

**“To Whom We Pray”**

Matthew 6:5-15  
Sermon on the Mount Series

*“When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight”*  
*Jeremiah 15:16*

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## Introduction

In the Christian Calendar, we have celebrated and left behind the seasons of Advent and Christmas and are now in Epiphany: a season of celebrating the light of Christ in our world.

Jesus said: **I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.** (John 8:12)

So, it is appropriate that we return to our study of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and re-focus on what happens there; two things:

First, in the Sermon Jesus reveals his life to us; light shines on all he is and what we see is God and Man in complete harmony; what we see is God come into our world with forgiveness, healing and restoration.

Second, in the Sermon we see Jesus forming those who follow him, his disciples, we Christians; into the shape of his life. At the beginning of the sermon Jesus says to us: **You are the light of the world . . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.** (Matthew 5:14, 16)

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount demonstrates his life forming our lives to give glory to our Father in heaven:

Giving glory to our Father in heaven is another way of saying – to shine a light on the person and attributes and values of God

To what end? So all people can see and be attracted to the true beauty of God. And, as the first petition in our Lord's Prayer says: that our Father's kingdom in heaven would come on earth.

That is the grandest plan imaginable. Perhaps so grand we do not know what to do with it. Thankfully Jesus makes it simple for us. If nothing else live with his final words in our reading this morning – go forth into a life of forgiveness and in that life Jesus will appear and form us.

The last sermon to preface our passage this morning was David Eikelboom's message on November 19<sup>th</sup>. David talked of the importance of secrecy, hiddenness in our relationship with God and in that secrecy discovering the deep values of our activities, our identity.

This hiddenness or protection of our personal life as identified by God is in contrast to the prevailing climate of our times wherein personal identification is increasingly a social identification – other people's reactions to us defining us (through social medial) or even a creational identification – besides other people, even other life forms, such as the animals and non-life forms like the rivers and hills – defining us.

A great example. Take a look at the article in last Saturday's Globe & Mail, it is entitled:

*Your smartphone is making you stupid, antisocial and unhealthy. So why can't you put it down?*

David referred to smartphones in his sermon as devices to gain social capital. The Globe & Mail article points out how 'smartphones are causing real damage to our minds and

relationships, measurable in seconds shaved off the average attention span, reduced brain power, declines in work-life balance and hours less of family time.

While the article does a great job at analyzing the effects of smartphone usage in the world today – ‘more than two billion people around the world, including three-quarters of Canadians, who now have this magic at their fingertips’ – I think the article fails to answer the question in its title: *So why can't you put it down?*

I think as David pointed out, as I would point out, the power of identity as invested in our social group is overwhelming in the absence of relation with God.

But it is only Christ who can fully restore us to our Creator's intention.

## Text

In this section of Jesus' sermon what is addressed is defined in verse one of chapter six:

**Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them: for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.**

As David pointed out, in the forming of our life by the life of Jesus (piety is shorthand for that formation), do not look for validation, the affirmation of value, from your social circle, rather from your Father in heaven.

The first 'piety' issue Jesus addresses is giving to the needy. An excellent place to start as Jesus was given by the Father to meet our needs and likewise should be our focus.

The second matter is prayer.

Now prayer is communicating with God; it is a primary venue for relationship with God.

So, it is no accident, in the Gospel of Luke, the Lord's Prayer is prefaced with the disciples of Jesus saying: **Lord, teach us to pray . . .**

Why do we pray? Certainly, to express our needs to our Father in heaven.

But in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, why pray?

I think to welcome the first petition in the Lord's prayer:

**Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**

This prayer petition is to permeate the life of the Christian; it is to always have first place in our conversations with our Heavenly Father.

And I believe what Jesus teaches us about prayer in his sermon demonstrates that in order to ensure the first petition is always first we must learn from Jesus about **to Whom we pray**.

Our view of God, our understanding of the person, attributes and values of God, our knowledge of our Father in heaven will always qualify our prayers to God.

Now, before Jesus responded to the disciples' request: **Lord, teach us to pray**, he showed them something important about prayer:

From Mark 1.35, before Jesus preaches his sermon: **In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him.**

True identity and values are forged in the secret place between God and me!

