

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 7: Giving, Prayer, and Fasting

Matthew 6:1–18

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Matthew 6:1–18 confronts a danger that lives in every religious heart: the temptation to make our devotion a performance for human eyes. What is doctrinally at stake is the nature of true righteousness. Jesus draws a sharp line between righteousness practiced “before other people in order to be seen by them” and righteousness offered to “your Father who sees in secret.” The same act, giving, praying, or fasting, can be either genuine worship or empty theater, depending entirely on the audience the heart is playing to. This passage teaches that God weighs the motive, not merely the deed, and that the Christian life is lived first and finally before the face of God. At the center stands the Model Prayer, which is itself a school of doctrine: it teaches us to honor God’s name, to long for His kingdom and His will, to depend on Him daily, and to live in the cycle of forgiveness given and received.

But this passage is not only about correcting motives; it is about forming hearts that are genuinely at home with God in private. Jesus is teaching us to crave an audience of one, to find our reward in the Father’s smile rather than the crowd’s applause. He is teaching us to pray in a way that reorders our whole inner life, beginning with God and only then turning to our needs. The aim is not merely to stop performing but to learn the deep, hidden joy of devotion that no one sees, the secret place where the soul is actually fed.

So teach for both. Help your students see clearly the difference between authentic and counterfeit righteousness, and let the Model Prayer ground them in sound doctrine about God, His kingdom, and forgiveness. And help them long for the hidden life with the Father, so that they leave not only warned against hypocrisy but drawn into the secret place where the real reward is found.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus warns, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them” (6:1). What does this teach us about the difference between true righteousness done before God and counterfeit righteousness done for human applause?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open by noting how this section connects to what came before. In chapter 5 Jesus commanded His disciples to let their light shine before others so that people would glorify the Father (5:16). Now in 6:1 He says, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be

seen by them.” These are not contradictory; they are complementary. The difference, again, is the aim of the heart. In chapter 5 the goal is that God be glorified; here the danger is that we be glorified. Help your class hold both together.

Explain the heart of the warning. Jesus is not forbidding visible good works; He is forbidding good works done for the purpose of being admired. The Greek behind “to be seen” is the word from which we get “theater.” The hypocrite is an actor, performing righteousness for an audience. And Jesus says such a person forfeits any reward from God, because he has chosen a different paymaster.

Draw out the doctrine of true versus counterfeit righteousness. Counterfeit righteousness is real in its outward form, the gift is given, the prayer is prayed, but it is hollow at the core, aimed at people rather than God. True righteousness is offered to the Father, whether or not anyone ever sees it. God is not fooled by the performance; He reads the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).

Help your class feel how searching this is. The most respectable, religious-looking life can be spiritually empty if it is lived for the wrong audience. Jesus is calling us to a righteousness that is real all the way down, offered to the One who sees in secret.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- True righteousness offered to God versus counterfeit righteousness performed for people (6:1)
- God’s judgment of the heart and motive, not merely the outward act (1 Samuel 16:7)
- The harmony of letting our light shine (5:16) with refusing to perform for applause (6:1)
- The forfeiting of God’s reward when human praise becomes the goal
- Living before the face of God as the heart of authentic devotion

Discussion Prompts

- How can the same good deed be either worship or performance?
- Where have you seen religion become a show, and where do you feel that pull yourself?
- What does it mean for you to live before the audience of one this week?

Question 2

Student Question:

Three times Jesus says the hypocrites “have received their reward” (6:2, 5, 16). Where in your own life are you most tempted to settle for the thin reward of being noticed by people instead of the lasting reward of pleasing your Father?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question fastens on the haunting refrain Jesus repeats three times: the hypocrites “have received their reward” (6:2, 5, 16). The Greek term was used for a receipt,

payment in full. Jesus is saying that the person who performs for human applause gets exactly what he was after, the admiration of people, and that is all he will ever get. The transaction is complete. There is nothing left for God to add.

Help students feel the tragedy in this. The reward of human approval is real but pitifully thin. It is here and gone in a moment, it must be constantly re-earned, and it leaves the soul hungrier than before. Meanwhile the lasting reward of the Father, His pleasure, His presence, His commendation, is forfeited for a handful of applause.

