

“The Wrong Way to Pray”

Matthew 6:5-14

Series: *Too Busy Not to Pray Week 2. The Practice of Daily Prayer*

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

February 28, 2016

It’s dangerous to go the wrong way.

One of our family’s favorite movies is *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* starring Steve Martin and John Candy. One of my favorite scenes comes when these two accidental traveling buddies don’t know they are driving the wrong way down the interstate. Despite warnings from a driver on the other side of the median strip, they don’t discover the terrifying truth until they need to thread the needle between two large trucks coming straight at them. With sparks flying and horns blaring, they squeeze and scrape between the semis. For one instant, Steve Martin looks over at John Candy and sees him laughing in a devil suit with a pitch fork. Emerging on the other side they hit the brakes, send the luggage flying and release their grip on the dashboard and steering wheel.

Some say the journey is more important than the destination. Maybe. But if you take a journey, I say: first make sure you are going the right way.

So far in this series *Too Busy Not to Pray*, we discovered that prayer is more about a relationship with God than requests. If you will, prayer is a daily journey with Jesus. So if we want to learn how to pray, it’s essential to learn directly from Jesus. Interestingly, Jesus begins by teaching us how NOT to pray. He’s like the couple in that car shouting: Don’t go the wrong way. Here are three ways the devil tries to derail our prayer time.

First, **Putting on a Performance**. Jesus says,

And 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 (Matthew 6:5).

Jesus doesn’t forbid praying out loud. If He is, then He immediately breaks that rule four verses later when He prays what we call the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus wants us to avoid making prayer a performance. We are not supposed to show off. He uses the word “hypocrite” which is an actor pretending to be someone he or she is not. The phrase “to be seen by men” describes an actor performing on stage in the spotlight.

There are two opposite errors to avoid here. Obviously you should never pray to impress people. Don’t suddenly switch to Elizabethan English. No need to use Thee, Thou and Thy. Dr. Tony Campolo who taught at Eastern University used to say, “I don’t want my kids to come to me and say, ‘O Thou great patriarch who doth clothe and feed me and who provideth for mine entire sustenance, I beseech thee to grant unto me my earnest desire.’ They just say, “Dad, can I have the car.” The opposite error is being so afraid of what others think of your prayers you don’t say anything. Often when I am at a meal with family or my church family, when it’s time to pray all heads will suddenly,

magically turn to me. If I ask in a Bible study, “Who wants to pray?” immediately all heads go down, all eyes close. I think the theory is if they can’t see me I must not be able to see them and call on them. They say, “You are the professional.” One time I visited a family to talk about the baptism of their infant daughter. At the end of my visit I offered a prayer. When I was finished, their 7 year-old son said, “Hey, you’re good at that.” Everybody can be good at praying. Jesus says when you pray, don’t perform for people. Don’t even think about people. Simply speak to your Father in heaven from your heart. That’s what He longs to hear.

This leads to a second problem to avoid: **Passing Up an Appointment with God.** Jesus continues,

But 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 6:6).

Yes, you are supposed to “pray continually” (I Thessalonians 5:17). Yet nothing compares to a specific, focused, daily appointment alone with the King of the Universe. It takes time, planning, commitment and discipline to do what Jesus teaches. I know it’s hard to find a room that is private, secluded and distraction free. But it is worth it. Why is a daily quiet time with God so essential? I am married. I am married when I am at work, in the car, at the grocery store. I am married even when I am not with my wife. A couple can be married, be in the same house, yet never be with each other. Healthy relationships require one-on-one, face-to-face time for communication. This is especially true of your relationship with God. You are with the Lord all the time. Yet there is no substitute for time alone with Jesus. When people ask me why their spiritual life feels flat, my first question is: how is your quiet time? Are you making the time to be alone with Him?

If you missed our showing of *War Room*, I strongly suggest you borrow the church’s copy. One lesson it gives is the importance of finding a specific place to pray – a closet, a corner of your office, a place in the basement. When you set aside a time and a place to be alone with the Lord, it becomes holy ground, sacred space. Write down a specific time and place where you can be undistracted and alone with the Lord. Don’t pass up an appointment with the King of the Universe.

Third error to avoid is **Piling Up Empty Words in Prayer.** Jesus continues, And when you pray, do not keep babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him (Matthew 6:7-8).

I am often asked, “Should I make up the prayer myself or should I use a prayer someone else wrote?” I say, “Yes.” Both are good so long as you say them from the depth of your heart. “Should I pray silently or out loud?” I say, “Yes.” Both are important ways to express our love for God so long as we pray from the depths of our hearts. “Should I pray for needs or for God’s will to be done?” I say, “Yes” Pray for both but pray it from the depth of your heart. Are you starting to see a pattern? The method does not matter. What matters is the meaning behind the prayer. Prayer is not a rote, routine ritual. Prayer is a

relationship. The Lord doesn't pay more attention because your prayers are long or eloquent. Honesty is more essential for a relationship than a lot of empty words. Wouldn't you rather hear five honest words in love than a thousand phony flattering ones because someone is trying to get something out of you? Well God feels the same.

So if that's the wrong way to pray, what does Jesus' say is the right way? Most of you already know it: the Lord's Prayer. What you may not know is Jesus never meant this prayer to be memorized and repeated as a ritual. This is a pattern for prayer. Jesus does not say, "This is *what* you should pray" but "This, then, is *how* you should pray" (Matthew 6:9). I will go through these six parts rather fast and then show you a simple pattern you can use in your daily prayer time that includes these principles.