And what did Jesus teach?

First, two perennial pitfalls:

The hypocrite prayer: the prayer that is not sincere and honest because either what is being prayed for is illegitimate or the motivation to pray is to build up my social capital.

To pray for something criminal is obviously illegitimate, but illegitimacy extends beyond the black and white to all kinds of grey. It is legal, but can it be right to pray to win at gambling. It is legal, but can it be right to pray for that which will consequently harm another person?

What is the guide to illegitimate prayer? Knowing to whom I pray.

Through Scripture and the lives of my fellow believers to know the person, attributes and values of the living God and to pray accordingly.

The hypocrite prayer is also a prayer wherein the motivation is to build up my social capital, to be valued by others due to my prayers. Jesus gives the obvious example about praying in the street corners. Now what Jesus references is culturally conditioned. In Jesus' culture, you could gain social capital by praying an elaborate and 'well-turned-out' prayer in the local synagogue.

However, in our culture this is no longer the case. Perhaps in some settings. Pastor Michelle suggested in some African churches this would be the situation.

I think the opposite is more our problem. For example:

We all know Pastor Michelle is an avid Ultimate Frisbee player. To my knowledge she is the only pastor on her team and perhaps the only Christian. Let's say an accident occurs and the team is traumatized, struck with fear over what has happened. It is not appropriate, it is not desired, is it not pastoral; for Pastor Michelle to gather the team together and pray for the peace and healing of God. Absolutely.

I think it is more a challenge to us to pray in the appropriate time and space than to refrain from praying so people can see us and honor us.

The problem here is the hypocrite prayer does not understand God sincerely and honestly. Jesus says in verse 2 that the underlying motivation for the hypocrite is to be praised (quite literally to be glorified, to have the light shine on them and display their beauty, goodness and power).

That motivation actually leads to the opposite – darkness rather than light. It is in the secret place where God is glorified that I, in the reflection of God's glory, find light and value to my behaviors.

The second pitfall Jesus mentions is pagan prayer. The literal word is the 'ethnikoi' or the people of the nations who are not Jewish or Christian. The main reference here is to all who practice Greek and Roman religion and a central characteristic is belief in gods that inhabit all creation: there is a god of war, a god of love, a god of the waters, a god of the mountains and so on.

In our day, the closest parallel would be indigenous spirituality that one author describes as according "intelligence, rationality, consciousness, volition, agency, intentionality, language and desire" to non-humans (Harvey on Animism). Everything, is animated.

For example, when drumming, as a means to pray, to communicate with the spirit world; the focus may be on animal spirits, spirits of land and water, spirits of ancestors and so on. The drumming in this case is believed to meld into creational harmonies and thereby stimulate contact with the unseen world.

Behind this worldview God is identified with Creation. And God becomes defined through our concepts and language as conditioned by our observations of nature: nature both beautiful & glorious and nature with claw & fang and death.

In the Christian view, the teaching of Jesus, God is creator and not to be identified with anything created. Therefore, rather than anything created having intrinsic value, including ourselves, (value that requires drumming up, stimulation, to be demonstrated); value comes from God, which we realize in the will of God

This is why the Christian says: . . . **I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.**

It is why the Prayer says: . . . **your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**

So, I think we can see that 'to whom we pray' is a critical determination in the nature of prayer.

I have gone through the Lord's prayer with you before so I will not spend time now. Suffice to say Jesus tells us several things about God to always keep in mind when praying:

Our Father in heaven; knowing all about us; calling us to find value in what he values as seen in his will being done; his kingdom with Jesus as King being lived out by us;

### Application

And as most important: **For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.**

Much could be said about these words. It is important to hold them together with all the rest of Scripture words on forgiveness.

However, in this case: in prayer, we align with the unseen presence of our Father in heaven with the main purpose for the will of God and the kingdom of God to be expressed in and through our daily lives. Given the central fact of Jesus Christ as God's forgiveness to us who embrace it, and given the central fact of our place in this world always touching on matters of forgiveness. It is in the life of forgiveness that prayer rises up from and is honored by our Heavenly Father and glorifies, sheds light on the will and kingdom of God. Amen.