**Our Father in Heaven**

Matthew 6:1-9

Today we start a **six week series on PRAYER**. Our ***Core Values*** define HOW we do ministry at Oakwood. We started with Scripture. As a church everything we do is grounded in the truth, authority, power and sufficiency of God’s Word. Directly related to Scripture is prayer. We know God through His Word and we commune with Him through prayer. We will spend the next six weeks walking through the key phrases of the Lord’s Prayer to learn how Jesus taught us to pray.

***What is prayer?*** How does prayer work? How do we go about GROWING IN PRAYER?

I won’t claim to answer all of your questions on prayer in six weeks, but ***these six phrases give us principles to guide us as we pray***. On at least **two occasions** Jesus presented a version of this prayer. Matthew 6 will be our primary focus. But Luke 11 gives us another time, later in Jesus’ ministry, when the disciples asked him directly, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Since they didn’t remember all six phrases from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus simplified it even more for them in Luke 11.

Let’s start back in the beginning of Matthew 6 to get the broader context for Jesus’ teaching on prayer. ***He precedes the words of the prayer with several WARNINGS***. I’ve summarized these into **three PITFALLS** to avoid when it comes to prayer.

Prayer Pitfall 1 - **Performance**

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people to be seen by them.” Matthew 6:1

Since prayer often has a corporate aspect to it, Jesus cuts this problem off first. ***Prayer must NEVER be a PERFORMANCE***. If we are praying to impress other people with our spirituality or our insight or our amazing faith - we are not praying to God, we are putting on a little skit for each other.

Jesus wanted to make it clear to His followers that the prayer God wants from us is not the rehearsed, staged, theologically impressive rhetoric of the Pharisees and religious leaders.

Prayer Pitfall 1 - **Performance**

“When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray… at the street corners.” Matthew 6:4

If prayer is showmanship Jesus clearly states that ***whatever applause you win in the moment is all those “prayers” accomplish***. “They have received their reward.” Just being seen. Winning admiration. Impressing people and getting their applause - whether out loud or just in their minds.

So let’s get this right straight away - prayer is not about performing to impress people. And here is the corrective for those of us who are tempted to perform.

Prayer Pitfall 1 - **Performance**

* Pray in **Private**

“When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.” Matthew 6:6

**The antidote to seeking applause is private, secret prayer** - because NO ONE sees, no one knows. You can’t impress people with something they don’t know about. And this is the test of integrity versus hypocrisy - do we mainly pray in public when other people can hear us, or do we mainly pray in private when only God can hear us?

To be sure prayer is focused on God, we need to be careful not to pray to impress people. The only One whose applause we should seek is the God who has invited us to pray to HIM. The next pitfall is:

Prayer Pitfall 2 - **Magic**

“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.” Matthew 6:7

I’m sure you’ve heard of the old ***“name it and claim it”*** theology that goes along with the prosperity gospel. According to this non-Biblical teaching if you just pray enough and believe enough then God will do what you tell him. They use Old Testament passages like Deuteronomy where God promises blessings for obedience. And they use New Testament passages like Mark 11:24, “whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours.” They take verses like these out of context and turn them into guarantees of health and wealth and any other blessing you want to NAME and CLAIM.

Now, I’m sure all of us here know better than to approach prayer ***as if we were supposed to TELL GOD what to do***. If your three-year-old son or grandson came to tell you what should be on the menu for the weekend, you would expect all candy and no vegetables, right? If we listen to our kids without just giving them everything they ask for, how much more should we be thankful that God DOESN’T give us everything we ask Him for?

But we can still fall into this trap of believing that prayer is magical - that there is **some secret formula** related to the number of minutes you pray or the number of people you get praying or the sincerity of your prayers. That is not prayer, that is ***WITCHCRAFT.*** That is Harry Potter stuff - getting the pronunciation right and the flick of the wrist right.

Of course, prayer does take time. It does require faith. We do have to persevere. We do need to enlist other people to pray with us. But none of that can force God’s hand. None of that puts us into control. That is upside down. Prayer is about us surrendering control, not taking it. ***Faith is TRUSTING God, not micromanaging Him.***

***Prayer is not magic.*** God is not counting the minutes you pray or assessing the merits of your prayers with some kind of point system, waiting for you to reach some number and then you’ll get that job or get that relationship or get that thing you want. God is waiting for you to bring that issue to Him and lay it at His feet. ***Prayer is about SURRENDERING to God not MANIPULATING GOD.*** He is **not a vending machine,** and we just need to find the right buttons. The antidote to the magic idea is to:

Prayer Pitfall 2 - **Magic**

* Understand God’s **Nature**

“Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” Matthew 6:8

Prayer is about **KNOWING GOD**, drawing closer to Him, being with Him. And the closer you get to God the more you know you can’t possibly control or direct Him but rather you need Him to direct YOU! The more we know God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good, all-loving Father that He is, the more we will trust Him instead of trying to control Him.

