



## **Matthew 6:5–6**

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.”

## Reflection

Shortly Jesus' masterclass on the Christian faith – the Sermon on the Mount – is going to step up to another level and I can't tell you how excited I am. Today is the entrée, in a couple of days the main. Today Jesus speaks to us about prayer, in a couple of days Jesus is going to teach us how to pray. In some of the most precious teaching in all of Scripture – and in the most famous section of the Sermon on the Mount – Jesus will shortly teach us how to pray by teaching us the Lord's Prayer.

But today and tomorrow Jesus first teaches us how *not* to pray. In Jesus' day, although individual prayer was encouraged

at any time, pious Jews would also pray publically at set times throughout the day. This practice had been around for many centuries, you may recall Daniel in the Old Testament praying three times a day. Jewish historians tell us that public prayer in the synagogue twice a day (before and after work) was very normal for a devout Jew.

Yet in our passage today Jesus, on the surface at least seems to condemn this behaviour. But as we have seen Jesus often uses elevated language to get our attention and to drive his point home. He's also an expert at tracing an outward activity back to the motivations of our heart; as Jesus says elsewhere, out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. The mouths of many public prayers in Jesus'

day were self-righteous. People were making a public display of their supposed righteousness and, even worse, to their shame were speaking words that were meant to be addressed to God but were secretly aimed at those around them.

Perhaps Jesus has in mind a story he told in Luke 18:

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evil-doers, adulterers—or even like this

tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' 13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

This parable of Jesus needs almost no explanation; this is exactly what he's talking about in today's passage. The vanity, the shame that this Pharisee is heaping upon himself as he pretends to pray to God but is actually just puffing up his ego by pointing out to those around him how superior he is. Jesus heaps shame on him by elevating the tax collector's display of repentance far above this outwardly righteous man's vain hypocrisy.

Yet Jesus goes on in our passage to seem-

ingly condemn all public prayer. Again here however I think he is shocking his hearers for effect. You see, while the passage mentions retiring to an inner room to pray most people in the ancient world lived in share houses with extended family, houses which very often only contained one big room. Only a privileged few would have an inner room and the privacy that it would afford. So this is a figure, an illustration that Jesus is using. He's effectively saying, even when praying in public (and Jesus would go on to do that at several points in his ministry) pray as if you are in that inner room. This is a conversation between you and God. It's important to add here that very often Jesus would withdraw to isolated places to pray in private. Thus following the pattern he sets in the gospels seems to be the best way.

Public prayer in church and small groups and in other meetings as appropriate is important and part of being a member the community of God. But as with our Lord, a good balance may well be that for every occasion of public prayer, you spend many more times one-on-one in prayer with God. This is not a prescription, as I don't think Jesus meant these verses to be prescriptive. Jesus isn't teaching us where or when to pray, but the manner in which you pray wherever that may be.

The passage moves on to speak of a reward for those who pray 'behind closed doors.' Here, as yesterday, this may mean many things. At the outset, there are intrinsic benefits to prayer. When we pray we experience a centring, a peace, a reminding of who God is and who we are

and the centrality of this relationship to all aspects of our lives. But further than this inherent blessing, the bible, to borrow one of Jesus' phrases from yesterday is almost one long, sustained trumpet blast as to the power of prayer. There are so many verses I could include here to support this statement but how about just one simple observation. Do you notice how many times Jesus prays? Jesus who is the son of God. Even Jesus, withdraws to pray all the time in the gospels. We get the impression from the gospels that Jesus would often preach and heal for a full day and then instead of crashing into bed, he would often pray all night. Jesus was fully God, but he was also fully human which meant that praying right throughout the night would have hurt and taken great focus and discipline, but Je-



sus knew the power and the rewards of prayer.

## **Think**

Do you think much about prayer? Showy prayers may not be a problem for you or perhaps they might be? Does your prayer life reflect the intimacy, and focus and planning and routine that seems to jump out at us from the teaching of Jesus in our passage? Again today, Jesus takes aim of the Jews who while praying vainly and ineffectively were still regular prayers. Maybe God is using this to prick your conscience as an irregular prayer? Whatever your personal situation, perhaps take the time now to consider the shape and routine of your prayer life. What change might be needed in response to the passage in

front of you? Perhaps read over it slowly again now and pray for conviction.

## **Pray**

Today and over the next week or so it won't be hard to end in prayer. Pray in the quiet of your own heart right now. Pray like Jesus prayed. To my shame I often fall asleep when I pray in my bed at night – here's Jesus, exhausted from a full day of ministry and then praying to his Father all night because prayer to him on some nights is far more important than sleep. However you've been struck by this passage please conclude your time this morning in prayer to God in heaven.

Tomorrow and over the next week Jesus will continue to teach us how to pray.