

What Jesus says here about prayer should revolutionise our attitudes and beliefs about sin. Some people think of a sinner as a person who robs, lies, and murders. Then there is a higher level of understanding which thinks of a sinner as a person who doesn't go to church, who isn't kind and friendly. There is still a higher and refined idea of who a sinner is. Someone who is really orthodox thinks a sinner is anyone who doesn't believe in Jesus Christ. But Jesus places before us a man at prayer as an illustration of what a sinner is. Can you imagine a religious man or woman kneeling reverently in church, devoutly praying, being used as an illustration of what a sinner is? This is what Jesus does here.

Jesus is saying that a man or woman can be sinning in the very act of prayer. He warns us about this. "When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites." Hypocrites are people who are legalists. They insist on obeying the letter of the law. So they pray, ~~But they pray,~~ not because they love God and enjoy his fellowship, but merely because they feel they ought to. Now they are right to pray, but their motivation is wrong. Hypocrites are also actors. That's the meaning of the Greek word. They go through their religious life as an actor on a stage playing for

an audience. Their prayers are a part of their religious act. That is why Jesus said, "They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners." They had an audience.

Now we can't be too hard on these hypocrites because there is a hypocrite in all of us. There is something of the legalist in us. And there is something of the actor in us. Even when we are sincerely devout hypocrisy still remains in the hearts of all of us. Sin is such a subtle thing in the form of hypocrisy. It's like a foreign spy that infiltrates our hearts and sabotages even our prayers. And I become most aware of its presence in my own life when I'm praying in public.

It isn't wrong to pray in public. Jesus often prayed in public. Paul prayed in public. There are times when public prayers are commanded within the worship service. And there are times when we should pray even before the unbelieving world. But there is always that subtle and sinful desire to look good before others. Everytime I pray in public I become aware of the fact that I am a sinner. No matter how hard I try it is hard to forget that you are listening. I want my prayers to sound impressive. Some prayers are not so subtle ways of preaching to

the congregation. And yet public prayers are commanded by Christ.

So in our Scripture Lesson Jesus exposes the sin in the heart of the religious person. Last week Jesus placed before us a picture of a generous man as an illustration of a sinner. This week he places before us a picture of a man at prayer as an illustration of a sinner. And I might add that the main reason for the Sermon on the Mount is to expose the sinfulness of the human heart. And in particular to expose the sinfulness and deceit in the heart of every religious person. Jesus does this so that each one of us might realise we too are sinners. Because unless we see ourselves as sinners... as hell deserving sinners... we can't appreciate what Christ did for us on the cross. The crucifixion will be little more than a sentimental story.

Jesus does not stop at simply exposing the sinfulness of the religious person. He goes on to teach us how to pray sincerely. He says, "When you pray, enter into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret." Now a strictly literal and legalistic obedience of these words can still leave us a sinner in our prayer life. I can go into my office over at the manse and shut

the door and pray, but all the time be thinking, "Oh, if only the congregation could see me now, humbly and devoutly praying in secret. If only they could see what a fine, devout, godly minister they have, then maybe they would respond better to my ministry." And all the time I am a hypocrite. I am an actor playing before an imaginary audience.

Jesus isn't interested in a legalistic fulfilment of his teaching. What Jesus wants is for us to close out the world when we pray; shuteout it's sights, its sounds, its desires, its attractions and distractions, its stares. He wants us to withdraw from it, to turn our backs on it and face God himself. We don't even have to shut our eyes to do this. We can do it when we are walking down the street or driving the car, sitting in the living room, or attending a party. We stop and turn the eyes of our hearts upward into the eyes of God. And when we look into his eyes "the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace."

This is the kind of prayer our heavenly Father hears and rewards. His reward is the smile of his face and the light of his countenance. When we pray to be seen by men we are really seeking their praise and admiration and

we find that very rewarding. But when we turn our eyes to God and truly pray to him, forgetting everybody else, he smiles on us. He lifts up the light of his countenance upon us. He makes his face to shine upon us and gives us peace. That is the reward for sincere prayer.

