

Prayer Preliminaries

Sitting at the Feet of Yeshua

In this post, we continue our study of the Sermon on the Mount by turning to Matthew Chapter 6 by exploring the preparations for prayer.

Don't Be A Hypocrite

"When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites, who love to pray standing in the synagogues and on street corners, so that people can see them. Yes! I tell you, they have their reward already!" (Matthew 6:5)

The word translated from the Greek for hypocrite means an actor. This word, which is frequently used in Scripture, denotes one who either *pretends* to be what he is not (as here), or *masquerades* what he really is. People like that put on an act, which is designed only to glorify them.

Yeshua warns about the danger of hypocrisy, the sin of using religion to cover up sin. A hypocrite is not a person who falls short of his high ideals, or who occasionally sins, because all of us experience these failures. A hypocrite *deliberately* uses religion to cover up his sins and promote his own gains.

In verse 5, Yeshua says, ***"When you pray"*** not ***"If you pray."*** He expects us to pray. Yeshua emphasizes that it is a sin to pray to be seen and heard by others. Nobody should pray in public who does not pray in private; for that would be hypocrisy.

The *standing* posture in prayer was an ancient practice. The Amidah recited in Jewish synagogues is the "standing prayers." Yeshua was warning that a conspicuous posture could open the way for hypocrisy. Again, it's an issue of the heart. What is our true motivation?

Pray In Your Secret Place

"But you, when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matthew 6:6)

We must pray in secret before we pray in public. I will always have the movie, **"War Room"**, etched in my mind when I recall this verse. It is obviously not wrong to pray in public (1 Timothy 2:1ff), or when blessing our food (John 6:11) or when seeking God's help (John 11:41-42; Acts 27:35). But it is wrong to pray in public if we are not in the habit of praying in private. Observers may think that we are practicing prayer when we are not. Again, this is hypocrisy.

Yeshua had a secret place where He went to talk with God. It is important that we find a quiet place so we will not be distracted from listening to God. We shut the door on the noise outside, and we shut ourselves in with God.

There was a tendency to connect prayer with certain places, and especially in the synagogue. It is undeniably true that there are certain places where God seems very near, but there were certain Rabbis who went so far as to say that prayer was effective only if it was offered in the Temple or in the synagogue. So there grew up the custom of going to the Temple at the hours of prayer.

There is the danger that we might come to think of God as being confined to certain holy places and that we might forget that the whole earth is the temple of God. The wisest of the Rabbis saw this danger. They had this to say: *"God says to Israel, pray in the synagogue of your city; if you cannot, pray in the field; if you cannot, pray in your house; if you cannot, pray on your bed; if you cannot, commune with your own heart and be still."*

Don't Babble On and On

"And when you pray, don't babble on and on like the pagans, who think God will hear them better if they talk a lot. Don't be like them, because your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." (Matthew 6:7-8)

We must pray sincerely. The prophet Isaiah tells us: ***"Before they call, I [God] will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear"*** (Isaiah 65:24).

Many people think that the purpose of prayer is to get our will done and to persuade God to give us what we want. We rattle on and on about our wants and desires, but the true purpose of prayer is to get God's will done. (1 John 5:14) We need to seek after His will. Yeshua said that He did nothing except what He saw His Father doing.

We need to avoid repeating phrases or words, because it makes our minds wander during prayer. God wants our full attention when we converse with Him. We don't need to use a certain tone of voice for prayer nor do we need to use formal King James English. A normal conversational tone and plain language are fine. Although God knows our thoughts, speaking out loud helps us to keep our minds on what we are saying. It also helps us to verbalize our feelings.

When we pray we're coming into the presence of the Creator of the universe. We should be conscious of His power to do anything that we might ask. Faith is vital for effective prayer. We can make our requests to God boldly, for we are His beloved children, and He delights in giving to us. One of the keys to Abraham's faith was that he believed that God could do what He had promised to do (Romans 4:21). We need to remind ourselves of who God is when we approach Him with our requests, so that we ask in faith (Ephesians 3:20).

No nation ever had a higher ideal of prayer than Israel; and no religion ever ranked prayer higher in the scale of priorities than Judaism. One of the loveliest things that was ever said about family worship is the Rabbinic saying, *"He who prays within his house surrounds it with a wall that is stronger than iron."* The only regret of the Rabbis was that it was not possible to pray all day long.

