

## Chapter 16

### Private Prayer No. 1 January 19, 1997

The last two Lord's Day evenings we have considered corporate prayer and the special rules and characteristics of that important type of prayer, central as it is to the life of the Christian and the advancement of the Christian church and the kingdom of God in the world. Tonight I want to consider as a separate topic *private prayer* and the characteristics of this prayer, central as it is to the Christian life, and the rules that govern it. Just as the Bible addresses the matter of corporate prayer, so it addresses private prayer and speaks specifically to the practice.

*Read:* Matthew 6:5-6

The main point has been stated already in v. 1: "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven." He gave a first example of such a false kind of righteousness because selfishly and proudly motivated the matter of giving of alms. Now he turns to prayer. v. 5, the prayers meant here are not particular petitions for various matters, but the prayers of the sanctuary, the "shema" and other prayers that would be said at set times of the day. Jesus is, of course, not speaking against public prayer, which he recommends elsewhere and which the early church practiced widely, but simply against prayer that is prayed for the purpose of the impression made upon onlookers and not on God. Such prayers are "to men" and not really "to your father" as in the next verse. [By the way, the Lord does not seem to

object here or anywhere to prayers prayed at set times of the day. He even seems to assume such prayers.]

Now, you get the Lord's great point, don't you? This is the sermon on the Mount. And we are all put on our mettle before this great sermon. For it is the tendency of all of us to shift the application of these so searching remarks of the Lord to someone else and to something else than that which we find in our own lives. We hear the Lord saying "turn the other cheek" but we never quite find the occasion in our lives when we are actually being called upon to do such a thing. And, in this matter of prayer, we tend to focus on the Pharisees and imagine that the Lord is speaking of a kind of overt and obvious hypocrisy of which we are, of course, innocent. *But that is to miss the entire point!*

What the Lord is showing us here is how penetrating the influence of sin actually is, how it follows us up even into the sanctuary of God, into heaven itself, if that were possible. The great sinner, in the Lord's scheme of things, is not the drunk lying unconscious in a gutter, or a thief making off with someone else's money, or even a murderer, terrible as such a sin is. No, a greater, still more deadly sin is committed by the earnest, religious person who perverts the very words he utters to God. The deepest sin and the greatest sinner will always be found in the church not the world! That man uses God to serve and worship himself. And in that he defames and blasphemes God Almighty.

That is what the Lord is after here in his instructions about prayer as a private act. The issue is where your attention is, to whom you are devoting yourself, what is your real interest. And it isn't only in the matter of praying in public or secret that such an issue is raised. A man can pray in private and be interested only in having "said his prayers" so that he can be done with them and go on with his day. He is checking a box, filling a square. He has only his own interest at heart, not God's! To be honest, he finds God's commands a burden that he wishes to be done with so that he might do what he pleases. That too, surely, is taking God's name in vain.

It is in this sense that the Lord speaks of prayer as a private act. It must be an act of genuine communion with God, a prayer that is truly prayer and not a pose, not a barren duty, not a performance offered in hope of some reward, but "earnest and real conversation with God." That is what prayer is, anything else is a perversion of it and an offense against God who sees

what is done, even in the heart, and can weigh the motives of the heart.

Some of the greatest portraits of the life of prayer painted for us in Holy Scripture are prayer of this type, prayer of a man or of a woman alone, intensely alone, alone not only in the physical circumstances of the prayer, but alone spiritually and psychologically. That is, he or she is before God, and speaking to God out of the secret burden of life. All the rest of the world is forgotten and God alone remains before the soul.

1. Jacob wrestling with the Lord at Peniel (I'm going to treat that text next Lord's Day evening as a supreme example of the art of private prayer);
2. Hannah praying for a child;
3. Jesus in the Garden;
4. Zechariah 12:12-14 ("alone" or "by itself" or "by themselves" appears but twice in the NIV translation; it appears 11x in the Hebrew ("apart" or "by oneself") making for a striking emphasis on solitary pleading with God.

Now, what is the real difference, the material difference between public and private prayer? Some have thought it a matter of power or effect.

