

Hope Church South Haven September 27th 2026

Matthew 6:5-8

Pray like Jesus #1: Why do we pray?

One of the most profound books I've ever read on the **world of Jesus** is KENNETH BAILEY'S *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. In his book he shares this story.

He met a young woman in LATVIA after the Soviet Union collapsed. She grew up in an **atheist family**. There were *no churches* in her village. No Sunday school. No Bible stories. Nothing. But there was one strange exception. At funerals, people were still allowed to say the Lord's Prayer.

So as a little girl, she would hear these words being prayed without really knowing what they meant. She didn't know who "Our Father" was. She didn't understand the kingdom they were praying for. *They were just words.*

Then the Soviet Union fell. Freedom came. **And she started asking questions.** What do these words mean? Who are we praying to? And she went looking. *And somewhere in that search, she found Jesus.* Years later she described it like this: **When you are in total darkness, the tiniest point of light is very bright.**

For her, the Lord's Prayer was that tiny point of light. Just a few words she heard as a child. But sometimes a little light is enough to show you where to start walking.

And I keep thinking about that story. What is it about prayer that can give someone hope in the **darkest of places**? That can somehow give us strength when almost everything else **has been taken away**? Because when you really think about it **prayer is strange**.

- We close our eyes and *talk to Someone we cannot see*.
- We *ask an all-knowing God* to do things he already knows need doing.
- Sometimes we get exactly what we ask for. Sometimes we don't.
- Sometimes prayer *feels like the most natural thing* in the world.
- And sometimes you're *three sentences in thinking*: I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing.

GOOD NEWS: we're **not the first ones struggling** with it. The PEOPLE who actually walked and lived with Jesus eventually came to him in the Gospel of Luke and said: Lord, teach us how to pray.

- They watched Jesus **heal people**.
- They watched him **preach**.
- They watched him **confront religious leaders**.

- They watched him **do miracles**.

But there was something about the way Jesus prayed that made them say:

I want that. Teach us to pray like that.

And Jesus did. He gave them the Lord's prayer.

We're going to spend the coming weeks slowing that prayer down. Because Jesus wasn't simply giving his disciples some words to memorize.

- He was GIVING them a way **to see God**.
- A way **to see themselves**.
- A way **to see the world**.
- And a new way **to live**.

N. T. WRIGHT describes the Lord's Prayer as an invitation to share in the prayer-life of Jesus himself. But before we get into the prayer, we need to talk about something a lot of us struggle with: **PRAYER GUILT**.

I think we sometimes make prayer harder than it is supposed to be. We develop a *special prayer voice*. You know the voice. Nobody talks like that anywhere else. Suddenly we're *using words we never use* in normal conversation.

Lying underneath is a **nagging insecurity**:

- Am I doing this right?
- Do I pray enough?
- Should I be getting up at 4:30 in the morning?
- Do I sound spiritual enough?
- Why does that person sound so much better at prayer than I do?

Somewhere along the way, prayer became one more thing we're failing at.

The struggle is real. I won't sell myself as the *world's #1 prayer warrior*.

It feels sometimes that my memory is worse than Dory in Finding Nemo...

And maybe we need to start the series here today. Not about how we struggle with prayer, but

the guilt we've attached to prayer. Because Jesus didn't start with:

- Pray LONGER.
- Pray HARDER.
- Pray BETTER.

He started by taking the pressure off. Let's read **Matthew 6:5–8**.

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Jesus gave us two principles on prayer.

#1 – Prayer isn't performance. It's presence.

When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others...

- **Standing wasn't the problem.** Standing was a *completely normal posture* for Jewish prayer.
- Jesus didn't have a problem because they prayed in public.

- Matthew uses the word **φιλοῦσιν** (*philousin*). It means '*they love*'. **They loved** being seen praying.
- The PROBLEM was the audience.
- Prayer was supposed to turn their attention toward God, but they used prayer **turning everybody else's attention toward them**.
- They were *talking to God* but **thinking about the people watching them**.
- And that's the DANGER Jesus is exposing. You can SAY *all the right words to God* but your **heart is performing for somebody else**.
- Prayer isn't a PERFORMANCE where **God is the subject** and people are the audience.

