

BREAKING BARRIERS TO INTIMACY WITH GOD:

Overcoming Ruts

A Study of Matthew 6:7-8

Characteristic of Completeness: Prayer

Big Idea: Pray meaningfully, simply, persistently, and relationally.

Related Scriptures: Ecclesiastes 5:2; Isaiah 40:26; Matthew 7:7; Luke 12:6-7; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 4:12-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:17

Introduction:

1. Let me tell you about the ongoing conversation I've been having with God.

Relax. It's not weird or psychotic. I'm not hearing voices. No voices telling me to climb a tower with a rifle. No voices telling me you should hand over all your money.

I'm just a normal guy trying to figure out what God is up to in my life and in this church. And in various ways, God keeps showing up and disclosing things. Gradually. Little by little. Not all at once.

A few weeks ago, when I came back from my summer break, I explained how I think God is calling me—and us—to prayerfully wait on Him to show us how He wants to use us from now on. Instead of running out ahead on my own initiative and strength, which is my tendency, I'm somehow supposed to prayerfully wait on the Lord. And I think we're supposed to do this together.

I don't like waiting all that much, and apparently God needs to remind me. I want to show you how He's reminding me.

Last Monday night, I was reading a recent book by ► Neil Cole titled, *Organic Church*. Cole heads up a ministry of starting and multiplying healthy churches in the world. I highlighted this part that stood out to me. Cole ► says,

“When we were looking at reproducing our ministry of multiplying . . . churches in Japan, we met with five men, hand selected for their obvious leadership, call, and understanding of . . . church. ► We had received a grant from an organization that paid for our transportation, meals, and hotels for six of us to facilitate this new undertaking. I felt pressured to make sure we had a remarkable meeting . . .”¹

Now, as I'm reading, I can identify with this feeling of pressure to pull off something remarkable. You're the leader. Other people are paying you to lead. There's pressure to perform, to make it happen. But Cole ► says,

¹ Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 51.

“I felt pressured to make sure we had a remarkable meeting, but as I sat down to come up with an agenda, I clearly felt the Lord saying, ‘I’ll take care of that.’”

► “It was risky to show up with these dynamic Japanese leaders who do not have time to waste, at someone else’s expense, and tell them, ‘Oh, by the way, I don’t have an agenda.’ But this is exactly what I did. ► I started the meetings by saying, ‘It is hard for me to do this, but I think it is absolutely necessary. We will not have an agenda here. We will seek the Lord and wait until we know we have heard from Him, because it is important that this work be His, not ours.’”²

Cole goes on ► to say:

“ . . . I believe we need to learn to sit still and wait for God before we launch out with our strategic plans . . . ”³

So, now I’m thinking, okay Lord, thanks for the reminder to wait and pray. I get it. And the very next morning I get up to continue reading in my “relentless” Bible reading plan, and it takes me to Lamentations ► 3:37-38, where it says,

^{NKJ} Lamentations 3:37 Who *is* he *who* speaks and it comes to pass, *When* the Lord has not commanded *it*? 38 *Is it* not from the mouth of the Most High That woe and well-being proceed?

The point is the Lord is calling the shots. He’s in charge. It’s His deal, not mine. So I need to turn back to the Lord and wait on His instructions. And then, in Lamentations ► 5:21, this is confirmed. It says,

^{NKJ} Lamentations 5:21 Turn us back to You, O LORD, and we will be restored; Renew our days as of old

So, now I’m thinking, okay Lord, I’m waiting. I’m turning to You. But I didn’t write anything down in my journal because I think I get it.

But ► God is not done. Later that morning, I am cooking up some oatmeal and slicing some peaches, when my son, Chase, comes in and flips on the TV. A movie is on. I can see it easily from the kitchen. It’s called “Searching for Bobby Fisher.” A seven-year-old chess prodigy named Josh is in a championship chess match against his cocky nemesis. Josh is dressed in black. His opponent is in white. It’s Josh’s move.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 52.

The timer is on. I insert myself in the story and I feel the pressure to make a move. Be decisive. Conquer. The clock is running. Make a move.

And a voiceover of the remembered words of his teacher—a chess master—turn over in Josh’s mind. Watch this clip of what I was watching while slicing peaches Tuesday morning, and listen for the repeated phrase of the boy’s chess teacher—the chess master—playing again and again in Josh’s head.

