



## January Sermon Series

### Practicing Righteousness

*Giving, Prayer, and Fasting*

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**Practicing Righteousness: Prayer**  
**Matthew 6:1-18, (focused: 5-15)**  
**January 16, 2022**

**Main Idea:** Following Jesus in prayer is practicing righteousness

### Personal Study Guide

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READ ENTIRE TEXT: MATTHEW 6:1-18, PARTICULARLY VERSES 5-15

## **Matthew 6:5-15**

### **English Standard Version**

#### **The Lord's Prayer**

<sup>5</sup>“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. <sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>“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. <sup>8</sup>Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. <sup>9</sup>Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Your kingdom come,  
your will be done,<sup>[b]</sup>

on earth as it is in heaven.

<sup>11</sup>Give us this day our daily bread,<sup>[c]</sup>

<sup>12</sup>and forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

<sup>13</sup>And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.<sup>[d]</sup>

<sup>14</sup>For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, <sup>15</sup>but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

#### **Footnotes**



4. Look at verses 5-6. How does Jesus exhort us about prayer in these verses? Look at verses 7-8. How does Jesus exhort us about prayer in these verses?

## **Explain – What does this mean?**

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This section is going to look at answering this question: **What is prayer?**

1. Look at verses 5-6. Who is Jesus saying we shouldn't model our prayers after? What is the emphasis here on what our prayers should look like?
  
2. Look at verse 7. Who is Jesus saying we shouldn't model our prayers after? What is the emphasis here on what our prayers should look like? How does verse 8 explain the meaning of "empty phrases?" For further explanation as to what he's getting at look up 1 Kings 18:25-29. Now how does this explain what he means by "empty phrases?"

3. Do you think Jesus is saying we never pray publicly? Or is he saying something else about prayer? Can you think of a time where he prayed publicly or others in scripture prayed publicly? What was the emphasis of their prayers and how is it different than the hypocrites mentioned in verses 5-6?

## **Apply – How does this change me?**

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This section is going to look at answering this question: **How do I pray?**

1. Look at the Lord's Prayer (verses 9-13). This is Jesus' response to his exhortation to not pray like the hypocrites and not pray like the Gentiles. As you think about your own prayers, compare and contrast them with Jesus' prayer here. Which are you most tempted to pray like (the hypocrites or the Gentiles)? How can you adjust to pray more like Jesus?
  
2. Dr. Don Whitney says that the reason we struggle with prayer is because "we pray the same old things about the same old things." We struggle to pray because we don't know how to pray. But we have many model prayers in scripture that teach us to how to pray. **Look up Psalm 13, Psalm 42-43, Daniel 9:3-19, Ephesians 1:15-23.** How do these prayers compare to how Jesus prays in Matthew 6:9-13? Can you think of a time where you prayed like this? If not, choose one prayer to model yours after in the coming week.



# Commentary

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\*For additional study on prayer there are resources listed below in the "Additional Resources" section that will help prepare you.

**Taken From:** [\*The message of the Sermon on the mount \(Matthew 5-7\): Christian counter-culture\*](#) by John Stott

## 2. Christian praying (5, 6)

In his second example of the 'religious' kind of righteousness Jesus depicts two men at prayer. Again the basic difference is between hypocrisy and reality. He contrasts the reason for their praying, and its reward.

What he says of the hypocrites sounds fine at first: 'They love ... to pray.' But unfortunately it is not prayer which they love, nor the God they are supposed to be praying to. No, they love themselves and the opportunity which public praying gives them to parade themselves.

Of course the discipline of regular prayer is good; all devout Jews prayed three times a day like Daniel. And there was nothing wrong in standing to pray, for this was the usual posture for prayer among Jews. Nor were they necessarily mistaken to pray *at the street corners* as well as *in the synagogues* if their motive was to break down segregated religion and bring their recognition of God out of the holy places into the secular life of every day. But Jesus uncovered their true motive as they stood in synagogue or street with hands uplifted to heaven in order that they might *be seen by men*. Behind their piety lurked their pride. What they really wanted was applause. They got it. 'They have received their reward in full' (NIV).

Religious pharisaism is far from dead. The accusation of hypocrisy has often been levelled at us church-goers. It is possible to go to church for the same wrongheaded reason which took the Pharisee to the synagogue: not to worship God, but to gain for ourselves a reputation for piety. It is possible to boast of our private devotions in the same way. What stands out is the perversity of all hypocritical practice. The giving of praise to God, like the giving of alms to men, is an authentic act in its own right. An ulterior motive destroys both. It degrades the service of God and men into a mean kind of self-service. Religion and charity become an exhibitionist display. How can we pretend to be praising God, when in reality we are concerned that men will praise us?

