

His Now

Matthew 6:5-13

The theme this week for the 40 days of prayer is “His Now” and it highlights the fact that through faith in Christ we belong to God. We are his. We have been saved from sin and condemnation and transferred out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light. Because of what Jesus did for us in his life, death, and resurrection, our sins are forgiven and we are given a new life - eternal life in Christ. We now belong to God. We are his people, citizens of his kingdom and members of his household. Because of this we have been given the awesome privilege to know God and join in Christ’s mission of making disciples of all nations. It’s this calling that gives us tremendous purpose in this life and we are to embrace this purpose.

But I want to take this one step further this morning and talk about how this new identity we have in relation to God relates to prayer. The daily devotionals didn’t really get there, but I think it’s important for us to do so as we continue to focus our thoughts on prayer and growing in prayer during these 40 days.

I want you to think about what you do when you prepare to pray. Whether consciously or subconsciously, we usually do some things as we enter into prayer. (Picture) Think about what you do – do you close your eyes or bow your head? Do you fold your hands or kneel? Why do you do those things? What’s going through your mind when you prepare and enter into prayer? Do you think about who you’re talking to, or just start to pray? Do you do anything to quiet your heart or focus your thoughts? When you start praying, do you immediately start going through prayer requests, or do you spend any time in praise, adoration, confession, thanksgiving, or something else?

Prayer is a unique experience. It’s very relational. It’s communicating with the God who created you and all things in this universe, both seen and unseen. And this morning I want us to think about how that relationship should influence our prayers. If we are his and belong to him, what effect should that have on our prayers? What effect should that have in how we prepare for and approach our times of prayer?

I want to look at a basic teaching about prayer that Jesus gave to his disciples to help us see how we ought to think and prepare. And then I want to look at a couple examples of great prayers in the Bible that demonstrate these things.

Prayer was a regular practice for Jesus. The gospels record that Jesus often withdrew to lonely places to pray, and Jesus' disciples would have been aware of that. They would have seen him coming and going. They would have also witnessed him praying with them, like in the Upper Room when he prayed before them, or when he prayed with the people he was ministering to – praying for healing or deliverance. There are many, many examples of Jesus praying, and the disciples wanted him to teach them to pray. They would have learned prayer from what they saw in their religious leaders – the scribes and Pharisees. They would have also seen the prayers offered by the Gentiles who were living in their area. But when they saw Jesus pray, they saw something different.

On one occasion they asked him to teach them to pray, and this is what he said...

Read Matthew 6:5-6.

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when 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.

Jesus started by teaching them a little bit about how to prepare themselves for prayer. He gave a contrast between the Pharisees, or hypocrites – those who were just praying for show, and how he wanted his disciples to pray. (Picture) There are all kinds of things we can learn about prayer in these words. Jesus indicates that your attitude matters, your motive matters, what you're thinking about matters, even the setting matters. In this case, he didn't want them to pray like the people who taught them to pray. Their motives were evil. They were purposefully praying in public places because they were seeking attention. They wanted to promote their own self-righteousness. They weren't thinking about the one they were praying to, they were thinking about themselves and the attention they were getting.

Jesus taught his disciples that prayer should be much different than that. The focus of prayer must be on God, their heavenly Father. They were communicating

with God. And it was personal. They were to relate to him as their Father who would meet with them in secret. He would hear them, listen, and reward them. There's this idea of entering a private prayer room to meet secretly with God. I don't think Jesus was telling them that it was always wrong to pray in public, but not to pray for show or to try to impress people.

Jesus continued teaching them in Matthew 6:7-8.

“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Here again we see a contrast, this time between the Gentiles and how they prayed, and how Jesus wanted his disciples to pray. And again, we can learn many things about prayer from these verses. (Picture) The practice of prayer for the Gentiles was to babble on and on to try to get the attention of their gods. Their view of their gods and prayer was that the gods were distant, separate, and impersonal. They weren't paying attention to them and their needs. So in order to get assistance from the gods, one must barrage them with prayers and try to get a listening ear.

Jesus taught his disciples that for them, prayer should be different – it should be different because God is not like the gods of the Gentiles. He is not far off, distant, aloof, and impersonal. In fact he is very aware and attentive. He even knows what you need before you ask. When you pray, you're not trying to get his attention or inform him of what's going on so he can help you. He is a good Father to his children. Therefore, this is how Jesus taught his disciples to pray...

Read Matthew 6:9-13.

Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread, ¹² and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

This is a model prayer to show his disciples how to approach prayer. Like we saw earlier, they were not to approach it like the hypocritical Pharisees or the pagan Gentiles. Prayer to the true God of Israel was to be different. Right away he teaches them to think of God in relationship as Father, not just distant deity. Our God is a gracious Father who loves his children. But there's also the recognition

that he is in heaven and he is holy. So there's this combination of affection for our Father and high honor and esteem because of his holiness. Both aspects of God's nature and how we relate to him are important in prayer.

You can also see that Jesus teaches that an attitude of humility and submission is important. They were to recognize that he is King and they were to submit to his rule and will and not seek to spread their own. They were to recognize his goodness and provision and their need for him in meeting their daily needs. They were to recognize their need for his mercy and forgiveness and their responsibility to walk in obedience to him. And they were to recognize their ongoing need for his protection and deliverance from evil.

So as Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, all these things are important – their location, their motives, their understanding of who God is, their attitude, their thoughts. And that brings me back to the question about how we prepare ourselves for prayer... We shouldn't just pray flippantly or robotically or mindlessly or with faulty views of who God is. We should pray with intentionality and purpose and in recognition of who he is and who we are in relation to him. We belong to him. We are His Now, and that should have a major influence on what prayer looks like for the Christian.

So I encourage you to make it a practice to prepare yourself for prayer – not that you have to do so every time you whisper up a prayer, but I encourage you to do so in regular times of prayer, so that you learn to enter into prayer in the way that Jesus taught his disciples to pray.

I want to show you two examples of prayers in the New Testament that I think demonstrate this really well. One is in Acts 4. Peter and John had just been arrested for the first time for preaching about Jesus. They were questioned and threatened and eventually released. Upon their release, they went back to their friends and told them what happened. And when they did, they turned to God in prayer. They had been in an intimidating situation and had probably become more aware of the danger they were in if they continued to do what Christ had called them to do. And this is how they prayed...

Read Acts 4:23-31.

When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.²⁴ And when they heard it, they lifted their

voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them,²⁵ who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ““Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain?²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’—²⁷ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness,³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

What an awesome prayer. But I want you to see how they approached this prayer. In the face of a threatening and intimidating situation, they addressed God in a particular way – “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.” Can you see why they began that way? They weren’t just heaping up empty phrases, they were declaring the truth about who their God was. They also declared God’s sovereign power and plans and how in everything that happened, he was fulfilling what had been foretold. All kinds of people were trying to stand in the way of God fulfilling his plan, but he did exactly what he had planned to do. No one could stop him. And with this view of God, they prayed for boldness to continue the dangerous work he had called them to do, trusting him to work in them and through them.

Prayer wasn’t just some empty religious practice for them. It was communicating with a very real God who loved them and had called them and would go with them to accomplish his purposes. Their relationship with God had a profound effect on how they prayed.

I want to look at one more awesome prayer as an example of what we’re talking about. This is actually more like a description of a prayer that Paul prayed for the Ephesian believers. This is another one of my favorite prayers in the Bible and it has a different flavor than the one we just looked at, but you’ll see it includes some of the same personal characteristics.

Read Ephesians 3:14-19.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

This is a much different prayer than the previous one. As Paul describes it, you can see that he prayed with intentionality because of who he knew God was. In this case, he was relating to God as his Father like we saw in Jesus' model prayer, but he also acknowledges his supremacy over all people and his glory in heaven. Paul didn't pray absentmindedly; he had a view of God in mind when he prayed, along with a view of his people in relation to him. He prays for God to strengthen them in their inner being, so they would experience the presence of Christ in their lives. He also prays that they would know the anchor of unending love that was theirs in their relationship with Christ.

The Bible is full of prayers in which we see people praying with intentionality, who know and are aware of who they are praying to and who they are in relation to him. It affected how they prayed, where they prayed, when they prayed, and what they said.

I want to encourage you to learn to pray in this way – to prepare for prayer. You are His Now. You belong to the mighty Creator and sovereign King of the Universe. But this king has also adopted you to be his beloved son or daughter and he knows all the intimate details of your life. The King of Heaven loves you and wants you to come to him, knowing who he is and who you are in relation to him. And he wants you to pray with that understanding. So think about it before you pray. Prepare yourself. Don't just go through the motions. What posture seems fitting? What should you think about? What truths do you need to remember? Follow the examples we've seen today as you enter into communion with your heavenly Father.