

BREAKING BARRIERS TO INTIMACY WITH GOD:
Overcoming Hypocrisy
A Study of Matthew 6:5-6

Characteristic of Completeness: Jesus Christ

Big Idea: Pray authentically.

Related Scriptures: 1 Samuel 16:7; Psalm 26:2; 139:23-24; Jeremiah 20:12a;

Matthew 15:7-8; 16:27; 23:25

Introduction:

1. I've been doing some reading lately and ran across something that got my attention. A recent study was conducted among young people outside the Christian faith to find out what they think about Christians in America. The results are reported by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons in ► a book titled, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why It Matters*. Here's what got my attention.

An overwhelming ► majority of young Americans outside the Christian faith—some 84%—say they personally know at least one committed Christian.¹ That means among young Americans 16 to 29 years of age who are not Christ followers, over eight out of ten are personally rubbing shoulders with somebody they know who is a Christian. This seems like a great opportunity for a new, unbelieving generation to see how the Christian faith is lived out. Young outsiders are getting to observe the insiders up close and personal. Should be good. Right?

Well, here's the kicker. Only ► 15% of the outsiders think the lifestyles of the Christians they personally know are any different from the norm.² So, while 84% are getting a good look at how professing Christians live; only 15% are noticing any difference at all.

It would be tempting to ► dismiss perceived hypocrisy as just a trumped-up excuse to reject Christ. But other research seems to back up these perceptions of unbelievers. Kinnaman, ► explains, "In virtually every study we conduct, representing thousands of interviews every year, born-again Christians fail to display much attitudinal or behavioral evidence of transformed lives."³

It's not ► surprising then, that one of the three most prominent perceptions about present-day Christians—a perception held by fully 85% of young outsiders—is that we are hypocrites.⁴ We "say one thing and live something entirely different."⁵ We don't walk what we talk.

¹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why It Matters*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 48.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

We seem to have a hypocrisy image problem among young Americans. And that's not the half of it. Hypocrisy presents problems in our relationship with God, too. In fact, hypocrisy is a barrier to intimacy with God. Hypocrisy can disconnect our prayers. It really messes things up all the way around.

2. You may be thinking, "Thanks for the guilt trip, Bob."

If you're like me, you may be feeling a little overwhelmed by this because I see hypocrisy in my own life. It creeps in especially when I'm coasting, plateaued, in a rut. I'm afraid I have contributed to our collective image problem. And I'd like not to be a hypocrite. But I look at my own life and there are so many things that could use improvement, it's hard to know where to start.

Well, I'd like to cut short this guilt trip and give you some encouraging news. Jesus gives us a very simple step we can take to help overcome hypocrisy in our lives. It's not everything, but it's a big thing. And it's so simple, we can all do it. It takes no special knowledge or training or maturity.

We're continuing in our study through the Bible book of Matthew. In particular, we've been studying what Jesus teaches us about prayer. So, ► prayer is the general topic we're going to consider. Prayer is our Characteristic of Completeness in Christ for the week.

This morning, we're going to be focusing on ► Matthew, Chapter 6, Verses 5 and 6. If you have a Bible with you, I invite you to turn there. Matthew, Chapter 6, Verses 5 and 6. If you don't have a Bible with you, no sweat. The text is also printed on the note sheet in your bulletin and we'll be projecting the verses on the screen as well. In this text, Jesus talks about the relationship between prayer and hypocrisy.

- I. In ► Verse 5, Jesus begins by saying,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:5 "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites."

Jesus warns His followers right up front: Don't pray like the hypocrites. Don't make the same mistake as the hypocrites do when you pray.

This raises a number of questions.

- A. Like who are ► the hypocrites?

⁵ Ibid, 41.

From the context, it's pretty clear that Jesus has in mind some religious people in His day known as the scribes and Pharisees.⁶

B. Well, what is their problem? What is the nature of their hypocrisy?

1. The word “hypocrites” is a translation of the original Greek word, *hupokrites*. In classical Greek, this word was used of actors on stage who customarily wore large masks with megaphone-like attachments to amplify their voices to the audience.⁷

Over time, the word also was used to describe people who pretend to be something they are not. That's how Jesus is using the word. Hypocrites are counterfeits; they portray something on the outside that is inconsistent with what is on the inside.