In one sermon entitled "The Magnificence of Prayer" Alexander Whyte suggests in words that are all his own,

"And then there is this fine and noble thing about prayer also, that the acceptableness of it, and the power of it, are in direct proportion to the secrecy and the spirituality of it. As its stealth is: as its silence is: as its hiddenness away with God is: as its unsuspectedness and undeservedness with men is: as its pure goodness, pure love, and pure goodwill are — so does prayer perform its magnificent part when alone with God." [Lord Teach us to Pray, pp. 11-12]

But, so far as I can tell, though there is truth in what Whyte says in another way I will come to shortly, the Bible never indicates that prayer is more

powerful because offered in secret. Indeed, most writers on this subject say the contrary and argue that the most powerful prayers are precisely those that many Christians pray together.

Thomas Manton: “Single prayers are like the single hairs of Samson; but the prayers of the congregation are like the whole bush.” [James, 461]

One Dr. Guthrie, whom Moody quotes: “Separate the atoms which make the hammer, and each would fall on a stone as a snowflake; but welded into one, and wielded by the firm arm of the quarry man, it will break the massive rocks asunder. Divine the waters of Niagara into distinct and individual drops, and they would be no more than the falling rain, but in their united body they would quench the fires of Vesuvius, and have some to spare for the volcanoes of other mountains.” [In Moody, Prevailing Prayer, 71-72]

What the Lord seems to be saying and what the rest of the Bible seems to confirm is that true sincerity and the passion that accompanies true sincerity is the real power of prayer and, *for many prayers, for many specific prayers and for many types of prayers*, that kind of sincerity absolutely demands solitude. What solitude makes possible is intimacy and the truest and most honest expression of feeling and need and desire.

In one of his never to be equalled sermons, this one entitled “The Secret Burden,” Alexander Whyte brings out this distinction between public and private prayer as only he could have done.

“There is it — written all over our open Bible so that he who runs may read it, — the sure and certain blessedness of prayer *apart*, the immediate and the immense advantage and privilege of private prayer.”

And then the great preacher goes on, in an extraordinarily daring passage, virtually to complain about the public prayer of the church and of ministers in the church and how it does not at all do justice to prayer or to the greatest subjects of prayer, and cannot.

“... you cannot in public prayer go out sufficiently into particulars and instances, and times, and places, and people. *Particularity*, and *taking instances*, is the very life-blood of all true and prevailing prayer. But you [that is, the minister] dare not do that: you dare not take an outstanding instance of your daily sinfulness and utter corruption of heart in public or in family prayer. It would be insufferable and unpardonable. It is never done. And you must not under any temptation of conscience, or of heart, ever do it. When your door is shut, and when all public propriety, and all formality, and insincerity is shut out, *then* you can say and do anything to which the spirit moves you. You can pray all night on your face, if you like, like your Lord in Gethsemane. When you are so full of sin that you are beside yourself with the leprosy of it and with the shame and the pain of it, — they would carry you to the madhouse, if you let yourself say and do in public what all God’s greatest saints, beginning with God’s Son, have continually done in private. But your soul may sweat great drops of blood in secret, and no human being is any wiser. And as for those who watch you and see it all, — ‘there is joy in heaven’ over you from that night. Not one in ten of you have ever done it, possibly not one in a hundred: but when you begin really to look on Him whom you have pierced... then you will begin to understand what it is to be in bitterness, and to mourn apart, as one is in bitterness for his firstborn. Then, no pulpit confession, and no family altar, will relieve your heart.”

“And the very same thing holds true of all *intercessory* prayer. It would be an impertinence and an impudence; it would be an ostentation and a presumption to pray for other men in public, as you are permitted and enabled and commanded to pray for them in private. It would be resented and never forgiven. In intercessory prayer in public, particulars and instances, and actual persons, and special and peculiar cases, are absolutely impracticable and impossible. You simply dare not pray, in public, for other men, — any more than for yourself, — as they need to be prayed for. You would be arrested and imprisoned under the law of libel if you did it. Were you to see these men and women around you as they are; and were you to describe them, and to

plead with God to redeem and renew, and restore, and save them, — the judge would shut your mouth. But in private, neither your friend nor your enemy will ever know, or even guess, till the last day, what they owe to you, and to your closet.” [Lord Teach us to Pray, 268, 272-275]

That is the true point of difference. Private prayer allows an intimacy, an honest reckoning, an expression of the truest and deepest feeling that public prayer does not and cannot.

Down to Gehenna and up to the throne  
He travels the fastest who travels alone.

