

BREAKING BARRIERS TO INTIMACY WITH GOD:
Overcoming Prayerlessness
A Study of Matthew 6:5a

Characteristic of Completeness: Prayer

Big Idea: Pray reflexively.

Related Scriptures: Matthew 26:41; Mark 1:21-38; Luke 3:21-22; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; Hebrews 4:15; 1 John 5:19

Introduction:

1. God is up to something.

Last week I talked about what I did on my summer vacation. I shared how God kept bringing up ► the question: Are we using God or we letting God use us? Specifically, I confessed that too often I've been using God and maybe we all have. Yes, there are some good things happening at Moon Valley, but we seem to be coasting, drifting along, plateaued, on level ground, not climbing. And I'm not satisfied with that. I repent of using God; I want to be used by God. I'm ready to climb.

But I don't know where. Not yet. God seems to be calling us to discover this together. As a team. As a family. As a body. And so, last week I invited you to join me in praying ► a simple prayer: "Lord, make me aware of how You want to use me today." And in the weeks and months ahead, Moon Valley leaders and staff will also be zooming out a little to prayerfully ask: "Lord, make us aware of how You want to use this church from now on."

Apparently, it struck a chord. I've never received more comments and emails and notes in response to a sermon, affirming, sympathizing, encouraging, applauding. And you know what it feels like?

It feels like a couple who's been married for a while. It's not a bad marriage, but they both feel like there could be so much more. Something's missing. And they're hesitant to say anything because they don't know what the answers are, and they don't want to hurt feelings, and they've been working hard. But finally one of them says, "I love you. I'm committed to you. But I feel like we've plateaued. We're in a rut. We're coasting. There could be so much more. I want more for us." And the other says, "I want that, too." And there's this strange and wonderful feeling of relief and hope and unity, even though they still don't have all the answers. We're that couple.

I mentioned to you that I'm taking a doctoral class that involves a lot of reading on church growth and change. I just finished a book titled, *Comeback Churches*. It's a study of a group of over three hundred churches that had plateaued—churches that had been stuck in a rut, coasting, or even declining—churches that are now vibrant and climbing again. Leaders in these comeback churches were asked, "What changed?"

What can you associate with the comeback?” The number one response was this: prayer.¹ Not clever strategies. Not new carpet. Not glossy brochures. Prayer.

And so today, I’m going to talk more about prayer. Prayer ► is our Characteristic of Completeness in Christ.

I mentioned last week that we’re going to pick up our study through the gospel of Matthew. Specifically, we’re going to begin at Matthew 6:5. I realize that means we’re skipping a few verses that we didn’t cover in Chapter 5, and if you’re anal like me, that bothers you a little. I don’t like gaps. But I have a good reason. In Matthew 6:5, Jesus begins to teach us about prayer. And that’s exactly where God seems to be leading right now.

This marks the beginning a new sermon series titled, “Breaking Barriers to Intimacy with God.” This first sermon has the subtitle: “Overcoming Prayerlessness.”

2. We’re only going to consider the first four words of Matthew 6:5. In addressing His followers, Jesus ► says,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:5 “And when you pray . . .”

Curiously, Jesus doesn’t explain exactly *when* His followers are to pray. He simply assumes that they *are* praying and goes on to explain how to do it.

I don’t know about you, but I want to know *when* I’m supposed to pray. I’ve invited you to join me in praying, “Lord, make me aware of how You want to use me today.” But *when* are we to pray this? Once in the morning? Three times a day? When?

Some other parts of the Bible address the issue in a general way. For example, ► 1 Thessalonians 5:17 says,

^{NKJ} 1 Thessalonians 5:17 pray without ceasing,

That tells me that I should be praying an awful lot. But, I’m a visual learner and I like to do one thing at a time. So, I want to know what this praying without ceasing looks like. I want to see some life situations in which I ought to pray.

3. I ► decided it would be a good idea to consider what Jesus did as recorded in the Bible. When did He pray? What were the circumstances? What prompted Him to pray? What can we learn from Him?

¹ Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2007), 192-193.

