

RHYTHMS OF GRACE: PRAYER

MATTHEW 6:5-13

Well, good morning Church! We are in our third week of this four-week series we're doing to end the summer called *Rhythms of Grace*.

If you haven't been here the last couple of weeks, I'd encourage you to get up on our website and listen to the last couple of messages - www.summit-christian.org...

And what we've been looking at specifically is how, what are traditionally called the means of grace, or "spiritual disciplines," We've been looking at how these practices shape us as followers of Jesus.

And really we've been trying to go beyond just looking at sort of this list of religious activities that good Christians just "do." We've trying to take a step back and ask the broader question: *How does God actually take us from these lumps of clay, and shape us and form us to look more like Jesus? How does that happen?*

And we've seen this important distinction in who we are, and how God has made us.

Humans are not just brains on a stick. We're not just the sum total of our cognitive processes. At our core we're lovers. We're worshippers. God has made us, in a good way, to respond to life on this deeper, more visceral level than just synapses firing.

And so transformation as disciples of Jesus isn't just a matter of learning more information, or just incorporating the right practices, what we really need is a reordering, a re-forming of what we love.

And that's what the means of grace are all about. These practices surrounding God's Word, and Prayer and Community, aren't just what good Christians do, they actually do something to us. And so as disciples, intentionally shaping our lives in a way that saturates our day-to-day, week-to-week rhythms with these means of grace is what God uses to start re-ordering and re-orienting our loves.

I believe it was Winston Churchill who said that as humans "we shape our buildings, and afterward they shape us." And Churchill's words are so true of life in general, aren't they? You see, we form and shape our lives in our habits, our schedules, our routines, our rhythms, but in the end, those rhythms shape us - they never stop forming us, everything from our smartphone

to our shopping habits to our sleep schedule shape what we value, and what we treasure, and what we love. And so, in a lot of ways, the rhythms of grace are not just formative, they're counter-formative. Rhythms of grace re-orient us to true gospel north, and counter the ways we're being misdirected and malformed all the time by the self-centered rhythms we naturally fall into in life.

The picture we used a couple of weeks ago to get this was of being out at the ocean, right? Most of you have been out to Ruby Beach on the coast, or Cannon Beach in Oregon... I grew up right on the ocean on the coast of British Columbia, and there is just something spectacular about the ocean. It's this beautiful, massive, powerful, uncontrollable, glorious expanse.

And I'm sure most of you have been somewhere on the coast where you see these spectacular monoliths, and cliffs, and rock formations along the shore right? How do those get formed? It's simply the regular rhythm day after day, month after month, year after year, of the waves and currents of this beautiful ocean, washing over them. And this is exactly what we're talking about when we talk about rhythms of grace. We're not talking just about how to do better at being a Christian, or how to be a more spiritual person, we're talking about placing ourselves right on the vast shoreline of God's incredible grace, and allowing the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ to wash over us and shape us.

Last week, Ryan reminded us that this is exactly what the Word of God does, right? The Word of God creates and orders and sustains in a way that nothing else can. God's Word, inscripturated in the Bible and incarnate in Jesus, creates a love for God in that was not there before, it orders our disordered loves, and it sustains rightly placed loves.

Well, this morning we're going to move from talking about how the Word of God does these things, to looking at how prayer does this deep, reconstructive work in our hearts.

Now, can I just admit that when it comes to prayer I feel incredibly inadequate. How many of you feel that too? There's nothing that gets our churchy guilt meter up quite like talking about prayer is there? Many of you feel that, I feel it. Just writing the sermon title for this morning's message, I had to get on my knees and repent for the lack of this consistent rhythm in my life. There are a significant number of you in this room that just feel guilty when it comes to your stumbling efforts, or even your lack of effort toward prayer.

But there's a spectrum here. So I don't want to assume that's all of you, ok? For others of you, prayer might be relatively consistent, it's part of a consistent rhythm of time with the Lord,

but there is no vitality to it. It's more duty than delight. So that's sort of the middle category. But for others of you, there are some of you in this room, we could learn from you, right? Because there is a sweetness to your prayer life. You love to pray more than anything. And maybe you need to be here next week when we talk about community because you're in your closet praying all the time, but that's sort of this other end of the spectrum.

So we have the guilty and the maybe if we want to alliterate, we have the grieved, you know, who want their prayer life better, and then on this other end we have the glad prayers, the happy prayers... and all of you fit somewhere here, in the categories of the guilty, the grieved and the glad, but can we all just admit that none of us is in the category of Jesus? I mean, I'll start us off here, but I just want to publicly confess that there is a universe of understanding about prayer that I can learn from Jesus. How about you this morning?

