

Jim's Notes
August 23, 2006
The Gospel According to St. Matthew 6:5-8

Matthew 6:5

St. John Chrysostom (died A.D. 407)

When you pray, it is as if you were entering into a palace-not a palace on earth, but far more awesome, a palace in heaven. When you enter there, you do so with complete attentiveness and fitting respect. For in the houses of kings all turmoil is set aside, and silence reigns. Yet here you are being joined by choirs of angels. You are in communion with archangels and singing with the seraphim, who sing with great awe their spiritual hymns and sacred songs to God, the Lord of all. So when you are praying, mingle with these voices, patterning yourself according to their mystical order. It is not to human beings that you are praying but to God, who is present everywhere, who hears even before you speak and who knows already the secrets of the heart. If you pray to this One, you shall receive a great reward. "For your Father who sees in secret shall reward you openly." He did not merely say he would give it to you but reward you, as if he himself had made a pledge to you and so honored you with a great honor. Because God himself is hidden, your prayer should be hidden. (The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 1.9)

While pretending to pray to God, the hypocrites are looking around for human praise. The elaborate garb they wear is laughable, and hardly that of a sincere supplicant. One who is earnestly offering a supplication looks exclusively to the One who has the power to grant the request and lets all other claims recede. But if you leave behind the one you are petitioning and immediately go wandering about looking everywhere for others' approval, you will depart with empty hands. . . Your inner will cannot be hid. This is why Jesus did not say, "They shall not receive a reward" but "They have received their reward" -already! Their reward comes from those from whom they themselves most desire to get it. God does not desire this. For God preferred to bestow upon humanity the grace that comes only from himself. Those who seek their reward from people cannot receive another reward from the One for whom they have sought nothing. (The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 19.2)

Matthew 6:6

St. Hilary of Poitiers (died A.D. 368)

We are asked to pray with the bedroom door closed, as it were, and we are taught to pour out our prayer in every place. The saints' prayers were undertaken in the presence of wild animals, in prisons, in flames, from the depths of the sea and the belly of the beast. Hence we are admonished not to enter the recesses of our homes but the bedroom of our hearts. With the office of our minds closed, we pray to God not with many words but with our conscience, for every act is superior to the words of speakers. (On Matthew 5.1)

St. Augustine of Hippo (died A.D. 430)

Enter into your inner chamber. Do not let the door stand open to the boisterous, through whom the things that are outside profanely rush in and assail the inner self. . . Outside the inner chamber are all things in time and space, which knock on the door. Through our bodily senses they clamor to interrupt our prayer, so that prayer is invaded with a crowd of vain phantoms. This is why you must shut the door. The senses of the body are resisted, that the spirit of prayer may be directed to the Father. This occurs in the inmost heart, where prayer is offered to the Father in secret. There “your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” This is a fitting conclusion to good counsel, not merely calling us to pray but also showing us how, not merely calling us to give alms but also showing the right spirit for doing so. The instruction is to cleanse the heart. Nothing cleanses the heart but the undivided and single-minded striving after eternal life from the pure love of wisdom alone. (Sermon on the Mount 2.3.11)

St. Chromatius of Aquileia (died A.D. 407)

We find in the books of Kings that very holy woman Hannah fulfilling the precepts of this Gospel teaching. For while praying<without uttering a sound, in her heart and in the sight of God, she poured out her desire in her prayers. She was immediately found worthy to be heard by the Lord.¹⁴ In the same way the Lord granted to Daniel, who always prayed in secret with three servants, to understand the interpretations of his dream and the secrets of revelation.¹⁵ Cornelius too, not yet instructed in the precepts of the gospel, prayed secretly and faithfully in his room and was found worthy to hear the voice of the angel speaking.¹⁶ What should we say of Jonah, who, not only in his room but trapped in the stomach of the whale, deserved so greatly to be heard through his prayers that from the depths of the sea and from the belly of so great a beast he escaped unharmed and alive? (Tractate on Matthew 27.1.4-5)

Matthew 6:7**St. Chromatius of Aquileia (died A.D. 407)**

Nonbelievers think that they can more easily obtain from the Lord what they require by using many words, but the Lord does not expect this from us. Rather, he wants us to send up our prayers not with wordy speech but with faith that comes from the heart. By doing so we command the merits of justice to him. He surely knows better all the things of which we have need and before we speak is aware of everything that we are going to request. (Tractate on Matthew 27.2.1-2).