- a. I looked through the four gospels that record the life of Jesus—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—and I identified 18 circumstances in which Jesus prayed. That is not to say that Jesus only prayed on 18 occasions. Those are simply the ones that are recorded for us in the Bible.
- b. In most of the circumstances, we are not told what Jesus said when He prayed. We only know when He prayed.
- c. As I studied these circumstances that prompted Jesus to pray, I noticed a pattern, a thread, a model that is common to many of the circumstances. It's not a pattern that explains everything there is to know about prayer. But, it's a pattern that has helped change the way I think about prayer. It's a pattern that has helped me to know when I should pray. And, it's a pattern that has encouraged me to pray more often.

I want to present just a couple of the 18 circumstances in which Jesus prayed to show you the pattern that I found.

- I. The first recorded instance of Jesus praying occurs at His own baptism at the hands of John the Baptist in the Jordan River. It is recorded in ► Luke 3:21-22. It says,

^{NKJ} Luke 3:21 When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while ► He prayed, the heaven was opened. 22 And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased."

- A. Let me give you a little background that is important to keep in mind here.
 1. First, this is effectively the inauguration of Jesus' ministry. Prior to this point, Jesus had not begun to recruit followers or preach in public.
 2. Second, Jesus is beginning His ministry in a world that is against Him. The Bible tells us the ways of the world and its people are generally characterized by a stubbornly sinful, self-centered independence from God.² The default settings of life on earth will disconnect us from God if we do not proactively override them.
 3. Third, the Bible tells us that Jesus is fully God and He's fully human. That means He was tempted in every way just as we are. He felt the same tug of sin, just like we do, even though He never gave in to it.³

² 1 John 5:19.

³ Hebrews 4:15.

B. So, why did Jesus pray during His baptism? I think He prayed because He was facing temptation. He felt the tug of sin, and, as a reflex against it, He prayed.

1. You see, immediately following His baptism, Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, and, Jesus knew what was coming.⁴

Jesus was tempted to rely on His own self-provision, rather than on the provision of the Father. Jesus was tempted to pridefully abuse His power, independent of the Father. And, Jesus was tempted to choose the wrong path to achieve His goal—a path that was billed by Satan as easier and better than His Father’s will—a path that would have bypassed the cross.

2. So, at the risk of presuming to know what was on Jesus’ mind, I think it is reasonable to infer that Jesus, during His baptism, was thinking to Himself something like this: “Here we go. My work on earth begins here. Satan will now intensify His efforts to thwart Me. He will do anything he can to draw Me away from the work of the Father, to disconnect Me from the Father. I can feel his temptation coming. I must do the work the Father has given Me to do. I must pray.”
3. Jesus was sensitive to the unseen temptations He faced, and, as a kind of spiritual reflex, He prayed. This idea is quite consistent with what He says to His disciples in ► Matthew 26:41:

^{NKJ} Matthew 26:41 “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak.”

Notice Jesus says, ► “watch and pray.” Be alert. Stay tuned. Watch out for those circumstances which conspire to draw you away from a vital connection with God and pray during those times. The big idea here is to ► pray reflexively. To pray as a reflex in response to temptation. To actually use temptation as a trigger to pray.

4. When the doctor checks your reflexes, he gets out the little hammer. Then, he taps your knee with it. If your reflexes are healthy, your leg kicks a little in response to the tap.

Praying reflexively is a little like that. You feel the temptation—a little tap, a subtle assault, a jab of resistance—and it triggers a prayer. The big difference between physical reflexes and spiritual reflexes is that the physical ones are involuntary; the spiritual ones are learned. We watch for tempting circumstances and we decide to pray as a reflex in the midst of them. It is unnatural at first, but it gets easier with practice.

⁴ Luke 4:1-2.

- C. The results of reflexive prayer often stand out as being remarkably out of step with the rest of the world. Jesus' inauguration into ministry was unlike any inauguration I know.

We inaugurate our presidents in America with great pomp and circumstance and "Hail to the Chief" and the president gives a speech.

In stark contrast, Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords started His ministry by humbly submitting Himself to a rite of baptism in a murky river—a baptism He didn't need. He had no need to repent or to be forgiven. All the while He was praying to His heavenly Father. No inaugural speech.

Why? I suspect it's because He sensed the unseen temptation to self-sufficiency and pride that threatened to draw Him away from the Father, and He prayed reflexively.

