



By David Christensen

If there was one thing that the Jewish people in the first century knew all about, it was prayer. Their culture was steeped in, and devoted to, prayer. Three times every day all men, women, slaves, and children were required to stop what they were doing and say their prayers. Prayers were recited in the morning, at 3:00 P.M. when the afternoon sacrifice was offered and again at sunset. If a man was working up in a tree or on top of a course of stones, he must come down from that place to say his prayers. A bridegroom was exempted from his prayers only on the first night of his marriage. Those whose dead were not yet buried were also exempt from the regulations regarding prayer. All of these instructions and much more were recorded in the Mishnah (Berakoth) which is the collection of Rabbinic writings governing Jewish life.¹

The prayer to be recited was not just any prayer. The prayer uttered at these times was known as the Tephillah or "The Prayer, The Grand Benediction." The Tephillah consisted of 18 prayers which were memorized and then recited. After the person recited the prescribed prayer, the person would add his or her specific prayers and requests. In the morning, the faithful Jew was required to recite two prayers before the *Shema* and one prayer after so that one prayer was a short prayer and the other a long prayer. In the evening, he must say two prayers before and two prayers after the *Shema*.² There were also prayers for figs, grapes or pomegranates. The faithful Jew was to stop and pray if he saw a shooting star at night, lightning flash across the sky or a storm approaching. He was to stop and pray if he built a house or bought new items for the house. When he entered a town, he was to pray twice, some Rabbis said four times, and when he left that town, he was to pray once.

The religious leaders of Judaism had created a culture of prayer, but the prayer was designed to say more to other people than it said to God. Prayer was a sign of personal piety before others not true communication with God. Prayer had become horizontal, not vertical in its implementation. Jesus tries to correct this abuse of prayer in Matthew 6:5-6. Jesus teaches us that prayer is relational

communication, not a religious exercise. We are to talk with God for men not through God to men. Jesus teaches us to stop using prayer to send a message to the people around us because we, in our evangelical churches, fall prey to the same temptation to use prayer to influence others instead of to talk with God.

THE SUBTLE PRESSURE OF PRIDE IN PRAYER

Do we pray to impress people? Public prayers are often phrased not so much to talk with God but to impress others with our spirituality. The pride of public prayer is an occupational hazard of the pastoral ministry. We, pastors, are regularly asked to pray in public, and no one wants to pray with bad grammar or weak theology, so we phrase our prayers carefully. Choosing our words to reflect well on us is a small step from composing our prayers to speak clearly to God. Prayer language can be used to reinforce a sermon or influence other Christians. Much like a husband who is talking to his children but sending a message to his wife, we can be talking to God but sending a message to those who are listening.

Pride is the greatest hindrance to real prayer. I find it instructive that Jesus does not start his teaching about prayer (Mt. 6:5) with an attempt to get people excited about prayer or to motivate people to pray more. He begins his teaching on prayer by warning us about hypocrisy in prayer which would tend to put a damper on our enthusiasm for prayer. To start instruction on prayer with correction about prayer is like throwing a wet blanket on a flickering fire. It would discourage listeners from praying. I remember one of my early Bible College classes where the professor called on a student to open the class in prayer that first day with about seventy of us freshmen listening. When the student finished his stumbling prayer, the professor proceeded to critique his prayer. We were all glad we didn't get called on to pray, and we prayed that we wouldn't get called on to pray in future classes. Perhaps his correction motivated us to pray honestly in private, but it certainly didn't excite us about praying in public.

Jesus is more interested in a few people engaging in real prayer than crowds of people praying show prayers. He knows that pride shackles our spirits in prayer. A woman said to a guest at dinner, "We say grace at dinner each day to remind us around here that there is something bigger than our egos."³ Sadly, prayer can be used as a form of ego gratification so we must guard against praying for show. Jesus said that the Pharisees, "love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men" (Mt. 6:5). Standing was the normal posture of prayer in the Jewish synagogues. They would stand to pray facing the direction where the Holy of Holies was located in the Temple of Jerusalem.⁴ Standing, of course, is not the only posture for prayer. The question is, are we engaging in real prayer or show prayer.

The story is told of a certain man who struggled to find the right posture for prayer. He tried kneeling, but it was uncomfortable. He tried standing, but his legs got tired. He tried to pray while seated in a hard chair but his back hurt and it seemed disrespectful to God somehow. Finally, one day he was walking through a field, and he fell headfirst into an open well, and did he ever pray!⁵ We find people in the Bible kneeling, standing and falling on their faces to pray. The physical posture is not nearly as important as the spiritual attitude. Do we pray in submission to the Lord or do we pray in the arrogance of our souls?