1. Praise: Love God "Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name." The Jewish people honor the name of God so highly they refuse to even say it. Being a faithful Jew, Jesus continues this practice and then adds something radical. He doesn't tell us to use God's name. Instead, Jesus tells us to call God "Father." To be on a first name basis with the Creator of the universe is incredible. To be intimately, personally related to Him is infinitely more incredible. Jesus brings us into the very throne room of God and instead of forcing us to our knees, He lovingly sits us on our Father's lap. Praise means we simply tell our Father how much we love Him. We start by focusing on Him, instead of on us and our concerns.

2. Purpose: Join God's Mission. "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Most of our prayers try to grab God's attention and get Him to do something about our worries and wants, fears and needs. We want Him to pay attention to our agenda. This second part turns that around. We pray and seek God's agenda. He wants to grab our attention and get us to see what He is already doing in the world. We join God's mission. Instead of asking Him to bless us, we pray we might bless what He is doing. You pray for His will to be done in your family, this church, your job, your future, this community, this nation, this world. If you make this one shift in your thinking, it will completely transform your life.

3. Provision: Ask God for Your Needs. "Give us today our daily bread." God wants to supply your needs. Some say to me, "I was taught I should never pray for myself." Nonsense. Jesus wants you to make your needs known to God. "Bread" is a symbol of all the things which support life. Notice, however, your requests come after Praise and Purpose. We often put requests first. By putting them third, we recognize God is bigger and His plan is bigger than all the worries, which keep us up at night. It brings them back down to their proper size. Nothing is too insignificant. Be specific. And remember we are praying for daily needs. Just go one day at a time.

4. Pardon: Seek God's Forgiveness "Forgive us our debts..." God does not want us to wallow in our sin. Nor does it do any good to ignore it. If you have never asked Jesus to be your Lord and Savior, if you have never asked Him to pardon all your sin, that is the essential first step. If you are a follower of Jesus, then it's important to clear away whatever builds up and blocks Your relationship with God. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal

every sin. Confess each sin specifically. Make restitution and amends to others when necessary and accept God's forgiveness. In fact, if we really want to be free of sin, we need to confess it to God and to at least one other trusted person here on earth. Bringing it into the Light is the only way to break the power it holds over you.

5. People: Offer God's Forgiveness "... as we forgive our debtors." If God has let us go free, we need to do the same for other people or we'll never feel free. Holding on to anger, resentment or bitterness only keeps us in prison. Letting go, lets us out. It's not easy, so we need God to help us. In addition, we can pray for the needs of others. When someone is hurting, pray for them. When someone bothers you, pray for them. When someone cuts you off, pray for them. When someone is lost, pray for them. Be an instrument of God's peace and blessing to the people around you.

6. Protection: Go Forth in God's Power "and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one." I've often been asked, "Why would God lead us into temptation?" This part of the prayer is similar to those times when we pray for God to protect us as we travel on the roads. Accidents will happen. Yet we still ask God to protect us from them. Temptations and Trials will come on the road of life. Evil is around us. Yet we pray for God to lead us through it and deliver us from it – especially if, like John Candy, we made the decision to drive the wrong way down the road of life. We are constantly facing spiritual battles. We do not have enough will power to face every temptation. Yet we also do not face them alone. For there is a power that is greater than the evil one. The Bible says, "The One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

I promised you a simple pattern for prayer. In your bulletin is an outline I learned when I was in high school. It's called the ACTS prayer. It follows the pattern of the Lord's Prayer. What I like about ACTS is the way it puts the focus on God first. You begin not with requests but with praise, confession and thanksgiving. If you begin by praising the God of the Universe, asking forgiveness for where you fall short, thanking Him for the many blessings He showers upon you, then your requests and concerns don't appear so overwhelming or impossible.

Adoration simply means, "I love you Lord because you are..." You can list the attributes of God – almighty, ever-present, gracious, loving. For inspiration you may read Psalms 8, 19, 23, 46, 95, 100, 148. We don't praise God because He needs it or because He's forgotten He's the King of the Universe. Praise helps us realize how powerful, mighty and loving God is. Adoration helps us be awed by God.

Confession is saying, "Forgive me Lord for..." It's important to be specific. Where have I been selfish, self-centered, prideful, hurtful? The more honest we are with ourselves, the more healing and relief can come. It's also important to ask God to help you forgive others.

Thanksgiving allows us to pause and say, "Thank you Lord for..." This is your opportunity to count your spiritual, relational and materials blessings as well as to take

stock of answered prayers. I find nothing lifts the heaviness of self-pity as gratitude for all God's gifts and all the good in my life.

Supplication is just a fancy word for offer our requests and saying, "Please Lord..." You can lift up requests which are about you, your family, your work or school, the church, our community, nation and world.

Since Ash Wednesday I have been writing out my prayers using this format. Then I get on my knees and pray them out loud. That simple little discipline so far has helped me develop the pattern of prayer better than any other method I've tried. And I'm not the only one receiving discoveries and blessings from this prayer challenge. Among the more than 275 people who've made this commitment is a 13-year-old disciple at Woodside named Eva Crosson. She gave me permission to share this discovery she made through the prayer commitment.

I just wanted to say I have been thinking about the prayer commitment a lot lately and the past 2 days I prayed like I always do, but it wasn't enough and so tonight I just sat down and confessed everything on my mind and I learned something new. God did not die for just one or two people he died to save everyone in the past, present, and future. He saved me from sins and regret and dread. I can't even begin to fathom having every sin thrown on you like he did and then to forgive them all. But his majesty doesn't stop there; he also went through Hell for us and came back to the people who had condemned him in the first place with open arms. If that is not unending love I don't know what is. Thank you for planting the seed of prayer in me and I will continue to water it as the days go by.

Sincerely,
Eva Crosson

That is the right way to pray.