- D. Whenever we are faced with circumstances in which we are tempted to be pridefully self-sufficient, we should pray as Jesus did.

- II. Well, let's move on to next circumstance Jesus faces which I think will strike very close to home. In the next recorded circumstance in which Jesus prayed, He is faced with busyness, as we will see in Mark 1:21-38.

- A. I'm going to fast-forward through the itinerary of Jesus for just His first few months of ministry to show you just how busy Jesus was.

This ► is a map of Palestine. There's the ► Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, and the Dead Sea. The map spans about 100 miles top to bottom. Here's the itinerary:

1. Jesus is baptized by John in the ► Jordan River.⁵
2. He is tempted by Satan in the ► wilderness for forty days.⁶
3. He goes to a wedding in ► Cana where He performs His first recorded miracle.⁷
4. He makes His first, short visit to ► Capernaum.⁸
5. He goes to ► Jerusalem for the Passover, kicks out merchants in the temple and performs some miraculous signs.⁹

⁵ Mark 1:9-11.

⁶ Mark 1:12, 13.

⁷ John 2:1-11.

⁸ John 2:12.

⁹ John 2:13-25.

6. He travels the ► Judean countryside.¹⁰
7. He goes to ► Samaria and meets a woman at a well.¹¹
8. He goes back to ► Cana and heals a Nobleman's son.¹²
9. He visits His hometown of ► Nazareth where He is rejected.¹³
10. Then, He returns to ► Capernaum.¹⁴

That's an ambitious itinerary, particularly for someone on foot! He was busy. He was a guy on the go.

- B. Now let's zero in on ► Capernaum where I would like to pick up the story of more busyness and hassles leading up to the second recorded instance of prayer. It begins in ► Mark 1:21:

^{NKJ} Mark 1:21 Then they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and taught.

1. The first question that arises is, who are ► "they?" If we look at the preceding five verses we find that the word "they" includes Jesus and four fishermen He has just recruited to be His followers: Simon (also called Peter), Andrew, James, and John. These four guys are brand new followers. They don't really know what they're doing yet. The fish smell hasn't even left their hands.

Ever been on the job with new guys who don't know what they're doing? The guys are more of a drain than a help. Always asking questions, needing help. That's the situation in which Jesus finds Himself.

2. They enter Capernaum, a large metropolitan city known for its arrogant unbelief.¹⁵
3. Then on the Sabbath, Jesus enters the synagogue and begins to teach. The audience is not what you'd call friendly. In fact, later, Jesus would denounce

¹⁰ John 3:22-30.

¹¹ John 4:5-42.

¹² John 4:46-54.

¹³ Luke 4:16-30.

¹⁴ Matthew 4:13-17.

¹⁵ Matthew 11:23.

Capernaum for its lack of repentance.¹⁶ Ever have to do a presentation or make a sales pitch to unfriendly people. Jesus knows what that's like.

4. Mark 1:22-28 records that, in the synagogue, a demon-possessed man begins to cry out in the meeting. (I've been in some meetings where I thought one of the participants was demon-possessed!) Jesus casts out the demon. The people are amazed and the word spreads.
5. The synagogue meeting ends. Verses 29-34 record that Jesus went to Simon and Andrew's house. I suspect Jesus was tired. As He reflected on the day, perhaps He wished the people had paid more attention to His teaching and less to His miracle. They didn't seem to understand His message.
6. Then, the new followers bring Simon's mother-in-law to Jesus because she is very sick. Jesus heals her. She fixes them dinner and the sun is going down. It's been a long, draining day.
7. Then Jesus finds that his greenhorn followers—the one's who haven't really done anything but watch all day—they are bringing people from all over the city to be healed. ► Verse 33 says,

^{NKJ} Mark 1:33 And the whole city was gathered together at the door.

Of course this is hyperbole; the whole city was not literally at the door. But in a city of that size it is reasonable to expect that hundreds, maybe thousands were coming. News of healing spreads rapidly.

- C. Can you imagine how Jesus feels? Exhausted. Pulled in every direction. Everybody wants a piece of Him. He heals them one at a time, all evening. And the line of people who want Him to do something for them keeps growing.

Jesus faced the same kind of busyness that we face.