2. The scribes and Pharisees were *religious* hypocrites. They pretended to be very godly, righteous, devout, and spiritual on the outside. But, their outward pretense was just a religious masquerade to cover up some very ungodly motives on the inside.

Jesus unmasks them in ► Matthew 23:25, saying,

^{NKJ} Matthew 23:25 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence.”

C. How does this hypocrisy show up in their prayers? How do the hypocrites pray?

Jesus describes the pattern in the last part of ► Verse 5. He says,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:5 “. . . For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets . . .”

1. The fact that the hypocrites prayed while ► standing was not all that unusual. In fact, it was customary for Jews in that day to pray while standing. What

⁶ If we look back at what Jesus says leading up to our text, the nearest reference to a group of people that he would describe as hypocrites comes in Matthew 5:20. There Jesus says, “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Later in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus makes it quite clear that He considers these scribes and Pharisees to be hypocrites. For example, in Matthew 23, Jesus repeats the following phrase 7 times (13a, 14a, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29): “. . . woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! . . .” So, the scribes and Pharisees are the hypocrites Jesus has in mind, and we should not pray like them.

⁷ W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, unabridged ed., s.v. “hypocrite, ὑποκριτής,” (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing, n.d.).

some may envision as the more traditional posture, kneeling, was reserved for solemn occasions or times of trouble.⁸

The fact that the hypocrites prayed in ► the synagogues was not unusual either. They were Jews. It was normal to pray in the synagogues, just as it is normal to pray in church.

The only hint we get here that the hypocrites might be a little distinctive in the way they pray is suggested by the tense of the participle translated, “standing.” It suggests that the hypocrites may have been distinguished by praying for long stretches.⁹ But is it bad to pray for a long time? I don’t think so.

2. Jesus also says that the hypocrites pray ► “on the corners of streets.” Jesus is describing the hypocrites as purposely praying in high-traffic areas, where lots of people would be.
 - a. By its very nature a street corner is a high-traffic area, where people headed in different directions converge.
 - b. In that culture, many people would congregate on street corners and discuss the affairs of the day.
 - c. And, these weren’t just any street corners Jesus is talking about. The term Jesus uses for “streets” describes the widest streets, the main thoroughfares carrying the greatest number of people.
3. So, the hypocrites may be distinguished as religious people who love to pray for extended periods of time with lots of people around.

But is it bad to pray a long time with lots of people? No. The problem with the hypocrites is not *how* they pray; it’s *why* they pray. The problem is not outward; it’s inward. The problem has to do with their motives.

- D. Well, ► why *do* the hypocrites pray? What is their motive? Jesus says in ► Verse 5, that the hypocrites pray . . .

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:5c “. . . that they may be seen by men.”

That is to say, the hypocrites pray to show off. They pray to impress people. They pray for the purpose of pretending to be really spiritual. They pray so that people will think they are wonderful.

⁸ W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Matthew, The International Critical Commentary*, vol. I, eds. J.A. Emerton, C.E.B. Cranfield, G.N. Stanton, (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, Ltd, 1988), 585.

⁹ In the original Greek, “standing” is in the perfect tense, which describes an action that has a definite beginning and then continues on and on and on.

E. What happens to the hypocrites when they pray this way? What is their reward?

Jesus says in ► Verse 5,

^{NJ} Matthew 6:5d “. . . Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.”

When Jesus says, ► “Assuredly, I say to you” that means that what He is about to say is very important. We need to understand it.

But, at first blush, what He says may seem hard to understand. It may seem odd that Jesus would say that the hypocrites have their reward. After all, what ► reward would they deserve for praying in a way that Jesus condemns?