Prayer is presence. God is the audience.

And we still do this. Nobody here is standing on the corner of Phoenix Street shouting prayers. But somebody asks you to pray before dinner. And suddenly you're not just talking to God anymore. You're **editing yourself** while you're talking to God.

- Was that spiritual enough?
- Should I quote a Scripture?

- Did I say “Lord” enough times?

DON'T BE LIKE BOB meme...because there's a little Bob in most of us. We start talking to God and *halfway through the prayer* we **start wondering** what everybody else thinks about my prayer. SUDDENLY there are **two audiences in the room**: God and everybody listening.

And Jesus says prayer only needs an audience of One.

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.

Jesus REMINDS his disciples **who they're actually talking to**.

- He could have said: Pray to the King.
- He could have said: Pray to the Almighty.
- He could have said: Pray to the Creator.

All of those things are *true about God*. But Jesus says: When you pray, you're talking to your **Father**. Prayer begins with knowing who you're talking to.

The *antidote to performance* isn't just privacy. **It's relationship**.

Jesus uses the word **ταμείον** (*tameion*) – for room. It's not a beautiful home office with candles burning and worship music playing softly in the background. **ταμείον** is a storeroom or a pantry. It was one of the *few places in a home* where you could **actually close the door**.

Jesus says: Go into the pantry. Shut the door. And pray.

- No CROWD. No APPLAUSE. Nobody to IMPRESS.
- **Just you and your Father.**

And here's the beautiful part. Jesus reminds us that He's already there.

- You didn't *summon* him.
- You didn't finally get his *attention*.
- You didn't pray *long enough* or *well enough* for him to show up.

You walked into the pantry and God was already there.

PHILIP YANCEY has this beautiful description of prayer:

Prayer means keeping company with God who is already present.

We don't need impressive vocabulary. We don't need to sound like our grandmothers or a charismatic pastor. We don't need to have our lives together. I can show up **angry** and **grateful** and **confused** and **happy** and **scared** and **doubting** and **tired**. I can even show up with *absolutely no idea what to say*. Because PRAYER BEGINS WITH PRESENCE.

And the One who is present is our Father.

Take-home #1 Prayer isn't performance. It's presence. It's keeping company with God.

But Jesus isn't finished. He gives us another principle for prayer.

#2 — Prayer doesn't make God care. It brings me to the God who already does.

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

The word translated as BABBLING is interesting. It's the only time this word was used in the New Testament. It carries the idea of piling words on top of words. **Repeating.** *Adding more.*

Jesus is CHALLENGING an assumption *we still struggle* with today:

- Maybe if I say enough, God will listen.
- Maybe if I use the right words.
- Maybe if I pray long enough.
- Maybe if I sound sincere enough.
- Maybe if enough people pray.

If we get all the maybes right, MAYBE THEN **God will finally pay attention** and answer my prayers.

And Jesus reminds us in MATTHEW 6 that that's not how God works.

- **He isn't condemning repetition.** He repeated the same prayer three times in Gethsemane.
- **He isn't condemning set prayers.** He's about to give us one.

Jesus is CHALLENGING the idea that somehow the right words or enough words or impressive words make God **more likely to listen.** *We don't have to impress God to get his attention.*

And then Jesus says something that *creates a lot of questions*:

Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

- If God already knows, why pray?
- If God knows about the diagnosis, why tell him?
- If God knows my marriage is struggling, why tell him?
- If God knows my kid is hurting, why tell him?
- If God knows I'm terrified about what happens next, why tell him?

That's the obvious questions created by Jesus' own words. *And Jesus doesn't give us a philosophical lecture* or an easy answer. He simply says: **Your Father knows.**

- Prayer isn't the morning briefing where God says: Cancer? Wow. I had no idea.
- When we pray, we're **not giving God information** He didn't have FIVE MINUTES AGO.
- Prayer is not trying to *convince a stingy God to finally care.*

Before you speak. Before you ask. Before you find the right words.

