

## The Way We Live: An Exploration of The Sermon on the Mount

*Matthew 6:1-18*

This week and next we're going to take on bigger chunks of the Sermon than we have up to this point. In other words, we're going to take chapter 6 in two bites. Then in the final four weeks of the series (chapter 7/the month of August) we'll slow it down a bit and take it in smaller chunks again.

The main point of this week's passage is succinctly summarized in the opening verse...

*"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' in front of others **to be seen by them**. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven."* (Matthew 6:1, emphasis added)

Jesus then goes on to offer three illustrations of such "*acts of righteousness*" that were common and familiar to the people—giving alms, praying, and fasting. The question at hand is why does someone do these things? What is the "reward" they are seeking in doing them? ("Reward" is a key word in Matthew, who uses this word more than any other New Testament writer.) It is assumed that people do "*acts of righteousness*" or "*practices of piety*" for a reason. Jesus is inviting His hearers (then and now) to examine their motivation.

According to Jesus there are good reasons/motivations and bad reasons/motivations for doing them. The primary bad reason is in order to look good, to look righteous, in the eyes of others. Or as we might say today, "image management" ...to do religious-y things to create an image of ourselves in order to be respected, admired, perceived as good or holy by people. Jesus says that is the WRONG reason for doing them.

Is the goal to BE/BECOME good people or just to LOOK LIKE good people in the eyes of others? Just this week I learned the state motto for North Carolina: *Esse Quam Videri*, which translates, "*To be rather than to seem.*" It comes from an essay for the Roman philosopher Cicero, which can also be translated as, "*Fewer are endowed with virtue than wish to be thought to be so.*" This captures the essence of what Jesus is saying here. (Thanks to author, podcaster, and leadership coach J.R. Briggs for this timely nugget.)

Jesus uses the same word in all three illustrations to describe those who simply want to create/curate an image for the perception of others...HYPOCRITES (see 6:2, 6:5, 6:16). This is a Greek word that is simply transliterated "hypokrites" that means actors, like in a theater. Interestingly, as best as we can tell, Jesus' use of the word is how we came to have the negative connotation we now have of this word. Prior to Jesus this was just a neutral word. Jesus is the one who gave it the negative spin that we are accustomed to today. It is a fitting word...someone who is putting on an act/performance for others. (To be fair, this should be contrasted to someone who is inconsistent, or falls short of, a standard, but who is nevertheless sincere...which is how we sometimes use the word.)

Jesus says don't be like the hypocrites. When we take all of Matthew's Gospel into account, it becomes pretty obvious (and to no surprise) that those Jesus had in mind were the Pharisees and teachers of the law (see Matthew 23). Though He does concede that if the goal is to LOOK

righteous in front of others, “*acts of righteousness*” will get the job done. If that is the reward that is sought after, that is all that they will get. Which implies that there is a better reward to be had...

What might that be? We’ll get there. But first notice...

- “*When you give...*” (6:2)
- “*When you pray...*” (6:5)
- “*When you fast...*” (6:16)

Not “if” but “when”. Jesus expects ‘acts of righteousness’ or ‘practices of piety’ to be done. This raises the question, what are ‘acts of righteousness’/‘practices of piety’ for? What was/is their intended purpose or function? Or, what is the “reward” we should be desiring by doing them?

As the name implies, they are meant to cultivate righteousness/piety, or if you prefer, goodness/virtue. Or to say it another way, they are meant to form us well, to help us BECOME good people. HOW do these acts/practices accomplish the formation of goodness/virtue in people? They help us to draw near to God. Prayer and fasting are meant to develop intimacy with God, where we learn to love God and be loved by God. Giving is simply an overflow of the love we’ve been given. How utterly offensive and disrespectful to take such gifts and use them to make ourselves look good in front of others.

(Remember two of the important questions the Sermon addresses: *Who is a good person?* And *How does one become a good person?*)

Again, are we desiring to BE/BECOME good people or simply to APPEAR good in the eyes of others? This is the crux of this entire passage.

Another key word in this passage is SECRET (see 6:4, 6:6, 6:18). This is the Greek word “*kruptos*”, from which we get the word cryptic, that means hid/hidden, concealed, or secret. Jesus says that our giving, praying, and fasting ought to be done in secret...not for the attention or admiration of others...trusting that God sees us. The apostle Paul uses the same word when he says, “*For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.*” (Colossians 3:3-4, emphasis added)

The image this connotes is one of intimacy...think of the type of “secrets” or personal/private matters that are kept between spouses, that are special just to the two of them. There are things spouses just don’t share with the world, nor should they. It’s what makes their relationship special, unique, precious. This is the picture Jesus is painting as He speaks of God who “*sees in secret*” throughout this passage.

There is an inherent tension here because on one level, yes, our faith is a communal/collective, and thus public, thing. But there is a personal and private dimension to it as well. Jesus’ concern here is whether we are the same people publicly that we are privately...or are we wearing a mask,

putting on a show. Again, what's our motivation and what reward are we seeking? Perhaps a better way to think of our "faith" is as our "way of life". Obviously, parts of our life are naturally public (unless we're a hermit or recluse...which is not the way of life we are called to). But part of the Christian way of life is to keep certain matters private, secret, just between us and God.