But certain faults had crept into the Jewish habits of prayer. Prayer tended to become formalized. There were two specific prayers that were to be repeated daily: the Sh'ma and the Amidah.

The Sh'ma (D'varim 6: 4-9) had to be recited by every Jew every morning and every evening. It had to be said as early as possible. It had to be said before the third hour, that is, 9 a.m.; and in the evening it had to be said before 9 p.m. If the last possible moment for the saying of the Sh'ma had come, no matter where a man found himself, at home, in the street, at work, in the synagogue, he must stop and say it.

There were many who loved the Sh'ma and who repeated it with reverence and adoration and love; but inevitably there were still more who rushed their way through it, and went their way. The Sh'ma had every chance of becoming a vain repetition, which men mumbled through like some spell or incantation.

The Amidah was also required to be repeated daily. At the time of Yeshua, it consisted of eighteen prayers. Later the Amidah consisted of nineteen prayers, although we generally only use seven in Messianic services today. Most of these prayers are quite short, and nearly all of them are very lovely.

The rule was that the Amidah must be recited three times a day, once in the morning, once in the afternoon, and once in the evening. The same thing happened again. The devout Jew prayed it with loving devotion; but there were many to whom this series of lovely prayers became a rote formula. The repetition of the Amidah could become nothing more than the superstitious incantation of a spell.

As you may know, the Jewish liturgy has specific prayers for almost any occasion. There is hardly an event in life, which doesn't have a specific prayer. There is prayer before and after each meal; there are prayers in

connection with the light, the fire, the lightning, on seeing the new moon, comets, rain, tempest, at the sight of the sea, lakes, rivers, on receiving good news, on using new furniture, on entering or leaving a city. Everything has its prayer. Clearly there is something infinitely lovely here. It is the intention that every occurrence in life should be brought into the presence of God.

But because the prayers are so meticulously prescribed and stated, the whole system lends itself to formalism. The danger is that our prayers may slip off the tongue with very little meaning. The Rabbis knew that and tried to guard against it. *"If a man," they said, "says his prayers, as if to get through a set task, that is no prayer."*

The devout Jew also had set times for prayer. The hours were the third, the sixth and the ninth hours, that is, 9 a.m., 12 Noon and 3 p.m. In whatever place a man found himself he was bound to pray. Clearly, he might be genuinely remembering God, or he might be carrying out a habitual formality. It is a great discipline that three times a day we should remember God; but there is a very real danger that it may become no more than three times a day we babble our prayers without even a thought of God.

There was - and still is - a kind of subconscious idea that if we harangue long enough at God's door, He will answer; that God can be talked, and even pestered, into condescension. The Rabbis were well aware of this danger. One of them said, *"Let a man's words before God always be few, as it is said by Shlomo in Ecclesiastes, 'Don't speak impulsively – don't be in a hurry to give voice to your words before God. For God is in heaven, and you are on earth; so let your words be few.'"* (Ecclesiastes 5:1). *"The best adoration consists in keeping silence."*

The final fault, which Yeshua found was that the P'rushim prayed to be seen of men. The Jewish system of prayer made ostentation very easy. It had to be said wherever a man might be and it was easy for them to make sure that at the appointed time they were at a busy street corner, or in a crowded city square, so that all the world might see with what devotion they prayed. It was easy for a person to halt on the top step of the entrance to the synagogue, and there pray long and demonstratively, so that all might admire his exceptional piety. It was easy to put on an act of prayer, which the entire world might see.

In effect, Yeshua lays down two great rules for prayer.

- (i) He insists that all true prayer must be offered to God. The real fault of the people whom Yeshua was criticizing was that they were praying to men and not to God.
- (ii) He insists that we must always remember that the God to whom we pray is a God of love who is more ready to answer than we are to pray. His gifts and his grace are not to be unwillingly extracted from Him. We do not come to a god who has to be coaxed, pestered, or battered into answering our prayers. We come to the One whose one wish is to give. When we remember that, it is surely sufficient to go to God with the deep sighs and desires of our hearts, and on our lips the words, "Our will be done."

In my next post, we will start a new series exploring the form of prayer that Yeshua taught to His talmidim.