**Beware of Danger: Empty Prayers** Matthew 6:5 And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. **6**But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.**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. **8**Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (ESV)

Now in His great Sermon on the Mount Jesus comes to the matter of prayer, an essential aspect of the Christian life. Most people even in the outside world know this. They may nothing about Christianity, but they know we believe in God and they know we pray to God. How fitting it is that Jesus should address this essential matter in His sermon.

Contrary to popular belief, there is both a right way to pray and a wrong way to pray. That is not to say that you have to be some special person or have some level of prayer experience to pray right. If that were the case no one could start the Christian life, seeing that prayer will start as soon as a person believes, perhaps even before and likely with no experience doing so. No, prayer is not a matter of experience or ability, but a matter of the heart. It is a matter of approach.

Jesus, rather than explaining the right way to pray, explains the wrong way to do it. From the outset Jesus makes it very clear: The way to pray wrong is to focus only on yourself. It is not to pray for yourself or even necessarily to pray for things for yourself, but to FOCUS on yourself. See, Jesus compares it to a person who stands on the street corner with the primary intention of being seen by others. What motivation might someone have for praying publicly for attention? They hope others may see them as holy, righteous and godly—as a very devout religious person—a man or woman of prayer. It is pride at its core: the desire to be seen.

When we want to be seen as a person of prayer we often assume that position by which most people identify a person praying. The primary physical position of a person praying is on their knees with head bowed and eyes closed. If you see someone doing that it is hard to think they are doing anything else. It is such a common practice then to get into that POSITION of prayer to make sure everyone around us knows that we are a person of prayer. But that is the matter: your POSITION is not what matters; it’s your heart. You can have just as holy communion with God while walking as you can while on your knees. Drawing attention to ourself is not the way God would have us pray. This is a holy moment. Being loud or making certain motions or acting a certain way does not make prayer any more powerful—it only draws attention to us. It is not to say that doing these things in prayer is wrong, but our motivation in doing such things must be prayer itself, not to be seen or known as a pray-er. The same principle can be applied to worship: Do you lift your hands because you want to be seen as a worshipper or because you truly worship?

Some people take Jesus’ command literally to find an inner room and pray in it. And that is good to do so. But the whole point of what Jesus is saying is principle. The principle is to seclude yourself when you pray—to pray somewhere where no one is. This not only helps with distractions but to guard our heart against the desire to pray to be seen. Jesus went to lonely places to pray. But this is also not a prohibition of praying in public or in Church. Some people think we should not even pray out loud at the dinner table because Jesus said to go to the inner room to pray. NO! There are many examples where Jesus or the Apostles prayed publicly. Prayer meetings were a staple of the early Church. You do not have to pray alone at all times, but our motivation when praying around others must not be to be seen. Our motivation must be PRAYER itself.

This makes it all the more important to consider how we pray in a public assembly. Sometimes our prayer is designed to motivate or impress or to give some sort of strength to others. But we must remember: our prayers are not being prayed to the people but to a holy God. So often we try and polish our prayers in front of people but the reason we don’t need to talk is because we are talking to God not to the people around us. It’s so easy to convince ourselves that if we are praying we are doing right. But our motivations in praying are the real test. Sometimes when we think we are worshipping God we are really just worshipping ourselves.

Jesus addresses yet another wrong way to pray: with many words. He says the Gentiles think that praying long prayers with many words are more likely to get answers from God. Jesus reminds us that God isn’t persuaded because we pray for hours or hours. He is not persuaded because we lay out a long list of reasons or utilize logic and reason to explain to Him why we need Him to answer our prayer. No, God already knows the need. He already knows why we are coming to Him in prayer, and He is already prepared to answer. God answers long prayers and He answers short prayers. The length of the prayer is not the difference in the outcome. The outcome of a prayer is the result of a few factors:

**THE WILL OF GOD**

1 John 5:14 And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. **15**And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him. (ESV)

**SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE PRAY-ER**

James 5:16 The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working (ESV)

Proverbs 28:9 If one turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination. (ESV)

John 15:7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you (ESV)

Isaiah 1:15 When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

**THE MOTIVES OF THE PRAY-ER**

James 4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. (ESV)

**THE PERSISTENCE OF THE PRAY-ER**

Matthew 7:7 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. (ESV)

A righteous person does not need to pray long because not only does God know what they are going to ask, but He knows their heart is right before Him. This is not to say that long prayers are wrong or bad. A person can pray for a long time, even hours on end and it not be wrong. It goes back to motivation. Are you praying for a long time because you think that is how God answers you, or because you are desperate to be in God’s presence? Our ultimate motivation in praying long should not be to be heard but to be in the presence of our Savior.