Invite honest reflection. Where are they most tempted to settle for being noticed? For some it is generosity that they hope others will hear about. For some it is spiritual reputation, being known as a person of prayer. For some it is the quiet ache to be seen as a good Christian. The temptation wears many faces, but it always trades the eternal for the immediate.

Point them toward the better reward. The cure is not to despise all encouragement but to learn to crave the Father's approval above the crowd's. When His smile becomes our treasure, the applause of people loses its grip.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The thinness and impermanence of human applause as a reward
- The lasting reward of the Father's approval and presence
- The danger of trading eternal reward for immediate recognition
- Craving God's commendation as the cure for the hunger for applause

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to settle for being noticed by people?
- What does the constant need to re-earn applause cost you?
- What would change if the Father's approval were the reward you truly wanted?

Question 3

Student Question:

When you give to the needy, Jesus says, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing (6:3). What does this striking image teach about the heart God desires in our generosity, and about who our giving is ultimately for?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus begins with giving to the needy, and He uses a vivid, almost playful image: "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (6:3). Obviously this is impossible in a literal sense; that is the point. Jesus is describing a generosity so free of self-congratulation that it barely keeps track of itself. The giver is so focused on the need before him and the God above him that he is not even tallying his own goodness.

Contrast this with the hypocrites who “sound a trumpet” before they give (6:2). Help your class see the absurdity Jesus is exposing. To advertise our generosity is to turn an act of love into an act of self-promotion. The right hand gives, and the left hand applauds; the gift becomes a way of feeding our own reputation rather than meeting another’s need.

Draw out the heart God desires. True generosity flows from love for God and love for our neighbor, not from a desire to be admired. It gives for the sake of the one in need and for the joy of pleasing the Father, content that He sees even if no one else ever does. Such giving is genuinely for God and for our neighbor, not for ourselves.

Make it practical. Ask your students whether their giving could survive total anonymity. Could they give generously to a need knowing with certainty that no one would ever know it was them? That test reveals who the giving is really for.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Generosity free of self-congratulation and self-promotion (6:3)
- Giving motivated by love for God and neighbor, not desire for admiration
- The contentment of being seen by the Father even when unseen by people
- Anonymity as a test of the true motive behind our giving

Discussion Prompts

- Could your giving survive complete anonymity? What does your honest answer reveal?
- Where are you tempted, even subtly, to let others know about your generosity?
- What would it look like to give this week for an audience of one?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus tells us to go into our room, shut the door, and pray to our Father in secret (6:6). What does your own private prayer life, the part no one else ever sees, reveal about the real state of your relationship with God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus turns to prayer and gives one of the most intimate instructions in all of Scripture: “go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (6:6). Against the backdrop of those who loved to pray standing on street corners to be seen (6:5), Jesus calls His disciples behind a closed door, into a place where the only audience is God Himself.

Help your class see what this reveals. Our private prayer life, the part no one ever observes, is the truest measure of our walk with God. Public prayers can be polished for an audience; secret prayers cannot. What we do behind the closed door, when there is no one to impress, shows whether we actually want God or only want to be seen wanting Him.

This question is meant to be quietly convicting, so handle it gently. Many sincere believers discover that their private prayer life is thin, hurried, or nearly nonexistent, even while their public spiritual life looks healthy. That gap is worth naming honestly, not to shame anyone but to invite them deeper.

Point toward the promise, not just the diagnosis. Behind the closed door is not an inspector but a Father, one who “sees in secret” and delights to meet us there. The secret place is not a duty to dread but an invitation to the most real relationship we will ever have.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Private prayer as the truest measure of our relationship with God (6:6)
- The closed door as a refuge from performance, where only God sees
- The danger of a public spiritual life that outpaces our private one
- God as a welcoming Father, not an inspector, in the secret place

Discussion Prompts

- What does your private prayer life reveal about your relationship with God?
- Where is there a gap between your public faith and your secret walk with God?
- What would help you meet the Father more honestly behind the closed door this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus contrasts the “empty phrases” of those who think they will be heard for their many words with a Father who “knows what you need before you ask him” (6:7–8). If God already knows our needs, what then is prayer actually for, and what does this teach us about who God is?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question raises a genuine puzzle. Jesus warns against heaping up “empty phrases” and thinking we will be heard “for our many words,” then says plainly, “your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (6:7–8). If God already knows, why pray at all? Help your class think this through carefully, because the answer reveals the very nature of God and of prayer.