The whole point and purpose of "acts of righteousness"/"practices of piety" is to draw close to God and allow Him to form us. One of the things that will sabotage our efforts to be formed in Christlikeness is the desire to have the approval of others. This is why Jesus points us to secrecy. As Dallas Willard says, *"The discipline of secrecy will help us break the grip of human opinion over our souls and our actions. A discipline is an activity in our power that we do to enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort...Thus our motivation and reward for doing these things [giving, praying, fasting] cannot come from human beings. We are liberated from slavery to eyes [of others]."*

Something to keep in mind is that the illustrations Jesus uses in this passage (giving, prayer, and fasting) were a regular part of the lives of His audience, as were ways in which someone could spotlight themselves in the process of doing them. While drawing attention to ourselves is still a huge temptation today, we might have different ways we go about that. We are invited to consider some of the practices we do that might be done in order to be seen by others. (Ex: virtue signaling on social media; posting pictures of ourselves on Facebook or Instagram doing good deeds or acts of service). "But wait," you say, "aren't we supposed to let our light shine before others so that they can see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven?" (Matthew 5:16) The answer comes down to our motivation. Is it so God will be praised/glorified, or so we will be?

Again, Jesus isn't laying out new laws/rules here, but asking us to examine our heart and motivation. The best way to check our motives is to do it when no one will see or know. If the discipline of secrecy is difficult, that might be an indication that our motives are off.

You have heard me say, quoting from pastor/author Brian Zahnd (who's really just paraphrasing others) that *"The purpose of prayer is not to get God to do what we think He ought to do, but to be properly formed."* I would say that holds true for all spiritual practices/disciplines. And that is what Jesus is getting at with the three illustrations He uses in this passage (giving, prayer, fasting). We will NOT be properly formed (which is a key part of the "reward") if we're seeking the recognition, approval, and admiration of others.

I'm not going to break down all three illustrations (Giving, Prayer, Fasting). Let's just focus on prayer, specifically what we call the Lord's Prayer. (FYI, some traditions simply call it the "Our Father".)

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed by Your name..."* Two important elements are emphasized here. First is the relationship—our FATHER. Of all the various and impressive names, titles, and references to God that were at His disposal, Jesus chose to teach His followers to address God as Father. Second, the concern quickly turns to God's character and reputation being held in high esteem—hallowed by Your name. This reinforces the point of this entire passage that we

shouldn't be concerned about what people think of us, but rather what they think of God. As children of God, our identity and reputation rides on our Father's name/character.

*"Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* Our Father is also the King of heaven and earth. Our desire is (or should be) to see our Father's/King's reign and rule recognized and expanded. If this is our prayer, it is designed to keep our agenda, our mini-kingdom (what we call our life; what we have agency over) in check, and connected to and submitted to His.

*"Give us today our daily bread."* This is a humble recognition of our needs that demonstrates our daily dependence and reliance upon God's provision. We trust God to provide for us. This is particularly challenging for affluent Westerners like ourselves, as many of us have never had to worry about where our next meal will come from. We typically insulate our lives in such a way that we are not dependent upon anybody, even God. We do this to our detriment. This line of the prayer is, in part, designed to have us reflect on how much we trust (or don't trust) God.

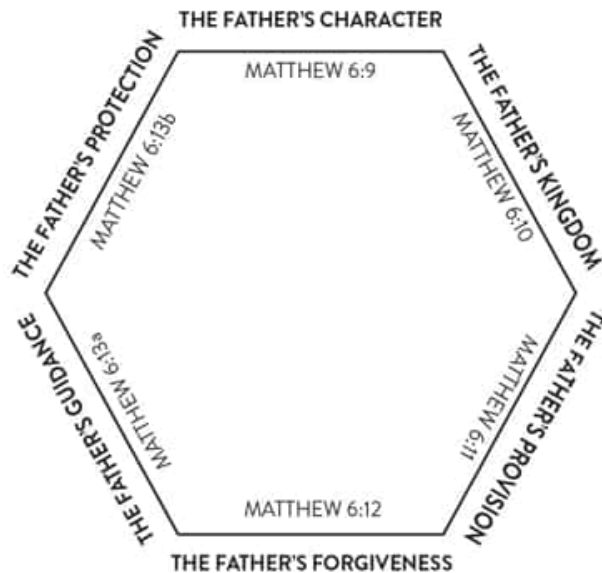
*"Forgive us our debts/trespases/sins as we also have forgiven our debtors/those who trespass or sin against us."* This is essentially asking that God would help us reflect His character to those around us. He is a forgiving God, thus we are to be forgiving people. Forgiveness is an essential element of the culture of God's Kingdom. Do our relationships reflect this aspect of God's character...not just in sentiment or rhetoric but in practice?

*"Lead us not into temptation..."* This is a request for God's guidance. It's a recognition that the world is a tempting and distracting place, and left to our own devices we tend toward a trajectory that is not good, right, or healthy.