***God is not TAME.*** He is not ours to manipulate. We are His to guide. And He is so merciful, so perfectly loving that He gives us so much freedom to be ourselves with Him. God is not this vindictive, cruel, punishing old fussbudget. He is the essence of love, patience, understanding, wisdom, goodness and every other virtue. The more you know God the more it counteracts false ideas of prayer. If you know God even a little you know He is not a vending machine you can manipulate. Magic will not work on God. One more prayer pitfall.

Prayer Pitfall 3 - **Fate**

“Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight…” Luke 11:5

Immediately following the Lord’s prayer in Luke 11 Jesus tells **a parable**. It’s the middle of the night and a knock comes on your door. It’s an out-of-town friend suddenly arriving unannounced and obviously expecting to stay with you. This would be super strange in modern times but rewind 2,000 years before texting and cell phones or even regular phones or even the telegraph. In ancient times this was a common occurrence. You frequently couldn’t plan or announce your travels in advance so you would show up at a friend’s house or a family member’s house and expect them to take you in. Such hospitality was built into the culture of the ancient middle east.

**What was unthinkable** in Jesus’ day was not showing up unannounced at midnight, what was unthinkable was ***turning such a guest away.*** But it puts you in a bind. You weren’t prepared for visitors. Your family is already asleep, and you can’t start grinding wheat into flour right then. So you do the next best thing - you walk next door to your neighbor and hope first of all they’re awake and second of all that they have some food on hand.

The point of that parable is **TO ASK**.

Prayer Pitfall 3 - **Fate**

“I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find.” Luke 11:9

On its own, out of context, this verse could teach the previous pitfall of MAGIC. But in context, understanding all Jesus teaches on prayer, it keeps us from falling into magic on the one hand or FATALISM on the other. In our tradition here at Oakwood we tend to err more often toward FATE than we do toward magic. We know that God is sovereign, that He is in control and so our approach to prayer can be “Eh, whatever.” **We can resign ourselves to a predetermined FATE**. But that is no more biblical than magic. That is Greek tragedy nonsense instead of Harry Potter nonsense.

***God’s sovereignty must not become an excuse for our prayerlessness*** or lack of faith. We will never fully understand how prayer works in relation to the sovereign decree of God who guides every detail of history. But we do definitively know that Jesus and the New Testament clearly and consistently command us to pray - and that praying must include ASKING for specific things.

* Do our prayers CHANGE the preordained plan of God?
* Or has God already ordained that we should pray just before He does something?

I don’t know. Our job is not to figure out the mysteries of prayer. Our job is simply to pray. Here is the antidote to FATALISM. “If you then, who are EVIL, know how to give good gifts to your children…”

Prayer Pitfall 3 - **Fate**

* Trust your **Father**

“How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask!” Luke 11:13

The cure for bad theology is good theology. Don’t start believing in magic, that is another way to make prayer about you. But don’t fall into the opposite trap and stop praying altogether because it’s all predetermined and doom is coming for us all. TRUST our Father in heaven. And that takes us into our positive lessons for today as we begin the Lord’s prayer. Two beautifully balanced principles that get us started in prayer.

Prayer is…

1. A **Relationship** with our loving, present heavenly Father

“Pray then, like this: ‘Our Father…’” Matthew 6:9

**The Lord’s prayer is not a magic formula** to repeat over and over and then you’ll get what is on your wish list. You need to find a special magic lamp with a Genie to grant your wishes. The God of the Bible doesn’t work that way.

Jesus says, “This is HOW you should pray.” This is the MODEL. Follow this progression. Use these phrases as a guide. **Let them be signposts on your JOURNEY of prayer.** When you reach the trailhead with the sign that says “PRAYER” this way, the first marker you come to is “Our Father.”

Prayer is first and foremost, always and forever a RELATIONSHIP. ***We approach God as His CHILDREN*** - secure in His love, prized as members of His family. If you have or had a good, loving, present earthly father it’s a big advantage for you in knowing God as your Father. If you had a grumpy, distant, unpredictable or mean earthly father that’s a hurdle you have to get over in knowing God. **Think of your best relationship** and multiply it by a million and you’ll begin to know the kind of love God has for you.

