

Talk to Me

LEARNING TO PRAY LIKE JESUS



vGROUP STUDY



VINTAGE PRESS

Talk to Me: vGroup Study

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WHEN YOU PRAY

In the religious landscape of 1st century Judaism, those deemed the most righteous (meaning *in right relationship with God*) among the people were the Pharisees, the scribes, and the teachers of the Law of Moses. For their righteousness, they were praised and lauded by the people. They were given the seats of honor at community parties. They were asked to pray in the synagogue. Their opinions on God's law and word were valued. They were the religious elite. While they were declared 'righteous' by the people, Jesus often described them by a different term—'hypocrites'.

The term 'hypocrite' was commonly used of actors on the Greek stage. These actors wore large masks to hide their face underneath. In Jesus' day, this term became extended to mean anyone wearing a figurative mask to hide their true motives and purposes from others. Jesus could say this about these religious elite because he ultimately knew their hearts. He knew what motivated them and what they valued above all else—the praise of others.

- Why do you think the secular world often likes to label Christians or Christianity in general as hypocritical? Do you think this is a fair accusation? Why or why not?
- Why do we often feel the overwhelming desire to seek the praise of others?

If we take a closer look at the few paragraphs that come before and after the Lord's Prayer, we may observe that the Lord's Prayer is a part of a wider sub-section of verses within the greater context of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). This sub-section (Matthew 6:1–18) is easily identifiable based on its distinctive, repetitive pattern and common flow of thought. Let's see how this works.

For a moment, take out the Lord's Prayer (v. 9–13) from this section and its pattern more easily comes into focus. Jesus first gives an introductory statement (v. 1), "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven." After his introductory statement to the topic, Jesus then teaches on three spiritual disciplines: giving to the needy (v. 2–4), prayer (v. 5–15), and fasting (v. 16–18). Each spiritual practice is presented by Jesus in a repeated pattern that maps directly onto the framework of verse 1.

- Can you identify the repeated pattern used by Jesus in verses 1–18 to teach on giving, prayer, and fasting? (For example, what do verses 2, 5, and 16 have in common?)
- What are the central ideas of Jesus' collective teaching on these spiritual disciplines?

In presenting his teaching in this manner, Jesus does at least a few things for his disciples. First, an easily repeated teaching pattern he knows will help his disciples better remember what he said. This is important for the second reason. Jesus fully expected his disciples to give, pray, and fast regularly. However, he knows that our hearts always need to be kept in check by his teaching as it relates to these practices. Sin, in this case specifically pride and self-exaltation, corrupts our motives. And as a result, we are deceived into thinking that human praise is equal to any kind of reward that God himself can offer.

Now, let's focus in specifically on what Jesus had to say about prayer from this section of teaching.

⁵And 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.

⁶But 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.

Matthew 6:5–6

- For what does Jesus critique the hypocrites?
- What is the warning in these verses for Jesus' disciples?
- What is the encouragement?
- What does this passage tell us about God? How should this help us in our prayers?

⁷And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Matthew 6:7–8

- For what does Jesus critique the Gentiles?
- What do these verses teach us about God's character? And about our relationship to Him?

As we conclude this week's vGroup study, it should not escape us that before Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer (v. 9–13), he first addressed their motivation to pray. Jesus spoke out against both the hypocritical Jews and the 'babbling' Gentiles of his day (i.e. those who followed false gods). He called his disciples to abandon the prayer practices of these people. Instead, he taught that righteous prayer is not made so by the elegance with which you pray, by how many people hear you pray, nor by the amount of words you pray to the Lord. The prayer of the righteous comes from a heart that trusts that the Father hears his children and reveals himself to them through answered prayer. The prayer of the righteous also comes from a heart that humbly seeks the Father and loves Him more than the praise of men.

- What motivates you to pray? Do you pray more for the praise of men or because you love God?

Think about your prayer life.

- How often do you pray?
- Do you only pray when you are 'in trouble'? (Lord help me! Help me! Help me!)
- Do you only pray when things are going well? (Lord thank you! Thank you! Thank you!)
- What is the usual setting of your prayer time? Is this time uninterrupted or unhurried usually?
- During Vintage Church's Anticipate Prayer Challenge, how can you apply these lessons given by Jesus to your participation in this prayer challenge?

Close the vGroup discussion by praying the Lord's Prayer together followed by praying for the request listed on the Anticipate Prayer Challenge for the day your group is meeting.