

## How Do YOU Want Me To PRAY? Study Guide R 2.5 (Matthew 6:7)

Today we learn the third point Jesus makes when he begins teaching about prayer in Matthew 6. You remember right? First, he taught us that prayer isn't for public display ... don't be like the hypocrites who love to stand and pray in synagogues and street corners to be seen by others. Prayer is not for show (Matthew 6:5).

Second, Jesus taught us that he wants us to pray privately. Go into your room and shut the door. Pray to your Father who is in secret. Your Father sees what you're doing in secret and He'll reward you. Quiet, alone time speaking with God is foundational to a healthy prayer life (Matthew 6:6).

Today Jesus teaches us one more thing about how to pray when we are alone with him.

**Matthew 6:7** "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.

I don't know if you've ever really thought about this but a lot of different traditions teach people to pray using the constant repetition of the same phrase. The Catholics repeat the rosary. It's not uncommon for Muslims to repeat, "Allah El Allah," or, "god is god" thousands of times. Buddhists write their prayer on a wheel and let the wind spin the wheel or they crank the wheel themselves. Every revolution is supposed to mean the prayer is offered again. People speak in tongues and mutter the same bunch of syllables over and over.

Some people light candles and believe that as long as the candle is lit, their prayers are being repeatedly transmitted to God. Perhaps you've seen those guys in their black suits and hats standing before the wailing wall and repeating the same prayer as they bob their heads.

These approaches to prayer all assume that the prayer is going to be recognized or heard by God because of the repetition. Does God like repetitive praying?

Jesus says don't bother. Don't heap up empty phrases. Don't go through vain repetitions. Don't think that God is going to listen just because a certain prayer or phrase a bunch of syllables are repeated over and over.

**Matthew 6:7** "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.

If scripture teaches us anything, it teaches us that God is a personal God.

**Psalms 4:3** But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him.

He listens when His people pray. He's right there when you talk to Him.

**1 Peter 5:7** casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

He heard you the first time. He doesn't need the 157<sup>th</sup> time. And, God will not be badgered into responding. Heaping up a pile of empty phrases doesn't do anything. Prayer is not about going through the motions by repeating phrases or words.

**Proverbs 15:29** The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.

Like we learned last week (R 2.4), God wants sincere prayer from the heart. Prayer is a conversation between the creature and the Creator. Alone with God is where prayer is at. Even if we're alone in a crowd of people, God sees us and rewards us when we pray sincerely from the heart.

Please don't misunderstand what Jesus is teaching us today. There's nothing wrong with repeating a sincere, heart-felt request to God in prayer. The apostle Paul prays three times about his thorn in the flesh.

**2 Corinthians 12:8** Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

Jesus prays three times for God's will to be done in the Garden of Gethsemane.

**Matthew 26:44** So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again.

Jesus isn't saying we shouldn't ask God a second or third or fourth or fifth time about something. But Jesus forbids us to mindlessly repeat a phrase over and over. Don't waste your breath and don't treat God like He's not a Person.

Just imagine with me what it would be like to have a face to face meeting with Jesus Himself. If Jesus was physically standing before us, we'd speak with Him directly and pour our hearts out to Him sincerely. That's exactly what God is looking for in prayer. Could you really be in His presence and repeat one phrase over and over? How ridiculous is that?

So let's recap the first three points Jesus has taught us about prayer in Matthew 6.

First, in Mt. 6.5 - God is not interested in responding to prayer when we pray to be seen or to look good or to improve our status with others. Don't be like the hypocrites – they have their reward in full. Remember, that's not telling us to avoid praying in public. Solomon leads the people in prayer in 2 Chronicles 6; there are several beautiful prayers offered in a group setting. But to use prayer to build up our own ego – Jesus says forget about it.

Second, in Mt. 6.6 – Get alone with God when you pray. Go into your room and shut the door. Have a conversation with Him. God sees. God rewards what happens in secret between you and Him.

Third, in today's lesson, Mt. 6:7 - Jesus says forget about repeating empty phrases to God. Whether you're just going through the motions and reading a few lines out of your prayer book, or, perhaps you think that if you repeat something enough you can manipulate God into answering your prayer. It doesn't work like that. God listens. Say what you mean and mean what you say from the heart. The Lord heard you the first time, as we'll learn in the next lesson.

### **Study Guide Questions:**

- 1) List the three points Jesus makes regarding prayer in Matthew 6:5-7.
- 2) Consider your prayer life. Does your prayer life reflect those 3 points? In what ways is your prayer life obedient and what should you improve?
- 3) List two examples of repetitive prayer in Scripture. How do these differ from what Jesus is teaching us not to do in Matthew 6:7?

- 4) Think about how you would feel if someone you loved kept repeating the same words to you over and over while speaking with you. How do you think Jesus feels when people “heap up empty phrases?”
- 5) List three verses that speak of God as a personal God. How does His personhood impact the way you pray to Him?