Prayer as the Path to Intimacy

Matthew 5: 5-8 (in the context of 5:1-18)

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Eugene Peterson who was a pastor at one church for most of his life and who then became a pastor to pastors of sorts, writes about a time when a woman he didn’t know made an appointment to come see him based on a recommendation of a friend. It turns out that this woman had been seeing countless psychiatrists for years and yet not getting any better. When the woman walked into the office her opening statement was this: “Well, I guess you want to know all about my sex life – that’s what [the psychiatrists] always want to know.” He answered, “If that is what you want to talk about I’ll listen. What I would really be interested in finding out, though, is about your prayer life.”

Apparently, she didn’t think he was serious but he was. He was interested in the details about her prayer life for the same reason that the psychiatrists were interested in the details about her sex life – “to find out how she handled intimate relationships.”

He goes on in the book I was reading to say this, “All horizontal relationships between other persons, when they achieve any degree of intimacy at all, are aspects of sexuality….” Let’s read that again. Please note he says “aspects of sexuality” and not “aspects of sex”. He’s not saying that all human intimacy leads to sex, but that human intimacy is part of our sexuality. Then he says this: “All vertical relationships with persons of the Godhead, when there is any degree of intimacy at all, involve prayer.”[[1]](#footnote-1) So, intimacy with God involves prayer. Prayer is where our intimacy with God gets cultivated and nurtured and expressed.

The thing is, though, as much as we may long for intimacy with God, prayer rarely seems to come easy for most of us. Isn’t that true? In fact, most people tend to think that prayer must come easier for other people. NT Wright, says that lay people tend to tell him, “I leave prayer to the clergy.” But then clergy say, “Oh, I leave the serious stuff of prayer to the monks and the nuns.” And then some in monastic communities say, “Well, we can’t all be mystics, can we?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Maybe not. Maybe we can’t all be mystics but if what Eugene Peterson says is true, and I think it is, then any degree of intimacy in our relationship with God involves prayer. And, I think you all know that but all kinds of notions about prayer seem to get in our way. We aren’t mystical enough or we aren’t good with words, or we aren’t the “candle” kind of person, or we are too busy, or we are more doers than the kind that can sit and stare in to space for hours. We don’t know how to detangle the challenges of prayer so it becomes easier to put prayer on the shelf or throw it out all together than to try to detangle the knotted ball of yarn on our own.

Well, thankfully in our passage today Jesus does a little detangling for us. We’re looking at Matthew 6: 5-8 which is part of a collection of Jesus teachings that he gave on a hillside detangling all kinds of mixed up notions that people had about what God was doing in this world and what it meant to be part of it. And, here he turns to the tangled up notions of prayer. Notice that he begins with this, “When you pray….” Now the kind of prayer he describes after this of a guy standing up and pompously praying on the street corner is another one of those pictures of prayer that would turn most of us off today, right? In our culture it wouldn’t be something that would gain you a lot of honour but in Jesus’ day it was different. Still, it’s important to note that Jesus assumes you will pray. Just because this guy over here twists the meaning and expression of prayer doesn’t change the assumption. When you pray…. Just as Peterson says, intimacy with God involves prayer so when Jesus is teaching about this Kingdom of God that is breaking in, he is assuming that it will involve prayer. Rather than putting prayer on the shelf because it is being distorted by so many he helps us detangle it.

Okay, now to detangle the next part we have to see it in a larger context. This is part of a larger teaching that starts in verse one. There are three teachings that elaborate on the thesis statement in verse one. You can see the relationship between the three parts in this chart. [Note that vs. 7-8 doesn’t fit the formula – we’ll come back to that later.]

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| INTRO (vs. 1) | GIVING (vs 2-3) | PRAYING (A) (vs. 5-6) | PRAYING (B) (vs. 7-8) | FASTING (vs 16-18) |
| Be careful not to **practice** your righteousness in front of others  **to be seen by them**; | **2**“So **when** **you**[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6&interface=print#fen-NASB-23285a)]give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the **hypocrites** do in the synagogues and in the streets,  so that they may be **honoured by others**. | **5**“**When you** pray, you are not to be like the **hypocrites**; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners  so that they may **be seen by others. [** | **7**“And **when you** are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do,  for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words | **16**“**Whenever** **you** fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the **hypocrites***do*, for they [[j](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6&interface=print#fen-NASB-23299j)]neglect their appearance  so that they will **be noticed by others** when they are fasting. |
| If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. | Truly I say to you, **they have their reward in full.** | Truly I say to you, **they have their reward in full.** | **8**So do not be like them; | Truly I say to you, **they have their reward in full.** |
| [what to do] | **3**But when you [[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6&interface=print#fen-NASB-23286b)]give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, **4**so that your [[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6&interface=print#fen-NASB-23287c)]giving will be in **secret.** | **6**But when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in **secret**. | [EXAMPLE IN LORD’s PRAYER] | **17**But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face **18**so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in **secret**; |
| [The Father sees and rewards] | **Then your Father,**  **who sees what is done in secret,**  **will reward you.** | **Then your Father,**  **who sees what is done in secret,**  **will reward you.** | for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. | and **your Father,**  **who sees what is done in secret,**  **will reward you.** |