Here’s what I think. I think the reward the hypocrites receive is whatever praise that might come to them from the people who buy their sanctimonious charade. If you pray to show off, the only reward you might get is from somebody you’ve duped into thinking you’re spiritual. But, you get zero from God. That’s the thing Jesus wants you to know for sure. If you pray hypocritically you cannot expect anything from God. The only thing you might expect is the pitiful praise of some sucker you’ve fooled into thinking you’re the genuine article.¹⁰

F. Well, ► where does hypocritical praying show up today?

1. Because it’s a matter of motives, it can be hard to identify in others. So, we need to be careful about imputing motives. But, if you’ve been around churches a while, you’ve probably sensed some hypocrisy during prayer. You don’t mean to be critical but sometimes you hear people praying and the little hypocrite light goes on in your head.

a. Maybe it’s when you hear a person who weaves a little three-point sermon into his prayer. Pastors are notorious for this. It’s one reason why I don’t particularly like to go to prayer meetings with a

¹⁰ Here’s a more detailed defense of my opinion: First, it seems that their reward comes now, not later. The original clause translated, “they have their reward” can also be rendered, “they are receiving their wages in full.” This is in the present tense, indicating that whatever the reward is, they get it all now. And, that’s all they get. There is no future return on their investment of prayer. This is in contrast to the person who prays without hypocrisy who is making an investment to receive a reward in the future. In prescribing how we should pray, Jesus says in Verse 6, “. . . pray to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you . . .” Here, the verb, “will reward” is in the future tense. Religious hypocrites get their reward now; those who pray without hypocrisy have a reward in the future. Also, it seems reasonably clear that the reward the hypocrites receive for their praying does *not* come from God. It is quite clear from Verse 6 that the one who prays without hypocrisy receives a reward from the Father, but the source of reward for the hypocrite is unspecified in Verse 5. And, if we look back in the immediate context at Matthew 6:1, we hear Jesus talking about hypocritical motives for doing charitable deeds, and He says such hypocrisy is not rewarded by God the Father. He says, “Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” So, it seems that the hypocrites in our text receive some kind of reward, but it’s not from God, the Father.

whole bunch of pastors I don't know. Sometimes they feel like prayer competitions.

- b. Maybe it's when you hear a person who seems to be trying to impress his hearers by praying with fancy, religious-sounding language. He's speaking English, but you feel like you need an interpreter.
 - c. Maybe it's when you hear certain repetition as if someone is a prayer DJ, playing prayer track Number 6 from his mental prayer iPod for the sake of his listeners. "Now, here's a little prayer from my pensive collection. It's called, 'I'm a Deep Thinker.'"
 - d. I remember years ago going to lunch with another believer I did not know well. We were about to give thanks for our meal when this guy dramatically raised his hands high in the air across the table, inviting me to join hands with him in creating what seemed like the same kind of little tunnel cheerleaders create for football players to run through when they first come out on the field. The little light in my head was going crazy.
2. Hypocritical prayer creates such an obstacle for new believers in the church. By definition, prayer hypocrites are among the more conspicuous people who pray. So, new believers see them, and can begin to believe that in order to pray, they must pray just like them. But, Jesus says, "Don't pray like the hypocrites."
 3. Well, it's easy to point at other people. It's harder to admit hypocrisy in our own prayers. Let me ask some difficult questions.
 - a. When you pray, have you ever been more concerned about what people think of you than about communicating with God?
 - b. Ever been in a church group, and when it came time to pray together, you felt pressure to pray something out loud, because if you didn't, the others might think you are unspiritual, so you cooked up a little something that would sound good?
 - c. Or turn it around. Ever been in a church group, and when it came time to pray together, you did not participate because you were afraid of what others might think of you? Refusing to pray for fear of what others might think is no better than praying to show off. Both are self-centered.

- II. How should you pray, then? Here's ► the big idea: Pray authentically. We can all take a big step toward overcoming hypocrisy if we would just pray authentically, genuinely, without pretense.

Well, how do we do that? How do we pray authentically? What motives should be involved? Jesus shows us the way in ► Verse 6. He says,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:6 “But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”

From this I draw ► three important directives about how we should pray authentically.

- A. First, ► pray to an audience of One. That is, we should pray focusing entirely on God as the only person to whom we are speaking. We shouldn't pray to try to impress other people. I want to show you how Jesus emphasizes this important point.

1. First, He says in ► Verse 6,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:6 “But you, when you pray . . .”

You don't notice it in English, but Jesus has narrowed His focus here. Remember, He began back in Verse 5 by saying,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:5 “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites.”

The “you” back in Verse 5 is plural. “When y'all pray, don't be like the hypocrites.”