Well, why don't you turn with me to Matthew chapter 6 then, and as guilty, grieved, and glad-hearted prayers this morning, I want us to humbly walk together, learning from Jesus, every one of us in need of his instruction and his grace. So let's come to his word to be changed by him this morning. So Matthew, chapter 6, beginning at verse 5, where we read this morning already. *PRAY.*

No person in history has ever had the prayer life that Jesus had while he was on earth. Even John Hyde, the great missionary to India, nicknamed Praying Hyde because he would consistently pray several hours every morning and evening, even his rhythm of prayer can't compare to Jesus.

Jesus' disciples knew this - they saw it in the grind of everyday life. They saw Jesus escape the crowds to find quiet on a mountainside in prayer. They saw his regular rhythm of rising early to spend time with his Father. And what they saw in Jesus' prayer life was different than they'd ever seen before.

You see, what made Jesus' life of prayer so attractive to them wasn't the number of hours Jesus' spent praying, there were plenty of the religious elite who spent more, it wasn't the eloquent religious language he used when he prayed, it wasn't even the powerful answers to his prayers, and there were many. What attracted them was this relationship Jesus seemed to have with the God he prayed to.

And so you can imagine, as a follower of Jesus, sitting on this Galilean hillside as Jesus preaches, beginning to listen to him teach about prayer.

Read vv. 5-8

Now, the first thing I want you to notice is that Jesus begins, not by telling us we should be praying more, not by chastising us for not praying better, he starts out by telling us how *not* to pray. Jesus is saying that, in a lot of ways, *praying* can be just as dangerous for the formation of our hearts as *not praying*. What I mean is that we need to be just as careful about the paradigm we're praying out of, what's driving, and shaping, and informing our prayers, as we are about actually praying at all. And so before Jesus ever starts constructing a model for how to pray, he deconstructs the disordered ways we've seen prayer, he deconstructs these wrong paradigms that we've had.

And the first paradigm Jesus tears down is that of the religious hypocrite. Now, the religious person prays. In fact, they pray a lot. They love prayer. They stand in the street corners and in the synagogues praying because they love it so much! Their prayers are lengthy and they're eloquent, and they sound like they are really in touch with God.

But Jesus pulls back the curtain on all this religious activity. Like Jesus always does so well, he exposes what's going on underneath all this praying. You see, under all this piety and religious activity, what is the religious person actually loving? It's not God is it? It's themselves. There is a disordering of what they love. Wrapped up in all this shiny, put-together, I've-got-life-together packaging is still the ugliness and emptiness of a self-focused heart.

At the root of the religious person's faulty paradigm of prayer is an unquenchable thirst for approval and significance. They want these things, from God and from others, more than anything, and devout religious activity is simply the means to get them. Look at the text again - their public prayers are all about being seen. v. 5, "they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others." And implicit in that is not just this desire that others around them see them, but that somehow God notices too, that God sees their piety and their devotion and gives his approval. There is a sense that by praying well enough and long enough, they can earn God's "well done."

Now most of you are probably like, you know - praying out loud, making long boastful prayers - that's not exactly a stumbling block in my prayer life. My issue is more that I don't pray. But I think there is a paradigm that Jesus wants to deconstruct in every one of our prayer lives here.

You see, if the root of the problem for the religious person is seeking the approval of God and others through religious performance, then this is just as much an issue for the non-prayer as for the prayer.

Are you one of those people that came in this morning and felt pangs of guilt just reading the sermon title on the bulletin? Was your ability to genuinely sing out the gospel in song this morning impacted by your look back at your religious performance this past week? At times there is a reasonable and good conviction about the need to mature and grow beyond our prayerlessness, there is also a guilt that sticks around because we see approval and significance with God and others tied to religious performance. And so prayer and other religious activity becomes not this overflow of relationship with God, not a means to love God and grow to love God more, instead they become the foundation of how I see my significance and standing before God — for better or for worse. Jesus wants to deconstruct this religious paradigm in us, he wants to push us on to a healthier more beautiful paradigm for prayer that we're going to get to in just a moment.

But there is a second paradigm for prayer that Jesus also wants to deconstruct, and it's what Jesus describes as praying like the Gentiles do.

v. 7: "And when you pray," Jesus says, "do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

Now we are all Gentiles here, Gentiles is the biblical term that was used for people that were non-Jewish, people outside of God's covenant relationship with Israel. And so we need to understand that what Jesus is talking about here isn't just about ethnicity, it's about people who are disconnected from the religious practices of the people of Israel. These are pagans. They are not necessarily irreligious people, they are devout, but their devotion is not tied to the God of Israel.

And fundamental to these pagan prayers is a desire for security. There are needs they have, there are things that make up the security of the "good life," and prayer is the means to get these needs met.

