

Matthew 6:5-8

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. 6 But 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. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

The Scripture takes place early in the ministry of Jesus. After his baptism, trial of temptation from the devil, and recruiting his disciples, he delivers the Sermon on the Mount. This Scripture takes place during that sermon. Jesus knows what is going on in the religious world. He knows the religious leaders are trying to impress others and are focused more on the self and institutionalism than God. Matthew chapter six takes us to the reward motive. Jesus tells us about the rewards that come to us from God and the kind of service that God desires. Jesus also addresses the right kind of living: giving, praying, and fasting. Incidentally the message from Jesus is parallel to the holistic message of sin, repentance, and reward that was delivered from the Old Testament prophets. The message from Jesus is cohesive with Old Testament prophecy because they all deliver the word of God. Bringing people back to God was the overall effort of the Old Testament prophets.

God loves the people that God created. Therefore, God cares for the people and does a lot of good for the people. God also cares if you are good or bad. Therefore, we are to do good for others and to care for others. The reward from God does not come to those who seek it; it does not come to the greedy and the selfish who are only concerned with their own benefit. God rewards those that are truly devoted.

Jesus warns us of the wrong intent of bringing glory to ourselves. If you are giving to make yourself look good, then it is not about helping the other person; it is about you and your own glory and satisfaction. Jesus cautions that you have received your reward. In this case your gain, glory, and satisfaction are from people; that's all you get and nothing more. Giving is to be done in secret. God knows your heart and benevolence. If you want others to know what you give, that is your ego, vanity, and pride at work. Jesus teaches benevolence without pride. Do not call attention to your giving because self glorification does not please God.

The behavior of the religious establishment, especially the religious leaders was for show. People judge by appearance so the religious leaders tried to impress others by looking hungry during fast and praying grandiose prayers. This was not done to favor God or to please God. This was done to impress the people that are watching. Jesus denounces such hypocrisy. God is not fooled by appearances. To please God you have to be pure on the inside.

Jesus does not give a step by step, detailed specific outline of how to pray. In teaching us to pray, there are two main things that he teaches us not to do. Do not be a hypocrite and do not show off. He does not go into a detailed specific method of prayer because prayer is a personal thing. It is communion with God in a loving personal

relationship. Jesus is teaching against hypocrisy. The number one thing that Jesus preached against the most is hypocrisy. In today's Scripture Jesus is specifically teaching against the hypocrisy of their prayers. Jesus teaches us about private prayer. Private devotion is personal between you and God it does not impress others and is a direct contrast to prayer that is done for show. Jesus gives us a main rule for prayer. Your prayers must be offered to God. The prayers of the religious leaders were focused on impressing humans.

Prayer is the one of the most common faith practice in the world. Prayer comes from deep within the heart and addresses needs that are beyond human ability to meet. Prayer connects people with God and allows us to realize that we are not alone. When people face trauma, emergencies, and crisis, they find comfort in spiritual support from someone that cares. Prayer is significant and meaningful. We view God as all powerful, present, personal, and one who cares about us.

I remember reading a long time ago a question was asked "Is it OK to smoke while praying?" The obvious answer is no. The next question was asked "Is it OK to pray while smoking?" The answer not so obvious, if you take it a step further a lot of despondent people pray while drinking. I'm not going to advocate for either one but it brings out a vital point of the necessity of prayer in various circumstances. There may be times when prayer is appropriate. Prayer is not reserved for specific settings or specific reasons. Prayer is to be long, short, and often, by anyone and anywhere, and the more sincere the better. After Jesus teaches how to pray, and how not to pray, he follows the lesson with The Lord's Prayer.