But, the ► “you” of Verse 6 is now singular. “But *you personally*, when *you alone* pray . . .” Jesus is talking about praying one-on-one—just you and your heavenly Father. You're praying to an audience of One.

2. Then, He ► says,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:6 “. . . go into your room . . .”

I suspect that when you hear this, you might think of going into your bedroom. After all, when your mom said, “go to your room,” you went to your bedroom.

But, Jesus is not talking about a bedroom. There's a Greek word that means bedroom, but Jesus doesn't use it here. He uses a word that describes a private inner room, more like a closet. The word is *ta-MAY-on*. One Greek

dictionary says, it's "a room in the interior of a house, normally without windows opening to the outside . . . the emphasis is on the strictly private location of the inner room."¹¹

You're there alone, just you and your heavenly Father. You're praying to an audience of One.

3. Then Jesus ► says,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:6 ". . . and when you have shut your door, pray . . ."

Just to make sure this is a matter between you and God, you shut your door. And, notice it's not just *a* door to *some* room that might belong to someone else. It's ► *your* door to *your* room, emphasizing that nobody else would even know you're in there. This is not a show. You're praying to an audience of One.

4. Then Jesus ► says,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:6 ". . . pray to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."

- a. This could be translated "pray to your Father, *the One* who is in the secret place." He's the only One who's there with you. There's no one else who's there.
- b. And notice, Jesus says your Father is the One ► "who sees in secret." He's the only one who sees you in there. There's no one else who sees. Over and over again, Jesus wants us to understand that we must pray to an audience of One. We must not be concerned about how we look or sound to other people.

5. Is ► Jesus saying that we should never pray in public? No. That's not the point. There are plenty of instances in the Bible where the early church is said to have prayed together, corporately. And, Jesus Himself sometimes prayed publicly.

In our text, Jesus is using a literary device known as hyperbole in which He gives an exaggerated example to make the point. He is telling us that wherever and whenever we pray we must do so to an audience of One. Our motive must be to connect with God, not to impress other people. Going into our

¹¹ Louw-Nida *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2d ed, J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida, eds, s.v. "ταμεινον," (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988).

inner room to pray makes the point because a person could not possibly do it to impress other people because no one else would even know.

So the first important thing to know about connecting with God is that we should pray to an audience of One.

- B. Now, here's the second thing: To pray authentically is ► to pray as a child to your Father. Notice that twice in ► Verse 6, Jesus describes the person to whom we pray, not as the Cosmic Creator, not as the Distant Deity, not even as *the* Father. He is "your Father." To pray authentically is to pray as a child to your Father.
1. If you have trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin, then you are God's child and He is your Father. You have a personal relationship with the One who created the universe. The Father who is above all else, above all else wants to enjoy a close relationship with you, His child.
 2. How would a child like you pray to Father like Him? Well, what's the right way to talk to a father? Perhaps your earthly father is not a particularly good model for you in this regard. Mine is. I love to talk with my dad. And, I try to talk with my earthly father and my heavenly Father in much the same way.
 - a. We have a close relationship, so my conversations with my dad are not stiff, cold, and formal. They are respectful, but not formal. I can just be myself.
 - b. I don't worry too much about impressing my dad with the way I talk. He knows who I am. I've got nothing to prove.
 - c. I don't feel compelled to adhere to a certain rigid formula in talking to my dad. I just let it rip. He sorts it out. He loves me.
 - d. Sometimes, I like to just be with my dad, without saying anything. I just listen because I want to know what's on His mind.
 - e. And, I try to let my dad know that I love him, that I appreciate what he's done for me.
 3. Praying like a child to your Father is about being free to be who you are and being free to talk normally in communicating with God. Praying like a child to your Father is as genuine as it gets.
 4. We'll talk more about the significance of the term, "Father" in the weeks to come. For now, just recognize that the second important thing to know about praying authentically is that we should pray as a child to our Father.