If you've ever been overseas or actually seen other religious cultures or practices in action, you understand something of the picture that Jesus is giving here. Many animistic cultures have gods who look after specific areas of life. So you have gods that are in charge of health, and gods in charge of wealth, and gods who look after crops and harvest, and gods who look after livestock, and these gods can be benevolent or they can be malevolent, but the key is you need to court their protection or blessing or help. So idols are made for them, and offerings and prayers are offered to them in order to get the security in life you want.

But what stands out in my own experience of seeing people pray like this, is that there is a relational disconnect between the pagan and the gods they pray to. If the right prayers are said, at the right time and in the right way, the right things happen that provide security and safety in life.

And it's easy for us to look down our nose at these pagan practices, but how often do we just come to God with a shopping list of our own ideas on what would make life secure and safe. How often do we bypass relationship with God simply to solicit his protection or blessing or help. We want God to meet our needs, to make life secure, to make life comfortable for us - and so we treat prayer as the means to get that done. Do you see how self-focused this is?

But you recognize it in yourself don't you? Look at the times you pray the most - what are they? They're the times your circumstances feel the most insecure aren't they. We want God to be the genie in the lamp who fixes our circumstances, who gives us security and safety in the way we think he should. Jesus wants to tear down this ugly, drab, broken self-centered paradigm for prayer and replace it with something better and more beautiful.

Now for these followers of Jesus, listening to him teach on the hillside, these two paradigms for prayer, the examples of the religious hypocrite and the pagan? Up until Jesus showed up, these were probably the only two paradigms for prayer the disciples had seen. But Jesus brings with him a brand new way to see prayer. In the rubble of these buildings that Jesus has just deconstructed, he builds a new paradigm for prayer that is actually beautiful and life-giving.

And that's what we get in the Lord's prayer. You know, there is so much here to unpack that there's no way I can do it justice in just a few moments this morning, at some point we'll do a whole sermon series on these five verses, there is a universe here, but this morning I just want to focus really on the top half of this, as Jesus constructs a new understanding of prayer for us. And what I want to do is unpack the new paradigm Jesus constructs and then build out some implications of that in how praying the way Jesus teaches us to actually shapes us.

Jesus is teaching us here, not just how to pray better, not just how to do more and better religious activity, not just how to be better Christians. Neither is Jesus giving us a formulaic approach to prayer, like we should just say these words every time we pray. Jesus is giving us a paradigm for relationship with God, intimately tied to prayer, that affects every area of our life.

And central to Jesus' understanding of prayer is that *prayer* begins with God, not with us. Let's look at Jesus' prayer together. You know if you've grown up in church, you've grown up

maybe memorizing this prayer, this is so familiar to you that it can become dry and ineffective. I want you to see these words with new eyes this morning. So why don't you read with me:

Read vv. 9-13

Jesus' prayer, if you didn't notice, really has two halves to it. There is the God half, and there is the "us" half. vv. 9-10 begin with God. Our father, hallowed be your name, *your* kingdom come, *your* will be done. Whereas these faulty paradigms that Jesus deconstructed began with our desire for approval and our desire for security, Jesus' models something altogether different. He shows us that prayer starts with God.

This is why we're talking about prayer in this series *after* having talked about the Word of God. We can speak to God only because he first spoke to us. God is the initiator in this relationship, and so we need to realize that prayer first and foremost is a Godward response to his work in our lives.

Not only that, but this God-centeredness to praying means that prayer is not primarily about what we get from God, but about getting God himself. If how you think about prayer is rooted mostly in supplication, asking God for stuff, if your rhythm of prayer is primarily a matter of going through lists of people and circumstances and things you need to be praying for, you are missing out on an abundance of prayer's riches.

Because at its core, prayer is about relationship with God. And here's where Jesus really starts to blow up the boxes of prayer for these early disciples, because he says that this relationship with God is a relationship defined by our knowledge of him as our Father.

Can I just step back and say church that this is the single most redefining reality in my own prayer life. Do you realize what it means that prayer is rooted in knowing God as your Father? It means that you come to God as a child, as his child. It means you can come to God in all of your mess, in all of your struggles, there is no need for spiritual show in your relationship with this father. You don't need to clean up your act to come to him. Your father isn't interested in your virtuoso spiritual performances anyway, he's interested in you.

But in coming to our heavenly father in our brokenness and weakness there's an admission of need that we don't like. Paul Miller, in his wonderful book *A Praying Life*, comments that its the very thing we're allergic to, our own helplessness, that actually makes prayer work. So we come to our father admitting and owning our inability, because its in that admission that there's actually life.

And that means that all of your stumbling efforts in prayer. All of your inability to concentrate. Your schizophrenic patterns in prayer. Your distracted heart. These don't matter. Your heavenly father just enjoys being with you.

