Don't Pray Like This
Kevin T. Bauder

No one in the Bible was more interested in prayer than Jesus. Prayer was a natural and regular part of His life. He could speak to His Father spontaneously and almost conversationally. He could also devote long periods to planned prayer. Not surprisingly, prayer was one of the important matters in which He instructed His disciples.

A substantial portion of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:5-15) focuses on prayer. It occurs in the middle of a discussion of spiritual exercises, which is part of a larger discussion of idolatry, which in turn is part of a larger discussion of the meaning of God’s law. The positive side of Jesus’ instruction takes the form of the Lord’s Prayer, which is designed to provide a template for His followers to employ in their prayer lives. Immediately before the Lord’s Prayer, however, Jesus offers words of negative instruction. Before He teaches His disciples how they should pray, He describes two ways in which they should not.

First, Jesus tells His disciples not to pray like the hypocrites. This warning follows the pattern of Jesus’ instruction about giving and fasting. All of these spiritual exercises can be performed hypocritically.

What does it mean to pray, give, or fast like a hypocrite? According to Jesus, spiritual exercises become hypocritical when they are performed in order to impress people—as the King James Version puts it, to “be seen of men” (Matt. 6:1, 5, 16). The reason is simple.

How does one pray, give, or fast like a hypocrite? According to Jesus, spiritual exercises become hypocritical when they are performed in order to impress people—as the King James Version puts it, to “be seen of men” (Matt. 6:1, 5, 16). The reason is simple.

No one can serve two masters (Matt. 6:24). One must choose between God and money. In the same way, one must choose between God and human praise. When money and praise are pursued as ends, they become idols. Spiritual exercises performed in the pursuit of idols are idolatrous.

The Lord is a jealous God. He does not share His glory with false gods or His praise with idols (Isa. 42:8). He refuses to be treated as one god among others. Consequently, an act performed in the pursuit of another god is unacceptable and offensive to the Lord God.
Religious hucksters can manipulate devotion in order to make money. They can distort spiritual observances in order to build reputations for themselves. They are capable of the crassest subversion, not only of false systems of belief, but of true biblical religion. Even the most holy exercises can be performed to impress people rather than God, and someone is always willing to engage in this subversion.

No tendency is more natural than the desire to divert glory from God to self. This is exactly the inclination against which Jesus was warning. Those who engage in spiritual pursuits in order to be seen by people do get a reward—they receive worship, however briefly. But Jesus cautions that such people are already paid in full. They have all that they are going to get. They should anticipate no praise from God.

Consequently, Jesus commands that spiritual exercises are best performed in secret. The person who gives should not let his right hand know what his left is doing. The person who fasts should wash and dress himself. The person who prays should address God privately in his own closet. These acts, performed in secret for the pleasure of God alone, will eventually win public praise from Him.

Of course, Jesus is neither forbidding public prayers nor implying that they are necessarily unspiritual. Old Testament leaders such as Moses and Solomon offered public prayers in the discharge of their duties. Many of the psalms were written as prayers to be offered in public. Paul sets his prayers in writing for all Christians to see—and that is about as public as prayer can get (e.g., Phil. 1:9-11). And Jesus Himself follows this warning with a public prayer—the Lord’s Prayer.

Public prayers are not wrong. Indeed, they are a normal part of corporate worship. Even when offered in public, however, prayer must never be a means of aggrandizing the speaker. The individual who prays in public has a special duty to frame the prayer so that every devout heart may enter into the utterance, being carried into and impressed by the presence of God rather than being swept in admiration of the eloquence of the speaker.

Such public prayers grow out of the long habit of private prayer. This is not to say that public prayers should be private prayers offered in front of other people—far from it! Nevertheless, the heart that is regularly opened to God in secret will evidence a jealousy for His glory and reputation. The prayer that flows from such a heart will shout, “Look at Him!” rather than, “Look at me!”

Nothing is more audacious for a human or more degrading to God than to treat Him as an instrument to bring glory to idols. When people pray in order to be praised, however, that is just what they are doing. They are attempting to manipulate God into becoming an instrument for the glory of their idols. The true and living God will never comply.

We must not pray as the hypocrites. Neither ought we to pray as the heathen. What that means, however, must become the subject of a separate discussion.

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.