And that is why we must have both in our lives: the united prayer of the body, strong to obtain many things for the kingdom of God, and the solitary prayer of the saints seeking what cannot be sought in the same way with the saints together.

Now, let me set out briefly some of the favorable characteristics or features or conditions of private prayer, what we are to seek and how we are to take advantage of this kind of praying in our lives.

**I. The first is seriousness.** This seems to be the Lord’s intention when he speaks of “going into your room and *closing the door*.”

As Philip Henry, the father of Matthew Henry, put it: “There are two doors to be shut when we go to prayer; the door of our closet that we may be secret; the door of our hearts that we may be serious.” The Lord mentions the one to suggest the other.

Thomas Manton puts it differently but with the same effect. The Lord’s emphasis on solitude is really, he suggests, an emphasis on “fervency or vehemency of zeal.” “He suffers truly who suffers without a witness.”

When you are alone you can say all that is in your heart to God and with the full force of your feeling. There are fewer distractions and no necessity to hold back because of what others may think.

And can there be many things of greater importance than that at least for some time each day we are in full seriousness before God!

**II. The second is the choice of an opportune time.**

When the Lord speaks of going into one's closet he opens for us the question of when and how. In a busy home, amidst the pressing schedule of a busy life, when are we to do this, when are we to find our solitude with God?

The wisdom of the ages is, of course, that the best time is the early morning at the beginning of one's day. And, in theory, there is obviously much to commend that time. The day, beginning with prayer, is sanctified in that way and bathed in the atmosphere of the sanctuary of God. The Bible gives us many examples of men of God who rose early to seek God and our Savior was chief among them. Practically, it may be the time of day with fewest external distractions. The house is still quiet, the children are not yet awake.

But many people have not found that an easy time to manage with any great success — they are sleepy, groggy, they find the temptation to stay in bed a life-long struggle, etc.

Indeed, there is perhaps no part of the Christian life more susceptible to personal idiosyncrasy than private devotions. Rabbi Duncan, who was most certainly a man who walked with God, was not lengthy, not even highly regular in his private devotions, his biographer admits. He made up for it with a spirit of constant communion with God.

Richard Baxter, in his Saints' Everlasting Rest [Pt.IV, Chapt. vii, p. 299f.] very helpfully says, "God hath...left it to be ...determined by ourselves, according to every man's condition and occasions, lest otherwise his law should have been a burden or a snare." And it was a great encouragement to me when he went on to describe his own practice — he apparently wasn't a morning person either! "I have always found fittest for myself. . . the evening, from sun-setting to twilight; and sometimes in the night when it is warm and clear." (He goes on to mention that Gen. 24:63 suggests that this was Isaac's practice and that he knew it was also the practice of the saintly Bishop Hall.) [p. 301]

And C.S. Lewis, perhaps obliquely admitting that he was not a "morning person," wrote this in one of his letters to Malcolm:

"And, talking of sleepiness, I entirely agree with you that no one in his senses, if he has any power of ordering his own day, would reserve his chief prayers for bed-time — obviously the worst possible hour for any action that needs concentration. . . . My own plan, when hard pressed, is to seize any time, and place, however

unsuitable, in preference to the last walking moment.”

Surely, the Lord’s point is that it be done *seriously* and the best time and the best opportunity is that time and opportunity that contributes most to that seriousness.

You perhaps have heard the no doubt apocryphal story about Wesley and Whitefield. Wesley, as you know, was raised in a High Church household where the children were ordered by the ringing of a bell and were taught by their mother to cry silently. Whitefield was brought up much more carelessly in a local inn. When working together in their adulthood they were supposed to have arrived late one night very tired at an inn. When they reached their room, Whitefield threw himself on the bed exhausted, while Wesley got down on his knees, opened his Bible and, before setting to his devotions, looked reproachfully at Whitefield falling asleep on the bed, “George, George, is this your Calvinism?” At 2:00 am Whitefield woke up and found Wesley still on his knees, but fast asleep over his Bible. He shook him awake and said, “John, John, is this your Arminianism?” [Montagu Barker in the *Still Festschrift*, p. 92.]

### **III. The third is the length of private prayer.**

Every minister knows that it is much easier to pray long prayers in public than in private. As John Owen admitted, “One reason why private devotion is so difficult is that there is nothing in it which satisfies the carnal part of the soul as there may be in public worship.” [vi, 229] Spurgeon used to admit that ministers characteristically got it exactly the wrong way around: long prayers in church and short prayers in their closets.

