



## Sermon Transcript January 6, 2019

### Seeking God in the Secret Place An Upward Heart of Prayer Matthew 6:1, 5-15

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on January 6, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

**Sermon Text**  
**Matthew 6:1, 5-15**

<sup>1</sup> Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

<sup>5</sup> “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>7</sup> “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

<sup>9</sup> Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.

<sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come,  
your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

<sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread,

<sup>12</sup> and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

<sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

<sup>14</sup> For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,

<sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

## Introduction

Eugene Peterson wrote a book about pastoral ministry called *Working the Angles*. In the book, he likened pastoral ministry to a triangle. The lines of the triangle are the most visible part of the triangle. The lines of the triangle represent the things a pastor does that everyone sees. For example, you see me preaching this morning. You heard me offer a public prayer this morning. Like the lines of a triangle, these public activities I do are the most visible part of what I do as a pastor. You can see me do them.

On the other hand, the angles of the triangle are the least visible part of the triangle. And yet they are very important because they are what give shape to the triangle. The angles of the triangle represent the things I do that no one sees. For example, you didn't see whether or not I spent any time in private prayer this week. You didn't see whether or not I took time to feed my own soul through time silently reflecting on Scripture. Peterson's contention is that as pastors it is easy to pour all of our time into the things that everyone sees to the neglect of the things that no one sees. But if we do not "work the angles" it eventually shows up in our ministry. He said that if the lines of ministry "are disconnecting from the angles and drawn willfully and at random, they no longer make a triangle. Pastoral work disconnected from the angle action . . . is no longer given its shape by God. Working the angles is what gives shape and integrity to the daily work of pastors."<sup>1</sup> In other words, I need to "work the angles" and to faithfully tend to the secret place of my life.

And yet, would we not all agree that working the angles—tending to the secret place of our lives—is important for all of us. Peterson writes, "The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are, instead, communities of [redeemed] sinners, gathered before God week after week in towns and villages all over the world. The Holy Spirit gathers them and does his work in them. In these communities of [redeemed] sinners, one of the [redeemed] sinners is called pastor and given a designated responsibility in the community. The pastor's responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God."<sup>2</sup> This lumps us all together and puts us in the same boat. We all need those things in our lives—in the secret places of our lives—that keep us "attentive to God." I need it. You need it. It is what gives shape to our faith.

We are going to spend the first month of 2019 in Matthew 6. It is interesting to note how Jesus calls us in this chapter to pay attention to the "secret place." He is calling us to "work the angles." The heading for this chapter is Matthew 6:1. "*Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.*" In other words, Jesus is saying that when

you practice your faith, make sure you are not just paying attention to the lines, the things everyone sees. He is not saying that the lines aren't important. They are important. What we are doing this morning is visible. This worship gathering is "line stuff." We know you are here. We watched you sing and worship and take communion and give of your offering. All these public "practices of righteousness" are important. But Jesus is saying that these public activities take shape when we also "practice our righteousness" in the secret place of our lives. You get the sense from Jesus that if the secret place is missing, your faith has no shape to it. He says that if you only do what you do to be seen by others, then there is no reward in that. In fact, Jesus doesn't hold back on his assessment for the one who doesn't "work the angles" of the secret place. Three times in Matthew 6 he uses the word *hypocrite* to characterize such a person. "*You must not be like the hypocrite . . .*" Jesus says. The word *hypocrite* "was originally used for actors on a Greek stage who put on various masks to play different roles."<sup>3</sup> Without the "working the angles" of the secret place of our faith, we are just playing the part—we are just putting on a show. It is not real.

What are the angles of the triangle that Jesus calls us to practice in the secret place? In this passage, Jesus gives us three angles to tend to. This morning we will look at the "upward heart of prayer." Next week we will consider the "inward heart of repentance." (I will argue next week that repentance is the issue at the heart of the practice of fasting.) Then the third angle we are called to work is an "outward heart of generosity." Upward—Inward—Outward. Prayer—Repentance—Generosity. These three practices need to be a constant presence in the secret place of our lives. The fourth week of this series the key word will be Onward. At the end of Matthew 6 Jesus says, "*Seek first the kingdom of God.*" These "practices of righteousness" are an ongoing activity of life in the "secret place." Upward—Inward—Outward—Onward.

