

The Sermon on the Mount, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 9: Giving, Praying, and Fasting for God's Eyes

Matthew 6:1-18

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage teaches that God weighs the motive of the heart, not merely the outward act, and that the craving for human approval can hollow out even our most sacred practices. Jesus addresses the three great pillars of Jewish devotion, almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, and applies the same principle to each: righteousness performed for human eyes forfeits any reward from God, because it was never really aimed at him. The recurring contrast is between the hypocrite who performs for an audience and the disciple who lives before the Father who sees in secret. This is the inward, heart-deep righteousness of the whole Sermon applied to the realm of worship and devotion.

At the center stands the Model Prayer, and it must be handled with care and reverence. Teach it as Jesus gave it, a pattern that shapes how we pray, not a magic formula or a liturgy to be recited mechanically. Indeed, the irony would be severe if students walked away treating as rote ritual the very prayer Jesus gave to rescue us from rote ritual. Walk through its petitions to show what it teaches about God, about right priorities (his name, his kingdom, his will before our needs), and about daily, humble dependence. Let it instruct and enrich genuine prayer rather than replace it.

The formational aim is to lead students into honest self-examination about the audience they are really seeking, and to free them from the exhausting performance of religion for human applause. Note that Jesus assumes these disciplines, when you give, when you pray, when you fast, so the lesson should both purify motives and recover the practices themselves where they have been neglected. The deepest aim is to draw students into the intimate reality of living before a Father who sees in secret, which the gospel makes possible, so that their devotion flows from relationship with him rather than from the desire to be seen. Keep the tone that of loving surgery, exposing hidden motives not to shame but to free.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus warns against practicing righteousness "before other people in order to be seen by them" (v. 1). What does this teach us about how deeply motive matters to God, and why can the very same good act be pleasing or worthless to him depending on the heart behind it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the governing principle of the whole passage, stated in verse 1: righteousness practiced to be seen by others has no reward with the Father. This means that motive is not a secondary concern God overlooks if the deed is good enough; motive is decisive. The same external act, a gift, a prayer, a fast, can be precious or worthless in God's sight depending entirely on the heart behind it.

Teach why this must be so, given who God is. God sees the heart; he looks not on the outward appearance but on the inner person (1 Samuel 16:7). He is not deceived by a polished performance, and he is not honored by worship that is actually aimed at impressing other people. To do a religious act for human eyes is, at bottom, to use God as a prop in a performance for ourselves, and he will not be so used.

Help students feel both the searching and the comforting sides of this truth. It is searching, because it means God evaluates the hidden motives we can conceal from everyone else. But it is comforting, because it means the quiet, unseen faithfulness that no one notices is fully seen and treasured by him. The widow's two coins, dropped unnoticed, were worth more in Jesus' eyes than all the loud gifts of the rich (Mark 12:41-44).

Guard against a paralyzing misapplication. The point is not that we must achieve perfectly pure motives before we may do any good, which would freeze us entirely, since our motives are always somewhat mixed. The point is to aim our devotion at God, to keep returning our hearts to him as the audience, and to refuse to let the desire for human approval become the driving motive. Direction of the heart, not flawless purity, is what Jesus calls for.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Motive as decisive, not secondary, in how God weighs our deeds (v. 1)
- God seeing the heart, not deceived by outward performance (1 Samuel 16:7)
- The same act precious or worthless depending on the heart behind it
- The unseen faithfulness God treasures (Mark 12:41-44)
- Aiming the heart at God rather than waiting for flawless motives

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the motive behind a good act matter so much to God?
- How can the same deed be pleasing to God in one heart and worthless in another?
- How do we pursue pure motives without becoming paralyzed by mixed ones?

Question 2

Student Question:

Be honest about your own motives in doing good. Where have you caught yourself wanting credit, recognition, or admiration for your generosity, service, or devotion, and how does Jesus' warning expose that desire?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to catch themselves in the act of wanting credit. The desire for recognition is so woven into us that it usually operates below conscious notice; we do a kind deed and feel a flicker of disappointment when it goes unacknowledged, or we find subtle ways to make sure the right people know. The question invites honest attention to that flicker.