Clearly the goal for every sincere Christian must be more and more of this private prayer, this earnest speaking to God about what most concerns his or her soul and those around him or her. Our Savior set us an example of much prayer of this type and we are to follow in his steps.

But, here too, personal characteristics need to be noted. I have already told you of Andrew Bonar’s conclusion, come to in the middle of his life, that his way of praying was apparently to be many short prayers than one long prayer offered at once.

Still we should all want to be like James, the brother of the Lord, the famous “Camel-knees!” [Explain: he was so much a man of prayer. . . ] And we know all too well of what Whyte was speaking when he said, “Gabriel is said to

have come swiftly to Daniel ‘whiles he was speaking and praying.’ He would need to come very swiftly indeed to most of us, if he is to catch us on our knees!” [Bio., 368]

So, let me conclude this evening with this sage counsel, once more from Alexander Whyte, this from his sermon, “The Element of Time in our Devotions,” [With Mercy and with Judgement, 73-79]. I wish I could read the whole of it to you, but I have time only for a few excerpts.

His text was Matt. 26:40 where, in Gethsemane, the Lord asks his disciples, “What, could ye not watch with Me one hour?” And that prompts him to ask whether any of us think of an hour as an amount of time that we should give to communion with God each day?

Now a *whole hour*, it must be admitted, is a long time. But it is not so much the length of the time: it is rather this — that we do not know what to do with ourselves for a whole hour. We are like St. Teresa. She made use of a sandglass; and she tells us, in her Autobiography, how she used to glance at the glass to see if it was not nearly run down yet, so that she might escape out of her place of prayer with a good conscience. Now, like Teresa, we have it on our conscience that we ought to be alone with ourselves, and with God, for some decent length of time every [day]; but then, there is no hour of all the twenty-four that goes so slowly, and that hangs on our hands so heavily, as just the hour of secret prayer.

*[Doesn't it encourage you as it does me to hear a man like this admit that, or for St. Teresa to admit what she did?!]*

You might try this. You might begin by cutting down the hour. If a whole “hour” is too long for you — take half an hour: or even to begin with, take a quarter. Christ is not a hard taskmaster. He will not bind you to a hard-and-fast bargain — if you are unwilling. And, besides, you can get through a great deal in half an hour; or even in a quarter of an hour. You can name a great many forgotten people, and a great many forgotten things, in half an hour or even in a quarter. You can go over your past day. . . in much less than an hour. . . . Then again, there is this to lighten and alleviate the strain. You do not need to lay it on your conscience that you must be on your actual knees all the time. Not at all. Rise up. Walk about the room. God out and look up at the stars. Say — ‘What is man that Thou art mindful of him?’ Come in again. Sit down. Take help out of Andrewes, or another. Lift up your hands. Lift up your eyes. Recite a psalm. Chant a psalm. Say over a

... hymn to yourself. Do anything you like. Prayer is the most elastic exercise possible. Communion with God has no hard-and-fast rules and regulations. Then there is your Bible to help you to fill up your hour. And once you have begun, really, to read your Bible — one hour each night will be far too short. The Psalms for instance. The best of the autobiographic and experimental Psalms were written late at night, and when the psalmists were alone with God.... Take your Bible, then, to help carry you through your hour of prayer.

Then again, there is this well-approved way of filling up the hour, and of giving an intense interest to it:

Let not sleep come upon thy languid eyes,  
Before each daily action thou hast scanned,  
What done, what left undone; what done amiss.  
From first to last examine all; and then  
Blame what is wrong, in what is right rejoice.

[And then Whyte goes on to speak to parents of how easily they can fill up their time in prayers for their children, the prayers they promised God when their little ones were baptized.]

And then the conclusion:

“Whoever you are, — parent, or child, old or young, sinner or saint, — give yourself to prayer. Let no distaste for prayer turn you away from it. Let no want of practice, let no difficulty in it, make you give it up in despair. Let no greatness of sin, or frequency of sin, frighten you away from the Throne of Grace.

“*Begin to-night*: and never, on any account, give it over. Whatever else you do, or do no do — in God’s name I beseech you to pray. Pray, and you will pray yourself into a life of pardon and holiness, till you pray yourself into heaven itself. And *begin to-night*. Only try one week of it, and then judge for yourselves.”