- C. Now, here's the third thing: We can pray authentically ► by expecting a reward. Jesus ► says,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:6 “. . . pray to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”

1. This may be a little surprising to you.
 - a. Perhaps you would expect Jesus to say that if you pray, your Father will give you what you pray for. But that's not what He's saying here.
 - b. Perhaps you would expect Jesus to say that if you pray, your Father will answer you. But that's not what He's saying here.
 - c. Instead Jesus says that your Father will ► *reward* you.
2. What reward? What does this mean?
 - a. The original Greek verb translated, “reward” means to pay or to render what is due. The noun form of the word means “wages.” Rewards are something earned.
 - b. Remember, we discovered earlier that the hypocrites receive a reward that is not from God. They deserve nothing worthwhile, and so that's exactly what they get. They receive as a reward empty praise from men that amounts to nothing in the end.
 - c. In contrast, the believer who genuinely prays to God with pure motives will receive a reward in the future. The verb, “will reward” is in the future tense. Prayer is an investment whose return is not yet fully realized. What is the reward?
 - d. Is the reward an answer to our prayer? Is it receiving what we ask for? I don't think so.
 - (1) Scripture consistently portrays rewards as something earned or something deserved. But, I believe we can and do receive answers to prayer that we do not deserve. For example, I might pray to be healed of an illness. God might heal me, but not because I deserve it. I wouldn't have earned the right to be healed. By God's grace, God would have simply granted it. As such, the answer to my prayer would not be a reward. Therefore, I don't think we are to equate rewards with answers in our text.

- (2) In addition, recall that Jesus takes pains to contrast the reward that the hypocrites receive now with the reward we'll receive later.

But, sometimes our prayers are answered now. Sometimes, we don't have to wait for answers. So, it seems that the rewards which are future mean something different than answers which may come now.

- e. Well then, how will our Father reward us for praying rightly? I believe He'll reward us in the life to come. I believe authentic prayer is a primary work of the believer in this world, and it is a work that will be rewarded in the life to come. When Jesus returns, believers will be rewarded for the time we spend praying authentically—praying to an audience of One, like a child to our Father.

Listen to what Jesus has to say in ► Matthew 16:27 regarding His return. He says,

^{NKJ} Matthew 16:27 “For the Son of Man (Jesus) will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.”

There's our ► word, “reward.” It will be paid to us based on our works. And, the works include the work of prayer.

So how can we “work” on this problem of hypocrisy? How can we “work” at avoiding being like the hypocrites? Jesus gives us a simple step in that direction: Pray authentically. Pray authentically to an audience of One, as a child to his Father, expecting a reward. That is our work.

To think that someday I will face the Lord and He might say to me, “Well done, you were faithful to pray”—that motivates me.

To think that every moment I spend in authentic prayer is an investment in a future reward that will last forever—that motivates me.

And so, ► in sum, we are to pray authentically to an audience of One, as a child to our Father, expecting a reward.

- III. Last week I got to thinking and praying, “Lord, how does all this relate to us as a church, as a faith family? You've put us here in ► the Moon Valley area. Do people in the community see any difference in us? Do they see us as benefits or hypocrites?”

Maybe we ought to pray authentically right now. Together. Not as a show. But as a family. A family stirred.

I have some suggestions. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but maybe right now it would be good for us to pray authentically about a few things.

Maybe we could start by asking the Lord ► to show us any weeds of hypocrisy in our lives that need to be pulled—perhaps weeds that have sprung up in the soil of complacency or apathy or selfishness or just putting on a show.

And depending on what we see, maybe we ought to just ► say we're sorry. Sorry together. Maybe we ought to ask the Lord to forgive us for being hypocritical.

And then maybe we could offer ourselves to the Lord in a fresh way, saying something ► like, "Lord, I'm ready to climb. I've been on the level ground long enough, just coasting. ► Show me how You want to use me today. ► Show *us* how You want to use *us* from now on."

That's what I'm inviting you to pray right now in the closing moments of our time. *Whether* you pray or *how* you pray is entirely up to you. Don't be constrained by what other people might think. This is not a show. We pray authentically to an audience of One. If you feel like standing, stand up. If you feel like kneeling, get on your knees. If you feel like joining me in the front, come on up. If you feel like sitting still, stay put. If you feel like praying aloud, voice the words. If you feel like remaining silent, be quiet. If you feel like now is the time to make your escape, go ahead.

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:6 “. . . pray to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”

Jeff Merry will be playing some soft music as we pray, and in a few moments, he'll close us with a song. Let's pray.