

**Best Practices for Followers of Jesus – Prayer, Part 1**  
**From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”**  
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**Introduction**

I’m going to date myself here. When I grew up, I spent a lot of time in front of the television. I sometimes like to say that the TV was my babysitter. Being a child of the 60’s, one of the shows we saw a lot involved “The Three Stooges”.

Like I said, I’m dating myself.

The Three Stooges could be described in a number of ways. One that fits our message today would be to say that the Three Stooges could always find the wrong way to do something.



In one episode, these three men somehow got hired as plumbers. In one scene, Curly is sent into a bathroom to fix a leaking faucet. He winds up pulling the valve out of the wall which results in a full-force water stream splashing into his face. He decides he can fix this by screwing in a 3-foot length of pipe. Unfortunately, this only moved the water stream 3 feet. So, he screws in another length of pipe which again only moves the stream a few more feet. Throw in a few angles and before he knows it, he’s made a cage for himself out of pipes - And the leak is still flowing at full force. You can look it up on YouTube sometime – It’s called “A plumbing we will go.”

So, what do the Three Stooges have to do with our topic today? Well, you’d be surprised how many times people have taken simple commands from the Lord and turned them into a complex mess.

We’re in our series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe.” In this series, we’re walking systematically through the Gospel According to Matthew. We’re in chapters 5 through 7, a section we’re calling, “The Christian Manifesto”.

In our last session, we began chapter 6. Here, we started a sub-series that we’re calling “Best Practices for Followers of Jesus. A “best practice” happens when there’s something you want to do, and there is a best way to do it. There are many things that followers of Jesus do. We want to do them in the best way possible.

Another point of a best practice is that someone has already figured out how to do it. Or the maker of a product gives you instructions so you'll get the most out of it. So, Jesus tells us how to do things so we don't have to figure it out on our own.

Knowing the best ways to do things means we're effective. If you don't know the best way to do something, you may do it badly - You may wind up looking like the three stooges - Or worse.

Today, Jesus is going to tell us some things about prayer. He has a lot to say, so discussing prayer will take more than one session. Let's look at the first part:

5 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. 6 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. (Matthew 6:5-6)

Let's break this apart.

## **I. Prayer is assumed.**

First, it's important to note that in all the things Jesus will teach us in this series, the action is always assumed. Let's look at the first statement: "And when you pray..." Jesus assumes that his followers will pray. Why does he do that? There are two reasons, I think.

### **A. The nature of prayer**

First, it's because of what Prayer is. Prayer is just talking to God. In our next session, we'll talk about what many call "The Lord's Prayer." It starts with the words, "Our Father in heaven". We are encouraged to think of God as a father. Followers of Jesus are encouraged to think of ourselves as God's children.

When things are working well in a family, children talk to their parents. Imagine that you're invited to have dinner with a family. You sit down for a meal with Mom, Dad, and a child; a little girl. You notice that the girl isn't talking, so you try to start up a conversation. You say, "Hey, what's your name?" The child doesn't answer. Dad says, "Oh, she never talks." Now you feel bad. You say something like, "Oh, I'm so sorry. She can't talk?" Dad answers, "Oh, she can talk - she just doesn't talk with us. She talks with friends. She talks with other children. She talks with total strangers. She just doesn't talk to us."

Well, something is wrong here - Severely wrong. Children talk with parents. In fact, parents usually get the first words a child can speak - Words like "mama" and "papa." Jesus assumes

that his followers will pray because prayer is talking with God. And God wants to have an intimate relationship with us - A relationship like a loving father has with his children.

## **B. It's What God's Word tells us to do.**

Next Jesus assumes that his followers will pray because that's what God's Word tells us to do. God's Word includes all kinds of situations where people pray. And as we are reminded, God's Word matters to the Master - So, it matters to his followers. In the days of Jesus, believers had the Old Testament. Most of the major figures in the Old Testament prayed.

The Hebrew people look to three men who are called "The Patriarchs" - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Abraham prayed. Isaac prayed. Jacob prayed.

One of the greatest prophets was Moses, who gave the Law. Moses prayed.

