

PRIVATE PRAYER – WHEN?

Matthew 6v6

Two weeks ago I launched a teaching series on 'Your Inner World'. We began with Matthew 26v41: "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." Last week we examined Matthew 6v1-21 to think about developing a secret life for God's eyes only. Today we bring the camera up close to verse 6 about private prayer. **But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.**

The text starts with a very little word: **but**. This points us back to verse 5: *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 men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.* Jesus is describing those whose only concern is their outer world. They make a public show of piety with the express purpose of impressing other people. They look good on the outside, but their inner world is not so impressive.

Jesus goes on to say: **but when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.**

1. When you pray

There are two issues here.

1.1. We need time for private prayer

Notice that Jesus talks about "when you pray" not "if". By definition, a disciple is like his master. Jesus prayed, therefore so will His disciples.

The twelve certainly saw at first hand the priority Jesus gave to prayer. He prayed out publicly, often in extreme situations, and the disciples were there to witness it. (John 10) He prayed *with* his disciples (John 17); sometimes He just took three of them with him to pray. (Luke 9v28) Occasionally He spent time in prayer with his disciples close at hand (Luke 9v18; Mark 14v32f). But He also spent long periods alone in private prayer.

In the midst of His demanding life Jesus needed to be alone with the Father.

- Mark 1v35-37: *Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"*
- Mark 6v45f: *After the amazing miracle feeding of a crowd of thousands with a few loaves and fishes: Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.*
- Luke 5v15, 16: *News about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.*

At significant moments Jesus spent time in private prayer:

- Luke 6v12,13: *One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.*
- Luke 9v18: *Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?"*
- Matthew 26v36: *Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."*

Jesus' prayer life was so dynamic that the disciples wanted the same.

- Luke 11v1: *One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.*

This is fascinating isn't it? Jesus enjoyed unbroken fellowship with His Father, yet He still set specific time aside to pray in private. If Jesus needed time for private prayer, how much more will I?

But by saying, **when you pray** Jesus also raises the issue of when to pray

1.2. We need a time for private prayer

But when? When should we set time aside for prayer?

It is possible to make a very strong case for private prayer first thing in the day. In the Old Testament we get a privileged glimpse into the rich inner world of some of its great characters and early morning prayer is a theme. Take these two for example:

- David: *In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation. (Psalm 5v3) Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul. (Psalm 143v8)*
- Isaiah: *My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you. (26v9) The Sovereign LORD ... wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught. (50v4)*

John Piper argues strongly for early-morning prayer. It signals, he says, to our conscience that this is of first importance in the day. Second, it strikes the first blow in the battle of the day, instead of waiting till we are besieged from all sides. Third, what we do daily and do early shapes the spirit of our minds. It brings us into a disposition of humility and trust that will bear better fruit than anxiety and self-reliance.

For some here this has been your practice for years. It is part of your life now.

But what about those who have tried but find this is almost impossible? Are they weaker brothers and sisters? What about people who find they pray better at another time? What about “night owls” whose best hours are later in the day? What about those who have work patterns which turn their day upside down? And what about believers who did have a great pattern of early morning prayer until small children came along and smashed it to pieces?

If you look again at the example of Jesus you will see that He prayed early in the morning, but He also prayed during the day or in the evening and occasionally right through the night.

Rather than make rules about when to pray and feeling condemned by comparisons or failure, perhaps we should be thinking about principles and values. Here are five:

Accept that we are all different and you are therefore unique.

Don't be intimidated by other people's patterns of prayer. Don't be squeezed into a one-size-fits-all mould. This is the theme of Gary Thomas' book, 'Sacred Pathways.' (Zondervan1996) By 'Sacred Pathways' he means the way we relate to God, how we draw near to Him. *“Over and over again we give Christians the same spiritual prescription. “You want to grow as a Christian? All you have to do is develop a thirty or sixty minute quiet time and come to church every Sunday morning.”* He then describes ten different spiritual temperaments and how knowing what your dominant one is can help you in developing your inner world. If he is right then this will explain how what works for one person does not work for another. This applies, not just to when you pray, but how. So we will need to return to this in our series.

Devote some of your best time to prayer rather than your left-overs.

For some their “best time” may be early in the morning, for others it may be during the day or in the evening. But avoid just offering God time you can't use in any other way, or time when you are exhausted. Imagine inviting a friend for a meal but only offering them what you can't pile on your full plate or giving them food you don't like or can't manage. Not much of a friendship! No, we offer our friend the best of the food and we also offer them first refusal on second helpings! Sometimes we don't even offer God our left overs! Other things take over our day and we end up with private prayer squeezed out all together. This then, becomes another argument for starting the day with prayer. Give God your best not your left-overs.

Make a plan.

Think ahead about when you will pray. For instance, if it is to be early in the morning, make sure you don't go to bed late. If it is to be at another time in the day then think through how you can avoid interruptions. Think ahead about where you will pray and how you might spend the time.

John Piper writes: *“Unless I'm badly mistaken, one of the main reasons so many of God's children don't have a significant life of prayer is not so much that we don't want to, but that we don't plan to. If you want to take a four week vacation, you don't just get up one summer morning and say, “Hey, let's go*

today!" You won't have anything ready. You won't know where to go. Nothing has been planned. But that is how many of us treat prayer. We get up day after day and realize that significant times of prayer should be part of our life, but nothing's ever ready. We don't know where to go. Nothing has been planned. No time. No place. No procedure. And we all know that the opposite of planning is not a wonderful flow of deep, spontaneous experiences in prayer. The opposite of planning is the rut. If you don't plan a vacation you will probably stay home and watch TV. The natural unplanned flow of spiritual life sinks to the lowest ebb of vitality. There is a race to be run and a fight to be fought. If you want renewal in your life of prayer you must plan to see it." ('Desiring God.' IVP 1986)

Don't clock-watch!

By this I don't mean forget about time altogether; and, of course, we do need to schedule time for prayer. I mean, don't judge the quality of your private prayer by the length of time you spend praying. And be wary of those who tell you that you must pray for such-and-such a length of time. I recall one new believer describe how prayer was such a pleasure and he would spend extended times with God. Then some well-meaning person mentioned the principle of praying for an hour. So the young Christian began to put a clock beside him when he prayed. Very soon he was clock-watching. *"Have I prayed for an hour yet?"* The joy was gone. His eyes were on the time rather than on God. His private prayer was now governed by a rule rather than grace. I don't think how long we pray is ever the real issue. One of the most vital prayers we can every pray only takes two and a half seconds: *"God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"* (Luke 18v13)

Be aware of the presence of God throughout the whole day.

The apostle Paul exhorted the believers to *"pray without ceasing"*. (1 Thessalonians 5v17) This may mean praying repeatedly and often. But more than anything it captures the essence of prayer; being aware of our constant dependence on God and of His presence. Brother Lawrence (1611-1691) thought of it as a *"habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul with God."* He wrote: *"This often causes me to have feelings of inward rapture - and sometimes outward ones! They are so great that I am forced to have to moderate them and conceal them from others."* (Brother Lawrence: 'The Practice of the Presence of God') We can be aware of God's presence throughout the day *and* have specific times for private prayer. This was how it was for Jesus. It is not a case of either/or, but of both.

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Private prayer says something about the quality of your inner world. The Scottish divine Robert Murray McCheyne wrote *"What a man is on his knees before God, that he is and nothing more."* Prayer reveals our character and it shows us where we are in our relationship with God. But it also shapes our character. It affects our life, our thinking, our responses, our inclinations and our aspirations.

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