First, clear away the wrong idea. Prayer is not informing a God who is ignorant, nor wearing down a God who is reluctant, nor accumulating enough words to finally be heard. The pagans Jesus describes imagined their gods had to be badgered into action. Our Father is nothing like that. He is a Father who already knows and already cares.

Then build the right idea. If prayer is not about getting information to God, then prayer is fundamentally about relationship. We pray not to change God’s knowledge but to commune with Him, to express our trust, to align our hearts with His will, and to depend on Him as

children depend on a loving parent. A child does not tell his father his needs because the father is uninformed, but because he trusts him and wants to be near him.

Draw out the doctrine of God here. The God of the gospel is not distant and demanding but near and knowing, a Father who delights to be asked. This shapes how we pray: not anxious and wordy, trying to twist God's arm, but trusting and honest, resting in the One who already knows and already loves.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Prayer as communion and trust, not informing or manipulating God (6:7–8)
- God as a knowing, caring Father, unlike the distant gods of the pagans
- The purpose of prayer in expressing dependence and aligning the heart with God's will
- Freedom from anxious, wordy prayer because the Father already knows our needs

Discussion Prompts

- If God already knows your needs, what do you think prayer is really for?
- How does seeing God as a knowing, caring Father change the way you pray?
- Where have your prayers felt more like badgering than trusting, and why?

Question 6

Student Question:

The Model Prayer begins, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name” (6:9), before it ever mentions our needs. What does it tell us about ourselves that Jesus teaches us to begin with God’s name, kingdom, and will, and where do your own prayers tend to begin?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now Jesus gives us the Model Prayer, and the very first thing to notice is where it begins. Before a single request for ourselves, we pray, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done” (6:9–10). The prayer opens with God, His name, His kingdom, His will, and only afterward turns to our bread, our forgiveness, our protection. The order is not accidental; it is instruction.

Help your class feel what this reveals about us. Left to ourselves, our prayers tend to begin and end with our own needs. We treat God like a divine vending machine, approached chiefly when we want something. Jesus reorders the whole soul by teaching us to begin with God: to be captivated by His holiness, to long for His reign, to surrender to His will. When we begin here, our requests fall into their proper place.

Unpack “hallowed be your name.” To hallow is to set apart as holy, to treat as supremely precious. We are asking that God's name, His revealed character and reputation, be honored as

holy in the world and in our own hearts. This is the first and deepest desire of a rightly ordered heart: not that we get what we want, but that God be glorified.

Bring it home gently. Ask your students where their own prayers tend to begin. There is no shame in bringing our needs to God; He invites it. But Jesus is teaching us that the path to peace begins by lifting our eyes to God before we look at our problems. A prayer that begins with “hallowed be your name” has already begun to put the heart back in order.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Model Prayer’s God-first order: His name, kingdom, and will before our needs (6:9–10)
- Hallowing God’s name as the deepest desire of a rightly ordered heart
- The tendency of the human heart to make prayer self-centered
- Worship and surrender as the proper foundation of all our requests

Discussion Prompts

- Where do your prayers tend to begin, with God or with your needs?
- What does it mean for God’s name to be hallowed in your daily life?
- How might beginning with God’s name and kingdom reorder a typical prayer for you?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus teaches us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (6:10). What is the kingdom we are praying for, how does this connect to the kingdom Christ established in His church and His reign at God’s right hand now, and how does this prayer still shape us today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is one of the doctrinally rich petitions, so take time with it: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (6:10). To pray rightly we must understand what kingdom we are asking for. In Jesus’ day many longed for a restored earthly, political kingdom of Israel. But the kingdom Jesus came to bring was something far greater and not of that kind. Help your class trace the biblical story of this kingdom.