(Play ► “Don’t Move 2” here.)

So there I am with the oatmeal and peaches. Now, I’m thinking to myself, okay Lord, I hear You. Don’t move until you see it. Wait. Pray. Don’t move until you see the Lord’s next step for you. And I decide I better write this stuff down in my journal. So I do. And I conclude with a principle and an application.

► PRINCIPLE: We must prayerfully wait on the Lord to direct us together.

► APPLICATION: Keep praying with staff and elders and keep listening for the Lord.

Now I’m thinking, okay, I wrote it down. I got it.

But God is not done. Just yesterday, I’m reading an entirely different book—number seven of twelve for a class I’m taking. It’s ► *Breaking the Missional Code* by Ed Stetzer and David Putnam. And God uses Stetzer to remind me again. Stetzer ► says, “Perhaps our greatest fault is that we use a nebulous urgency for pressing ahead before we have heard from God.”⁴

And now, I’m laughing—delighted with God’s clarity.

2. I ► don’t want to give the impression that the leaders around here are just sitting on their hands. We’re not. Things are happening. For example, after a diligent, nationwide search for a new youth pastor, we found our guy. His name is David Mead. He’s from Tennessee. If the congregation affirms our nomination next Sunday, David will start October 1.

Around the same time, Steve and Ruth Wilson will be joining us from Washington state. They are veteran missionary church planters to Latinos. They will be helping us to reach and serve our Latino neighbors in the community.

I’m excited about the Meads and the Wilsons and feel as though God is preparing us—stirring us up—for something bigger ahead.

⁴ Ed Stetzer and David Putnam, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Homan, 2006), 22.

3. Clearly, whatever the Lord has in store for us, it involves prayer. Prayer is vital to this process and so we've been studying about prayer together in the gospel of Matthew. Prayer ► is once again our Characteristic of Completeness in Christ for the week.

A couple of weeks ago, in ► Matthew 6:5, we considered *when* we ought to pray. The big idea was ► to pray reflexively. That is, we should be sensitive to the temptations all around us and pray as a reflex against the temptations, whenever we face them.

Last week, in ► Matthew 6:5-6, we considered *motives* for praying. The big idea was ► to pray authentically, without hypocrisy, without trying to impress other people. We should only be concerned about praying to an audience of One—the One who will surely reward us for our prayers.

This morning, we come to ► Matthew 6:7-8, which talks about *methods* of prayer. Specifically, this text helps us to overcome ruts in our prayers and in our relationship with God. Let's read those verses one time through, then I'll unpack the points one by one. In ► Matthew 6:7-8, Jesus says,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:7 “And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen *do*. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8 Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.”

From this text, I glean four ways that we are to pray. And they constitute four parts of the big idea for today's sermon—a big idea that we're going to build together one word at a time.

- I. First, I think Jesus is saying that we should ► pray meaningfully. That is, we should talk to God without mindless, rote, unthinking repetition of words and phrases that have no particular meaning for us. I get this from the ► first part of Verse 7 where Jesus says,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:7 “And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen *do*. . . .

- A. It's important to know that Jesus is speaking to a group of Jews in our text. And, the word He uses, translated, ► “heathen” comes from the Greek word, *eth-ni-KOS*, from which we derive our English word “ethnic.” It was used to describe foreigners. To the Jews in that day, this defined all non-Jewish people—people who did not believe in the God of Judaism, the God of the Bible. In this particular context, the word, “heathen” describes people who pray to other gods—gods other than the God of the Bible.

- B. The heathens pray using ► “vain repetitions.” A sampling of the several English translations of the Bible gives us a good idea of what this means. It is variously rendered, “meaningless repetition,” “empty phrases,” and “babbling.”⁵
- C. You see, the typical first-century heathen believed in many gods, not just one. The heathen gods each exercised control over a different part of nature. And these gods were viewed as having some human faults such as not paying attention; they were gods with attention deficit. So, the heathen believed that, in order to get the attention of the gods in prayer, they had to babble on and on, often using the same words or incantations over and over again. Once they got the attention of a god, they also believed that they needed to repeat themselves in order to appease, to inform, and to persuade their god to act. They also believed that certain words carried magical power, so they were careful to say these “power words” mindlessly over and over again.⁶
- D. Jesus tells us not to pray this way. We are to pray meaningfully. Mindful of what we’re saying. Attentive to our words. Thinking things through.