*"...but deliver us from the evil (or the evil one)"* This recognizes that not all is right in the world, and that there is an enemy (of God and us) that seeks harm and destruction. It also recognizes that we need help, that we can't deliver or protect ourselves. Additionally, as history attests, our attempts to protect ourselves tend to add more evil in the world.

Jesus is teaching us that prayer (as well as fasting and giving) is meant to form us into people who humbly embrace our dependence upon our good Father...as opposed to presenting an inflated self to the people around us. Notice also the use of the words "our" and "us" (as opposed to "me" or "my"). In this prayer Jesus teaches us to view ourselves as part of a collective/community, not just as isolated individuals. This, too, reflects God who is a divine community, the Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit.

The image below (Prayer Hexagon) is borrowed from the book *Building a Discipling Culture* by Mike Breen and Steve Cockram. While it's fine to simply recite the Lord's Prayer, it is also good to reflect upon it, make it our own, to riff on it, if you will. The hexagon is simply a tool to remind us of the basic outline/framework of the prayer so we can add the specifics of our own life, context, and community into it.



In verses 14-15 Jesus gives extra emphasis on forgiveness. Remember from last week, God loves indiscriminately, and we are His children and are to emulate Him. Because God is love, forgiveness is His natural posture. The default setting of His Kingdom is grace, mercy, and forgiveness. The Church is to be the physical representation of His Kingdom on earth for people to see.

Now let's be honest, forgiveness is HARD. And the more we've been hurt the harder it is to forgive. This is the true reason we press into "acts of righteousness", these means of grace, whereby we give God the time and space to transform us into people who forgive like He forgives. We NEED these practices in order to BECOME who and what we were meant to be.

The ability to forgive (or not) is a window into our heart. It is a good gauge of how we view God and others. The condition of our heart has been a consistent theme throughout the Sermon. If you think about it, when we seek the approval, respect, or admiration of others we're actually using them to prop up our egos. As we learn to receive the love of God, we become people who don't need the esteem of others to prop us up, because we're so secure in the Father's love. Let's use these means of grace for their proper purpose.

Just to round out this week, here's some videos from the Bible Project to compliment your study.

- <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/warnings-about-religious-practices/>
- <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/matthew-6-1-4-generosity-and-true-reward/>
- <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/passage-insight-purpose-fasting/>

## Possible Discussion Questions

- What “acts of righteousness” or “practices of piety” or “means of grace” do you practice regularly? (Think beyond the 3 illustrations offered in this passage.) Why do you do them? What “reward” are you seeking by doing them?
- Beyond spiritual exercises, in what other ways do you find yourself drawing attention to yourself? How do you go about being seen by others?
- Whose opinion of you matters to you? Why them?
- How, or in what ways, are you tempted to make yourself look better than you really are? Why do you think you do this? What’s going on in your heart?
- How are you developing a secret life with God? (Yes, I realize the inconsistency in asking you to share about this. The paradox at play is that we don’t develop intimacy with God in order to be seen in a particular way by people, yet as relational creatures we typically need the encouragement of others to do things that are good for us. So in answering this question, just be real...no need to try to impress anyone.)
- Looking specifically at the three illustrations Jesus offers—giving, prayer, and fasting—what experience do you have with these, or what role have they played in your spiritual development? On that note, spiritual development doesn’t happen by accident. It requires effort and intentionality. What’s your plan for spiritual development? Which means of grace have you found helpful?
- (To be clear, by “spiritual development” I mean developing intimacy with God and being formed in Christlikeness. A helpful way to think of it is: Be with Jesus, to Become like Jesus, to be able to DO as Jesus did.)
- Looking specifically at the Lord’s Prayer, beyond simply reciting it, how has it helped you pray? Which part of it is most meaningful to you? Most challenging for you?
- Last week we looked at “*love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*”. What’s the connection between that and forgiveness? What’s the connection between forgiveness and “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”?
- Who do you need to forgive? Who do you need to seek forgiveness from?
- As we are halfway through the Sermon on the Mount, how’s your heart? What are you noticing about the condition of your heart?

## Soul Training Exercise ~ Practicing Secrecy; Embracing Obscurity

We live in a culture that encourages drawing attention to ourselves. “*Look at me, look at me, look at me!*” Whether it’s by posting about ourselves on social media, or drawing conversations in our direction, or making sure people know how “busy” we are (because, of course, busy people are important people...and we want to make sure people know we’re important)...it’s all about me, me, me. We do everything we can to make sure people see us in a positive light, and do everything we can to make sure they don’t see us in a negative light.

But what if life isn’t all about us? (Hint, it’s not.)

This week’s invitation is to go a week without drawing any attention to yourself. Don’t post anything on social media. Don’t stir conversations in such a way that you can talk about yourself. Don’t worry about how people view you or value you.

Simply rest in the knowledge that you are loved by God. Allow that to be enough for you. And take note of how challenging this exercise is. You might be surprised to find out how much you desire the attention and affirmation of others.