So, each of these three (charity, prayer, fasting) are what he is calling acts of righteousness. In that religious context these were some of the actions that were meant to be an expression of their devotion and right-relatedness to God. These actions were meant to flow out of their worship. Of course, Jesus calls them hypocrites because these actions aren’t part of their devotion to God but are part of their devotion to the opinion of others or the status and honor that others give them.

Now, cultural ways and reasons for seeking honour and recognition in Jesus times are different from our dominant culture here, but in any culture I think we all have ways and reasons for seeking approval and honour from others. We don’t culturally do that much through praying loudly on the street corner or covering our heads with ashes when we fast, but we seek the approval of others in so many other ways don’t we. We dress a certain way, use certain language, avoid being seen carrying certain coffee brands, make sure we are being seen carrying our cloth shopping bags, make posts on facebook about justice, and only share the selfies that support the image we want to project to the world. I know some of that may come authentically from your values or who you really are but if we are honest we all know what it means to do things for the purpose of approval from others. The people we seek approval and honour from may be different. The way we seek to be seen may not be the same. But we all know what it means to want to be seen a certain way and to shape our actions and what we externalize to the world to fit the way we want to be seen. As long as we can keep the act up we will likely be rewarded by some people.

Jesus bluntly calls these folks hypocrits because they are doing these actions that are meant to be acts of worship or a reflection of their relationship to God. But they are just a guise since their real desire is to be seen by people. It is fascinating, though, that he doesn’t say that they’ll be punished. He doesn’t even say they won’t be rewarded for their behavior. In fact, each of these three hypocrites receive a reward. Isn’t that crazy? To think of being rewarded for hypocrisy. Jesus says they’ve received their reward for their actions. So what is the reward? Well, he has exposed that the real reason they have been doing these actions is that they want to be seen, honoured, noticed by others and so, the implication here is that that is exactly what they’ve received. They wanted recognition by others and they are rewarded by recognition from others.

But let’s be honest, here that’s not too bad, is it? I mean really. Having people see us, notice us, honour us, respect us. These are pretty nice rewards. In fact that reward is why we do these things in the first place.

I was chatting with Tim W this week about a couple of projects I’m working on and some of my barriers to getting going on them. He threw out the idea of setting some little rewards for myself along the way when I get different steps done. I told him that I thought getting these tasks done would be reward in and of themselves. I’d feel great relief and sense of accomplishment if I could do them. He then challenged me with these words: “Well, Joy, they are obviously not reward enough, are they? Or else you wouldn’t have trouble getting them done.”

Following that logic, reward from God is not reward enough for us to seek him in the unseen places in prayer or else we’d be doing it, wouldn’t we?

I don’t think the issue is that God’s reward is less significant than the reward of being recognized by others, it’s just that we have a tangled up understanding of both. We don’t have a deep enough understanding of the reward offered in union with God on one hand. On the other hand we aren’t honest about the cost of trying to manufacture our righteousness, our okayness, our well-beingness through the reward of being seen by others.

There may be a temporary rush that comes from the approval of others but living your life to be recognized by others is living on a tiring tread mill that is constantly on high speed. I won’t elaborate on the toll that that takes because I know many of you are already aware of it. But, the cost is not only individual. A society that is organized and devoted to this principle means many, many are not able to stay on the treadmill of approval and honour and recognition. Some can play the game for a while but many cannot. There are emotional costs, physical costs, environmental costs, relational costs. Anytime we worship the created rather than the creator things go awry, deeply awry.

So if this reward that the hypocrites receive is not all that it’s cracked up to be, what is Jesus saying about this different reward when we practice these acts of worship in secret, away from the gaze of others.

