



Matthew 6:7–8

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.

Reflection

In the first half of Matthew 6 Jesus is teaching his disciples and the large crowds who

have gathered to hear him preach the difference that the kingdom of God makes to traditional areas of Jewish righteousness. Becoming a member of the kingdom of God will transform the way you give to the needy, the way you pray, and the way you fast. The first verse of chapter 6 spoke of the 'practice of righteousness' and Jesus goes on to show us how to practice our righteousness in the areas of giving to the poor, praying and fasting in the first half of the chapter. After the heady heights of the beatitudes, those powerful images of Christians being salt and light, and after his masterclass in the Old Testament law, Jesus now sets into reforming the Jewish religious practices of giving, praying and fasting. 'Christians,' Jesus is preaching, 'in light of the kingdom of God, and in contrast to Jewish and pagan practices, this

is how you give, this is how you pray, and this is how you fast.’

Over the next seven days Jesus is teaching us how to pray. He began yesterday and will continue in the passage in front of us today by teaching us how *not* to pray. Today Jesus moves from the hypocritical practices in the prayer lives of the Jewish religious leaders to the way the pagans, the non-Jews, prayed to their very many gods. He says in verse 7,

7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

Roman and Greek culture was polytheistic – they worshipped many gods. This

partly explains the tension and dislike that built up between the gentiles (remember that's just a collective term for non-Jews) and the Jews who were monotheistic (believing that there is only one God.) The way Jesus describes gentiles praying to all their gods is 'babbling.' In the Greek this is a rare word. We get the sense that it means babbling, or mindless repetition, or heaping up empty phrases. In the New Testament, in Acts 17 we see an Ephesian crowd chanting for 2 hours at the top of their voice, over and over again, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.' In the Old Testament, we read in 1 Kings of 450 prophets of Baal praying and chanting loudly from morning until midday, even resorting to slashing themselves with swords – all to no response.

The pagan conception of deity was of capricious gods, not much interested in humankind, who needed to be badgered and cajoled to even get their attention, let alone get them to do anything. And you can understand how that impression came about. In the best scenario they were praying to thin air – and hence receiving no response. In the worst scenario, they were praying to demons, hence the feverish and self-destructive lengths they needed to go to that, may or may not, have resulted in some occasional response.

But Jesus, in a beautiful turn of phrase, shows us how different we are to those who pray to no gods at all.

8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before

you ask him.

Our God is not far off and disinterested, needed to badgered and pestered to take notice of us. The God we pray to is our Father, who loves us as his precious children, and who is completely aware of our every need before we even ask him.

Many of the greats of the Christian faith have found much wisdom in this intriguing verse. If God knows what we need, why then pray at all?

Martin Luther answers, 'by our praying ... we are instructing ourselves more than him.' Jean Calvin expands, paraphrasing him, 'when we pray we are arousing ourselves to seek God, that we may exercise our faith in meditating on his promises,

that we may relieve ourselves from our anxieties by pouring them onto him; in a word, that we may declare that from him alone we hope and expect good things for ourselves and others.'

But prayer is even more than this. The bible tells us that prayer is powerful and effective and so even though our Father knows our needs he still encourages us to lay them before him with the promise that he will act if they are consistent with his will.

But is Jesus telling us to only pray short prayers? I don't think so. Augustine said of these verses that there is a difference between much speaking in prayer and much praying. The Puritans used to say pray until you pray. I agree. I think the sense

here is in the earnestness of your prayers. Don't pray mechanical prayers, habitual prayers that are just words you recite while your mind is off somewhere else. When you pray, pray earnestly to your Father in heaven, with your full attention, not just with your lips but with your mind and heart as well. I think Jesus models this to us in his prayer life. He's about to teach us the Lord's Prayer which is extremely short. And yet Jesus regularly prayed for hours on end, even throughout the entire night. Jesus also repeated the same prayer three times in the Garden of Gethsemane and commended a widow for her persistent prayer in one of his parables. Not length; prayer can be many words or few, but true prayer is intimate and earnest, a moment in which you are fully present and your heart and mind is fully engaged.

Think

Take some time now to think about your prayer life. Perhaps you've fallen into a routine that you work through somewhat automatically, praying for the same people, in the same way, with the same words. This is fine, but is your heart engaged? Persistence in prayer is a wonderful thing, as is discipline and routine, but as you go through the motions is your mind sometimes elsewhere? Have you thought much about why we pray given that God knows our every need far more fully than even we do? Perhaps meditate over this for a few moments. What then is prayer? Do you agree with Calvin and Luther? Why did Jesus pray so often and so fervently? Perhaps you might also consid-

er slowing down the flow of words when you pray. How can you bring more passion and earnestness to your prayer life? Perhaps through more pauses, or more carefully chosen phrases, or more heartfelt language? By praying more Scripture back to God?

Pray

And then this morning why not practice some of the things you've just been thinking about as you pray to God to finish this devotional time with him. If you're on the bus, or walking, or on the go, why not stop the commute. Sit down somewhere or wait until you get off the bus, withdraw from the routine, and devote a few moments to commune with the God of the universe. Earnestly seek him in that moment. Ear-

nestly plead with him and petition him. Claim his promises, enjoy him as your Father, and remind yourself of how precious this relationship is to every aspect of your life and being.

See you again tomorrow.