I want to make one more introductory thought before we look at the first angle of the triangle. Whenever we talk about "practices of righteousness" - or often we call them disciplines—they can feel somewhat onerous. In fact, with each of the three practices listed in Matthew 6, Jesus says, "*And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*" I am afraid that when we hear this statement we can view God much like we do Santa Clause. "He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake!" But God is not wagging his finger of scorn or correction here. Rather, it is an invitation—his arms are open to you. In prayer he is inviting us to meet with him. In repentance he is wanting to assure us of his forgiveness and grace. In practicing generosity, he wants to use us to bring his blessing to others. And by making these things a way of life—an onward reality—he wants to demonstrate to us how he can take care of us—"*and all these things shall be added unto you.*" He is inviting us to a dynamic relationship with

God. The Christian life is about receiving what God has graciously given to us in Christ.

In January we are going to talk about “Seeking God in the Secret Place.” In February we are going to talk about “Worshiping God in the Corporate Place.” What are we doing when we come together to worship on a Sunday morning? Going into Easter we will talk about “Finding God in the Hard Place.” The bow that ties it all together is the reality that God has made himself known in Jesus and you can know him. Lets begin by being attentive to God in the secret place of our lives. Lets “work the angles.”

### **The Upward Heart of Prayer**

I want to begin by looking at “the upward heart of prayer.” Three times Jesus says in our passage, “*And when you pray.*” He says it verses 5, 6 and 7. Can you hear the assumption in that phrase? The word “*when*” assumes that we pray. And yet, is that an assumption we can make of ourselves? J. C. Ryle opens up his timeless and convicting booklet on prayer with this piercing question: “Do you pray?”<sup>4</sup> Then he gives a host of reasons why he even asks such a question. Here is one of the reasons he asks the question: “I ask whether you pray, because there is no duty in religion so neglected as private prayer.”<sup>5</sup>

If I can be transparent with you this morning, I feel convicted by that statement. I mentioned earlier in the sermon that I am in the boat with you. I need this sermon as much as the next person. Every year I like to pick a word I want to focus in on for the year. Often the word I choose reflects an area I need to address in my life. The word I chose this year is the word “intercession.” Why? Because the words of Jesus in Matthew 6 exposes my own hypocrisy. I need to “work the angle” of prayer.

I am currently reading a book on prayer and here is how it begins. “Well, here you are reading another book on prayer. Maybe the last one didn’t make you feel guilty enough, and you’re a glutton for punishment. What good is a book on prayer without an initial quote that surfaces your shortcomings as a pray-er. Without further ado, here it goes. ‘To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.’”<sup>6</sup> That is similar to what Ryle said when he made the comment that “the habit of prayer is one of the surest marks of a true Christian.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, like Jesus, Ryle is making the assumption that we pray. That is what a Christian does.

I wonder what you would consider to be some of the “great evils” of our time. Perhaps racism or sex-trafficking or terrorism would make your list. What about the lack of prayer? Would you even consider that a great evil? E. M. Bounds says that little or no

praying is one of the crying evils of our time, maybe of all times. He goes on to say, “Of these two evils, little praying is worse than no praying. Little praying is a kind of make-believe, a salvo for the conscience, a farce and a delusion.”<sup>8</sup> Why is that? It is because the absence of prayer is a clear indicator that we really don’t think we need God. We wouldn’t say that. But our actions betray us.

Nothing can produce within me a sense of guilt like my lack of prayer. It is not my goal to heap on the guilt this morning. It strikes me that the only time we hear the disciples asking Jesus to teach them to do something is when they come to Jesus in Luke 11 and ask him to teach them how to pray. In that request is a humble admission of the importance of prayer and our lack of prayer. It is an admission that our practice doesn’t match our belief. Jesus responds to them with the same loving assurance he gives to us this morning when we come and express our need to grow in prayer. He doesn’t chide them when they come to him with this request. He simply receives them where they are at and invites them to take a step in his direction. So it is with us, no matter where we are when it comes to prayer. In Matthew 6, Jesus teaches us two things about prayer. He teaches us “where” to pray and he teaches us “what” to pray.

**Where to Pray:** Jesus begins by telling us where to pray. He begins in verse 5 by saying, *“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”* There is a public place of prayer and a private place of prayer. The point Jesus is making is that your private prayer ought to fuel your public prayer. Otherwise, when you pray in public you are just putting on a show for others.

Hopefully you don’t take these words as an indictment against praying in public. Praying together as a church has always been a priority for the life and work of the church. Paul tells Timothy that prayer is the highest priority we have in our life together as a church. He says in 1 Timothy 2:1, *“First of all, then I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people.”* He goes on in verse 8 to say, *“I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling.”* That implies we are praying together, a public display of prayer. Jesus and his disciples participated in the liturgical prayers of the synagogue. Like any observant Jew, three times a day they prayed a series of eighteen prayers called “The Amidah.” They would pray these prayers while standing.