How, then, should Christians pray? *Go into your room and shut the door*, Jesus said. We are to close the door against disturbance and distraction but also to shut out the prying eyes of men and to shut ourselves in with God. Only then can we obey the Lord's next command: *Pray to your Father who is in secret*, or, as the Jerusalem Bible clarifies it, 'who is in that secret place'. Our Father is there, waiting to welcome us. Just as nothing destroys prayer like side-glances at human spectators, so nothing enriches it like a sense of the presence of God. For he sees not the outward appearance only but the heart, not the one who is praying only but the motive for which he prays. The essence of Christian prayer is to seek God. Behind all true prayer lies the conversation which God initiates:

Thou hast said, 'Seek ye my face.'

My heart says to thee,  
'Thy face, Lord, do I seek.'

We seek him in order to acknowledge him as the person he is, God the Creator, God the Lord, God the Judge, God our heavenly Father through Jesus Christ our Saviour. We desire to meet him in the secret place in order to bow down before him in humble worship, love and trust. Then, Jesus went on, *your Father who sees in secret will reward you*. R. V. G. Tasker points out that the Greek word for the 'room' into which we are to withdraw to pray (*tameion*) 'was used for the store-room where treasures might be kept'. The implication may be, then, that 'there are treasures already awaiting' us when we pray. Certainly the hidden rewards of prayer are too many to enumerate. In words of the apostle Paul, when we cry, 'Abba, Father,' the Holy Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are indeed God's children, and we are granted a strong assurance of his fatherhood and love.<sup>3</sup> He lifts the light of his face upon us and gives us his peace. He refreshes our soul, satisfies our hunger, quenches our thirst. We know we are no longer orphans for the Father has adopted us; no longer prodigals for we have been forgiven; no longer alienated, for we have come home.

Our Lord's emphasis on the need for secrecy should not be driven to extremes. To interpret it with rigid literalism would be guilty of the very pharisaism against which he is warning us. If all our praying were to be kept secret, we would have to give up church-going, family prayers and prayer meetings. His reference here is to private prayer. The Greek words are in the singular, as the AV indicates: 'But thou, when thou prayest, enter thy closet, ... shut thy door, pray to thy Father.' Jesus has not yet come to public prayer. When he does, he tells us to pray in the plural 'Our Father', and one can scarcely pray that prayer in secret alone.

Rather than becoming absorbed in the mechanics of secrecy, we need to remember that the purpose of Jesus' emphasis on 'secret' prayer is to purify our motives in praying. As we are to give out of a genuine love for people, so



we are to pray out of a genuine love for God. We must never use either of these exercises as a pious cloak for self-love.<sup>1</sup>

## **Christian's prayer: not mechanical but thoughtful**

### **Matthew 6:7–15**

Hypocrisy is not the only sin to avoid in prayer; 'vain repetition' or meaningless, mechanical utterance is another. The former is the folly of the Pharisee, the latter of the Gentile or pagan (7). Hypocrisy is a misuse of the *purpose* of prayer (diverting it from the glory of God to the glory of self); verbosity is a misuse of the very *nature* of prayer (degrading it from a real and personal approach to God into a mere recitation of words).

We see again that the method of Jesus is to paint a vivid contrast between two alternatives, in order to indicate his way the more plainly. Regarding the practice of piety in general, he has contrasted the pharisaic way (ostentatious and selfish) with the Christian way (secret and godly). Now regarding the practice of prayer in particular, he contrasts the pagan way of meaningless loquacity with the Christian way of meaningful communion with God. Thus Jesus is always calling his followers to something higher than the attainments of those around them, whether religious people or secular people. He emphasizes that Christian righteousness is greater (because inward), Christian love broader (because inclusive of enemies) and Christian prayer deeper (because sincere and thoughtful) than anything to be found in the non-Christian community.