Centuries earlier, Daniel had prophesied that in the days of the Roman kings, “the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed” (Daniel 2:44). Jesus came preaching that this kingdom was at hand (Matthew 4:17), and He promised that some standing with Him would not taste death until they saw it come with power (Mark 9:1). That promise was fulfilled at Pentecost, when the church was established, three thousand souls were added, and the reign of the risen Christ began over His people (Acts 2). The kingdom of God is the church, the realm where Christ reigns as King.

So when the first disciples prayed “your kingdom come,” they were praying for what God established at Pentecost. And this petition still shapes us today. Christ is reigning now, at the right hand of God (Acts 2:36; Colossians 1:13), and we who have been transferred into His kingdom continue to pray that His reign would advance, that more would be brought under His lordship, and that His will would be done in our lives and in His church as fully as it is done in heaven. Be careful to guard against the error that this kingdom is a future earthly political reign yet to be set up; Scripture presents it as established already and growing now.

Then press the prayer into the heart. To pray “your will be done” is to surrender our own agenda to God’s. It is the prayer Jesus Himself would pray in Gethsemane, “not as I will, but as you will” (26:39). It is one of the most costly and freeing things we can say. Help your class see that this petition is not passive resignation but active allegiance, gladly submitting our lives to the reign of King Jesus now.

End in wonder. We are praying that the rule of God would spread on earth, beginning with our own hearts, until His will is done here as gladly and completely as it is done among the angels. That is a prayer worth meaning.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The kingdom of God as established in Christ’s church at Pentecost, not a future earthly political reign (Daniel 2:44; Mark 9:1; Acts 2)
- Christ reigning now as King at the right hand of God (Acts 2:36; Colossians 1:13)
- Praying for the advance of Christ’s reign and the doing of His will today
- Surrender of our own will to God’s as active allegiance, not passive resignation (Matthew 26:39)
- Guarding against premillennial expectations of a future earthly kingdom yet to be set up

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to you that Christ is reigning as King right now?
- Where is God asking you to pray and live ‘your will be done’ rather than your own?
- How does belonging to a kingdom already established change the way you pray for it to come?

Question 8

Student Question:

After teaching us to pray for forgiveness, Jesus adds a sobering note: if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you (6:14–15). Who is God calling you to forgive, and what is keeping you from releasing them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After the Model Prayer, Jesus singles out one petition for special comment, the one about forgiveness, and His words are sobering: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you” (6:14–15). Help your class feel the weight of this. Of all the petitions, this is the one Jesus underscores, and He ties our being forgiven to our forgiving.

Be clear about what Jesus is and is not saying. He is not teaching that we earn God’s forgiveness by forgiving others. He is teaching that a heart genuinely transformed by grace cannot hold onto bitterness against others. The person who has truly received mercy becomes merciful; the person who refuses to forgive shows that he has not really grasped how much he has been forgiven. Refusing to forgive closes our own hearts to the very grace we need.

This question is meant to get personal, so create a safe space. Ask students to consider, honestly, who they have not forgiven. Often there is a specific name, a wound that still aches, a person they have quietly written off. Resentment can feel like justice, even like self-protection, but Jesus calls it a poison that blocks God’s grace.

Then point to the only sufficient motive for forgiveness: our own forgiveness. We forgive because we have been forgiven so much more (Ephesians 4:32). The cross is both the reason and the power. Encourage your students to bring the name and the wound to God, and to take a first step toward releasing it this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The link between receiving God’s forgiveness and extending it to others (6:14–15)
- Forgiveness as the fruit and evidence of grace genuinely received, not its purchase price
- Unforgiveness as a barrier that closes our own hearts to grace
- The cross as both the reason and the power for forgiving others (Ephesians 4:32)

Discussion Prompts

- Who comes to mind when Jesus speaks about forgiving others?
- What is keeping you from releasing that person, and what is it costing you?
- How does remembering your own forgiveness make forgiving them possible?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus assumes His disciples will fast, “And when you fast” (6:16–18), and ties it, like giving and prayer, to a hidden devotion rewarded by the Father. What is the deeper principle running through all three of these practices, and what does this whole passage teach about how the New Testament shapes private devotion to God rather than public performance before men?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest question of the lesson because it asks your class to step back and see the principle uniting the whole passage. Jesus treats fasting just as He treated giving and prayer: “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others” (6:16). Instead, fast so that it is “not seen by others but by your Father who is in secret,” and the Father who sees in secret will reward you (6:18). Note that Jesus says “when,” not “if”; He assumes His disciples will fast, but always as a hidden devotion, never as a public display.

