



Week 3

Day 1 - Matthew 6:1-4

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Understanding the Passage:

Jesus is warning people to not turn their acts of piety into something that is just for other people to see. The word “piety” is actually the Greek word *dikaiosyne*, which is translated as “righteousness” in the chapter before. The use of the same term for both “piety” and “righteousness” underscores that there is no distinction between devotion to God and living in right relationship with others.

Similar to Jesus’ day, we are tempted to make a big show of our financial giving so that everyone will know just how generous we are. Images of charity reports, donor lists, and pictures with people standing behind large cardboard checks remind us that we enjoy the praise and notoriety of others. These things are not bad on their own; in fact, public examples of generosity can inspire others to give as well. But if your motivation for giving to others is simply that other people will think well of you, then Jesus says that is where your reward will end.

Our hearts should be set on seeking God’s approval and not others. When we long for the approval of others we are longing for acceptance from our creator on a deeper level. The more we know God’s love and acceptance, the less we will look for it in other places. It has been said that the true nature of someone’s character is what he or she chooses to do when no one is watching – when no credit or punishment will be given. Jesus wants our character to be one of justice and our hearts to be filled with gratitude. That is why when we give

anonymously, we are more likely to give out of the proper motivations and in the end our rewards will be greater and more fulfilling.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. When you read this passage do you find it comforting or convicting?
 2. When have you been tempted to practice your piety before others in order to be seen as a good Christian?
 3. Take a few minutes to think about your charitable giving. What are your motivations for giving?
 4. Do you ever struggle with acceptance? From God or from others?
 5. When Jesus talks about being rewarded in secret, what do you think he means by that?
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Day 2 - Matthew 6:5-8

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever 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.

“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

Understanding the Passage:

Here the word hypocrite is similar in meaning to a stage actor or someone who is pretending or putting on a show for others as entertainment. Jesus is not saying that public prayer should be abolished, but he is saying that prayers should be directed to God alone. When we pray around others, are we intentionally speaking to God, or are we trying to sound eloquent and well-spoken to the people around us? Jesus advises us to pray in private because when we are praying in the privacy of our own homes, we remove many of the distractions that might otherwise keep our focus away from God.

Jesus reminds the reader that fancy words are not required for our prayers to be heard by God. For many of us this should come as a comfort – we need not sound like a biblical scholar in order to make ourselves known to God. There is no wrong way to pray so long as your prayers are authentic and directed towards God and not for the sake of others.

The best way to go deeper in your prayer life is simply to start praying. Don't worry about how formal or informal your words are because God knows your heart. God is not impressed by fancy words or long and drawn out prayers. God simply wants you to grow closer to God through your prayers. Jesus molded the importance of prayer in his own life often withdrawing to a secluded place to spend time in prayer.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What do you think the role of public prayer is?
 2. How comfortable are you with praying in public? What do you think you could do to become more comfortable?
 3. Have you ever been tempted to pray a certain way to impress the people around you?
 4. Do you have a favorite place or time of day that you like to pray? If not, give some thought to what your prayer rhythm might look like. What would make it easier for you to pray regularly?
 5. What do you need to say to God in prayer today?
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Day 3 - Matthew 6:8-15

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

“Pray then in this way:

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 do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one.”

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Understanding the Passage:

When it comes to prayer there are many questions that we are tempted to ask: How should I pray to God? Is there a right or wrong way to pray? If God is so great and I am so small, then how can I possibly begin to think that my words will be heard and have any kind of impact? Doesn't the God of the universe have better things to do than to worry about my little problems?

These questions come naturally for us because they recognize the vast difference between who God is as creator and who we are as his creation. But Jesus Christ removes the giant gap and reveals to us not a distant and all-powerful Creator, but a loving Father who knows our hearts and wants to be an intimate relationship with us.

Given that this is the kind of God we are praying to, Jesus answers the question of how we should pray with a brief and simple prayer that has been offered up by his followers all around the world and throughout the centuries. No New Testament text is better known or has had more influence on Christian piety than the Lord's Prayer. As Christians we should

feel a real sense of connection knowing that this prayer was taught by Christ himself and handed down through every Christian that has ever lived.

The Lord's Prayer is by design simple. It is our greatest example of how we should pray. If Jesus did not need elaborate language for his prayers, then we can rest assured that neither do we. Additionally, scripture is a great resource for your prayer life if you are struggling to find the right words to say. The Psalms are filled with songs and prayers covering any human emotion from praise and thanksgiving, to anger and fear. When questions arise in your heart about prayer, remember that the most important thing is the simple and authentic sharing of your heart to God. And, you can never go wrong using the Lord's Prayer.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. As you read this passage notice the structure of Jesus' prayer. What stands out to you?
 2. Do you ever struggle with questions on how to pray, or if prayer has any impact? How might Jesus answer those questions?
 3. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus invites God's kingdom to come on earth as in heaven. What would that look like?
 4. This passage closes with a reminder of the importance of forgiving others. Who might God be putting on your heart to forgive today?
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Day 4 – Matthew 6:8-15

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

“Pray then in this way:

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 do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one.”

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Understanding the Passage:

This prayer touches on many aspects of life: God's will, provision for us, forgiveness for ourselves and from us to others, resisting temptation.

