

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 7: Giving, Prayer, and Fasting -- Matthew 6:1-18

There is a kind of religion that looks wonderful from the outside and is hollow within. Jesus knew it well. In His day there were people who timed their charitable gifts for maximum visibility, who prayed long and loud on busy street corners, who walked around with disheveled faces so everyone would know they were fasting. They had mastered the art of looking holy. And Jesus, who sees straight through to the heart, gave them a sober warning: they already have their reward. The applause they were chasing is the only payment they will ever get.

So Jesus takes the three great pillars of devotion, giving to the needy, praying, and fasting, and He runs the same searching question through each one. Not “Are you doing it?” but “Who are you doing it for?” Three times He repeats the same haunting refrain about the hypocrites: they do it “to be seen by others” and “they have received their reward.” And three times He calls His followers to something hidden and real: do it in secret, where only your Father sees, and “your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” The whole passage turns on a single hinge: the audience of one.

At the very center, almost as if it were the beating heart of the section, Jesus does something remarkable. He teaches us how to pray. He gives us words, what we have come to call the Lord’s Prayer or the Model Prayer. It is breathtakingly short and almost overwhelmingly large. In a handful of phrases it teaches us to hallow God’s name, to long for His kingdom and His will, to depend on Him for daily bread, to seek and extend forgiveness, and to ask for rescue from evil. It is a prayer that reorders the whole soul.

This passage is an invitation to come in out of the spotlight. It is a call to trade the thin, exhausting reward of human applause for the rich, lasting reward of a Father who sees in secret. So slow down with Jesus here. Let Him search your motives in the quiet. And let Him teach you to pray, not to be heard by people, but to be heard by the God who is already nearer than you think.

Group Discussion: Three times in this passage Jesus says the hypocrites “have received their reward” because they did their giving, praying, and fasting to be seen by others. Why do you think Jesus cared so intensely about the audience we are performing for, and what does that reveal about what God actually values in our devotion?

Personal Reflection: Jesus calls you to give, pray, and fast in secret, “and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Where in your own walk with God are you most tempted to perform for an audience of people, and what would it look like this week to do something good that no one but God will ever know about?

Read Matthew 6:1-18

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?

7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 1 Samuel 16:7, the Lord looks not on the outward appearance but on the heart; Luke 18:9–14, the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple; Daniel 2:44, God setting up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed; Acts 2:36–41, the kingdom coming as the church is established at Pentecost; Colossians 1:13, being transferred into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son who reigns now.