### **1. The pagan way of prayer**

*Do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do*, he says (7). The Greek verb *battalogeō* is unique not only in biblical literature but elsewhere as well; no other use of the word is known beyond quotations of this verse. So nobody knows for certain either its derivation or its meaning. Some (like Erasmus) 'suppose the word to be derived from Battus, a king of Cyrene, who is said to have stuttered (so Herodotus); others from Battus, an author of tedious and wordy poems'. But this is a bit far-fetched. Most regard it as an onomatopoeic expression, the sound of the word indicating its meaning. Thus *battarizō* meant to stammer; and any foreigner whose speech sounded to Greek ears

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<sup>1</sup> Stott, J. R. W., & Stott, J. R. W. (1985). [\*The message of the Sermon on the mount \(Matthew 5-7\): Christian counter-culture\*](#) (pp. 132–135). Leicester; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

like the interminable repetition of the syllable 'bar' was called *barbaros*, a barbarian. *Battalogeō* is perhaps similar. William Tyndale was the first translator to choose 'babble' as an equivalent English onomatopoeia, and NEB has taken it up: 'Do not go babbling on like the heathen.'

The familiar AV rendering, 'Use not vain repetitions,' is therefore misleading, unless it is clear that the emphasis is on 'vain' rather than on 'repetitions'. Jesus cannot be prohibiting all repetition, for he repeated himself in prayer, notably in Gethsemane when 'he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words'.<sup>2</sup> Perseverance and even importunity in prayer are commended by him also; rather is he condemning verbosity, especially in those who 'speak without thinking'. So RSV's 'heap up empty phrases' is helpful. The word describes any and every prayer which is all words and no meaning, all lips and no mind or heart. *Battalogia* is explained in the same verse (7) as *polulogia*, 'much speaking', that is, a torrent of mechanical and mindless words.

How are we to apply our Lord's prohibition today? It is certainly applicable to the prayer wheel, and even more to prayer flags by which the wind conveniently does the 'praying'. I think we must apply it also to Transcendental Meditation, for Maharishi Mahesh Yogi has himself expressed regret at his misleading choice of the word 'meditation'. True meditation involves the conscious use of the mind, but Transcendental Meditation is a simple and essentially mechanical technique for the relaxing of both body and mind. Instead of stimulating thought, it is designed to bring a person to a state of complete stillness and inactivity.

Turning from non-Christian to Christian practices of prayer, it seems that our Lord's condemnation would certainly include a mindless use of the rosary in which nothing happens but the fingering of beads and reciting of words, in which (that is) the rosary distracts instead of concentrating the mind. Does it also apply to liturgical forms of worship? Are Anglicans guilty of *battalogia*? Yes, no doubt some are, for the use of set forms does permit an approach to God with the lips while the heart is far from him. But then it is equally possible to use 'empty phrases' in extempore prayer and to lapse into religious jargon while the mind wanders. To sum up, what Jesus forbids his people is any kind of prayer with the mouth when the mind is not engaged.

The next words expose the folly of such a pretence at praying: *for they think that they will be heard for their many words*. NEB: 'They imagine that the more they say, the more likely they are to be heard.' What an incredible notion! What sort of a God is this who is chiefly impressed by the mechanics and the statistics of prayer, and whose response is determined by the volume of words we use and the number of hours we spend in praying?

*Do not be like them*, Jesus says (8). Why not? Because Christians do not believe in that kind of God. That is, we are not to do as they do because we are not to think as they think. On the contrary, *your Father knows what you need before you ask him*. He is neither ignorant, so that we need to instruct him, nor hesitant, so that we need to persuade him. He is our Father—a Father who

loves his children and knows all about their needs. If that be so, somebody asks, then what is the point of praying? Let Calvin answer your question: 'Believers do not pray with the view of informing God about things unknown to him, or of exciting him to do his duty, or of urging him as though he were reluctant. On the contrary, they pray in order that they may arouse themselves to seek him, that they may exercise their faith in meditating on his promises, that they may relieve themselves from their anxieties by pouring them into his bosom; in a word, that they may declare that from him alone they hope and expect, both for themselves and for others, all good things.'<sup>1</sup> Luther put it more succinctly still: 'By our praying ... we are instructing ourselves more than we are him.'<sup>2</sup>

## **2. The Christian way of prayer**

If the praying of Pharisees was hypocritical and that of pagans mechanical, then the praying of Christians must be real—sincere as opposed to hypocritical, thoughtful as opposed to mechanical. Jesus intends our minds and hearts to be involved in what we are saying. Then prayer is seen in its true light—not as a meaningless repetition of words, nor as a means to our own glorification, but as a true communion with our heavenly Father.