Now draw out the unifying principle. Three times, with giving, prayer, and fasting, Jesus runs the same structure: the hypocrites perform for human eyes and receive their reward in full; the disciple acts in secret before the Father, who sees and rewards. The deep principle is this: the Christian life is lived first and finally before the face of God, not before the eyes of men. The audience determines whether an act of devotion is genuine worship or empty theater.

Connect this to how the New Testament shapes private devotion. Under the New Covenant, true religion is not a matter of public ceremony performed to earn human or even divine approval, but of a heart relationship with the Father, expressed in secret faithfulness. This does not mean the Christian life is invisible; chapter 5 commanded visible good works that glorify God. It means our devotional practices, our giving, praying, and fasting, flow from love for God rather than hunger for human applause. The New Testament consistently calls us to worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:24), to serve the Lord and not men (Ephesians 6:7), to do all to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Help your class see how freeing this is. When we live before the Father who sees in secret, we are released from the exhausting treadmill of impressing people. We no longer need the trumpet, the street corner, or the gloomy face. We can give, pray, and fast in quiet joy, knowing the One who matters most already sees.

Close in worship. The whole passage is an invitation to trade the thin reward of human applause for the rich reward of a Father who sees and delights in His children. Lead your class to long for that hidden life, where devotion is real because it is offered to God alone.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unifying principle of giving, prayer, and fasting: devotion offered to the Father, not performed for people (6:1–18)
- Jesus’ assumption that disciples will fast, as a hidden practice rather than a public display (6:16–18)
- The Christian life lived before the face of God under the New Covenant
- True New Testament worship as heart relationship, not ceremony performed for approval (John 4:24)
- The freedom that comes from serving the Lord rather than impressing men (Ephesians 6:7; 1 Corinthians 10:31)

Discussion Prompts

- What single principle ties giving, prayer, and fasting together in this passage?
- Where in your devotional life are you still partly playing to a human audience?
- How would living before the Father who sees in secret free you this week?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage, from the warning against performing to the Model Prayer to fasting in secret. Name one specific way Jesus, who calls us to live before the Father who sees in secret, is reshaping your motives or your prayer life this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the whole passage and press it toward the heart. Matthew 6:1-18 has held up one searching question through giving, prayer, and fasting: who are you doing this for? It has warned against the thin reward of human applause and called us into the secret place where the Father sees. And at its center it gave us the Model Prayer, a school for the soul. The aim now is not more information but transformation.

Encourage students to be specific. A vague intention to “pray more” will fade by Tuesday. A concrete answer might sound like: “I will give to a need this week that no one will ever know about,” or “I will start each morning with the Model Prayer, beginning with God before my needs,” or “I will finally forgive the person I have been holding at arm’s length.” Specificity is where formation happens.

Let the question divide naturally into the two great themes of the lesson. For some, the work this week is on their motives, learning to live before the audience of one rather than performing for people. For others, the work is on their prayer life, learning to pray the way Jesus taught. Invite each person to name which one God is pressing on them.

Close in worship, not mere resolve. The wonder of this passage is that we have a Father who sees in secret and delights to reward His children. Our response of secret faithfulness flows from gratitude and trust, not from anxiety. Lead your class to marvel that the God of heaven invites ordinary people behind the closed door to call Him Father.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The integration of pure motives and genuine prayer in the life lived before God
- Specific, concrete obedience as the fruit of genuine encounter with Christ
- Worship and gratitude as the proper motive for hidden faithfulness
- The lifelong process of being formed into a child who lives before the Father who sees in secret

Discussion Prompts

- Is God pressing more on your motives or on your prayer life this week?
- What is the one specific step you will take in response?
- How can this class pray for you and help you take that step?