"But 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." Don't babble incessantly when you pray to God. Have you ever met someone who babbles incessantly? You can't get in a word edgewise. Their sentences run into one another. You wait patiently for some crack to appear in the solid wall of their words, but there words go on like the Great Wall of China. You don't want to but in and interrupt. That would be impolite. So you slowly back towards the door to get away. And still your friend babbles on oblivious to your weariness and boredom.

When that happens to me I get the feeling that I am not really being talked to. I might as well not even be there. I'm not needed to respond or to comment or to do anything. I'm just a kind of impersonal catalyst, an excuse for them to verbalise their thoughts. My friend is really engaged in a monologue or a soliloquy.

I think some of our prayers to God are like this,

especially in times of crisis. We babble on to God begging his help, telling him what needs to be done and what has happened and what might happen. This kind of prayer is hard to distinguish from worry or anxiety. Our prayers should not be monologues. They are conversations with God.

We need to also remember that Jesus sometimes spent the entire night in prayer, such as the night before he chose his twelve disciples. And Paul urges us to pray without ceasing. These facts don't contradict the teaching of our Lord about long prayers. True prayer is a conversation with God. We can be engaged in long conversations with people without babbling and talking too much. When we really believe God is there our prayers are conversations. We will pray often throughout the day just as we will talk frequently with a companion.

Jesus assures us that there is no need for this babbling because "your father knows the things you have need of." If God already knows then why pray? Because he is our Father. He wants us to come to him as a little child. He wants us to confide in him and depend on him. Some fathers are satisfied if they never see their kids. They supply all their physical needs but they don't like

to spend time with their children. They are absentee fathers. But God wants to have fellowship with us. He knows our needs and will supply them all, but he desires our love and fellowship. He doesn't want us to be indifferent to him or to take him for granted.

To help us pray Jesus gave his disciples a model prayer. This prayer contains everything we need to pray for. It's a model prayer for those who know and love Jesus. It's divided into two parts. The first part focuses on God and his glory. The second part focuses on our needs.

Let's take a brief look at the first part of the prayer. When we truly pray it from our hearts we confess that the creator God is also our father. But we can know God as our Father only through Jesus. We are not all the children of God. You will not find the doctrine of the general fatherhood of God in the Bible. That is a liberal 19th century doctrine and not a New Testament doctrine. God created us all but he is not the heavenly Father of all people. Apart from faith in Christ, Jesus once said, we are children of the devil. Paul taught the same thing. Apart from faith in Christ we are children of wrath. The apostle John wrote, "Jesus came unto his own but his own

received him not. But to as many as did receive him he gave to them the power to become children of God." We become a child of God when we receive Christ as our Saviour.

When we come into the throne room of God our heavenly Father, through prayer, we want his name to be hallowed. "Hallowed be Thy name." That is, may I see Thee, my heavenly Father, as a holy and just God and King, a God who is "wholly other", a God who is set apart and, in a sense, set over and against this rebellious world. "Hallowed be Thy name." May all honor and glory and praise be unto thee.

Then we pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." God's kingdom is wherever his laws are recognised and obeyed from the heart. God's kingdom is wherever his power is seen in healing, forgiving, and administering justice. Wherever his love and compassion are shown; wherever his authority is submitted to. When we pray for the coming of his kingdom we are asking, first, for Christ to rule over us and in our hearts; to control our thoughts and feelings; and to make us submissive to his Word in Scripture. Secondly, we pray for God's rule to begin in the hearts and lives of all people. This is where we pray for the President and all those who are in authority, not only in our own country but throughout the

world.

We add to this petition the little phrase, "in earth as it is in heaven." It is all too evident that God's will is not always done in our own hearts or in the world. But it is done in heaven. I do believe in angels. I believe that in heaven his angels obey God perfectly. I also believe in the church triumphant. I believe that all those who have died in the faith of Christ are now worshipping and serving God perfectly in heaven. That vision of the church triumphant worshipping and praising God perfectly inspires me and encourages me to persevere in the faith of Christ.

