

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Sermon XI

"The Law Kept by Sincerity"

"And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. In this manner, therefore, pray," etc. -- Matt 6:5-9 [NKJV].

The privilege of access to a throne of grace, to confess our sins that they may be forgiven, to make known our wants that they may be supplied, to pour all our sorrows and troubles into a Father's ear that he may comfort our souls--that, surely, is one of the greatest boons that God could well give or man could possibly get. . . . It is assumed here that the Lord is a prayer-hearing God, and that his people wait upon him that He may incline his ear unto them. It is assumed that wherever there is a contrite heart pouring out its broken, half-articulate sorrows; wherever there is a vexed and troubled spirit calling for Divine help in despair of all other; wherever there is a loving soul longing for the fellowship of God, and that it may see his glory,--[that] here also is an ear open to hear their cry, and a very present help to them in their time of need.

Hold fast your confidence in this, brethren, and let "no one spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ." And though it does require a lively exercise of faith to separate your mind from all the environments of sense and to feel that you are transacting directly with the unseen God, yet when you can thus realize Him and speak to Him all the fulness of your heart, you shall find in this fellowship the richest blessing, the surest comfort, the greatest strength that man can have on earth. Therefore the truly spiritual man delights in prayer, does all things by prayer, prays always with all supplication and thanksgiving; for prayer is the joy and the might and the peace of the Christian soul.

But in order that it may be so, it must be done in entire sincerity. It must be done as unto God and not as unto man. It must be spiritual and true, not a mere form and vain repetition. It must neither be a hypocritical display in order to be seen of men, nor a heathenish outcry clamorous to be heard for its much speaking. It must be the secret, closet exercise and communion of the soul with the Father that sees in secret. It must be the believing, confiding prayer of one whose Father knows what he needs, and who trusts that Father to do what is best. These are the four thoughts suggested by this passage, and to these I would now draw your attention.

First, "When you pray," the Lord says, "you shall not be as the hypocrites are; for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men." The hypocrites to whom Christ here alludes were doubtless the Pharisees--not indeed all of them, for Nathanael and Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea and Saul of Tarsus were all of that sect and were obviously true and right-hearted men. But they were exceptions to their class; and the system which they followed tended to produce not such as them but such as Annas and Caiaphas and the other

pious rogues who were so abhorrent to the soul of Jesus. The Sadducees, being of a materialistic way of thinking, probably did not pray at all, having lost faith in prayer altogether and being at least honest enough not to pretend to much religion of the spiritual kind--so one might conclude in a general way, though I am by no means sure that they did not do pretty much as the Pharisees did even while they utterly despised the whole matter. Scepticism is apt to have an easy conscience, and in the long-run you shall find it much more ready to agree with the Pharisees than to accept of the heart-searching Christ.

At any rate, the hypocrites alluded to here were mainly Pharisees, the popular religionists who did not love prayer for its own sake but for the credit which it gave them, and whom one might see in any synagogue standing in rapt adoration, or at any street corner in the throng and concourse of men lifting up their eyes to the hearer of prayer and their hearts to the people around.

Now, neither the synagogues nor the streets were the appointed places of prayer. But a custom had risen since the days of Daniel the prophet to pray seven times a day at certain appointed hours, and when those hours came the Pharisee turned at once to his devotions. He might be in the street or the market doing business, or he might be in the synagogue hearing the reading of the law. And of course when people saw him, even in such circumstances, faithful to his pious task, they naturally said, "How good and holy a man this must be!" Naturally, also, when the Pharisee perceived the high estimation in which he was thus held, he would come by and by to find himself generally in some public place when the hour of prayer drew night. And so, what may at first have been only a rigid and punctilious observance of a religious custom, gradually--perhaps even insensibly--came to be an ostentatious display, a pretentious exhibition of self-righteousness without heart or faith or truth, turning the most sacred duties into a very mockery of God.

And I wish you to mark how, as I have just stated, this may have arisen without very much conscious and deliberate and intentional hypocrisy. I am loath to think that there are many people who could calmly say to themselves, "I will put on a mask of devotion, I will pretend to be more than ordinarily pious and so I shall gain favor of men, and under cover of that do all the evil that is in my heart to do." I cannot think that such base creatures either are now or ever were very common. And it seems to me that the value and efficacy of our Lord's warnings against hypocrisy are very much lessened when we suppose them to apply only to characters so vile as that. Let me therefore remind you that most probably the iniquity of the Pharisee grew up in a very natural way, beginning with a scrupulous but honest observance of religious forms and gradually sliding into a pretentious and hypocritical display, as he found himself a growing object of respect and esteem among men.

