Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

I have a relative who, when he was young, was asked to pray before dinner. And because he did not like the vegetables that were on the table, he prayed, “Thank you for this yucky food. Amen.” And we have probably all heard children make some funny and not so funny prayer mistakes. But children are not the only ones who have ‘prayer issues.’ I also remember an adult who once told me that he had learned that getting into bed and praying was not a good idea for him because he kept waking up with his hands folded and realizing that he had fallen asleep while praying. And I am sure that every one of us can remember getting distracted during prayers, or saying silly things, or not knowing what to say or what to ask for, or repeating ourselves, or being so worried about what other people might think about our prayers that we do not want to pray in public, or even long periods of just not praying at all.

Well, we are not the first ones to struggle with the theology and the practise of prayer. Indeed, as our text reveals, even Jesus’ disciples needed teaching about prayer, because of some prayer issues in their day. And knowing that every generation of believers would need to be taught the same things, the Holy Spirit led Matthew to write down some dos and don’ts about prayer that Jesus gave His disciples.

And so, in this passage we see that **Jesus Uses Prayer Errors to Teach Us How to Pray to Our Father in Heaven**. And the three prayer errors that Jesus uses are **Show-off Prayers**, **Mindless Repetition**, and **an Unforgiving Attitude**. And may the Lord use our time this afternoon to really help us with our prayers and strengthen our desire to pray to Him, more and more.

1. Well, the first prayer error identified by the Lord Jesus is **Show-off Prayers**, as we see in **verses 5-6**. He said, “*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*.”
   1. Now, let’s start with what Jesus is **not** condemning here:
      1. He is not condemning *a love for praying*. Elsewhere in Scripture we are commanded to pray “*at all times*.” And praying at all times includes hands folded, eyes closed prayers, as well as quick unspoken, ‘Thank you, Lord!’ or ‘Praise God!’ or ‘Lord, give me wisdom’ prayers.
      2. And neither is Jesus condemning praying *while* *standing*. The Bible mentions many different postures for prayer, including standing.
      3. And Jesus is also not condemning *public* prayer, as though we should never pray out loud when others can hear us. There are many public prayers recorded in the Bible.
   2. So, what was Jesus condemning? He was condemning prayers prayed “*to be seen by others*.” In other words, wanting people to admire your prayers.
      1. And of course, Jesus gave us the perfect illustration of this in the parable of Luke 18 that speaks of **the Pharisee and the Tax–collector** praying at the temple. The Pharisee gave thanks to God that he was not like other men, including the tax-collector, who were sinners, and loudly advertised how often he fasted and how much he gave to the Lord. The Pharisee’s words were either mostly or entirely spoken for the benefit of the people who could hear him. He wanted those who heard to be impressed with him.
      2. There was also once a man who went to a worship service in a fashionable church in **Boston**. And the time came when the minister leading the service prayed. The man described the prayer as ornate and elaborate. He said, That prayer was “the most eloquent prayer ever offered to a Boston audience.” Now, that was probably meant as a compliment, but it was actually a devastating criticism. And that is because a congregation is not an audience at a show. And prayer should not be offered to an audience, but to God.
   3. So, how should we pray, instead? Well, Jesus continued, “*When you pray, go into your inner room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret*.” And again, Jesus was not saying that the only prayer that the Lord accepts is private prayer in a wardrobe! Is it a good idea for us to make time for private prayer in a place where we will not be interrupted? Absolutely! We often read of Jesus, for example, going off to pray in a solitary place. But as we have already noted, there are many examples of public prayer in the Bible. **Jesus’ key point here is that whether you pray alone or in public, your attention should be focused on God.**
   4. So, what this instruction of Jesus about a wrong attitude and practise reveals about prayer to our Father in heaven is that **we are only truly praying when we are conscious of having come into the presence of God and are actually praying *to Him***.
      1. I have shared this with you before, but it is worth repeating. The Bible teacher and evangelist, **R.A. Torrey**, stated that that it was that thought that utterly changed his prayer life. He explains that he was raised in a Christian home and taught to pray from a young age. But prayer, for him, was largely a matter of form; of saying the right things. He says, “There was little real thought of God, and no real approach to God. And even after I was converted, yes, even after I had entered the ministry, prayer was largely a matter of form. But the day came,” he wrote, “when I realized what real prayer meant, realized that prayer was having an audience with God, actually coming into the presence of God and asking and getting things from Him. And the realization of that fact changed my prayer life. Before that prayer was a mere duty, and sometimes a very irksome duty, but from that time on prayer has not been merely a duty but a privilege, one of the most highly esteemed privileges of life.”
      2. There isn’t really a way to illustrate this perfectly, but imagine that you have written several **letters to the Prime-Minister** about various issues. You tried to be polite and respectful and persuasive, but you know that your letter is one of hundreds she gets every day.But then you get a hand-written letter from the PM, which includes her personal phone number, and an invitation to call her whenever you like. And it will be just you and her talking together. Well, the difference between your letters and your private conversations would be immense! And that doesn’t even come close to the privilege of being able to enter the very presence of your Father in heaven in prayer!
   5. So, prayer to our Father in heaven must not be done to show-off to others. In fact, we are only truly praying when we are conscious of having come into the presence of God and are actually talking to Him. Is this how you *understand* prayer? Is this your *experience* of prayer?