But don’t miss the gospel in this truth - that as those who belong to Jesus we are the children of God. Because membership in God’s family is not automatic or guaranteed.

“Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated… strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” Ephesians 2:12

**To appreciate how CLOSE our relationship with God is now** as our loving heavenly Father we have to first ***remember how FAR we were from Him***, when we were living in our sin. Before you called on Jesus to save you, you were not God’s child, you were God’s ENEMY.

* You were **separated** from Christ.
* You were **alienated** from God’s people.
* You were **a stranger,** a foreigner, OUTSIDE of God’s covenant promises.

This is **very Jewish language**. The nation of Israel prided itself as being God’s chosen people. They were IN with God, and everyone else was OUT. Every other nation was outside of God’s promises and blessings, but the Jews were IN. They were marked by the blood covenant of circumcision, they followed the Law of Moses, they were HOLY, set apart for God, distinct from all other nations.

All communities work this way. It reminds me of high school. I played violin through sophomore year, if you believe that. Some of my friends were in the **BAND** - which was a thing. It wasn’t exactly cool, but it was definitely ahead of ORCHESTRA. I also played soccer which was definitely cooler than Band, but it definitely wasn’t FOOTBALL. Those were the cool guys. Those were the **IN CROWD**. For there to be an IN crowd there have to be people who are OUT. Teenagers are professionals at this.

But adults aren’t much better, are we? **We have clubs for everything** you can imagine.

* ***Fitness clubs*** for people of a certain body type and athletic level. You are either worthy to join or so unworthy. Most of us - unworthy.
* ***Financial clubs*** for people of a certain class or standing.
* ***Interest clubs*** like book clubs or discussion groups for different kind of nerds, I mean academics.
* ***Political parties*** are certainly like this.
* You name it - there is a group for it. You are IN or you are OUT.

So, picture me as **a freshman in high school** - barely five feet tall, 100 pounds soaking wet, violin playing soccer guy. You all shake your heads in sympathy for my little sister. She was one year behind me and worked very hard to not be associated with me. A lot of my teenage years was ***feeling like someone on the outside*** of most groups. I wasn’t one of the cool kids. I wasn’t on the football team. I wasn’t even in the band. Out. Out. Out.

Now, you may have been on the other side of those lines - you may have been like my sister, in with the cool kids, in with the football team or the cheerleaders. In with the band or the math club or whatever your thing was. (I at least had the sense not to join the Math team, though they did try to recruit me once. I’m sorry if there are any Mathletes among us, but that’s the bottom of the barrel, right?)

Whatever your teenage status, **all of us were OUTSIDE when it came to God**. All of us were strangers, aliens, foreigners, separated. UNTIL JESUS. Listen to the next verse.

Prayer is…

1. A **Relationship** with our loving, present heavenly Father

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” Ephesians 2:13

**Because of Jesus**, because of His blood, we have been forgiven, we have been washed, ***we have been reconciled with God, adopted into His family***. Ephesians 1 says that God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world and that ***“in love, He predestined us for adoption*** as His sons and daughters.” But there was a moment in time **when that adoption took place**, when those legal papers were signed in the blood of Jesus - the moment that you called on Jesus in faith.

That is the only reason we can approach God as our loving heavenly Father - because of the Lord Jesus and His sacrifice for us. **Only IN CHRIST** do you and I dare to call God Father. ***We deserve to be outsiders***, we deserve to be forever banished from the holy presence of our glorious God. BUT GOD, in His infinite mercy, rescued us from the separation we deserve and brought us into His family, into His loving arms so that we can call Him FATHER.

Prayer is… A **Relationship** with our loving, present heavenly Father

* Prayer is possible because Jesus paid for our **Adoption**

“But to all… who believed on his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” John 1:12

Think of the audacious intimacy that represents! We pray to our Papa, to our Daddy. We come with the familiarity of a child. We come not as guests or even foreign dignitaries before a King - **we come as children**.

This is **where prayer begins** - simply coming into the presence of our loving, powerful, gracious and merciful Father.

***Why do you pray?*** The same reason you call your Mom or Dad. The same reason you visit them and they visit you - because you’re family. Those of us who have been Christians a long time have to regularly remind ourselves ***what a mind blowing privilege it is for us to pray!*** The fact that it is possible - that the way is open directly to the throne of Almighty God - should knock us down with amazement. The Creator of All Things - the Lord who rules over the Cosmos - is our Father. **At any moment of the day** we can run directly to Him - and He never declines the call. He never hangs up on us. He never tunes out mid-sentence. He never replies with a text - brb. Lol.

