

“Prayer Pointers”

Does your prayer life stand in need of some improvement? Could you use pointers on how to pray more effectively? For most of us, if we're honest, we would have to say yes.

Let's look at some words of Jesus today that might give us some help! Turn to Matthew, chapter 6, verse 5. Jesus says, “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.”

Hebrew people, and the Jewish religion, placed high value on prayer. But by the time of Jesus, some Jewish praying had become elaborate, formalized, ritualistic. Many religious people were even using prayer as a self-serving act, to draw attention to themselves.

Here (in verse 5) Jesus tells us not to be like the hypocrites, who love to pray in public so they can be seen and praised for their prayers. Now, there aren't too many people today who love to pray in church, or on street corners, just to be draw attention to themselves! We don't quite have this problem that Jesus was talking about! If anything, *it's hard* to get people to pray in church or in public. How often at the start of a meeting if I say, “Will someone lead us in prayer?” it is met with silence. I've often joked, that a surefire way to quiet a crowd is to ask if someone will pray! A lot of people are scared to death of praying in a group, or in public.

But I still think we can heed Jesus' warning that prayer should never be something that draws attention to ourselves. There are people who may be good at praying in public, or in a group. They can pray *eloquent* prayers, or *long* prayers. But this should never be a cause for pride or show. If that's the case, the prayer is worthless – “they have their reward”, Jesus says.

Jesus continues. “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” (Matthew 6:6). When Jesus says we're to go into our room, shut the door, and pray, He's not against Christians praying together in a group. We can see many instances in the New Testament of believers in the early church praying together. Exciting things can happen today when God's people gather to pray together – in our worship services, in small groups, at Bible studies. Jesus is not saying, “Don't ever pray out loud or with others”. He is emphasizing, again, not to pray in public, or anywhere, just to get attention, or to show people how religious you are.

Jesus continues. “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. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:7-8). Jesus says don't heap up “empty phrases” – thinking the longer the prayer, the wordier the prayer, the better it is. The Greek verb here means “to babble”. Don't keep *babbling* – repeating the same empty phrases over and over again. I believe Jesus is telling us, “It's not the wordiness or how religious sounding the prayer is that counts – it's the heartfelt sincerity and simplicity that's important!”

Jews of the first century weren't the only ones who at times “babbed” in their prayer life!

Do you ever find that your praying is just words...empty words? Your grace before a meal is just routine, without much thought or feeling put into it. You are saying words in a prayer, but your mind is wandering onto something else. Or, your prayers tend to be empty repetition, like mumbling the words of the Lord's Prayer, or just kind of mumbling through a prayer printed in the church bulletin. (*Do you remember what we prayed for in the opening prayer today?*). Or, maybe you find yourself praying for the same thing, over and over, as if the more times you repeat your request the more chance you have of God answering your prayer.

How can we avoid this "babbling", this empty repetition of words? Let me suggest some ways.

For one thing, prayer should be natural. What is prayer? It is simply *communication with God.* Talking. *Listening.* Prayer should be as natural as breathing, or talking to a close friend. Of course, God is holy, and we are sinful. God should be revered. But we can still talk to God in a way that's natural and spontaneous. I think people today *are* less prone to some of the unnatural ways of praying found in previous generations – like feeling that we have to use King James language (thee, thou)...or that when we pray we have to shift into a "prayer tone" that's unnatural.

I love to hear new Christians, new converts, pray. Most new converts haven't yet learned a lot churchy language – and their praying is often refreshingly natural and heartfelt. Rosalind Rinker, who wrote several very helpful books on prayer, and developed a group prayer style called *Conversational Prayer*, once said, "If prayer is talking to Jesus, why not stop trying to pray and just talk to Him." Jesus says, "Don't babble when you pray..." Pray naturally.

Also, we can avoid those "empty phrases" Jesus mentions if we pray prayers that are *specific.* Sometimes our prayers can become generalized prayers that we pray over and over. "Lord, bless our nation...our church" (what exactly do we expect God to do?). "Dear God, forgive my sins..." (what sins in particular are you sorry for?). My first year of theological seminary was at Wesley Seminary in Washington, D.C. I stayed on campus Tuesday through Friday. My roommate was a young clergyman from West Virginia, Arnold Husk. Sometimes we would pray together in our room. There is one prayer Arnie prayed that I've never forgotten. He prayed, "Lord, bless man." Well, I couldn't help but laugh, and kidded him, "That's probably the most generalized prayer I've ever heard!"

Praying in general isn't *wrong*, but being more specific in our prayers can create more variety and interest in our prayer life. I remember prayer meetings I attended in my home church, where the same people prayed basically the same general prayer at every meeting. To be honest, it got kind of boring.

How much more exciting if we follow the lead of a prayer group I read about, which keeps a record of specific prayer requests, then notes when God answers that prayer. The group can then acknowledge how God has answered that prayer, and thank God for it!

So, instead of praying, "Lord, bless our church", we might pray, "Lord, if it pleases you, send us

10 new people to attend by this time next year.” Instead of praying, “Lord, forgive my sins”, we might pray, “Lord, forgive me for the resentment I’m holding towards (name the person), and help me let go of it.” I think you get idea!

Another way to avoid “empty phrases” is for our prayers to be *honest*. It’s easy to be a bit evasive, even deceptive, in our praying! We pray what we think we *ought* to say, or what we think God wants to hear, rather than what we’re really thinking or feeling. Or, if we are praying out loud in a group, we avoid praying what we’re really thinking or feeling. But, isn’t this rather foolish? God knows what’s on our mind, and what we really want, anyway.