1. "If I hear, "Mom?" one more time, I'm going to lose it."
2. "If I hear one more customer complaint, I'm going to lose it."
3. "If I have to make one more trip to that school, one more trip to the soccer game, one more trip to the doctor, one more trip to the grocery store, I'm going to lose it."
4. "If that phone rings one more time, I'm going to lose it."

¹⁶ Matthew 11:23-24.

Jesus experienced the same kind of busyness we do. He knows exactly how it feels.

- D. What did Jesus do? How did He handle this busyness? He prayed reflexively. Mark 1:35 ► says,

^{NKJ} Mark 1:35 Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there ► He prayed.

When did Jesus pray? When He felt the crush of busyness. Why did He pray? I think He prayed in part because busyness tempts us to be distracted away from what's really important in life. Busyness presents a temptation to become disconnected from God. Reflexive prayer keeps that from happening.

- E. I mentioned earlier that the results of reflexive prayer are often way out of step with the rest of the world. This is demonstrated again in this case. ► Mark 1:36-37 says,

^{NKJ} Mark 1:36 And Simon and those *who were* with Him searched for Him. 37 When they found Him, they said to Him, "Everyone is looking for You."

Recall that Simon and his companions were the newly recruited followers who were fisherman—the guys that didn't really know what they were doing yet. Can you hear their tone of voice? Can you read between the lines? They are saying, "What are you doing? People need you, man! You need to heal these people! This is no time to pray; it's time to get busy."

Verse ► 38 records His response:

^{NKJ} Mark 1:38 But He said to them, "Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth."

Through reflexive prayer, Jesus overcomes the temptation of busyness and is able to focus squarely on the work God has given Him. He says, "no" to some good things so that He can pursue the best thing, His Father's will for him.

- F. We cannot be too busy to pray. We're too busy *not* to pray.

- III. When ► I looked at all the other instances of Jesus praying, I found a similar pattern. Various temptations—pride, busyness, popularity, decisions, power, rejection, success, betrayal, distress, and suffering—prompted Jesus to pray reflexively.¹⁷

¹⁷ Examples: When faced with frenzied popularity because of his healing ministry, Jesus prayed reflexively in order to humbly maintain His priorities (Luke 5:12-16). When faced with an important decision to choose His 12 disciples, Jesus prayed all night, perhaps as a reflex against the temptation to choose the movers, the shakers, the scholars, and the big dogs of the world. He chose some ordinary men instead (Luke 6:12-13). When Jesus miraculously fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fishes, the people wanted to make Him their political king, but He withdrew to a mountain to pray, perhaps as a reflex against the temptation to seize power before His Father's work was done (Matthew 14:13-23; John 6:14-15). When

We face the same kind of temptations every day. And, we have a choice. We can allow these temptations to draw us away from God so that we become disconnected in our relationship with Him. Or, we can actually use these temptations to prompt us to pray reflexively to the only One who can sustain us, the only One who can comfort us, the only One who loves us perfectly, the only One who can grant us peace and rest for our souls, the One who wants to use us.

How does this work today? Let me give you some examples.

- A. Last week I was on my way to the vet to pick up some food for my dogs. One of my dogs has a disease for which she needs prescription dog food. So I'm driving down Coral Gables Street to the vet, and I'm in the zone. The zone is where I'm focused on blowing through my to-do list as quickly and efficiently as possible. And the task, "pick up dog food" is the next item on the task pad in the Outlook program of my computer. There's an empty box to the left of it just begging for a mouse click to check it off. Like I say, I don't like gaps.

Anyway, as I'm driving, I'm feeling the zone, and the zone is a temptation—a temptation to ignore people—a temptation to ignore God's promptings so I can get all my stuff done. And so, I feel it and pray reflexively: "Lord, make me aware of how you want to use me today."

And my perspective changes. I'm not in the zone anymore. I've given the Lord permission to interrupt. And the receptionists at the vet are transformed. They're not receptionists anymore; they're people—people in my community—people in my sphere—people God has put in my path. And so I pray for them.

And I go inside to make my purchase. The receptionists know I'm a pastor, but I think they might be trying to figure out what kind of pastor I am. Is this guy judgmental? Is this guy safe?