First, he tells us that this reward is from the Father who sees. First let’s pause at the term the Father, here. Much has been made about Jesus use of the term Father to talk about God. Many talk about this being a relational term that reflects the intimacy level of a parent and child which is more personal and close than what we usually associate between a human and God. Now, I do think there is truth to that analysis. It’s not always a helpful metaphor for many today that have had had abusive or absent fathers and it has also led to misunderstanding God as male over the centuries, but none-the-less it does seem to be some of what Jesus is modeling by using this term to refer to God. What I’ve more recently learned, though, is that this term of the Father seeing has other important connections to the story of Israel. The first time in the OT that we have the relationship between God and his people as being likened to a parental relationship is in Exodus. There we see Moses marching into Pharoh’s presence with this message from Yahweh: These Israelites that you have captive are my children. Israel is my firstborn son. I demand that you let them go! This is the parent that will not stand by while their child is abused. The Jewish people were deeply shaped by that story, so, when Jesus says that the Father sees and the Father rewards, Jesus’ hearers would not simply hear Jesus using a personal and relational term for God but they would hear Exodus all over this teaching. By saying that the Father sees, he’s announcing a new exodus of sorts. The father that liberated the Hebrew slaves in Exodus sees you. The one who has the power to liberate you from being enslaved by the gaze of others, sees you. The one who desires true and lasting freedom not just for you but for all that have been in bondage by a society ordered around twisted notions of success and honour is at work. The one you calls you a child rather than a slave or any of the other derogatory names you have been called your whole life sees you, sees you as God’s child.

In the OT the first person to name God as the God who sees was Hagar. She was the lowly servant of Sarah who was married to Abraham. Abraham was of course chosen to be the father of a great nation. The problem was of course that Abraham and Sarah were getting quite old so they did as many of us do when things aren’t going our way: they decided to take things into their own hands. Sarah suggested they follow the solution others did in their day and made Hagar sleep with Abraham so that he could have a child, which worked. Well, sort of. Hagar did become pregnant but not surprisingly Sarah could no longer stand the sight of her and began to mistreat. In fact, her treatment was so harsh that Hagar decides to run away and abandon any thread of social standing and means of survival that she did have. But she is seen by God. We are told that an angel of the Lord meets her and tells her that the son she is carrying will be blessed and become a nation himself. She is to name him Ishmael which means “God hears.” This one who up until this part of the story has been given no say in any matter, whose voice has been silenced even in this narrative account has been heard by God. Not only does God hear but God sees and Hagar is so moved by this encounter that she gives God a name: El Roi, “the God who sees.” “Because” she says, “I have seen God.” God has seen her, and she has seen God. This is a face to face encounter that is so transformative that it gives her the courage to go back into

You see prayer is the place where we experience the God who sees. No matter how others see us, God sees us with promise. At the deepest places where we long to be known, God sees us. In the places that we feel are beyond hope, God sees us.

To pray is to be naked before God, yes, to be seen. But it is to be seen by the one who cares for the lowliest abused concubine. It is to be seen by the one who makes promises to the concubine’s bastard son. God’s gaze is not like the gaze of Abraham and Sarah, and much of society, that quickly turns to scorn once one’s usefulness is exhausted. It is a gaze that we can rest in. It is the gaze of love, of compassion. It is the gaze of the one who desires greater liberation for us and for our world. It is the gaze of the who sees promise and hope in us and in our world.

To sit in the presence of this loving gaze is deeply transformative. It gave Hagar the courage to return to a context that was less than ideal. This is the reward Jesus is speaking of. When the hypocrites seek the reward of being seen by others, their reward is just that – at least while they keep the act up. When we seek God in the secret places, we are rewarded by nothing less than being seen by God. Union with God is our reward when this is what we seek in prayer.

The same goes for the second teaching on prayer here. In this example, the pray-ers are not necessarily motivated by recognition from others but they seem to be motivated by a desire to control or the need for security. If they just get the prayer formula right they can get what they want. Jesus’ response is that the Father knows their needs. I’ve heard some people say, “Then why pray?” Why pray? Because prayer is a place of intimacy with God. It is the place were we become one with God and through that are transformed to be in the world and see the world with new eyes. As we are seen and known by the Father in liberating ways we can see and know the world through eyes of liberation.