Our culture doesn’t exactly encourage this. We can carry on a conversation with someone almost without thinking about what we’re saying or what is being said to us. It’s almost like we can flip on an auto-conversation switch and it just goes. We don’t pay much attention to what we say or what is being said.

It reminds me of a great story I read about Franklin Delano Roosevelt. As president of the United States, FDR grew tired of the mindless small talk at White House receptions. He doubted if anyone engaged in any genuine, mindful conversation during these

⁵ The original Greek word itself gives us an idea of what the vain repetitions sound like. The Greek word is an example of onomatopoeia, which means that the pronunciation of the word sounds like the thing it describes. The Greek word here is *ba-ta-lo-GE-se-te*. Seven syllables in one word: *Ba-ta-lo-GE-se-te*. Lots of syllables to describe the use of lots of empty words.

⁶ Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew, Holman New Testament Commentary*, Max Anders ed. (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 80.

Let me give you a couple of biblical examples of vain repetitions used by heathens. You may be familiar with the Old Testament account of Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Elijah was a true prophet of the God of the Bible. The prophets of Baal were heathens who prayed to a god named Baal. Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a kind of divine cook-off. He said, “Get some wood for a fire. Put some steaks on there. But don’t light it. Call on your god, Baal to bring down fire to light it himself.” 1 Kings 18:26 records, “So they took the bull which was given them, and they prepared *it*, and called on the name of Baal from morning even till noon, saying, ‘O Baal, hear us!’” There’s the vain repetition. “O Baal, hear us!” for hours on end. “O Baal, hear us!” Nothing happens. I get a chuckle out of what Elijah says at this point. With all the political correctness, and tolerance, and sensitivity to divergent beliefs that he can muster, he says, in Verse 27, . . . “Cry aloud, for he *is* a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, *or* perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened.” The translation, “he is busy” is actually a euphemistic way of saying Baal might be taking care of some business in the celestial men’s room.

Another example of vain repetitions occurs in the New Testament. The apostle Paul visits a town called Ephesus. Ephesus was the location of the temple of the goddess Diana, also known as Artemis. Some Ephesians were concerned that Paul’s preaching about Christ would upset their goddess Diana and, perhaps more importantly, would adversely affect their sale of souvenirs at the temple of Diana. So Acts 19:34 records their heathen prayer. It says, “. . . all with one voice cried out for about two hours, ‘Great *is* Diana of the Ephesians!’” Two hours of mindless repetition: “Great is Diana of the Ephesians. Great is Diana of the Ephesians. Great is Diana of the Ephesians.” That’s the vain repetition of the heathen.

gatherings. So, he conducted an experiment. At one White House reception, FDR approached his guests individually, shook hands, flashed his big smile, and said, “I murdered my grandmother this morning.” With but one exception, each person smiled back and said something like, “You’re doing a great job,” or “How lovely.” The one exception was a foreign diplomat who responded quietly, “I’m sure she had it coming to her.”⁷

This demonstrates the kind of mindlessness that Jesus is speaking against in our text. When we talk to God, we ought to be thinking about what we say.

It is a great irony that our text for today immediately precedes what is commonly called the Lord’s Prayer, which is in Verses 9-13. We’ll be talking about it in the weeks to come. If there was ever a prayer that has been recited mindlessly by many people, it’s the Lord’s Prayer. God only knows how many people have recited this many times from memory, not thinking about what it means. And, perhaps even if they thought about it, they still wouldn’t have a clear idea of what it really means. It starts out, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come . . .”

“Our Father in heaven.” Is that where He is? Heaven? I thought He was everywhere. Why does it say He’s there? Do we need to pinpoint His location before we address Him?

“Hallowed be Your name.” What does “hallowed” mean? And, is this saying that His name *is* hallowed, or that we *want* it to be hallowed?

“Your kingdom come.” What exactly is His kingdom? And, whatever it is, is this asking for it to come at some point in the future, or is it asking to experience it right now?”

It’s good to know, to be mindful of what we are praying.

- E. Let me give you some other examples of how vain repetition can creep into our prayers.
1. Perhaps some of you are in the habit of praying before meals. Praying to give thanks for a meal is a good thing, but not if it’s mindless repetition. I confess that sometimes I fall into the rut of just rattling off a mindless auto-prayer before meals.