Now, when we look at the matter in this light, we shall not find the Pharisee quite so far away from us, and consequently our Lord's warning will not be so readily set aside as if it did not concern us. For alas, brethren, the deceitful heart is still as prone as ever to get itself entangled in these snares of the devil. Woeful as it is to think of men standing in the presence of the heart-searching God and taking into their mouths words of lowly contrition, words of holy faith, words of meek submission, words of devout adoration, and yet all the while only thinking (when they think at all) of the effect they will have on other men and the approbation which they will accord, yet am I by no means sure that such hollow prayers are at all uncommon or that we are--any of us--wholly free from this guilt.

We may set aside the picturesque allusion to the hypocrite standing in the synagogue and at the street corners when the appointed hours of devotion came round. We have no such hours and no such customs. But the thing itself, the evil which grew up in this way may be among us for all that, and all the more dangerous that it is not suspected. Bethink you, then: we too have our pious customary duties, such, for example, as the beautiful exercise of daily family devotion. And how often is that performed in a dull, leaden, spiritless way just because religious social opinion favors the observance of it, and not because our hearts have any real longing after God.

Observe, I do not say that any man can be always in an equally spiritual frame when the hour of

daily prayer arrives. And I do not say that he is not to bow the knee duly as the time draws nigh, merely because on occasions he finds himself not in so fitting a state as he has sometimes been. But what I do say is that it is possible, without your perhaps deliberately intending anything of the kind, that by allowing the influence of public opinion to constrain you to engage in such religious exercises, you may in reality go on from day to day and from year to year praying from that motive and for that reason only, and never once taking your soul to task or asking yourself earnestly whether there has been all the while one single gleam of fellowship with God or one real yearning of your soul for His salvation.

In this way there may grow up a systematic yet unconscious hypocrisy. For such prayers do not flow out of the fountain of the heart's trouble and care and sorrow. They have nothing to do with the heart at all. They are only constrained by the influence of religious public opinion. And though they may not seem to be offered up at the shrine of Pharisaic ostentation, though they may belong to the quiet privacies of domestic life only, yet not one cry of true prayer may be in them all--they are simply a sacrifice to the custom of men, done for their sakes only, and not from the felt need and conscious guilt of the soul or from any faith in the prayer-hearing God. And is not that, brethren, very much the same thing as the hypocrite's prayer at the street corner, that he may be seen of men?

Again, let me ask you to compare for a moment your private devotions with those which you may be called to conduct in the presence of other men. Today you are alone with God, and save [except] his ear, there is none to hear you; and it is the hour of prayer. But alas! you have little say, and that little is cold, poor, and meager. There are no passionate cries, no fervent pleading of promises, no mournful confessions of sin, no rapt views of the riches of Divine grace in Christ Jesus. It is a dull heavy work, soon huddled over that your thoughts may turn to far other matters. Tomorrow you have to guide, perhaps, the devotions of others, and what a change there is! Your words flow freely and with all the unction and charm of sacred texts and allusions. Hallowed thoughts leap up and crowd for utterance. Godly sorrow wails forth its penitence. Faith and love seem panting for the Lord who is their portion, their strength, and their joy. And people say, "Surely this is a man of God! He has a rare gift of prayer. He must needs live under the shadow of Him that is almighty."

Now sit down and ask yourself honestly, "What was the difference between those two prayers? And was there one bit more reality in the one than in the other? I have confessed and deplored sin--did I truly feel its burden? I have pleaded many a promise--had I any trust in its faithfulness? I rejoiced in the grace of God--was I indeed glad for its salvation? I cried unto the Lord with my voice and made supplication--but how much heart was there in it all? Perhaps I did feel for the moment a certain glow and sensibility and emotion--but how much of it was only the excitement of a speaker, not the genuine tenderness of a soul in the presence of its God! What if I was praying like the hypocrite, only to be seen of men? Why should my solitary prayer to the Father who sees in secret be so markedly different from my public devotions in the sanctuary?"

Ah, brethren! That is a kind of question which we especially, who minister in holy things, would do well to put often and earnestly to ourselves, though it is fitting also for others as well as for us. I am afraid, too, it will be rather a humbling one to many of us. I am afraid it will discover a good deal of the leaven of the Pharisee lurking where perhaps it was little suspected. But I am very sure it will be a wholesome thing for us all strenuously to search out even the most secret element of unconscious hypocrisy and to cast it from us, for otherwise it will be a dead fly in the apothecary's ointment, tainting and corrupting our most sacred services, turning them into a mockery instead of a trust in God.