Notice the order of the prayer in each line. The structure of this prayer might initially be interpreted as a list that we bring to God in prayer asking him to grant us our wishes.

However, New Testament scholar, Craig Keener, encourages the reader to interpret these verses in light of one another. Each line has a relationship to the lines before and after it. In praying for the kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven one might ask, "What does that look like?" The following lines tell us exactly what that looks like. God provides for everyone. Forgiveness manifests among us. God forgives us and we forgive others. Sin and evil are resisted by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

This prayer is not simply meant to be something that happens in our prayer closet or in the quiet of our hearts. This prayer has feet on it. This prayer calls us to participate in the Kingdom of God. By living out our part of bringing the kingdom on earth we are praying with our lives, our actions.

The word hallowed means to "be holy," to "be sanctified." This was a common phrase in Jewish prayers. Jesus' sample prayer of the Lord's Prayer is giving the people of God examples of how to do so in the following passages. The people of God can hallow God's name by living rightly with God and with others. Relying on God to provide sustenance (physical and spiritual). Offering forgiveness often and freely. Resisting temptation and sin.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How does this passage give us insight into what the Kingdom of God looks like?
2. What are some other instances where Jesus teaches us to hallow God's name by loving and forgiving others? Look to the entirety of the Sermon on the Mount and beyond.
3. Re-read the verses about forgiveness. Does our willingness to forgive others have a relationship to God forgiving us? How can we interpret this passage knowing that God forgives us freely and also calls us to forgive others?
4. Spend some time writing down the answers to these questions and praying about them: Do you need forgiveness from God? Do you need forgiveness from others? Do you need to forgive yourself? Do you need to offer forgiveness to someone else?

Day 5 – Matthew 6:16-18

"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Understanding the Passage:

These few verses are all about the condition of our heart. Christ is making a distinction here about our actions that is very different from other Jewish teachings. Jesus says that God not only cares about the things you do, but also the spirit in which you do them. Pride and the need to be noticed by others completely defeats the practice of fasting. This passage

communicates that there are some things that we do publically and others that we keep between just God and ourselves.

The Jewish custom of fasting normally called for abstaining not just from food, but also from anointing one's face with oil (a custom we still practice today with facial moisturizers). Without the oil, their faces would be noticeably dry and chaffed. These outward acts made fasting obvious to others.

But God has never asked for simply an outward fast. As far back as the prophets, God condemned outward fasts (see Isaiah 58:3-12). This passage describes fasting as loosening the chains of the oppressed, to treat your workers with fairness and care, to bring the homeless into your home. Fasting has always been something that radically challenges us and cuts to the heart.

We engage in fasting in order to create space in our lives in which we can return to God. When entering a fast, we prayerfully consider what might be taking the place of God in our hearts. We can fast from different things, not just food. When I feel the desire to turn on the television, I have a new opportunity to turn to God. When I feel the almost knee-jerk impulse to look at my phone, I now am gifted with an opportunity to turn to God. When the craving for Diet Coke enters my mind, I have an opportunity to turn to God. These are modern ways of fasting.

Christ is implicitly teaching about the Christian witness. Christ says others are watching how you practice your faith. So do not show off, do not act as if you are better than others who do not practice. Do not compete amongst yourselves about who is the most piteous. Do not make non-believers feel inferior with your actions. Do not intimidate other Christians with your display of piety. It's hypocritical.

The purpose of fasting is not to look good in front of others. It is not so that we can feel superior to others. Fasting is not a glorified weight-loss plan. Fasting makes room in our hearts, at our dinner tables, calendars, pocketbook, and minds so that we have opportunities to turn to God.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Have you ever committed to a spiritual discipline like fasting, but ended up taking pride in it in an unhealthy way?
 2. What is your experience with fasting? What fruit has come from it? What did you learn?
 3. Look to Isaiah 58:3-12. What is named as fasting there? How does this challenge you? How might we participate in these practices during Lent?
 4. How else might we be trying to look good in front of others? Are there ways in which we live our lives that are out of order in that way?
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Video Questions:

1. What jumped out to you in the video? What did you find interesting or difficult?
2. Do you find yourself seeking praise and approval from others? From where does that desire come?
3. Compare what Jesus said earlier in the Sermon on the Mount about letting your light shine (Matthew 5:16) with his warnings against flaunting our piety to others (Matthew 6:1). Are these contradictions?
4. In Matthew 6:2, Jesus talks about hypocritical givers. What does that look like our society today? How can we guard our hearts and actions so that we don't fall into the temptation of trumpeting our giving?
5. What are some of the benefits to praying in secret? What are some of the benefits of praying with others?
6. When Jesus talks about being rewarded in secret, what do you think he means?
7. How are we guilty of "heaping up empty phrases" in our prayers? What makes our prayers acceptable to God?
8. Jesus begins the Lord's Prayer with "*Our*", not "*My*." How does that shape the rest of the prayer?
9. What is your reaction to reading that God will not forgive you if you don't forgive others?
10. How does pride interfere with the way you fast or practice other spiritual disciplines?
11. What new insights did you gain about the Lord's Prayer?
12. Notes, reflections, and prayer requests.