Now, before we move on to our second point, here is a really good place for us to consider two small verses in **Romans 8:**

* + 1. **Verse 26 -** For there we read that “*the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought. But the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words*.” So, the Spirit takes our feeble prayers and tidies them up and brings them to our Father in heaven!
    2. **Verse 34** – “*Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died- more than that, who was raised- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us*.” The Lord Jesus also pleads with the Father on our behalf!

If you think your prayers are feeble or pathetic or full of mistakes, remember that you have two divine prayer allies/assistants/advocates!

1. But the second prayer error that the Lord Jesus identifies to teach us how to pray to our Father in heaven is **mindless repetition**, from **verses 7-8**, where Jesus says, “*And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think they will be heard for their many words*.”
   1. And that word **mindless** is very important. You see, there is nothing wrong with repeating prayers or repeating things in prayer, *if we mean it*. For example, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed the same thing three times. Psalm 136 repeats a line about God’s steadfast mercy over and over again. And Jesus was also not forbidding long prayers or praying for a long time, per se. There are also long prayers and long times of prayer in the Bible. No, the wrong ideas of prayer in view here are the repeating of meaningless, gobbledygook sounds, over and over again, or repeating actual words or phrases, over and over again, or praying for a long time thinking that just the length of your prayer will impress God.
      1. We read an example of this earlier in **1 Kings 18** where we read about the prophets of Baal. **the prophets of Baal** “*called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered*.” And they did this because the pagan idea was that the gods could be persuaded into doing what you wanted if you just babbled for long enough.
      2. And sadly, the Jews of Jesus’ time had begun to imitate the Gentiles, by thinking that the longer the prayer or the time spent in prayer, the more God would listen. So, they would keep praying the same phrases over and over again.
      3. A modern form of this error is those who run prayer beads through their fingers as they repeat a form prayer to God or to Mary or to a saint, over and over again.
      4. But even closer to home, on the bookshelves of your local Christian bookstore, you will find books that say if you just pray this Bible prayer, enough times, with faith, God will surely answer you.
   2. But Jesus said, “*Do not be like them. For your Father knows what you need before you ask Him*.” You see, this prayer error arises when people do not know the God of the Bible!And we are going to get a little bit technical here, but I believe it will help us. For there is a **transcendent** truth and an **imminent** truth in these words of Jesus.
      1. **Transcendent** means way above and over. And the transcendent truth in these words is that God knows everything. So, if you think that prayer is telling God things that He does not know, or reminding Him of things He might have forgotten about, then you don’t know the God of the Bible. God knows everything. That’s the transcendent truth.
      2. **Imminent** means nearby and personal. And the imminent truth in these words is that this all powerful, all knowing God knows what *you* need as *your* *Father in heaven*.
         1. The Aramaic word translated as Father is **Abba**, which really is the equivalent of today’s ‘Daddy.’ It is that title that young children use with affection for the man they love and trust most in the world, because he protects and he provides.
      3. In the next chapter of **Matthew**, we read in **verses 9-11**, “*Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!*”
      4. Do you see the comfort here? Your Father in heaven knows what you need before you ask Him. And He has promised to give you what *you* need; and note, this is more than just what every human being needs, this is what *you* need.
         1. We marvel, don’t we, at parents with children who have **complex allergies**. We wouldn’t know where to start with feeding them, but their parents know exactly which foods to avoid, and which are fine.
         2. Well, you are a mix of physical and spiritual complexities. But your Father knows exactly what *you* need! And He invites you to ask Him for good things.