Therefore, brethren, without adducing other examples of the operation of this deceitful spirit, let me entreat you with all earnestness to be on your guard and watch and pray, and pray and watch, against this snare. It is very insidious. It wears often a guise of simplicity and evangelical fervor. It rarely puts on the revolting aspect of deliberate hypocrisy, for that would commonly be to lose its game. But it comes in the shape of a bidden duty about which all good men are agreed. Or it comes

in the shape of a hallowed phraseology which all spiritual minds have accepted as befitting. Only it always, one way or other, puts men and not God in the forefront, and wiles us to do for them what we would not do for Him.

Therefore let your prayer and your effort be that the Lord would put truth, utter truth, in your inward parts, that He would set a watch before your lips and keep the door of your mouth, lest "ye come before him as his people come, and sit before him as his people sit," while your hearts all the time are verily seeking the praises of men and not the favor of God. "When you pray, be not as the hypocrites are." Therefore,

Second, our Lord enjoins that his people, when they pray, "should enter into their closet, and shut the door, and pray to the Father who sees in secret." There are a good many lessons which may be fairly enough deduced from this injunction.

It is, for example, a legitimate conclusion from such words that every man ought to have a closet, a place of calm privacy to which he may retire for fellowship with God alone; and that consequently our social arrangements, which make no provision for this in so many cases, are seriously injurious to the true religious life of the world. For, alas! there are many among us who can have no place in their homes to retire to, and pray to the Father who sees in secret. It is also a fair application of the text, that while the fellowship of united prayer is right and good, yet the special sphere for real communion with God in this exercise is the solitude of a most private intercourse, when one can be alone with the Father, undisturbed by any other influences, to pour forth the whole heart to Him.

Still the closet is not absolutely necessary. The shutting of the door is the one essential point of importance to be considered. For one might have his closet, and might go to pray in his closet, and yet the thought of his heart might be, "Now men will see how spiritual I am. I turn aside from them. I go apart to meet my God. I do not make any show of religion. They must admit that a man so much given to closet devotion is surely a true and faithful servant of the Lord." It were quite possible in this way to make the closet as much an ostentation as the synagogue or the street corner. Therefore the true idea of prayer lies in the shutting of the door.

My friends, you may make a closet for yourselves in the veriest [largest] crowd, provided you shut out the world from your thoughts and lift up your soul to God alone. And that is essentially what the Lord requires of you. It boots [matters] not where the real prayer is made. It may be in the synagogue, only it must not be done for the praise of men. It may be at the street corners, only it must not be to draw [the] attention of them [standing there]. It may be anywhere, only it must be a real uplifting of the heart unto God and a shutting out of all consideration for the opinion of the world around--a simple, heartfelt, genuine cry to the Father who sees in secret. This, and this only, is real prayer. It is to be alone with God, and to transact with Him in the utter truth and sincerity of our souls.

O let it be your effort, brethren, thus to shut out of your minds all but the thought of Him with whom you have then to do, [to shut out] all regard for the opinion and the praise of men. For however your prayer may commend itself to them, however evangelical in its form, however full of apparent unction, however glowing with a seeming earnestness, yet if it be not the cry of a true and honest heart it is idle as the passing wind, and the Lord will not regard it. Shut the door, then. Shut out the world. Be alone with God in spirit and in truth. But,

Third, there is yet another kind of unreal, and therefore insincere, prayer against which also the Lord warns us here. We are not to be like the hypocrites who pray to be seen of men, nor yet like the heathen who think they shall be heard for their much speaking. With them prayer was a kind of bodily and mechanical process, supposed to be efficacious just in proportion to the number of times they could repeat the same cry. So the priests of Baal howled from morning till night their "O Baal, hear us! Hear us, O Baal!" making the rocks and forest of Carmel echo with their vain repetitions. So

to this day in the East you may see fanatical devotees yelling a similar prayer as they whirl their bodies round, until their litany becomes a convulsive and inarticulate gurgling, and they fall to the earth in utter physical exhaustion. The idea in the minds of those men seems to be that prayer is not a spiritual act but purely a form of words, the virtue of which lies in their clamorous repetition.