But I think what prompted the disciples to ask Jesus to teach them how to pray is when

they saw the pattern of Jesus going off on his own to pray. In Luke 5:16 it says that Jesus would often “*withdraw to desolate places and pray.*” That is what he was doing in Luke 11 when the disciples asked him to teach them to pray. It says, “*Now Jesus was praying at a certain place.*” It wasn’t a matter of just saying the prescribed prayers—which he did. But by calling us to tend to the secret place of prayer, Jesus is teaching us that prayer is a way of life. By praying in the secret place, we are demonstrating the priority that God has in our life. We are demonstrating our love for God and that God is indeed real to us. He sees us in the secret place. He meets us in the secret place.

Here is one of my convictions about prayer. “Prayer is not just a means to an end. It is an end unto itself.” What I mean by that is that we often approach prayer as a means to get something from God—an answer to our prayer. I believe God answers prayer. But we don’t pray just to get answers from God. That is viewing prayer as a prescription to fix our problems—a means to an end. If that is how we treat prayer, once the problem is gone, so is the frequency and the fervency of our prayer. But if we view prayer as being like breathing—we recognize that the goal of prayer is simply to meet with God. It is communion with God. It is expressing that it is enough to meet with God. David said in Psalm 27:4, “*This one thing I asked of the LORD, that I will seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.*” Through the secret place of prayer we are seeking the face of God—we are waiting upon God—when we encounter him we can be strong and take courage. Brad Young says that “prayer’s most basic meaning is communion with God.”<sup>9</sup> Meeting with God and knowing God intimately, is the ultimate reward of prayer. God is enough.

The secret place of prayer is an indicator of where I am in my relationship with God. I know it is work. I know it is hard work. I know that sometimes it feels like your prayers are just bouncing off the ceiling. But persevere in the secret place of prayer. “*And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*” He will meet with you.

**What to pray:** The other thing Jesus teaches us about prayer in this passage is “what to pray.” He begins by telling us what our prayers should not be like: “*And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*” Another word for “empty phrases” is “babbling.” It is the idea of “repetition” or “the use of many words.” In other words, the pagan—or the Gentile—thinks that through their many words they can coerce or manipulate God to do for them what they want for themselves. I don’t think that is too far removed from how many Christians approach prayer. And so when Jesus helps us with prayer by telling us what to pray—

the Lord's Prayer—he is teaching us some important things about prayer.

So Jesus says, Pray then like this: *“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”*

It is one thing to recognize our need to pray and to acknowledge our common struggle in prayer. But what step does Jesus offer to help us grow in prayer? He gives us the Lord's Prayer. I find it interesting and instructive that when the disciples came to Jesus and asked him to teach them how to pray that Jesus didn't respond by saying: “Prayer is just talking to God.” There is truth to that. We can talk to God about anything at anytime and anywhere. But it is more than that. The Lord's Prayer is a wonderful gift that he gives us because it teaches us “what” to pray. Did you ever go to pray and feel like you are just “heaping up empty phrases?” You just don't know what to pray. God is not just interested that we pray. He is also interested in what we pray.

So if you are looking for a place to begin with prayer, I can't think of anything to give you that would be better than what Jesus said. *“Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven . . .”* I have long believed that the Lord's Prayer is a template for prayer. Each request is like a file folder that you can stuff with prayers. Here are the file folders. We are to pray that God's name be glorified. We are to pray that the kingdom of God advance through the spread of the gospel. We are to pray that the will of God would be obeyed in our lives and in others. We are to call upon God to meet our needs, forgive our sins, help us forgive others and to resist temptation.

If you are needing a place to start, start by reciting the Lord's Prayer. There is nothing wrong with that. It is not lost on me, that in one of the earliest Christian writings we have, *The Didache* (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles) - this ancient writing instructs the early church to pray this prayer three times a day. As you pray each request, you can pause and add your prayers to it. For example, “Lord, hallowed be your name. Be glorified with my life. May others see Jesus in me. Lord, I pray that my wife and my kids would see Jesus in me. Lord, I pray that you would be glorified in our church. I pray that your fame and your glory would cover the earth and people from all over the world would worship you and find you to be their delight . . .” The Lord's Prayer is a template for what to pray. Use it.

What we learn then about prayer is that the purpose of prayer is not to get God on board with our agenda. That was the goal of the Gentiles with their *“empty phrases.”* They

were trying to coerce God to do for them what they wanted. So when God doesn't come through for us the way we think he should, we grow weary in our prayer. What good is it? Instead, the purpose of prayer is for us to get on board with God's agenda. A common question about prayer goes like this: Does prayer change things? I want to say, "you bet it changes things." But the first thing it changes is me. I think often the thought behind the question is whether or not our prayer can change God or get God to do for us what we want God to do for us. But the first aim of prayer is to change me. Brad Young says that "part of prayer's supreme purpose is to recalibrate our desires."<sup>10</sup> And so the Lord's Prayer causes my heart to be turned towards God and towards others. It helps me to love God and to love others.