St. John Chrysostom (died A.D. 407)

By the example of the importunate widow who prevailed with the pitiless and cruel ruler by persevering in her requests (Luke 18:1-8), we are shown how to pray. We hear the insistent voice of the friend who came late at night and roused the sleeper from his bed (Luke 11:5), not for friendship’s sake but out of his urgent need. By these examples Jesus called us continually to make earnest supplication to the Father. He did not ask us to compose a prayer of ten thousand phrases and so come to him and merely repeat it. He warned against those who “think that they shall be heard for their loquacity.” “For your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” But if he already knows what we need, why do we pray? Not to inform God or instruct him but to beseech him closely, to be

made intimate with him, by continuance in supplication; to be humbled; to be reminded of our sins. (The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 19.4)

St. Chromatius of Aquileia (died A.D. 407)

We have an example of just how great a distance there is between the wordy and the humble and simple prayer in the story of the Pharisee and the publican. The prayer of the Pharisee vaunting himself in his abundance of words was rejected. The humble and contrite publican, on the other hand, asking forgiveness for his sins, came away more justified than the self-boasting Pharisee. In this we find fulfilled what was written: "The prayer of the humble penetrates the clouds," (Sirach 25:21) reaching God who is ready to hear the request of the one who prays. (Tractate on Matthew 27.2.3)

***The Screwtape Letters*, by C. S. Lewis**

My Dear Wormwood,

I note with grave displeasure that your patient has become a Christian. Do not indulge the hope that you will escape the usual penalties; indeed, in your better moments, I trust you would hardly even wish to do so. In the meantime we must make the best of the situation. There is no need to despair; hundreds of these adult converts have been reclaimed after a brief sojourn in the Enemy's camp and are now with us. All the *habits* of the patient, both mentally and bodily, are still in our favour. One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. **All your patient sees is the half-finished, sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbours. Make his mind flit to and fro between expressions like "the body of Christ" and the actual faces in the next pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains.** You may know one of them to be a great warrior on the Enemy's side. No matter. Your patient, thanks to Our Father Below, is a fool. **Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous.** At his present stage, you see, he has an idea of "Christians" in his mind which he supposes to be spiritual but which, in fact, is largely pictorial. His mind is full of togas and sandals and armour and bare legs and the mere fact that the other people in church wear modern clothes is a real--though unconscious--difficulty to him. Never let it come to the surface; never let him ask what he expected them to look like. Keep everything hazy in his mind now, and you will have all eternity wherein to amuse yourself by producing in him the peculiar kind of clarity which Hell affords. Work hard, then, on the disappointment or anticlimax which is certainly

coming to the patient during his first few weeks as a churchman. The Enemy allows this disappointment to occur on the threshold of every human endeavor. It occurs when the boy who has been enchanted in the nursery by *Stories from the Odyssey* buckles down to really learning Greek. It occurs when lovers have got married and begin the real task of learning to live together. In every department of life it marks the transition from dreaming aspiration to laborious doing. The Enemy takes this risk because He has a curious fantasy of making all these disgusting little human vermin into what He calls His "free" lovers and servants--"sons" is the word He uses, with His inveterate love of degrading the whole spiritual world by unnatural liaisons with the two-legged animals. Desiring their freedom, He therefore refuses to carry them, by their mere affections and habits, to any of the goals which He sets before them: He leaves them to "do it on their own." And there lies our opportunity. But also, remember, there lies our danger. If once they get through this initial dryness successfully, they become much less dependent on emotion and therefore much harder to tempt. I have been writing hitherto on the assumption that the people in the next pew afford no rational ground for disappointment. Of course, if they do--if the patient knows that the woman with the absurd hat is a fanatical bridgeplayer or the man with the squeaky boots a miser and an extortioner--then your task is so much easier. All you then have to do is to keep out of his mind the question "If I, being what I am, can consider that I am in some sense a Christian, why should the different vices of those people in the next pew prove that their religion is mere hypocrisy and convention?" You may ask whether it is possible to keep such an obvious thought from occurring even to a human mind. It is, Wormwood, it is! Handle him properly and it simply won't come into his head. He has not been anything like long enough with the Enemy to have any real humility yet. What he says, even on his knees, about his own sinfulness is all parrot talk. At bottom, he still believes he has run up a very favourable credit balance in the Enemy's ledger by allowing himself to be converted, and thinks that he is showing great humility and condescension in going to church with these "smug," commonplace neighbors at all. Keep him in that state of mind as long as you can.

Your affectionate uncle,
Screwtape