The so-called 'Lord's Prayer' was given by Jesus as a model of what genuine Christian prayer is like. According to Matthew he gave it as a pattern to copy (*Pray then like this*), according to Luke as a form to use (11:2, 'When you pray, say ...'). We are not obliged to choose, however, for we can both use the prayer as it stands and also model our own praying upon it.

The essential difference between pharisaic, pagan and Christian praying lies in the kind of God we pray to. Other gods may like mechanical incantations; but not the living and true God revealed by Jesus Christ. Jesus told us to address him as (literally) 'our Father in the heavens'. This implies first that he is personal, as much 'he' as I am 'I'. He may indeed be, in C. S. Lewis's well-known phrase, 'beyond personality'; he is certainly not less. One of the reasons for rejecting the attempts of modern radical theologians to reconstruct the doctrine of God is that they depersonalize him. The concept of God as 'the ground of our (human) being' is simply not compatible with the notion of his divine fatherhood. God is just as personal as we are, in fact more so. Secondly, he is loving. He is not an ogre who terrifies us with hideous cruelty, nor the kind of father we sometimes read or hear about—autocrat, playboy, drunkard—but he himself fulfils the ideal of fatherhood in his loving care for his children. Thirdly, he is powerful. He is not only good but great. The words 'in the heavens' denote not the place of his abode so much as the authority and power at his command as the creator and ruler of all things. Thus he combines fatherly love with heavenly power, and what his love directs his power is able to perform.

In telling us to address God as 'our Father in heaven', the concern of Jesus is not with protocol (teaching us the correct etiquette in approaching the

Deity) but with truth (that we may come to him in the right frame of mind). It is always wise, before we pray, to spend time deliberately recalling who he is. Only then shall we come to our loving Father in heaven with appropriate humility, devotion and confidence.

Further, when we have taken time and trouble to orientate ourselves towards God and recollect what manner of God he is, our personal, loving, powerful Father, then the content of our prayers will be radically affected in two ways. First, God's concerns will be given priority ... ('your name, your kingdom ..., your will ...'). Secondly, our own needs, though demoted to second place, will yet be comprehensively committed to him ('Give us ..., forgive us ..., deliver us ...'). Everybody knows that the Lord's prayer is in these two parts, concerned first with the glory of God and then with the needs of man, but I think Calvin<sup>1</sup> was the first commentator to suggest a parallel with the ten commandments. For they also are divided in two and express the same priority: the first table outlines our duty to God and the second our duty to our neighbour.

The first three petitions in the Lord's Prayer express our concern for God's glory in relation to his name, rule and will. If our concept of God were of some impersonal force, then of course he would have no personal name, rule or will to be concerned about. Again, if we were to think of him as 'the Ultimate within ourselves' or 'the ground of our being', it would be impossible to distinguish between his concerns and ours. But if he is in reality 'our Father in heaven', the personal God of love and power fully revealed by Jesus Christ, Creator of all, who cares about the creatures he has made and the children he has redeemed, then and then only does it become possible (indeed, essential) to give his concerns priority and to become preoccupied with his name, his kingdom and his will.

The name of God is not a combination of the letters G, O and D. The name stands for the person who bears it, for his character and activity. So God's 'name' is God himself as he is in himself and has revealed himself. His name is already 'holy' in that it is separate from and exalted over every other name. But we pray that it may be *hallowed*, 'treated as holy', because we ardently desire that due honour may be given to it, that is to him whose name it is, in our own lives, in the church and in the world.

The kingdom of God is his royal rule. Again, as he is already holy so he is already King, reigning in absolute sovereignty over both nature and history. Yet when Jesus came he announced a new and special break-in of the kingly rule of God, with all the blessings of salvation and the demands of submission which the divine rule implies. To pray that his kingdom may 'come' is to pray both that it may grow, as through the church's witness people submit to Jesus, and that soon it will be consummated when Jesus returns in glory to take his power and reign.

The will of God is 'good, acceptable and perfect', for it is the will of 'our Father in heaven' who is infinite in knowledge, love and power. It is, therefore, folly to resist it, and wisdom to discern, desire and do it. As his name is already holy and he is already King, so already his will is being done 'in heaven'. What Jesus bids us pray is that life on earth may come to approximate more nearly to life in heaven. For the expression *on earth as it is in heaven* seems to apply equally to the hallowing of God's name, the spreading of his kingdom and the doing of his will.