All Israel was told to pray:

What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? (Deuteronomy 4:7)

After the people of Israel entered the promised land, they entered a period called the time of the Judges. They prayed. After that came the time of the kings. The kings prayed - Especially King David. He was a great man of prayer. Many of his prayers are recorded in the book of Psalms. All along the way, God sent prophets to Israel. The prophets prayed, too.

Everyone from common people all the way up to the greatest prophets and kings prayed. God's Word tells everyone to pray. That's why Jesus simply assumed his followers would pray, too.

So, it's not a question of whether or not to pray. It's how to pray in the best way. Jesus assumes his followers will pray. So now, he tells them how. He gives them the best practice. Let's read on.

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. (Matthew 6:5-6)

Jesus starts with the wrong way to do it. The wrong way to pray is to be a hypocrite. If you were to say this is the "three stooges" way to do it, that would be kind. Jesus has very harsh words for hypocrites.

Recall from the last session that the word "hypocrite" is the word used for "actor" in ancient Greece. We've all seen the classic image of the laughing mask of comedy coupled with the



crying mask of tragedy. The actors of that day wore a mask so they could play a different person from who they were. Being a different person than who you are is fine for the actor. It's a very bad idea for people who claim to represent God. Jesus says that the leaders of his day were hypocrites. They were one person on the outside, but another on the inside. In other words, they were fakes.

They would stand in very public places like the synagogues and street corners. At this point we should mention that as far as we can tell, Jesus didn't have a problem with praying in public.

He did it himself at times. There are times when people pray together in a group. We'll talk about that when we get to "The Lord's Prayer" in the next session. It's not wrong for one person (or more) to lead at those times.

One example of public prayer in those days was the synagogue. The synagogue was where believers gathered to worship and hear teaching from God's word, much like we do in church today. Another place people could pray was on the street. In those days, every faithful Jew would stop at specific times of the day to pray. If you happened to be on the street at the time, that was OK.

What Jesus is looking at here is motive. What was the motive for people to pray? Jesus said that many people, especially religious leaders, wanted exclusively to be seen by others. They wanted to put on a show. They wanted to be impressive.

Notice that Jesus mentions a street corner, as opposed to just a street. Street corners have even more people than a street. So if someone wanted to put on a show, they would walk past the location where they normally would have prayed. They would walk until they hit the corner, where more people would walk by and see.

So, Jesus is looking at the motive. The wrong motive for prayer is to be seen by others.

If you read the last article in the series, this is sounding familiar. In that session, Jesus mentioned the problem of giving with a bad motive. People in the days of Jesus were giving to be seen by others. For both groups, Jesus has a sad warning: "Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full."

Again, a reminder from the last session. It's not wrong to seek a reward. You just need to make sure you're seeing the right reward from the right place. The wrong reward is the approval of others. The right reward is the approval of our Father in heaven. If you give or pray seeking the approval of others, Jesus warns us that we will receive our reward in full. That's it, no more.

So, how do we pray the right way? How do we develop good motives, pure motives? Again, Jesus will tell us the right way - The Best way.

6 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. (Matthew 6:6)

“But, when YOU pray”. You are to be different than the hypocrites. There is a very practical way to start to develop the right motives.

Last week, we learned to practice righteous deeds in private. Jesus starts with this principle again. Find a private place. Go there. Go there alone. Close the door. Then, pray to your Father in heaven.

What will happen when you do that? No one will see what you’re doing. At least, no human will see. The Father in heaven, who is himself unseen, sees everything.

3 The eyes of the Lord are everywhere,  
keeping watch on the wicked and the good.  
(Proverbs 15:3)

God is fully capable of seeing behind closed doors. That can be a good thing, and that can be a bad thing. For now, it’s a very good thing.

What happens when we go to a private place to pray? Your Father will see. And he will reward you.

For this to work, you need faith. You need faith that the Father is in fact capable of seeing things done in private. And you need faith that he will reward such things.

We learned last week that the best practice of privacy does two things for us. It helps us to develop pure motives. It helps us to grow in our faith.

So once again, Jesus teaches us that privacy is the best practice. It’s the best practice when we give. It’s the best practice when we pray.