   3. So, what this instruction of Jesus about a wrong attitude and practise reveals about prayer is that you are truly praying **when you ask for good things from your Father in heaven, and you mean it**. For then your prayer **honours** God as the One who knows you and who will give you all the mercies that you need. And then your prayer is also the prayer of **faith**, because you believe His promises and trust in His provision.
2. So, prayer to our Father in heaven is not attempting to show-off and it is not **mindlessly** **repetitive**. But the third error that Jesus uses to teach us how to pray to our Father in heaven, is that we must not have an **unforgiving attitude**.
   1. In verse 12, Jesus taught us to pray, “*forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors*.” And this point is so important that Jesus said more about it in verses 14-15: “*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*.” And to further reinforce His point, in **Matthew 18**, Jesus took up this topic again with the parable of the **Unmerciful Servant**. That is the parable where the servant whose master forgave a debt of 10,000 talents of silver, an impossible sum, refused to forgive someone who owed him just a couple of dollars, and had him thrown into the debtor’s prison. And when the first master heard about this, he was furious and summoned the servant, and said, “*I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?*” And Jesus finished the parable by saying, “*So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart*.” And congregation, we dare not ignore or gloss over anything that the Lord Jesus says. But if He makes the same point *three times*, then we better pay attention!
      1. And the **first implication** of Jesus’ words is that **we can only pray to our Father in heaven because He has forgiven all our sins through Jesus Christ, His Son**.
         1. **Hebrews 10:19** says, “*Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus.*” We saw in our Leviticus sermon series that the God’s Old Testament people could only enter the tabernacle area if they made a blood sacrifice. And there were literal rivers and pools of animal blood flowing each day in the tabernacle area, because of the comprehensive uncleanness and sin of the Lord’s people that had to be atoned for. Well, it is the blood of Jesus that has atoned for the huge pile of your sins and my sins that has opened the way for us into the throne room of heaven!
         2. And you have to remember this when you pray; your Father in heaven will receive your prayers and answer them because He has forgiven all your sins through Jesus Christ, His Son. That is the entire foundation of prayer!
      2. But the second implication of Jesus’ words is this: If you understand the enormity of your sin and guilt, which God dealt with by punishing His Son on calvary’s cross, as like the 10 000 talents of silver debt, then you **must forgive any injury or offense that anyone causes you**, because it is like the $2 debt.
         1. And I must ask you, today, is this so with you? You see, there are many Christians who profess faith in Christ but who have an unforgiving spirit.
         2. But Jesus would have us see that an unforgiving spirit is incompatible with genuine Christianity. **If you refuse to forgive others, then you do not truly understand what it means to be forgiven by your Father in heaven**. And the implication of this for your prayers is that they will not be heard. You cannot come to God and open your hands to receive His gracious pardon, if your fists are tightly clenched against those who have wronged you.
      3. And in case you are thinking, but they have not asked for my forgiveness, did Jesus say you only need to forgive them if they ask you to? He did not. He commanded us to forgive others. So even if we cannot tell a person that we have forgiven them because they have not apologized to us, we must have an **attitude of forgiveness** towards them. And this means not an attitude of hatred or bitterness but truly wanting their best.

So, brothers and sisters, young people, and boys and girls, prayer to our Father in heaven offers a lot but it also demands a lot. Because of Christ, you may enter the very throne room of heaven with boldness and confidence, and ask your Father for good things, knowing that He will hear you and give you what you need. But you must pray to *Him* and not to be seen by others. And you must forgive those who have sinned against you.

May the Spirit of the Lord help us to pray like this and help us with our prayers. And all God’s people said, Amen.