At the same time, prayer is what God uses to accomplish his purposes in the world. The Lord's Prayer invites us to pray bold prayers. One of the characteristics of prayer in places in the world where God is on the move is that they don't just see prayer as petitions being made. Rather they see prayer as proclaiming that the authority of Jesus is more powerful than the gates of hell. So by definition, prayer is inviting the supernatural to earth.<sup>11</sup> May it be on earth as it is in heaven. *"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen."* Let us pray bold prayers! May churches be planted!!

Finally, secret prayer does not mean isolated prayer. Notice the plural pronoun of "our" and "us" laced all throughout this prayer. The secret place of prayer included praying for others. But the secret place does not cause us to withdrawal from each other. Rather it moves us to pray in the public place. It moves us to pray in our community groups. It moves us to pray in the church. It moves us to pray for the ones we are caring for and helping. But the more we tend to God in the secret place, the more we will be able to carry on a ministry of prayer in the public place. It naturally leads us to love others. It leads to the advance of the church.

### **Practice Your Righteousness**

I would like to close with some practical things we can do "work the angles" of cultivating a life of prayer.

1. Do you have "a secret place" to pray? If not, establish one. Find a place that is quiet. Find a place where you can be quiet. It may be some place in your house or in your car . . . . Wherever! Find it and claim it as a "secret place" for you to meet with God in prayer and start meeting him there. Remember, that God is there. He wants to

meet with you. He is your Father and you are his son or daughter through faith in Jesus. He is happy to find you there. The issue is not about how long it has been since you have been there or how long you stay there. Some days may be brief and other days may find you lingering there. Just get there!

2. Learn to pray by using great prayers. Obviously, the Lord's Prayer is as good as they get! But I also recommend John Baillie's book *A Diary of Private Prayer*. It has a morning and evening prayer for each day of the month. It helps you learn how to call upon God and how to recalibrate your heart around the things of God.
3. Next week we will have available a monthly prayer guide for the church that is organized around the Lord's Prayer. If you use this guide, you will be able to pray for all the people of the church in a month. It will also help you learn how to order your prayers around the Lord's Prayer. Take the weekly prayer sheet as well.
4. Sometimes the best way to learn to pray is to get around others who pray. That is how the disciples learned to pray. They watched Jesus pray. This coming Saturday, we will be hosting a prayer summit from 9:00—10:30 and we will be praying for the church. Join us! If you are not comfortable praying out loud, that is ok. You will not be pressured to do so. But you can pray along with us as we pray together.
5. Pray boldly. Pray boldly for the advance of the gospel and for God's will to be accomplished.

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene Peterson *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987) 5

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 5

<sup>3</sup>Michael Wilkins *Matthew: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 272

<sup>4</sup>J. C. Ryle *A Call to Prayer* (Laurel: Audubon Press) 3

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 7

<sup>6</sup>John Onwuchekwa *Prayer* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018) Kindle Reader Location 176

<sup>7</sup>Ryle, 5

<sup>8</sup>E. M. Bounds *E. M. Bounds on Prayer* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006) 118

<sup>9</sup>Brad Young *Meet the Rabbis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007) 13

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 13

<sup>11</sup>Jerry Trousdale and Glenn Sunshine *The Kingdom Unleashed* (Murfreesboro: DMM Library, 2017) 368

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## COMMUNITY GROUPS

### **Getting To Know Me Questions**

1. Share one word that describes your Christmas experience this past year and why?
2. What do you find to be the hardest thing about prayer? Why?
3. What is one thing that stuck out to you from the sermon this past week?

### **Diving Into The Word**

4. Read Matthew 6:1. What do you think it means to “practice your righteousness?” What are some of the “practices” we are to observe? What is the benefit of observing these things?
5. Read Matthew 6:5-6. What does the secret place of prayer reveal about us? “And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” How do you feel about these words from Jesus? Do you find them inviting?
6. Read Matthew 6:7-13. Spend some time as a group observing the content of the Lord’s Prayer. What do you see? What are the things Jesus is inviting us to pray about?
7. Take one of the requests of the Lord’s Prayer and discuss what other prayers could be “stuffed into that file folder” of prayer.

### **Taking It Home**

8. What is one step you can take this week to attend to the secret place of prayer?
9. As a group, spend some time praying for each other by using the Lord’s Prayer.