But, as we said, prayer is a big topic. So, Jesus has more advice for us. Let’s read on:

7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:7-8)

“...do not keep babbling like pagans...” What does Jesus mean by that? Every now and then, we run into words in the original language that present a challenge. Most of the words in the Bible, by far, are perfectly clear. But sometimes we get a big idea rather than a specific point. Let’s see how different translators brought this idea into English:

**NASB** "...do not use thoughtless repetition as the Gentiles do..."

**ESV** "...do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do..."

**KJV** "...use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do..."

**NIV** "...do not keep on babbling like pagans..."

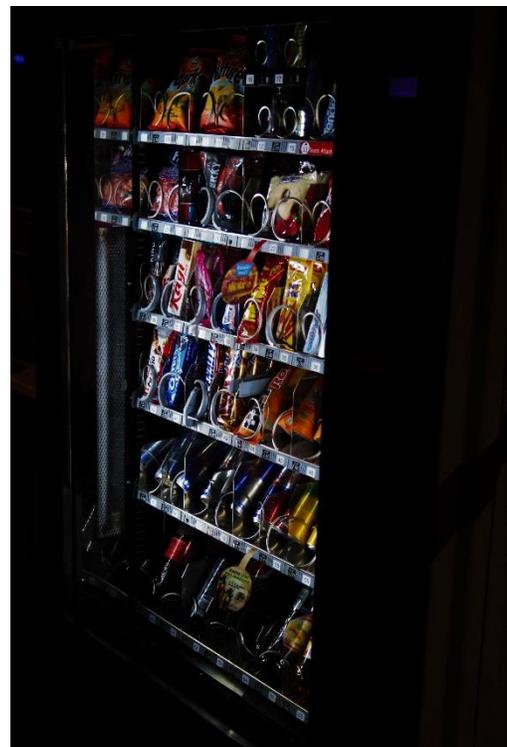
When we look at multiple translations, we see some common ideas. "Thoughtless, empty, vain": In other words, the mind is not engaged. Because your mind isn't engaged, you're saying things that don't make sense. So, the NIV uses the word "Babbling". Then we see "repetition (twice), heap up, keep on". We get a picture of someone saying things that have no meaning. And they keep repeating those things that have no meaning.

Jesus tells us that the Pagans do this. This isn't meant to be a derogatory phrase. The word "pagan" simply means, "Someone who has never met God." Remember, God wants his followers to think of him as a loving father. So, in Christian circles we talk about having a personal relationship with God. We talk about knowing God. When you have a relationship with someone, you talk with them.

When people don't have this relationship with God, they relate to him in different ways. For some, God is someone to be avoided at all costs. But others see God as a kind of vending machine. You put money into a vending machine and stuff comes out. With God, some people think, you send things up, and he sends things down. You send up prayers, God sends back what you want. With a vending machine, you put in money. With God, people these people think, you pay with good works.

This is a shame, because it's not what God wants for people. Jesus further describes people who think this way" "...for they think they will be heard because of their many words."

There's a problem with looking at God as though he was some kind of vending machine. It doesn't take long for people to figure out that he doesn't work that way.



Let's consider an example. Someone looks over the past month and they see some goods works. Maybe they attended worship service. Maybe they donated some money to the place of worship. Then, they realize that they want something. So they make a request to God - they pray. Then, they wait a bit. However, what they wanted didn't happen. They look at their watch. They tap their foot. Still no answer.

What next?

You can do two things if you're in this school of thought. 1) You can add more good works. The problem with this is that good works get expensive after a while. 2) So, you add words - Perhaps many words.

Jesus said that all over the pagan world, you could see examples of people who never met God, and who viewed him as a kind of vending machine. And so, they mindlessly repeated words over and over again, thinking they would be heard for their many words. Jesus said, "don't do that." "Do not be like them."

Why not?

"for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

The same God who sees everything knows everything. He knows what you need even before you ask.

So, the wrong way to pray is to mindlessly repeat words thinking God can't hear you otherwise. The right way to pray involves several things. First, work on the assumption that you have a loving Father who wants you to have everything you need - In other words, have faith in the goodness of God. Next, engage your mind. If you work on these assumptions, there are three answers that you will get from God when you pray.