Help the class see how cleverly this desire hides behind genuine good. We really do want to help, and we also want to be seen helping. We really do want to serve, and we also enjoy the reputation it brings. Jesus is not condemning the good itself but exposing the parasite of self-display that attaches to it. Naming the parasite is the first step to starving it.

Move toward one practical discipline of hiddenness. Perhaps doing a genuine good this week that no one will ever know about, resisting the urge to mention a kindness, giving without any record. Such deliberate hiddenness is a powerful way to retrain the heart to seek the Father's eyes rather than the crowd's.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Catching the often-hidden desire for recognition
- The parasite of self-display attaching to genuine good
- Naming the desire as the first step to weakening it
- Deliberate hiddenness as training for the heart

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you caught yourself wanting credit for your good deeds?
- How does the desire to be seen hide behind genuine devotion?
- What good could you do this week that no one will ever know about?

Question 3

Student Question:

Three times Jesus says the hypocrites who perform for others "have received their reward" (v. 2, 5, 16). What does it mean that human applause is the only reward such people get, and why is that a tragic bargain compared with the reward the Father gives?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus on the haunting refrain: they have received their reward. The word Jesus uses was a commercial term meaning paid in full, the language stamped on a receipt. The hypocrites wanted human applause, and they got exactly that, in full, with nothing owing. The transaction is complete. There is no further reward from God, because God was never the one they were serving.

Teach the tragic exchange this represents. To trade the Father's reward for human applause is to sell something priceless for something worthless. Human approval is fleeting, fickle, and powerless to satisfy; the crowd that praises today forgets tomorrow. The reward the Father gives is enduring and real. To choose the lesser is a bad bargain of the deepest kind.

Help students see that this is not God being stingy or vindictive. He simply honors the choice we make. If we aim our devotion at human eyes, we are choosing human applause as our payment, and God lets us have it. The warning is an invitation: aim higher, seek the reward that lasts, do not settle for the cheap currency of applause.

Apply this to our own age, where the audience is now global and instant. The temptation to perform our righteousness has never been stronger, with every act of devotion a potential post and every kindness a chance for affirmation. Help students consider how the hunger for likes, shares, and recognition can quietly turn worship into performance, and how Jesus' words call us back to the audience of One.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- "Received their reward" as paid in full, with nothing owing from God
- The tragic exchange of the Father's lasting reward for fleeting applause
- God honoring the audience we choose to serve
- The modern intensification of the temptation to perform our righteousness
- The cheapness of human approval compared to the Father's reward

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the hypocrites have already received their reward in full?
- Why is trading God's reward for human applause such a bad bargain?
- How does our age of instant audiences intensify this temptation?

Question 4

Student Question:

Consider how much of your spiritual life is visible to others versus hidden. Is there real substance to your secret life with God, your private prayer and giving, or does most of your devotion happen only where others can see it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to weigh the proportion of their spiritual life that is visible versus hidden. Jesus repeatedly commends what is done in secret, in the closed room, where only the Father sees. The question gently probes whether there is real substance to their secret life with God or whether their devotion is mostly a public affair.

Help students understand why the secret life is the true measure. What we do when no one is watching reveals who we actually are, because there is no audience to perform for and no reputation to protect. A rich private prayer life, unseen giving, quiet worship, these are the marks of devotion aimed at God himself rather than at people.

Move toward strengthening the hidden life concretely. Perhaps establishing a regular time of private prayer behind a closed door, a practice of unrecorded giving, a habit of worship that no one else witnesses. The aim is not to despise public devotion, which has its place, but to ensure that the secret life with God is real and growing, since that is where genuine faith is proved.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Weighing the visible against the hidden in our spiritual life
- The secret life as the true measure of devotion
- What we do unwatched revealing who we really are
- Strengthening private prayer, giving, and worship

Discussion Prompts

- How much of your spiritual life happens where no one can see?
- Is there real substance to your secret life with God?
- What is one way to strengthen your hidden devotion this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

At the heart of the passage Jesus gives the Model Prayer, beginning “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name” (v. 9–13). Walking through its petitions, what does this prayer teach us about God, about our right priorities, and about the kind of dependence on the Father he wants to cultivate in us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Approach the Model Prayer with reverence, and frame it rightly from the start: Jesus gives it as a pattern to shape our praying, not as a formula to be recited mechanically. The very context is a warning against empty, performative repetition (verse 7), so it would be a deep irony to treat this prayer as mindless ritual. Walk your class through it slowly, drawing out what each petition teaches.