Your Father already knows. Your Father already cares.

TAKE-HOME #2 Prayer doesn't make God care. It brings me to the God who already does.

This does NOT mean prayer does nothing. Jesus TEACHES us to ask. He REMINDS us that:

- God **hears our prayers**.
- He **answers our prayers**.
- God **works through prayer**.

Sometimes in ways that leave us absolutely speechless.

And I'll need to be honest today. I don't COMPLETELY UNDERSTAND how God's sovereignty and **our prayers** work together. But the BIBLE *isn't embarrassed by the mystery*. What we need to hold on to:

- God already **knows**.
- God is **sovereign**.
- God is **at work**.
- God **invites us** to ask Him.

The PROBLEM IS that we measure our prayers by **what happened after we prayed**.

- Did the *cancer disappear*?

- Did the *marriage change*?
- Did I *get the job*?
- Did my *child come home*?
- Did God *fix it*?

And sometimes the answer is yes. Sometimes God answers in ways we could never have orchestrated ourselves. But we need to be honest about those moments when the **answer wasn't the one we begged for.**

- The cancer didn't disappear.
- The marriage didn't make it.
- The child didn't come home.
- The thing I pleaded with God to do didn't happen.

I'm not going to pretend that question isn't there. I'm not going to insult you with an easy answer this morning like EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON. But maybe. Just maybe part of OUR STRUGGLE is that we've **made the results of prayers the only measure** for *why we pray*.

Every time I pray, I bring my fear and my anger and my gratitude and my plans and my family and my uncertainty and my sin and even my completely ordinary Wednesday afternoon into **the presence of God.**

And while I pray God is also doing something in me.

Prayer changes the person praying.

N. T. WRIGHT helped me see something in the Lord's Prayer that I've missed. **Jesus is** rearranging our world through prayer.

Because that's not how I normally start my prayers. **I normally start with me.** And Jesus says: **Start somewhere else.** Start with God. His NAME. His KINGDOM. His WILL.

We need to *start with the bigger story.*

- God's kingdom coming.
- God's will being done.
- Heaven and earth coming together under the reign of God.

And then **bring my story into that one.**

Prayer isn't asking God to enter my story. Prayer TEACHES me to **locate my story inside God's.** And when that happens, *prayer changes me more than I realize.*

- Prayer changes what I want.
- Prayer changes what I notice.
- Prayer changes how I see the person who hurt me.
- Prayer changes what I think my life is actually meant for.

Maybe that's why the disciples didn't simply ask Jesus: *Lord, answer our prayers*.

They said: **Lord, teach us to pray**.

And that's what we're going to do over the coming weeks. We're going to slow this prayer down. Not because we need another formula. Not because the right words get better results.

But because maybe *we've spent years asking Jesus to bless our prayers* when **Jesus has been inviting us to learn his**. To become people shaped by the prayer of Jesus.

This week I want you to do something embarrassingly simple – **Matthew 6 Challenge #1**.

- Five minutes. No impressive words. No prayer voice. No King James English. No trying to fill every silence.
- Find somewhere quiet. Your kitchen. Your car. Your basement.
- Put an empty chair across from you. Not because God is sitting in the chair. But because some of us may need something physical to remind us that God is here.
- And begin with this:

Father, you are here. I am here. Here we are together.

- **And then swing for the fence. Tell the truth.** The anger. The fear. The gratitude. The doubt. The thing you're embarrassed to say out loud. The thing you desperately want. The thing you're afraid God might say no to. The thing you've been carrying alone.
- **Bring all of it. No holds barred.**

Because before you started praying, your Father already knew.

Before you walked into the room, your Father was already there.

And before you ever went looking for God, God came looking for you in Jesus.

That's where our prayer begins. Not with our search for God, **but with the God who has already moved toward us.**

So maybe this week you don't need to PRAY LONGER. You don't need to PRAY HARDER. You don't need to PRAY BETTER.

- *Just show up.*
- Close the door. Sit down. Bring whatever you've got.
- **Your Father is already there.**

Prayer isn't getting God's attention. It's giving God mine.