1) Yes. God will grant your request. 2) Yes but wait. It's not the best time yet. At these times, you need faith in God's goodness. This produces patience. 3) No - because God has something better. What you're asking for is not the best. The infinite, all knowing, and loving God knows what is best, and you'll get it at the right time.

So, Jesus has told us some right ways to go about prayer. He has given us best practices. We started out with a story from the Three Stooges. I used them because sometimes it helps to be entertaining. And I wanted to stress that sadly, people throughout the ages have come up with all kinds of ways to take good activities and make them into complicated messes.

Before we close, I need to mention just a few negative examples. In doing this, I don't want to demean or belittle people. So, let's get rid of the comic image and concentrate on these practices. To stress, we're not going to do this because we want to make fun of people. We're certainly not doing this because we want to feel superior. On the other hand, if people are doing things that aren't effective, or which are counter-productive, we want to warn them.

With that, let's look at a few negative examples.

## Negative Examples

Because much of the religious leadership in the days of Jesus were corrupt, they became the target of Jesus' criticism. One thing the religious leaders did was write out long prayers. These prayers were very eloquent sounding, but they didn't come from the heart. So, they started out badly, and deteriorated from there. Leaders would recite these prayers without engaging their minds.

Today, this is embodied in what is called liturgy. In a liturgy, everything in a church worship service is scripted. Everything is written out in advance. Everything is followed closely. The script rarely changes. Sadly, churches who follow a heavy liturgical tradition sometimes fall into the trap of repeating things over and over without ever engaging the mind, much less the hearts of the participants.

We should mention: Is it completely wrong to write out a prayer or a church service? No – We just need to be careful to keep our minds engaged.

Sometimes, even in non-liturgical traditions, people can fall into bad habits. I've heard many prayers started with the words, "Lord, thank you for this day." That's not a wrong things to say. It's just that sometimes it's a thing that people say without engaging their minds.

Or, people will say, "Lord, we just want to..." Then they make their request. This implies that we're making a small request. We don't want to ask for anything big. Big requests, people sometimes think, bother God. So, we just want to ask for small, easy things. This totally negates the idea of approaching God as a heavenly Father who cares about. If you think you need something big, ask for something big. We are children of the King. We can walk with confidence into the courts of God to make our requests. So do it - Ask big! Don't be embarrassed!

Next, Jesus spoke of the Pagan world. The world of people who have never met God. In today's world, this is probably best represented by a device called a prayer wheel. A prayer wheel consists of a stick, a handle. On top of the handle is a small cylinder. People who use this write a prayer on paper and insert it into the cylinder. They then spin the device. It is thought that every time the cylinder spins, the prayer goes up to God.

This is very sad. It's total disengagement of the mind. The prayer wheel represents a sad illusion of spirituality that tragically misleads the people who use it.

There's one last negative example for today (With all due respect to our Catholic friends): The Rosary. People who use the Rosary move a bead. Then, they utter a prayer. They move another bead. They utter the same prayer again. They repeat this for each bead. I'm very sorry to say that in my opinion, this is exactly what Jesus told us to avoid. Although it may be possible to discipline yourself to think about the prayer each time it's said, the temptation is to disengage the mind.

Now, we should mention: Is it wrong to repeat a prayer? Are there times when a prayer is not immediately answered, and we need to be persistent? The answer is, yes. We'll run into some of those situations as we work our way through the book of Matthew. However, in those times when we pray for the same thing on more than one occasion, we need to engage our minds. And we must engage our minds every time we pray.

Let's pull this all together.

## **Conclusion**

Today, we've learned one more best practice for followers of Jesus. We've learned the best way to pray. Prayer, like giving, is best done in secret. It's OK to pray publicly, and we do that a lot. However, we must also balance out the public times with private. So find that private place, that inner room where you can close the door and pray to your heavenly Father. Doing this helps us to have pure motives, and it helps our faith to grow.

And when we pray, we need to always engage our minds. More words, especially repeated words, do not result in God being obligated to act. Remember in all things that we pray to a heavenly Father. He is all-present. He sees everything. He can see behind the closed door. And he is a loving Father who cares for us. He knows what we need even before we ask.

So pray to your Father. With all your heart. With all your mind.

And the Father who sees in secret, will reward you.