Notice first where it begins: not with our needs but with God. Our Father, intimate relationship; in heaven, reverent transcendence; hallowed be your name, the longing that God be honored as holy. The prayer teaches us that right prayer starts by lifting our eyes to who God is, ordering our hearts around his glory before we ever mention ourselves.

Then come the kingdom petitions: your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. This teaches the priority of God's reign and God's will over our own agendas. We pray for his purposes to advance and submit our wills to his. Only after God's name, kingdom, and will have been sought does the prayer turn to our needs, and even then in humble dependence: give us this day our daily bread, asking the Father for what we genuinely need, one day at a time, like children who trust their Father to provide.

Finally the prayer addresses sin and the spiritual battle: forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. This teaches our ongoing need for forgiveness, the inseparable link between receiving and extending forgiveness (which Jesus underlines in verses 14 and 15), and our daily dependence on God for protection from sin and the evil one. The whole prayer cultivates a posture of reverent, kingdom-first, trusting, humble dependence on the Father.

Help students see the prayer as a school of prayer. Each petition is a doorway into a whole realm of honest conversation with God. The pattern is not meant to confine our praying to these words but to teach us to pray about these things, God's glory, God's kingdom, our needs, our sins, our struggles, in the trusting spirit of a child speaking to a good Father.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Model Prayer as a pattern to shape prayer, not a formula to recite mechanically (v. 7)
- Prayer beginning with God: his fatherhood, holiness, and the hallowing of his name
- The priority of God's kingdom and will over our own agendas
- Humble, daily dependence on the Father for our needs
- The link between receiving and extending forgiveness (v. 14–15), and dependence on God in temptation

Discussion Prompts

- What does the Model Prayer teach us about God before it ever mentions our needs?
- Why does the prayer put God's name, kingdom, and will ahead of our requests?
- How can this prayer be a pattern that teaches us to pray, rather than mere words to recite?

Question 6

Student Question:

Reflect honestly on your own prayer life. Does the pattern of the Model Prayer, hallowing God's name, seeking his kingdom and will, depending on him for daily needs, seeking and extending forgiveness, expose anything missing or out of balance in how you actually pray?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the Model Prayer into a mirror for the student's actual prayer life. Most of us, if honest, find our praying heavily weighted toward our own needs and wants, with little of the God-centered worship, kingdom-seeking, and self-examination the pattern teaches. The question invites that honest comparison.

Help students locate the specific imbalance. Perhaps they rarely begin with worship and the hallowing of God's name, rushing straight to requests. Perhaps they seldom pray your will be done with real surrender. Perhaps confession and the extending of forgiveness are missing. Perhaps daily dependence has given way to anxious self-reliance. The pattern gently exposes what is thin.

Aim for one concrete enrichment of their prayers this week, guided by the pattern. Perhaps beginning their prayers with worship, or adding genuine surrender to God's will, or making confession and forgiveness a regular part. The goal is not to impose the words but to let the pattern deepen and rebalance their real conversation with God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Using the Model Prayer as a mirror for our actual praying
- The common imbalance toward our own needs and wants
- Identifying what is thin: worship, surrender, confession, dependence
- Letting the pattern deepen and rebalance real prayer

Discussion Prompts

- Where does the Model Prayer expose something missing in how you pray?
- Does your praying begin with God or rush straight to your requests?
- What is one way to let the pattern enrich your prayers this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus assumes his followers will give, pray, and fast, saying "when you give," "when you pray," "when you fast," not "if" (v. 2, 5, 16). What does it say that Jesus treats these as normal practices of the Christian life, and what is the proper place of such disciplines for God's people today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Draw students' attention to a small but important word repeated through the passage: when. Jesus says when you give, when you pray, when you fast, not if. He assumes these disciplines are normal, expected practices of his followers. The passage is not questioning whether we will give, pray, and fast; it is purifying the way we do them.