It is comparatively easy to repeat the words of the Lord's Prayer like a parrot (or indeed a heathen 'babblers'). To pray them with sincerity, however, has revolutionary implications, for it expresses the priorities of a Christian. We are constantly under pressure to conform to the self-centredness of secular culture. When that happens we become concerned about our own little name (liking to see it embossed on our notepaper or hitting the headlines in the press, and defending it when it is attacked), about our own little empire (bossing, 'influencing' and manipulating people to boost our ego), and about our own silly little will (always wanting our own way and getting upset when it is frustrated). But in the Christian counter-culture our top priority concern is not our name, kingdom and will, but God's. Whether we can pray these petitions with integrity is a searching test of the reality and depth of our Christian profession.

In the second half of the Lord's Prayer the possessive adjective changes from 'your' to 'our', as we turn from God's affairs to our own. Having expressed our burning concern for his glory, we now express our humble dependence on his grace. A true understanding of the God we pray to, as heavenly Father and great King, although putting our personal needs into a second and subsidiary place, will not eliminate them. To decline to mention them at all in prayer (on the ground that we do not want to bother God with such trivialities) is as great an error as to allow them to dominate our prayers. For since God is 'our Father in heaven' and loves us with a father's love, he is concerned for the total welfare of his children and wants us to bring our needs trustingly to him, our need of food and of forgiveness and of deliverance from evil.

*Give us this day our daily bread.* Some early commentators could not believe that Jesus intended our first request to be for literal bread, bread for the body. It seemed to them improper, especially after the noble three opening petitions relating to God's glory, that we should abruptly descend to so mundane and material a concern. So they allegorized the petition. The bread he meant must be spiritual, they said. Early church fathers like Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine thought the reference was either to 'the invisible bread of the Word of God'<sup>1</sup> or to the Lord's Supper. Jerome in the Vulgate translated the Greek word for 'daily' by the monstrous adjective 'supersubstantial'; he also meant the Holy Communion. We should be thankful for the greater, down-to-earth, biblical understanding of the Reformers. Calvin's comment on the spiritualizing of the fathers was: 'This is exceedingly absurd.'<sup>1</sup> Luther had the

wisdom to see that 'bread' was a symbol for 'everything necessary for the preservation of this life, like food, a healthy body, good weather, house, home, wife, children, good government and peace',<sup>2</sup> and probably we should add that by 'bread' Jesus meant the necessities rather than the luxuries of life.

The petition that God will 'give' us our food does not, of course, deny that most people have to earn their own living, that farmers have to plough, sow and reap to provide basic cereals or that we are commanded to feed the hungry ourselves. Instead, it is an expression of ultimate dependence on God who normally uses human means of production and distribution through which to fulfil his purposes. Moreover, it seems that Jesus wanted his followers to be conscious of a day-to-day dependence. The adjective *epiousios* in 'our daily bread' was so completely unknown to the ancients that Origen thought the evangelists had coined it. Moulton and Milligan are of the same opinion in our generation. It is probably to be translated either 'for the current day' or 'for the following day'.<sup>5</sup> Whichever is correct, it is a prayer for the immediate and not the distant future. As A. M. Hunter comments: 'Used in the morning, this petition would ask bread for the day just beginning. Used in the evening, it would pray for tomorrow's bread.'<sup>6</sup> Thus we are to live a day at a time.

Forgiveness is as indispensable to the life and health of the soul as food is for the body. So the next prayer is, *Forgive us our debts*. Sin is likened to a 'debt' because it deserves to be punished. But when God forgives sin, he remits the penalty and drops the charge against us. The addition of the words *as we also have forgiven our debtors* is further emphasized in verses 14 and 15 which follow the prayer and state that our Father will forgive us if we forgive others but will not forgive us if we refuse to forgive others. This certainly does not mean that our forgiveness of others earns us the right to be forgiven. It is rather that God forgives only the penitent and that one of the chief evidences of true penitence is a forgiving spirit. Once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offence against God, the injuries which others have done to us appear by comparison extremely trifling. If, on the other hand, we have an exaggerated view of the offences of others, it proves that we have minimized our own. It is the disparity between the size of debts which is the main point of the parable of the unmerciful servant. Its conclusion is: 'I forgave you *all that debt* (which was huge) ...; should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' (33).

