

## Matthew 6:5-8, 14-15

# A Simple Way to Pray

One of my guilty pleasures is, without a doubt, reading about ignoramus criminals. Their exploits are a special kind of humor for me. I particularly enjoy robbers who choose bad disguises. For example, 2009 in Carroll, IA, 2 intoxicated burglars tried to break into an apartment. For a disguise, they used permanent marker. They were still recognizable and when caught, but they still had the marker on their face. They became known as the Marker Bandits. In Spring 2015, a man robbed a convenience store wearing a clear plastic bag over his head and hand. He was arrested shortly thereafter and sentenced to 15 years in prison. In December 2016, a female bank robber disguised herself by drawing a fake mustache on herself. It worked. She has yet to be caught. My all-time favorite is, without a doubt, Kentucky's own, the Duct Tape bandit. YouTube it.

No one wears a mask in a bank or a convenience store unless they have an alternative motive. For most of us, however, we wear masks all the time to hide what is going on in our heart.

In the opening verse of chapter 6, Jesus laid out his thesis. Religious acts and spiritual discipline don't automatically make us holy and righteous. The issue is motivation. Are we motivated by the approval of others or of God? Jesus begins his infamous discourse on prayer by highlighting how the self-righteous pray. Their motivation is not communion with God, but the envy and approval of others.

Jesus begins by warning against **Performance** (vs. 5). A "hypocrite," describes someone who wears a mask. Today, we would call them actors and imposters. Just as a gifted actor plays is not their character, so too outward acts of piety from the self-righteous are not who they truly are. If we are motivated by a desire to gain approval, then our prayers are empty. God is not impressed by performance any more than we are impressed with a gift given out of routine. He cares about our hearts. Followers of Jesus must be a people of prayer, not to impress others, but to communicate with God.

For the rest of the passage, Jesus offers a helpful guide into how to pray. After correcting our motivations, Jesus recommends the following. First, prayer must be a **PRIORITY** (vs. 6). Just as he suggested with generosity (vs. 2-4), so too Jesus assumes his followers will pray. "When you pray" (not if) implies prayer is a priority. If you want a healthy and vibrant prayer life, prioritize it. Just as your marriage must be a priority for it to thrive, so must prayer. Martin Luther wrote, "As it is the business of tailors to make clothes and of cobblers to mend shoes, so it is the best business of Christians to pray."

Secondly, prayer must be **INTENTIONAL** (vs. 6). We would agree there is a difference between a man who says he's going to get engaged and a man who buys an engagement ring. So too, many people say they want a robust prayer life but fail to take practical steps. Buy a prayer journal, build a prayer closet, or set apart a sacred time of your day when you can be uninterrupted. Read the prayers of the saints or invest in theologically sound, but practical resources to help. Be intentional.

Thirdly, prayer ought to be **SIMPLE** (vs. 7). We are often guilty of overcomplicating prayer. At its simplest, prayer is communion with God. Every father has tried to teach his son how to talk to girls. Whether women know it or not, girls are scary. The prospect of asking a girl out is frightening. Every father encourages his son to simply walk up, look her in the eyes, and be direct and clear. Don't complicate it. Don't overdo it. Prayer is similar. Speak clearly without overcomplication. God understands us even without speaking in KJV English.

Fourthly, prayer ought to be rooted in **FAITH** (vs. 8). Without a doubt, the most debated theological statement of this passage is found here. Why pray if God already knows what we need? The question itself fails to appreciate God's absolute sovereignty and robs a fundamental understanding of prayer as communion. Prayer is confessional and is an admission we are nothing without our Creator-Redeemer. Prayer invites us to enjoy God's good company. His Fatherly sovereignty encourages us to come to him openly and frequently. Regardless, prayer is an act of faith. We beseech the Lord's goodwill knowing that he can and will accomplish all he desires.

Finally, prayer ought to be **PRACTICAL** (vs. 14-15). If prayer is primarily for communion and intimacy, then it ought to change us. After giving the Model Prayer (often called "The Lord's Prayer"), Jesus gives us one final reminder regarding prayer. The closer we grow with God, the more like him we'll become.

Scientists have discovered the common belief that couples start to mimic each other in behavior and even looks overtime. In fact, it's a sign of a healthy relationship. This makes sense. As we grow together, we really become one flesh. The same is true with our relationship with God. As we encounter the God of love, grace, and forgiveness, we learn to be more loving and forgiving. In fact, a sign of a poor spiritual life is the refusal and inability to forgive.

Martin Luther, the great German reformer, was asked by his barber how to pray. Out of that conversation came a short book called *A Simple Way to Pray*. Early in the book, he exhorts his barber and the rest of his readers:

So, a good and attentive barber keeps his thoughts, attention, and yes on the razor and hair and does not forget how far he has gotten with his shaving or cutting. If he wants to engage in too much conversation or let his mind wander or look somewhere else, he is likely to cut his customer's mouth, nose, or even his throat. Thus, if anything is to be done well, it requires the full attention of all one's senses and members . . . How much more does prayer call for concentration and singleness of heart if it is to be a good prayer!