What’s it like to really be honest in our praying? Have you ever sat down to eat, and you’re not thrilled about what you’re having at that meal? But you say a nice grace, “Thank you, Lord, for all Your gifts, and for this meal placed before us.” Then, maybe at some point later you complain about the meal, or perhaps grumble that you’re having leftovers *again*! A famous preacher, Peter Marshall, hated a certain type of food. Whenever they would have it, he would usually say to his wife Catherine, “You’ll have to say grace tonight!”

Some years ago, a Christian author by the name of Keith Miller, wrote a book that helped launch a lay renewal in the church. The book was titled, *The Taste of New Wine*. It included a stimulating chapter on prayer. Keith told of his struggle to develop a regular period of prayer in the morning. He writes, “At this point a new honesty crept into my prayers. Before this, I had always started out by saying, ‘God, I adore you’ (whether I really did or not that morning). Now I could say (when it was true), ‘Lord, I am sorry but I am tired of you today. I am tired of trying to do your will all the time, and I’d like to run away and raise hell.’ But I could also continue: ‘But Lord, forgive me for this willfulness; and even though I don’t feel like it, I ask you to lead me today to be your person and to do your will.’” Or, “Instead of saying, ‘Lord, today I exaggerated a little on my expense account, but you know everyone does’, I was able to say, ‘Lord, I *cheated* on my expense account today. Help me not to be a dirty thief.’” “Or, instead of saying, ‘Lord, I couldn’t help noticing that secretary down the hall...it was such a windy day...but Lord you know that boys will be boys’, I began to be able to level with God and to say openly to Him, ‘Lord, I thought of sleeping with that girl in my imagination. This is the kind of man I am. Forgive me and give me the power and desire to be different.’”

Another example of honesty in prayer comes from Rosalind Rinker, in her book *Communicating Love Through Prayer*. She’s in a group, praying informally. She began to pray, deciding she would admit in prayer (before the others) her tendency to be “bossy” and always think her ideas superior to others. So she starts, “Lord, if I have been...”. Then she stopped. “Lord, I sometimes have a tendency to...”. Again, she stopped. Finally, with determination: “Dear Lord Jesus, *forgive me* for always thinking my way is better, and for always wanting to ‘boss’ everything.” At that point, the others joined informally: “Thank you, Lord, for Ros’s honesty.” Another person prayed, “Yes, thank you. We have always known she was like this, but it sure helps us to hear her admit it!”

One of my all time favorites for honest prayer was from my seminary days. In this one class, we

students would each take a turn to open the class with a prayer. This was the day of a big exam. The professor handed out the sheet with the test questions. I look at it and gagged. The student who prayed that morning prayed this, and I quote: “God, help! Amen!”

Years ago, I bought a little offbeat book written by a British clergyman, David Head, a book called *He Sent Leanness*. It’s a tiny, rather humorous, book of prayers – prayers we might pray, if we were really, really honest!

Here are a few samples of these prayers, “We have done wrong, but we hope nobody will find out.”

(A litany) “We pray that the sick may be visited, the prisoner cared for, the refugee rehabilitated, the naked clothed, the orphan housed, and that we may be allowed to enjoy our own firesides, evening by evening, in peace. Lord, be good to us. Christ, make things easy for us. Lord, deliver us from the necessity of doing anything.”

Here’s another prayer we might think, but never pray: “God forgive him...for I never will.” Or this, “Bless all natives in foreign parts, and keep them there.” Another: “I’ve always lived a decent life. What have I done to deserve this?” And I love this one, “I thank thee that I had more gallstones than Mrs. Peters.”

Have you ever looked at some of the honest prayers in the Bible – how some of God’s people just let it hang out? The Psalm writers. Job. Jeremiah. God isn’t intimidated by our honest prayers – He knows what we’re thinking or feeling anyway! Sometimes honest prayers can be the first step to a new relationship with God! Don’t heap up empty phrases, Jesus said.

Just a word about making our prayers *brief*. Jesus says, “Do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; *for they think they will be heard for their many words*” (Matthew 6:7). The value of a prayer is not determined by its *length*! A 20-minute prayer is not necessarily twice as effective as a 10-minute prayer!

Now we have to be careful, here. I hesitate to talk about the need for prayers to be brief, since most of us today don’t spend much time in prayer. There is value in spending chunks of time, alone, with God in prayer. Jesus did! But what I’m saying is, *get to the point when we pray*, and don’t just keep repeating over and over again the same repetitious words!

A brief, heartfelt prayer, to the point, can be like dynamite in its power. The thief on the cross prayed, “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom” – and this brief prayer opened up the gates of paradise for this repentant man. The Lord’s Prayer is a brief prayer, but it pretty much covers what we need to ask of God. A radiant Christian I know told of how he was converted to Christ when he prayed a sincere prayer of exactly 7 words: “God, help me, help me, help me.”

It’s been over half a century, but I still remember the exact words of a brief prayer one of my

seminary professors would often pray as we started class: “God, save us from ourselves, lest we perish.”

Don’t worry about how long your prayer is. Pray what you mean. Mean what you pray. Then stop! A good rule of thumb, I believe, is this: For *public* prayers, keep them short. But in our *private praying*, pray as long as we feel we need to, in order to connect with God.

Jesus said, “Don’t heap up empty phrases” (don’t babble!). We can keep our prayers natural...specific...honest...brief.

Jesus here also talks about *trust*. “Don’t be like them (those who “babble”), for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:8). Prayer and trust go together. You don’t have to get wordy. You don’t have to keep repeating and repeating. You don’t have to embellish your prayer with fancy, beautiful words. God knows what you need even before you ask. *Trust Him* to hear and to meet your needs.

Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
June 21, 2026