The last two petitions should probably be understood as the negative and positive aspects of one: *Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*. The sinner whose evil in the past has been forgiven longs to be delivered from its tyranny in the future. The general sense of the prayer is plain. But two problems confront us. First, the Bible says that God does not (indeed cannot) tempt us with evil. So what is the sense of praying that he will not do what he has promised never to do? Some answer this question by interpreting 'tempting' as 'testing',<sup>3</sup> explaining that though God never entices us to sin he does test our faith and character. This is possible. A better explanation seems

to me to be that 'lead us not' must be understood in the light of its counterpart 'but deliver us', and that 'evil' should be rendered 'evil one' (as in 13:19). In other words, it is the devil who is in view, who tempts God's people to sin, and from whom we need to be 'rescued' (*rusai*).

The second problem concerns the fact that the Bible says temptation and trial are good for us: 'Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials' or 'various temptations'. If then they are beneficial, why should we pray not to be led into them? The probable answer is that the prayer is more that we may overcome temptation, than that we may avoid it. Perhaps we could paraphrase the whole request as 'Do not allow us so to be led into temptation that it overwhelms us, but rescue us from the evil one'. So behind these words that Jesus gave us to pray are the implications that the devil is too strong for us, that we are too weak to stand up to him, but that our heavenly Father will deliver us if we call upon him.

Thus the three petitions which Jesus puts upon our lips are beautifully comprehensive. They cover, in principle, all our human need—material (daily bread), spiritual (forgiveness of sins) and moral (deliverance from evil). What we are doing whenever we pray this prayer is to express our dependence upon God in every area of our human life. Moreover, a trinitarian Christian is bound to see in these three petitions a veiled allusion to the Trinity, since it is through the Father's creation and providence that we receive our daily bread, through the Son's atoning death that we may be forgiven and through the Spirit's indwelling power that we are rescued from the evil one. No wonder some ancient manuscripts (though not the best) end with the doxology, attributing 'the kingdom and the power and the glory' to this triune God to whom alone it belongs.

Jesus seems then to have given the Lord's Prayer as a model of *real* prayer, *Christian* prayer, in distinction to the prayers of Pharisees and heathen. To be sure, one could recite the Lord's Prayer either hypocritically or mechanically or both. But if we mean what we say, then the Lord's Prayer is the divine alternative to both forms of false prayer. I do not myself think it fanciful to see this in both halves of the prayer.

The error of the hypocrite is selfishness. Even in his prayers he is obsessed with his own self-image and how he looks in the eyes of the beholder. But in the Lord's Prayer Christians are obsessed with God—with his name, his kingdom and his will, not with theirs. True Christian prayer is always a preoccupation with God and his glory. It is therefore the exact opposite of the exhibitionism of hypocrites who use prayer as a vehicle for their own glory.

The error of the heathen is mindlessness. He just goes babbling on, giving voice to his meaningless liturgy. He does not think about what he is saying, for his concern is with volume, not content. But God is not impressed by verbiage. Over against this folly Jesus invites us to make all our needs known to our

heavenly Father with humble thoughtfulness, and so express our daily dependence on him.

Thus Christian prayer is seen in contrast to its non-Christian alternatives. It is *God-centred* (concerned for God's glory) in contrast to the self-centredness of the Pharisees (preoccupied with their own glory). And it is *intelligent* (expressive of thoughtful dependence) in contrast to the mechanical incantations of the heathen. Therefore when we come to God in prayer, we do not come hypocritically like play actors seeking the applause of men, nor mechanically like pagan babblers, whose mind is not in their mutterings, but thoughtfully, humbly and trustfully like little children to their father.

It will be seen that the fundamental difference between various kinds of prayer is in the fundamentally different images of God which lie behind them. The tragic mistake of Pharisees and pagans, of hypocrites and heathen, is to be found in their false image of God. Indeed, neither is really thinking of God at all, for the hypocrite thinks only of himself while the heathen thinks of other things. What sort of God is it who might be interested in such selfish and mindless prayers? Is God a commodity that we can use him to boost our own status, or a computer that we can feed words into him mechanically?

From these unworthy notions we turn back with relief to the teaching of Jesus that God is our Father in the heavens. We need to remember that he loves his children with most tender affection, that he sees his children even in the secret place, that he knows his children and all their needs before they ask him, and that he acts on behalf of his children by his heavenly and kingly power. If we thus allow Scripture to fashion our image of God, if we recall his character and practise his presence, we shall never pray with hypocrisy but always with integrity, never mechanically but always thoughtfully, like the children of God that we are.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Stott, J. R. W., & Stott, J. R. W. (1985). [\*The message of the Sermon on the mount \(Matthew 5-7\): Christian counter-culture\*](#) (pp. 142–152). Leicester; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.