What’s more, I’ve repeated some sayings in my prayers that don’t mean much to me. For example, I don’t really know exactly what “bless this food to our bodies” means, but I’ve used it at times because it sounds so spiritual. Does it mean, “please protect me from this burrito”? Does it mean, “Please add

⁷ Ben Patterson, *Deepening Your Conversation With God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bethany House, 2001), 129-130.

some nutritional content to this Big Mac”? Does it mean, “I hope this meatloaf makes it on through”?

It is good to be mindful of what we’re saying to God. When I repeat stuff that I’ve heard other people pray, but I don’t know what it means, it’s mindless. It’s vain repetition. Better to simply say what’s on my mind the best way I know how.

I’m not saying that it’s bad to say much the same thing each time you give thanks for a meal. I’m just saying that we must be careful to remain mindful of what we are praying.

2. Perhaps you pray at bedtime with your young children. I’ve been there. It’s easy to fall into a rut and inadvertently teach our children to recite a mindless formula. Talking with God naturally and conversationally is better than mindless repetition.

F. We’re going to practice praying meaningfully together right now. Jeff Merry is going to lead us in prayer in the form of a song. The song may be familiar to some of you—so familiar that it’s easy to sing it without thinking. As we prayerfully sing together, I invite you to think carefully about the words. Make them your own. We’re not just singing a tune. We’re praying. Praying meaningfully together.

(“Spirit of the Living God” sung here.)

II. Not only should we pray meaningfully, I believe we should also ► pray simply. That’s our second word: “simply.” To pray simply is to pray with a certain economy of words. We don’t need to multiply our words in order to persuade or convince God. We don’t really need to say the same thing over and over again. We can get right to the point and leave it at that.

Verse ► 7 of our text says,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:7 “And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen *do*. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.”

Our God is not impressed with many words. Neither our spirituality nor God’s understanding increases with the word count of our prayers.

A. Ecclesiastes ► 5:2 says,

^{NKJ} Ecclesiastes 5:2 Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God *is* in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few.

B. Jesus Himself is our model.

1. Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer as a specific example of how to pray. In the original language in which it was written, it contains only 57 words, including "Our Father" and "amen." It can be spoken in about 20 seconds. Simple.

That doesn't mean that our prayers must fit within that length. But, it does suggest that lengthy, complicated prayers are not a requirement with God. Simplicity is good.

A survey of all the recorded prayers of Jesus reveals that His prayers were rather simple and concise.

2. This doesn't mean, however, that Jesus didn't pray for extended periods of time. He did. Sometimes He would devote all night to prayer.

Which ► makes me wonder. How are we to reconcile His praying for extended periods with the apparent simplicity of His prayers? We are left to speculate. But, I think it's reasonable to infer a number of things:

- a. For example, I suspect that Jesus prayed for many different things and for many different people. Jesus covers a lot of ground in the Lord's Prayer.
- b. And, I suspect that the prayers of Jesus included not just the utterance of words, but also time for meditation, reflection, listening, and simply enjoying God's presence.

This is not all that surprising when we think of any relationship with a person with whom we are very close. Our conversation moves easily from one thing to another. It's not just about our talking. It's also about our listening to and just being with the other person. This listening part of prayer is the part I skip most often. It has the same effect as skipping the listening part with a spouse or friend.

- C. Okay, now we're going to practice praying simply together. Once again we're going to sing a simple prayer, and we're going to incorporate some silence where we get to just reflect and enjoy and listen in the presence of the Lord. We're going to pray simply together.

(Play "Here I Am To Worship" here.)

- III. The third way of praying is ► to pray persistently. To persevere in prayer. To stay at it. I arrived at this indirectly, based on a question raised by the second way of praying. You see, I got to wondering, does avoiding vain repetition mean we shouldn't keep asking for something? Is

there a limit to the number of times we ought to ask? Where's the line between perseverance and pestering?

