¹ The whole motive changes. Suddenly we aren’t trying to pray to earn God’s favor, but praying in response to God’s favor.

Just as Jesus gave us a practical way to check our motives with the first warning, he does so again here with the second. Specifically, he gives us what we now call The Lord’s Prayer. **“Pray then in this way...”** he says. Not long ago I gave an eight-week sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer. I would refer you to that series on our webpage if you want to take a deeper dive into this prayer.¹² For now, let me just remind you that with this prayer I believe Jesus isn’t only giving a script for prayer, one that we can pray through in 30 seconds, but also categories and an order for prayer. And

everything we might possibly need to bring before God in prayer is included in these categories, everything from praise for him as a loving Father who is also the sovereign Creator above the heavens, to a humble request for protection from evil in this world.

Of course, the Lord’s Prayer is not the only prayer we are to use when we come before God. Jesus himself didn’t always pray these exact words. But the antidote to coming before God in an effort to impress him with our prayers is to pray this prayer regularly. John Calvin once said, “No-one will learn to pray aright whose lips and heart are not schooled by the heavenly Teacher.”¹³ There is a reason why the early church, and much of the church ever since, has used this prayer daily, in private and in corporate prayer. This is a prayer which reorders our desires and teaches us to yearn for, and then pray for, the things which God yearns for. When we pray this prayer we can be confident that we are praying according to God’s will, and thus we are free to give up our vain pursuit of trying to impress and then manipulate God with our prayers.

Now, when we look at these various habits of our Congregational Rule of Life, prayer included, there must be practical application. If not, what’s the point? Again, a Rule of Life is a set of practices, habits and rhythms we establish in our lives together which help us abide in Christ for maximum fruitfulness. Practices, habits and rhythms have to be practiced. They don’t just happen. With that in mind, I want to invite you to a very practical application of Jesus’ teaching here. Specifically, I want to ask you to join me in doing two things every day this next week, and hopefully beyond this next week.

First, would you set aside time each day to go to a solitary place where you can be alone and pray. Shut and lock the door if you need to. And if there is no place where you live, go out and walk somewhere in your neighborhood where you can be alone. We can be tempted to say that all life is prayer. In a way, it can be. And we will talk about that in two weeks. But we can’t ignore the fact that Jesus explicitly teaches us that we also need to set aside intentional and regular times to go off by ourselves and give our focused attention to prayer. So consider a time every day, even if it’s just 10 minutes, where you can be alone to pray.

Second, when you do so, use the Lord’s Prayer as a starting place. You can pray it straight through, as we will do in a few minutes here. Or better yet, use the prayer as a guide for categories of prayer, and an order for those categories. I’ve put a simple guide on the back

¹¹ Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 1 (Eerdmans, 2004), 289.

¹² You can find these written sermons here beginning on January 7, 2024. <https://faithpresby.org/media/sermons>

¹³ Cited by McKnight, 190.

of the bulletin this morning which might help you in this if this is a new practice. When you do this, you don't have to limit your prayers to the Lord's Prayer. However, I believe you will find that everything you might ever need to bring before God is covered by the categories Jesus gives us here.

So, will you do these two things with me this week? Some of you already are doing them. Jesus wants to teach us to pray as individuals and as a community. But there are pitfalls in prayer, mainly our tendency to pray to impress, either others or God. Jesus is so kind in giving us very clear practices which help us avoid those pitfalls. This will not necessarily make prayer easy. I have not found prayer to be easy in my life. But this habit is so essential to our life in Christ that we must continue to help one another grow in this practice that, in doing so, we might grow together in Christ.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Matthew 6:5-15 again. These are likely familiar words, so pay attention to see if you can notice something you never noticed before.

2. What do you think is the main thing that Jesus is trying to teach us here about prayer?
3. How have you been tempted to use your prayers to promote yourself to others? Are you ever hesitant to pray in public because you are afraid that others may not be impressed with your prayers?
4. How have you been tempted to use your prayers to promote yourself to God?
5. How does it change your prayers when you remember that the Lord already knows your needs before you ask?
6. From God's perspective, what is it that you think makes a good prayer?
7. Is prayer easy or difficult for you? Is it fair to call it a practice? Is prayer something that needs practice?
8. Do you intend to take up the invitation to engage in the two practices Jeff suggested, setting aside time daily to be alone to pray, and using the Lord's Prayer as a guide when you do? If not, why not? If so, what's your plan? Be specific.

Table to Table: For kids and adults to consider together.



What is prayer? Is there a wrong way to pray and a right way to pray? What does Jesus teach us here about prayer? How can we as a family do what Pastor Jeff invited us to do this week?