When we pray, therefore, we should always focus first on God. Remember who he is. "Know ye that the Lord he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves."

In the second part of the Lord's Prayer the focus is on our needs. It begins on the lowest level with a request for our physical needs. We are not to pray for luxuries; for mansions, for money, or for steak and ice-cream. We are to pray for our daily bread; for the necessities of life. And we should be happy if that's all God gives us, in the way of physical gifts and provisions. *There is also need of mercy.*

Then, from our physical needs, we go on to ask him

to meet our spiritual needs. Our greatest spiritual need is forgiveness. This prayer teaches us that confession of sins should be a daily thing for us. We stand in the need of God's forgiveness everyday of our lives. The Christian life is a life of continual repentance in which each day we turn from sin to Christ for forgiveness.

Some people have asked why we have to confess our sins every Sunday in church. Why this morbid emphasis on sin? The answer is simple. Because we are sinners. Confession of sins becomes morbid only if we don't believe in the forgiveness of sins. Confession of sins is not a morbid thing because we know our heavenly Father has promised to forgive us.

But some people aren't aware of their sinfulness. Religious people especially often seem to have no sense of their sinfulness. I have heard people say quite sincerely that they rarely sin. I have even heard one minister in the area say this. But John wrote, "If anyone says he has no sin, he is deceiving himself and the truth is not in him." Anyone who has no sense of sin is simply deceiving ^{him} himself or herself.

The reason why so many of us aren't aware of our sinfulness is because we have such a shallow understanding

of the holiness of God and what he requires of us. Our God is ~~too much~~ too much like us. We need a new emphasis on the holiness of God. Then we will know why Isaiah cried out in the temple, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts." Oh, that God would shatter our polite, middle-class, sophistication and humble us and expose the hidden things of darkness in our hearts.

We have such a shallow understanding of sin. God requires us to be perfect and we think it's good enough to be average. God ~~requires~~ requires that we be like Christ and we are satisfied if we are merely religious. There is not one second of the day when we love God with our whole heart, soul, strength, and mind. When we know the holiness of God we will be aware of the utter sinfulness of sin. I often wonder, how can anyone understand the cross of Christ or come to Christ whose eyes have not been opened to see what lies hidden in the hearts of even the most religious people.

"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." How can we pray these words sincerely without taking life seriously? Everyday of our lives there is danger and temptation which would destroy us spiritually, were it not for God's deliverance.

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I have now reached the end of my sermon. As I think back I notice that there are no references to current events. It has simply been a commentary on the words of our Scripture Lesson. Because of the lack of reference to current events some of you may feel this is all irrelevant and boring. But how can the teaching of Jesus be irrelevant? In this passage Jesus teaches us how to pray. He exposes the hypocrisy of a lot of prayer and then goes on to teach in a positive way how we should pray.

And above all Jesus invites us to talk to the creator and king of the universe. Most of us would be excited to have the opportunity to speak to the President of the United States personally. You may or may not like the way President Carter is running the country. But regardless of our politics it would be a thrill to talk to the President of the United States; to one of the most powerful men in the world. But here in our Scripture Lesson Jesus

invites us to talk to the creator and ruler of the universe.

He tells us how to enter God's presence and what we should say. If there is no God, then, of course, what Jesus says is absolutely ridiculous. Or if you don't really believe in a God who answers prayer then, of course, what Jesus says won't be relevant to you. But if there is a personal God who rules the universe, a personal God who hears prayers, a sovereign God who governs all his creatures and all their actions, then these words are tremendously important and relevant.

If only God's people would listen and pray. If only they would catch a glimpse of the glory and holiness of God. If only they would bow in his presence and worship him as Jesus taught us. Maybe we would see His kingdom come and his will done on earth as well as in heaven.

AMEN