Jesus talks about people who pray in the synagogues or on the street corners. In the synagogue, the prayer leader would stand before the case containing the Torah scrolls and lead in prayer. Any male

adult member was entitled to take his turn leading in prayer. The priesthood was divided into twenty-four courses of priests who would each serve the temple in Jerusalem for a week at a time. Each course of priests also had its own group of laymen. Some of these laymen accompanied their course of priests to the temple during their week of service, but the others gathered in the synagogue to pray every day that week. Each afternoon at the time of the sacrifice they would gather in their synagogue for prayer and so participate in the temple sacrifice from afar. These men were known as the “standing posts” – the “pillars” of their synagogues.⁶

The reference to praying “on the street” conjures up the image of the Pharisees stationing themselves on the street corners and praying in a loud voice so that they attracted everyone’s attention. Jesus is not referring to such an obvious show of arrogance. The Pharisees were too scrupulous in their spirituality to be so publicly proud. Feigned humility achieved a better spiritual “look.” Jesus is referring to the afternoon time of prayer. At 3:00 P.M. a trumpet would blow announcing the time of the afternoon sacrifice which was also the time of prayer.⁷ The religious leaders such as the Pharisees or “standing posts” would conveniently contrive, supposedly unintentionally, to be at a major intersection in the town at the time of afternoon prayers instead of being in their own private homes or even the synagogue. The Greek word for “street” meant a wide street, not an alley or side street. The Pharisees would be positioned when the time came so they could stop and pray right then and there. Others could see their piety and say, “What holy men these are to stop and pray wherever they might be!”

We can do the same today. Humility is a virtue in our churches. Pride is condemned. We receive approval for humility and disapproval for pride. Prayer is a primary means of accomplishing feigned humility just like the Pharisees. We don’t have to shout out our prayers or call attention to our holiness in a showy way. Instead, we just make ourselves conspicuous at the time and place of prayer. At church meetings, we make ourselves available to be called on for prayer. It is better to be called on to pray than to offer to pray. We make sure we become known as “prayer warriors” in our church, so we will be called on to pray. We call attention to our prayer life. We begin a testimony by saying “as I was praying about this in my morning devotions.” When we pray, we make sure that our words demonstrate our piety in the practice of prayer.

Jesus says they have their reward. They got what they wanted – the respect of others for their feigned humility. We desire that reward too. Public prayers earn the wages of respect. The word translated to “be seen” by men means to “shine.”⁸ The word translated “have” was a business term for a receipt you received when you paid a bill.⁹ The word for “reward” literally means “wages.”¹⁰ Jesus says that these men earn the wages they deserve. The wages of such prayers are real. We get to shine before men! This is our wage. We earn the respect of people around us through our public prayers. We may say nothing at all that expresses any true prayer. In fact, Jesus goes on to warn against babbling in prayer! However, such prayers have their superficial reward. We get to shine before others at that moment, and some of us become highly skilled at shining brightly.

Public prayers are often for show. Jesus is not saying that public prayers are wrong. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not so much contrasting as comparing. He is not merely saying one way is wrong and another is right. He is, instead, comparing the good with the best. He is raising the standard for our spiritual lives. Prayer is good but how we pray may not be best. The danger is that in public prayer the subtle pressure of pride can shackle our spirits in prayer. Jesus is not saying we should never pray in public. Jesus is warning us about the dangers of public prayer.

The problem of public prayer is that we can begin to talk through God to men all too easily! Every preacher knows this danger acutely. After all, we are supposed to be able to pray spiritual prayers. Prayer becomes our profession. Every Sunday we must “do” a “pastoral prayer.” We are the Levites, and many Christians are the “standing posts” so prayer can degenerate quickly into a show we perform for others. Prayer must not become a performance skill we cultivate in public but the overflow our prayer in private.

THE SIMPLE POWER OF PRIVACY IN PRAYER

The antidote to performance prayer is to apply the public/private test for prayer.

- 1) Do we pray more in public than in private?
- 2) Do we pray differently in public than we do in private?

The pressure of pride increases in direct proportion to the discontinuity between our private and public prayers. If we change the language of prayers in public, we will succumb to pride. If we change our vocal intonations in public, we will succumb to pride. If we pray more in public than in private, we will succumb to pride. Others may never know because they cannot see the heart but God knows because God sees. The bottom line is: Do we pray to impress people or to enjoy God?

Privacy frees our spirits in prayer (Mt. 6:6). Jesus tells us to go into our private rooms to pray because He knows that in the privacy of our heart we can be free to express ourselves to Him honestly and openly. Most Jewish homes of that era only had one main room where everyone lived, so there was little privacy in the home. Many, however, would have a small room more like a storeroom where they would store their possessions.¹¹ We might call it is a closet! The wealthy would have a big closet, but the poor might have a tiny space. Here, right here in the closet, with all your most treasured possessions to remind you, close the door and talk with God. He is a treasure beyond compare.