We know this on an earthly level, but somehow we can't make the application to our relationship with our heavenly Father. I think about my own girls. Especially when they were in diapers. I mean, between four children I cannot count how many poopy blowouts I had to deal with. How many midnight baths I was running to clean up the mess of this child while Eli stripped the sheets to throw them in the laundry. And yet, as soon as I picked up this screaming baby and they calmed in my arms and settled into letting their Dad clean them up again, my heart was full. All of it was a delight, because these are my girls.

So prayer begins with God, and it is really just the natural outworking and overflow of a relationship with him as Father, where this isn't an event that we put on our calendar, this isn't something we have to get spiritually primed up for, this is just a conversation in the rhythms of everyday life with our Heavenly Father.

But prayer doesn't stop there. We also need to understand that prayer trains us to submit to him as King. Look at v. 10. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Suddenly, in prayer, life isn't about my kingdom, is it? It's not about way I think things should be done, right? Prayer is an overflow of relationship, but it's also an act of submission, where my will and my agenda and my ideas of what make for my own security and safety and happiness, have to be laid aside for his. Praying the way Jesus is unpacking makes me seek first his kingdom and his rule in my life, not my own. And this is just as hard for us as becoming helpless children. We want what we want when we want it, and most of the time God doesn't see it the same way. And so prayer, the way Jesus sees it, teaches us how to come under his authority and Lordship.

So the paradigm for prayer that Jesus is constructing in the rubble of our faulty notions has its foundation in a submitted Sonship.

What do I mean? Well, there is something that Jesus doesn't tell us here that we find out from the Apostle Paul. Turn with me to Romans chapter 8 and verse 12: *READ*

Paul is saying that there is something that has happened in us through Christ. You see, when Jesus says that we pray to God as our Father, he isn't talking about God as father in some universal sense, like God is the Creator over all of humanity. God is Father in the way that Jesus is talking about only through Jesus' death and resurrection. You see, through belief in Jesus

brothers and sisters, we are united with Christ and adopted into God's family. And as legally adopted kids we receive all the privileges of Sonship.

Why do I say sonship? We've used this term before, but there is something important for us to understand why I'm not saying "daughter-ship" as well. In the ancient world the inheritance and the blessing of the family, and it's still like this in many parts of the world, would only fall to the eldest Son in the family. Other sons, and especially daughters, would be dependent on some external source for their security and well being. So to be united to Jesus, the rightful heir of all that is the Father's, the eldest Son, is to become sons of our Father in the ancient sense of the term. That we receive all the legal rights and privileges of full heirs in his family. This is what it means for every one of you that has believed in Jesus to be sons of God.

And so prayer the way Jesus is teaching it to us is rooted in a submitted sonship to God as both Father and King. And it's in this place of submitted Sonship in a naturally prayer-saturated relationship with God that he starts doing the deep work of reshaping and reforming us as disciples.

Let me show you how. Can I talk specifically to the guys for a minute? Why do you think guys become workaholics? Most of the time it is this desire for approval and significance that we saw as the root of that first faulty paradigm of prayer. It's not bad to want approval and significance, but guys, I'll just admit with you that that isn't always easy to get at home as a husband or a dad. Even the most affirming wives will not fill this unquenchable thirst for approval. But guys can get this at work, can't they? And so increasingly work starts dominating life because it's where approval and significance are found.

Guys, why do guys cheat on their wives or find themselves addicted to pornography? Most of the time it isn't just unmet sexual desires, it's a deep need for approval and significance that are met in those things.

But here's where God wants to reshape us through prayer the way Jesus taught it. Because it's only in prayer the way Jesus is teaching here that we stop trying to take approval and significance for ourselves and instead God starts re-orienting us to the only place that craving can be met. You see, it's only when we see that God has already given us his approval in Christ that we'll stop looking to take that approval from other places and through other means.

Ladies - you know some of the same struggles. How easy is it for you to see your significance wrapped up, maybe not in your spiritual performance or your prayer life, but in your marital status, or your kids and how healthy or successful they are, or what pictures of your home you can put up on social media. It's in prayer shaped by what Jesus is talking about here

that God reforms your loves to find your significance in his approval of you, his declaration of your significance in his family, Do you see how praying out of a submitted sonship actually does something to us? And so what you find is that your reward, instead of coming right now from the approval of man, comes from the eternal and lasting reward given by God himself.

Praying from a paradigm of submitted Sonship also reshapes what we actually want. You see, our wants are disordered. We don't know what to ask for. But as we increasingly know and trust God's fatherly care over, and his ability to provide for us, we stop trying to figure out our own security for ourselves. We become more dependent on God and less confident of our own ability to judge or remedy our own feelings of insecurity. We start really believing that God knows our need and will perfectly provide for it.