At this point we have to be a bit careful, though, because the string that Jesus just untangled can easily get tangled back up again. When we talk about prayer and intimacy with God the string that it can easily get tangled up in here in Vancouver is the very tangly string of individualism and autonomy. Talking about cultivating intimacy with God doesn’t mean we fall into the trap of a “Me and Jesus” spirituality. Just as a healthy sexual relationship between spouses doesn’t leave them in the bedroom all day every day, a healthy intimacy with God ripples out into all of a life. This is where the Lord’s prayer is so helpful. If this were the kind of prayer we went into the secret places to pray on a regular basis, imagine the rippling affects. If we daily prayed for God’s Kingdom to come, don’t you think we would begin to look for it in our daily lives. If we regularly prayed for God to provide our daily bread, our daily needs, would we find ourselves freed bit by bit by the frantic need to control our own security, would we find ourselves more grateful? I don’t think we can pray regularly to be forgiven of our debts and to ask for grace to forgive others without that impacting our relationships and our economics. If we prayed each day to be delivered from evil and to be rescued from temptation, how might we witness the power of God around us, how might our despair for the world be turned to hope, how might we be able to imagine deliverance from the many evils that plague our families, our work places, our nation.

Intimacy with God always, always ripples outward, and in our highly individualistic and autonomous culture we do need to beware of the trap of falling into a “Me and Jesus” spirituality when we talk about intimacy. Having said that, though, Grandview, I feel like I need to say directly that we have worked so hard to counter the skewed notions of the individualistic, “me and Jesus” spirituality that we have sometimes gone to the opposite extreme and thrown out intimacy with God all together. Life in God’s kingdom is not possible without intimacy with God. Prayer is our path to intimacy. If we are to live deeply into the vision of God’s Kingdom that Jesus has given us, if we are to participate in the many ways that he is bringing greater liberation from tyranny and oppression in our time, then we need this constant rhythm of action and prayer that we see in Jesus life. This will be what sustains us, this will be what transforms us.

I don’t know if you’ve ever met someone that makes a deep impression on you even from a short meeting. I met someone like this once. His name was Father Bishoy and he was a Coptic Christian monk from Egypt. He was part of a group of folks here in Vancouver for a consortium on urban ministry that I participated in. Father Bishoy had a long salt and pepper beard and wore a simple black robe with beautiful Egyptian embroidery along the cuffs. Of course his appearance was striking but it was his person that made the deep impression. He seemed to be so completely comfortable in his own skin. He would lean his head back and laugh heartedly at himself, but also listen intently when others were speaking. I sat beside him on a bus ride through the city and he asked me about our intentional community houses that had only been going a year or two here at that time. I was a little embarrassed to tell him about our communities which were so new considering he was part of a community hundreds of years old, but he was genuinely interested in what we were doing. He also told me about his life. He spent 4 days in the city of Cairo working with impoverished families and children and then 3 days praying in the monastery in the desert. “Joy,” he said in describing his rhythm, “when I go into my cell in the desert I don’t go alone. I take with me my brothers and all of the families and children from the city into prayer. And then, when I return to the city, I don’t leave the cell behind. I take may prayers and union with God with me into the city.” This rhythm of prayer and action made Father Bishoy a joy to be around. He was not bitter, nor was he out of touch. He was a man seemed to know what it is to be seen by God and to see the world through those eyes.

Now, of course the danger of telling you a story like that is that you can simply dismiss it as being unrealistic for you. I know that almost no one here will be able to follow this exact rhythm. We are not Coptic monks after all. But, I offer it to you as an icon, of sorts, so that we can all find ways that fit our lives and contexts for cultivating intimacy with God in the midst of our active lives. What is a place? What are times, when you can close the door to some of the many distractions and competing gazes for the purpose of prayer and intimacy with God? Maybe it is the time when you are doing dishes each day, standing in one place with your hands in the soapy water. Mary grew up in a house with many children making it impossible to find literal spaces where she could be alone, but for her playing the piano became her place of solitude and prayer. The music became the room where she could meet God. Someone recently told me that he meets God on his bicycle. When he is riding on his bike sometimes the presence of God is so palpable that tears fly through the air behind him. In those places if you are not sure how to pray, you may want to begin with the Lord’s prayer. Pray it slowly or pray one phrase a day and allow the prayer to lead you deeply into the heart of God where you will be seen and where you will learn to see the world through these eyes of compassion.

Before we come to the communion table today I want to give you some time of silence simply to be in the presence of God. Know that in this time of silence that the God who saw Hagar in her distress, who saw her yet unborn son in her womb, sees you and knows you and deeply desires intimacy with you.

1. Eugene Peterson. *The Contemplative Pastor.*  p. 23-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. N.T. Wright. *The Lord and His Prayer.* p. 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)