We go into our closet and talk to God who is “in secret!” The word didn’t mean that God was a secret to be kept from others. The word meant “hidden” or “private.”¹² The Father is found in private for He is not visible to this world. We can go into our prayer closet and talk to our God who is unseen in this world but seen in prayer. Prayer opens our eyes to the wonders of the God who exists incognito much of the time.

Unlike public prayers that earn the wages of human honor, private prayers enjoy the rewards of personal relationship. Our Father, who sees what is done in private will reward us (Mt. 6:6). The word for reward used here is different than the word translated reward in verse five. The word for reward in private prayer means to return or give back something.¹³ What does our Father give back to us? He gives back what we gave to Him – our love! Private prayer is a conversation between two lovers. Like the young lady, who takes the phone to a private room to talk with her fiancé so no one will hear, private prayer involves the whispers of love between God and us. He returns the love we affirm to Him. One pastor writes, “Meaningful prayer looks like the communion between two people caught up in a love affair.”¹⁴ Lovers seek privacy. Lovers do not look for the busiest intersection in the city to share their intimate thoughts with each other. Lovers look for a private place to whisper their love. So it is in real prayer.

In the language of the Christian mystics, we need a sanctuary or hermitage where we can be alone with God. That sanctuary may be a walk in the woods or sitting under a favorite oak tree. It may be the sanctuary of our car or even the living room after all have fallen asleep for the night. The result of private prayer is powerful. Here we talk to God for men not through God to men. Kent and Barbara Hughes write:

Think of it this way: our lives are like photographic plates, and prayer is like a time exposure to God. As we expose ourselves to God ... His image is imprinted more and more upon us.¹⁵

Real prayer is natural, like water bubbling up from a spring. When the prayers bubble up, they are expressed naturally in public in sometimes surprising but refreshing ways. I read a story about a retired missionary to Africa for whom prayer had become a habit of life. Conversation with God bubbled out of him so naturally that, when he went to take his driver's test in his seventies, he said to the examiner, "I always pray before I drive so will you pray with me right now?" I wonder what the examiner thought, but the missionary passed his test!

Much of our church prayer life consists of what I call "end zone prayers." The football player celebrates his touchdown by kneeling in the end zone to offer thanks before the millions who are watching. Perhaps for a rare few, the end zone prayer is the bubbling up of the prayer spring that fills the athlete's life in private, but I doubt it. I suspect that many of those end zone prayers, like many of our prayers in church, are designed to say more to those watching than to God. I have more respect for the athlete who "high-fives" his team mates all around him and then, in the quiet of his locker or the privacy of his car, he thanks God in full sincerity where no one sees him and he cannot be seduced by all the watching fans.

End zone prayers tend to be for show and lack any real power, but real prayer is powerful. William Carey, the great missionary to India, is often called the "father of modern missions" because God raised up thousands of missionaries through his example. William Carey is well-known to Christians, but most don't know about his paralyzed bed-ridden sister who prayed regularly for him for fifty years. She was a major reason for his success!¹⁶

Every pastor knows that the church is only successful through prayer, but every pastor also knows that it must be real prayer and not show prayer. Many years ago, early in my ministry, I asked twelve people to commit to pray for me every Sunday morning. I asked these twelve people to pray for my family too since, contrary to what many imagine, Sunday mornings in a pastor's house is not a time of quiet serenity or visible holiness! I would, in turn, promise to pray for them on Monday mornings as they began their work week. We called it "THE ORDER OF THE CLOSET." The order of the closet was private. It was just between them, God and me. Nobody knew but me who those twelve were, but I know they were my faithful prayer warriors for many years. God worked powerfully in our church during those years when the order of the closet was fully operational! Most of those prayer warriors are now with the Lord, but I shall always treasure the memory of them as fellow members of the order of the closet.

¹ *The Mishnah: Berakoth*, Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes by Herbert Danby, Oxford University Press, 1933, pp.2-10.

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- ² The *Shema* formed an Israelite Statement of Faith drawn from Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41. Originally the *Shema* consisted only of Deuteronomy 6:4. The expanded *Shema* was used in liturgical settings.
- ³ Maxie Dunnam, "Living the Psalms," *Christianity Today*, April 5, 1993.
- ⁴ Emil Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, T & T Clark, 1979, 2:449.
- ⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, Crossway, 2006, p.103.
- ⁶ Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*, Fortress Press, 1978, p.71.
- ⁷ Jeremias, *Prayers*, p.74.
- ⁸ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, edited by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, second edition revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Walter Bauer's Fifth Edition, 1958. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979, p.851.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.84.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.523.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.803.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p.454.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p.90.
- ¹⁴ C. Welton Gaddy, *Discipleship Journal*, Issue 92, 1996, p.22.
- ¹⁵ Kent and Barbara Hughes, *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome*, Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1987, p.72.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.74.