That is the starting point of prayer - a relationship with our Father who is available, present, loving - always with us! Here is the other starting point of prayer.

Prayer is…

1. A **Miracle** of God’s mysterious, wonderful grace

“Our Father in heaven…” Matthew 6:9

In just four words we see this whole spectrum - **God is totally present with us**, and yet He is in heaven, **impossibly distant from us** here on earth. Immanuel, God with us, is also Yahweh, the Great I Am who dwells in the spiritual realm in the unapproachable light of His infinite glory and faultless holiness.

Our Father… in Heaven…

Have you ever felt the significance of that polarity? Both phrases are completely true of God at all times, and we feel both, sometimes very acutely. Sometimes we are so ***aware of the Fatherly love of God*** and the warm presence of the Holy Spirit. But other times **we feel the exalted distance of God** - so entirely beyond us in wisdom, power, goodness, and glory.

So, while prayer is POSSIBLE because Jesus paid for our adoption…

Prayer is… A **Miracle** of God’s mysterious grace

* Prayer is **Impossible** without God’s guidance and power

“Remain in me… apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:4-5

In John 15 Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches… If a man remains in me and I in him he will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing.” This is a teaching about the whole Christian life - we are helpless, powerless, apart from Jesus. But it is especially a teaching about prayer. Even prayer is impossible apart from Jesus.

And ***PRAYER is precisely what makes the rest of the Christian life possible*** because prayer is the way we REMAIN IN CHRIST. That is how we abide! That is how we grow closer to Him. We pray.

Here is our summary for today:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Prayer Pitfalls:** | **Prayer is:** |
| 1. Performance
2. Magic
3. Fate
 | 1. A Relationship “Our Father”
2. A Miracle “in heaven”
 |

We need to avoid the pitfalls Jesus warns of - ***performing to please others*** rather than God. **Magic** - believing prayer is a formula that if you get the minutes or the sincerity right you can control God. Or **Fate** - not praying because God has already determined everything anyway, so why pray?

How can we avoid those traps? We come to the Lord our ***God as our Father***! We come washed in the blood of Jesus, bought with His blood and adopted into God’s family. We come as children who simply want to be with our Papa. And we come recognizing what a ***miracle is that prayer is possible at all*** - knowing that the Holy Spirit must guide us as we pray just as He guides us through prayer in the rest of our Christian lives.

Now, **three practical steps to prayer** as we close:

**Three Steps to Pray:**

1. Find a **Time**
2. Find a **Place**
3. Find a **Way**

First, **find a time**. Nothing important happens in life if you don’t ***plan it and prioritize it***. If you don’t schedule prayer, chances are it won’t happen very often or very well. Interruptions will rule the day. Other things will come up and the first thing to be crowded out will be prayer.

This is why Christians for centuries have found that prayer and Bible study are best done right away, ***early in the morning***. That is not a law, it is not the only time. But often it is the most consistent time if you protect it. Find a time.

Second, **find a place**. The best place is the one that has the fewest distractions - a place where you can open your Bible and meet with the Lord uninterrupted. Some prefer a certain chair or place inside. Others enjoy a comfortable place outside. Find a place that works for you and that you can use consistently.

Third, **find a way**. Some of you are super organized list makers who have always prayed through lists and you will always pray through lists. You have lists of family members with specific needs and requests beside each name. You have lists of missionaries and missions trips friends are going on. You have a calendar and you pray through special birthdays, anniversaries and events. One professor of mine has a set of file folders - one for each day - that he opens and in it are papers that guide him in praying for a few family members, a couple of missionaries and some other issues each day.

Some of us are less organized in this way and prefer being ***more spontaneous and “Spirit led.”*** The organized ones shake their heads and call this “justified laziness,” but we know it works. Romans 8 says, ***“The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness.”*** When we don’t know what to pray or how to pray, He helps us. And Jesus himself intercedes for us before the Father, translating the prayers we pray into the prayers we SHOULD HAVE prayed.

Again, this is the miracle of prayer! Our weak, often selfish, inconsistent prayers are right now being collected before God’s holy throne and ***they rise before Him like sweet incense.***

***So PRAY!*** Above all, pray! Find the place and time and way that works for you and simply pray! Use the Bible to guide your prayer times and direct your prayers. Connect your Bible reading with your prayer time.

And trust that the Lord Jesus who paid the price for our adoption will see to it that our prayers are heard and that through those prayers God works in us and through us to accomplish His good purposes on this planet!
***Now, let’s pray!***