So one of them floats a comment while rolling her eyes: "My mom wants me to go to some conference at some church in Scottsdale with R.C. Sproul. Have you ever heard of R.C. Sproul?"

I say, "Oh yeah. I've heard of him. Are you going to go?"

Jesus experienced rejection and was misunderstood, He prayed, perhaps as a reflex against the temptation to forcefully vindicate Himself apart from the Father's will (Luke 9:18). When His disciples experienced some success in their ministry, Jesus prayed reflexively in humble thankfulness to the Father (Luke 10:15-21). When faced with arrogance and eventual betrayal from His friend, Peter, Jesus prayed for Him; He didn't punish him (Luke 22:28-32). When faced with the enormous distress of Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus dreaded His looming crucifixion, He prayed reflexively to His Father, saying, "not My will, but Yours be done" (Mark 14:32-42). And, when He faced the suffering and humiliation of the cross, instead of calling down 10,000 angels to rescue Him and to destroy His enemies, Jesus prayed reflexively for the forgiveness of those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34).

She says, “Well, if it were just one talk, I might sit through that, but I guess there are a whole day’s worth of speakers, and mom wants to sit through all of them, and the only way I’d do that is if they served margaritas.”

So I said, “Well, maybe you could take a Thermos.”

They both laugh, and she says, “Good idea. But I’d fall asleep. Margaritas make me sleepy. That’s why I drink them by the pool, so when I get sleepy, I can just jump in the water.”

And I said, “Well, they probably have a baptismal.”

And they thought that was a good one. They laughed harder. And when I left, they were probably still confused about what kind of pastor I am. I didn’t try to convert them. I didn’t hand them a gospel tract. But at least on that day, I was a pastor who did more than buy dog food as quickly and efficiently as possible, as if they didn’t exist. I prayed for them, I demonstrated a nonjudgmental interest in them, I cracked some jokes and we had a laugh—things I would not have done had I not prayed reflexively. I don’t know where it will lead, but God does.

B. That’s one way it worked for me. How might praying reflexively work for you tomorrow morning?

1. The alarm goes off. You climb out of bed. Dreaded Monday is staring you right in the face. Pray reflexively.

“Lord, I got some contentment issues brewing this morning. I’m sorry. Help me out here. Make me aware of how you want to use me today.”

2. The whole family is up now and the cycle of busyness begins.

“Lord, I’m tired. Help me to see Your priorities for me in the midst of this chaos. Is there something I should trim from my schedule? Make me aware of how you want to use me today.”

3. Your son has failed once again to take out the trash. You’re running late, again. You’re on the brink of an outburst.

“Lord, help me deal with this anger. Give me wisdom on how to deal with this kid. Help him grow in his relationship with You. Show me how I can encourage him to do that. Make me aware of how you want to use me today.”

4. You’re driving to work. Stop and go as usual. You’re waiting in line. Another car drives by and tries to muscle in ahead of you.

“Lord, I don’t want this guy to get to me. Thank you that you are a just God. Thank you for the injustice you suffered for me. Make me aware of how you want to use me today.”

5. A billboard has something on it that invites you to fantasize about something you know is wrong.

“Lord, keep me from stumbling. Make me aware of how you want to use me today.”

6. You arrive at work. You’re late. You’re tempted to say that traffic was worse than it really was to vindicate yourself.

“Lord, integrity is what I want. Keep me on track. Make me aware of how you want to use me today.”

7. In the coffee room, you run into the colleague who has been trashing you to other employees. He puts on a fake smile.

“Lord, I want to be like You. Help me to be gracious. Would you draw this guy to Yourself, that he might be saved? Make me aware of how you want to use me today.”

8. You’re in a meeting, and you’d like to work into the conversation something that would really be impressive to the others in the room.

“Lord, I can’t believe this ugly pride thing I got going. Forgive me. Help me to consider others more important than myself. Make me aware of how you want to use me today.”

You see, it’s only mid-morning, and you’ve been praying without ceasing as you sense the unseen temptations of the world. When you pray reflexively you end up praying without ceasing because the temptations never cease.

And I wonder. I wonder what would happen if all of us prayed this way, starting today. What could God do through us, together? I can imagine it, and the prospect excites me.