- A. In trying to answer this questions, I find that repetition itself is not necessarily bad. Mindless babbling is bad, but not repetition.
1. According to 2 Corinthians 12:7-9, the Apostle Paul asked God three different times to heal him—to remove the thorn in his flesh. Paul repeated himself.
 2. According to Matthew 26:39-44, Jesus asked the Father three different times if He could avoid the crucifixion. And, we are told that He used the same words. Jesus repeated Himself.
- B. In fact, persistence in prayer is commended.
1. You may have heard of the words Jesus said, “Ask and it will be given, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened.” He’s talking about prayer. And, the sense of the original Greek in each command is to keep it up. I like the way the way the New Living Translation renders the words of Jesus in ► Matthew 7:7. Jesus says,

^{NLT} Matthew 7:7 “Keep on asking, and you will be given what you ask for. Keep on looking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened.”

Persistence in prayer is good. Not vain repetition, persistence. We should pray persistently. That’s our third way of praying.
 2. A great man of prayer, George Mueller, prayed every day that five of his friends would trust Christ as their Savior. After 18 months, the first one trusted Christ. After 5 years, the second. After 6 years, the third. Finally, the fourth and fifth friends trusted Christ . . . after 52 years! Persistence is good.⁸
- C. Is there a limit to such persistence? Is there a time when we should stop praying for something? Yes, I think so. We should stop asking when we get an answer.
1. Paul asked three times to be healed, but he stopped asking when God answered Him. God said, “my grace is sufficient for you.”
 2. Jesus asked three times to be spared the crucifixion, but He stopped asking when the Father affirmed His will in the matter.

So we should pray persistently, until we get an answer.

⁸ Patterson, 105-106.

- D. We're ► going to practice praying persistently this morning. Or at least we're going to pray a prayer that speaks of persistence—persistence in many forms: knocking, crying, praying, watching, and looking. Together.
- IV. That brings us to ► the fourth and final way of praying from our text: Pray relationally. That is, we are to pray, recognizing that we are in a personal relationship with God—a God who knows us intimately and perfectly. I get this from the last part of ► Verse 8, where Jesus says,

^{NKJ} Matthew 6:8 “. . . For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.”

- A. As believers in the God of the Bible, we don't need to use vain repetitions because, unlike the heathen, we don't have a non-relational god with an attention deficit. We don't have a god who lacks information or understanding. In fact, our God knows and understands everything. We are in a relationship with Him. And so we pray relationally to our Father who knows us personally.

God knows all about your circumstance and your prayer before you utter a word to Him about it. You don't need to worry about whether or not God hears you. He does. You don't need to worry about whether or not God understands your explanation of the situation. He does. In fact, your prayers do not inform God of anything.

Just how attentive is God? According to the Bible, He's attentive to every little bird on earth, and He's got every hair on your head numbered. He's into the details. He knows what's going on. He's a relational God. Luke ► 12:6-7 says,

^{NKJ} Luke 12:6 “Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten before God. 7 But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. . . .”

- B. This does raise a vexing question though: Why pray if God already knows? If God knows everything, what good does it do to pray? If I'm not informing God of anything, why pray?

One reason God wants us to pray is that He wants to have a relationship with us. Prayer is intended to reflect our desperate, relational dependence on God. Prayer and self-sufficiency don't go together. Prayer is not just the pursuit of things asked for, but the pursuit of a vital relationship with our heavenly Father. Prayer is not just a list of requests; it's an expression of trust and dependence on our Father.

Consider your relationship with your earthly father as an example. When you were a child, perhaps there were times when your earthly father knew what you wanted from him before you ever asked him. What if your earthly father knew everything you needed without your telling him? If that were true, would you then say to your father,

“I don’t really want to talk to you because you already know what I want”? Of course not. The same is true for God.

Our Father wants us to trust Him, to depend on Him through prayer. Jesus says in ► Matthew 21:22,

^{NKJ} Matthew 21:22 “And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.”

We are to pray, believing, trusting, depending on God. That’s what He wants. James ► 1:5-6 says,

^{NKJ} James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. 6 But let him ask in faith . . .

God wants our faith, our devotion, our reliance to be placed squarely on Him.

We are like children who are trying to put together the pieces to a puzzle that is impossible for us. Our Father is watching and waiting for us to give up our stubborn and futile attempt to piece life together on our own. He’s waiting for us to quit relying on ourselves and ask Him for help. Depending on Him is our hope and His joy. That’s why we pray. If you don’t pray, by definition, you aren’t depending on God.

- C. Let’s ► pray relationally together right now, recognizing that God is lovingly attentive to every detail of our lives. We are fully known. He dances over us.

(Sing “Amazed” here.)