Now I do not say that one who is in much earnest, or in deep affliction, will not indulge in redundancies of expression. There are times when it is most natural, and indeed when one can do nothing else but just cry, "God have mercy upon me. Lord have mercy upon me." There is a state of mind when thought is swallowed up in mere emotion, and one has no words to express the agony of soul nor any calmness to urge pleas and arguments, so that he can do nothing but pray, and again pray, "Lord help me. Lord save me else I perish." But that is very far from the heathenish kind of vain repetition. There is real soul and heart and even agonizing emotion in such a prayer, while the other is but a meaningless mechanical form. Be not ye, then, like the heathen who think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.

As to whether even these poor heathens may be heard or no, whether even their meager, confused and distracted cries may or may not find something in the infinite Divine compassions, which is touched by their hapless state, of that the Lord says nothing here whatever. All he says is that theirs is not true prayer such as becomes his children, and that we are not to do as they do for [because] our Father knows what things we have need of before we ask Him.

And this leads me in conclusion to remind you that you, when you pray, should come believing in the unseen Father and trusting in his gracious disposition. Brethren, true prayer is just the cry of children to their Father, and it is the childlike feeling of trust in Him and love to Him which gives to their prayer all its efficacy. He does not need to be told what we want. He knows all that already better than we can tell him.

If in the dark night your child, in its trouble or pain, calls for you, [and] not being able to see you or [not] sure whether you hear, it will call again and make its weeping complaint until you come. But there is no such uncertainty about your heavenly Father. For the feeblest moan, the faintest inarticulate whisper of your soul, yea its very thoughts, are well known to Him. He is not a God afar off, or asleep, or gone on a journey so that you need to clamor with vain repetitions like the heathen. And if He sometimes delays his coming to help you, it is only because He would prove your faith and see in your patient trusting the true spirit of a child. "Wait upon the Lord, then, and be of good courage, for the Lord forsakes not his saints, none of them that wait on him shall be ashamed."

Wait upon the Lord, not as the hypocrite who has an eye all the while to the praise of men and considers what they will think of his devout customs and words, so full of the apparent unction and savour of godliness. But try to shut out all other thoughts and to realize the presence of the heart-searcher and the prayer-hearer.

Wait upon the Lord, not with mechanical forms and vain repetitions, as if mere unmeaning clamor were pleasing to him, or as if He did not know your need unless it were thus dinned into his ear. All He wants in your prayer is a spirit of childlike trust in him and love to him.

Therefore, wait on the Lord after that manner which He has so fully and graciously and beautifully set forth in that prayer, which he now gives as the model of all prayer, and which I have already expounded to you so fully that it needs at present only briefly to mark its general characteristics. Let your cry, then, be to the Father, your Father in heaven; for that is the keynote of all effectual supplication. And if you are truly a child of His, your desire for his glory will surely take precedence of your own personal wants, however urgent; for a father's honor is more [important] to a child than his own cares or troubles. Therefore will you pray that His name may be hallowed on earth as it is in heaven, that His kingdom may come on earth as it is in heaven, and that His will may be done on earth as it is in heaven. And because His name, so often dishonored, shall only be hallowed by the

establishment of the reign of Immanuel, and because that kingdom can only come through the renewing work of the Holy Ghost, therefore will you have respect to the work of that holy and glorious Trinity, wherein lies the blessed fatherhood of God.

Nor will you forget the fellowship of other brethren, and their communion with you, in the wants and sins and temptations of this life. For when you draw near to the common Father it will not be with a selfish "My Father," but bearing the burden of all the household you will seek for them as well as yourself those things you all have need of. Therefore will your prayer be, "Our Father, give US," not a competency to prevent the sense of continual dependence, but daily bread in answer to daily labor and prayer. And "forgive *us* our debts as we forgive our debtors," for be assured that "if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses." To the froward He will show himself froward; to the bitter and implacable He will be bitter and implacable. The cry of a hard and heartless man will meet only with a hard and stern God.

And finally, conscious of your own weakness, you will seek to be guided in a straight path, in a plain path, not to be sorely tried, at any rate not to be tempted above that you are enabled to bear. In this spirit pray ye the Lord's prayer. It is not hypocritical. It is not heathenish. It is the simple, natural, honest cry of children to a Father--children who have done wrong but would faint do right, children who have wants and weaknesses but who truly trust in the Lord to supply all their need, children who bear each other's burden lovingly on their hearts and are not merely selfish in their desires, children whose supreme wish is that all things may be done so as to hallow and glorify their Father in heaven.

Sermon XI, "The Law Kept by Sincerity," in *The Sermon on the Mount* (Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1867). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and spelling has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.