Teach the proper place of these disciplines in the Christian life. Generous giving to the needy, regular private and corporate prayer, and fasting are not relics of an older piety but ongoing practices through which we express devotion, cultivate dependence, and grow in grace. The Lord's church has always given, the early Christians devoted themselves to prayer (Acts 2:42), and Jesus expected his followers to fast after he was gone (Matthew 9:15).

Address fasting in particular, since it is the most neglected in our day. Fasting is voluntarily abstaining, often from food, to give focused attention to God, to humble ourselves, and to seek him in prayer. It is not a hunger strike to twist God's arm or a performance of piety, but a means of saying with our bodies that we hunger for God more than for bread. Jesus assumes his people will practice it, quietly, for the Father's eyes.

Guard against two errors. One reduces the Christian life to vague good intentions with none of these concrete practices; Jesus clearly expects more. The other turns the disciplines into a new legalism, a checklist by which we measure and display our spirituality, which is precisely the hypocrisy Jesus condemns. The disciplines are means to an end, deeper communion with God, not ends in themselves or trophies to display.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus assuming giving, prayer, and fasting as normal practices ("when," not "if")
- The ongoing place of these disciplines in the Christian life (Acts 2:42)
- Fasting as humbling ourselves and seeking God, expected of Jesus' followers (Matthew 9:15)
- Avoiding both the neglect of the disciplines and their corruption into legalism
- The disciplines as means to communion with God, not ends or trophies

Discussion Prompts

- What does it say that Jesus assumes his followers will give, pray, and fast?
- What is the proper place of these disciplines in the Christian life today?
- How do we practice them without turning them into a new legalism or display?

Question 8

Student Question:

Which of these practices, giving generously, praying privately, or fasting, has been most neglected in your own walk with God, and what would it look like to recover it this week, done quietly for the Father's eyes?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to identify which discipline, giving, private prayer, or fasting, has been most neglected, and to consider recovering it. Most of us have a weak spot; for many in

our day it is fasting, for others a consistent private prayer life, for others sacrificial giving. The question invites honest self-assessment.

Help students choose realistically and concretely. Recovery does not require a dramatic overhaul, just one real, doable step: a set time of private prayer, a planned act of generous giving, a first experience of fasting for an afternoon to seek God. The aim is to begin, quietly, where the practice has been thin.

Tie the recovery back to motive. Whatever discipline they recover, the call is to do it for the Father's eyes, in secret where possible, not to feel spiritual or to be seen. Encourage them to pair the recovered practice with a deliberate hiddenness, so that the discipline draws them toward God rather than toward self-display.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest assessment of which discipline is most neglected
- One concrete, doable step to recover it
- Beginning quietly where the practice has been thin
- Recovering the discipline for the Father's eyes, not for display

Discussion Prompts

- Which discipline has been most neglected in your walk with God?
- What is one concrete step to recover it this week?
- How will you keep it aimed at the Father rather than at being seen?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus repeatedly points to "your Father who sees in secret" and promises that he will reward what is done for him (v. 4, 6, 18). How does living before the Father who sees in secret free us from both the craving for human approval and the temptation to mechanical, going-through-the-motions religion? Connect this to the kind of intimate relationship with God the gospel makes possible.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal and pastoral heart of the lesson, and it gathers up the whole passage in a single, life-changing reality: there is a Father who sees in secret, and his seeing changes everything. Three times Jesus anchors the disciple's devotion in this truth, your Father who sees in secret will reward you (verses 4, 6, 18). The whole cure for performance religion is the discovery that God himself is watching, and that his is the only gaze that finally matters.

Show how this truth frees us from the craving for human approval. The reason we perform for others is that we are starved for an audience, hungry to be seen, known, and approved. Jesus

meets that hunger at its root by revealing a Father who already sees us fully, in secret, and loves us. When the deepest approval we long for is already secured in him, the applause of the crowd loses its grip. We no longer need to be seen by people because we are already seen by God.

Then show how the same truth guards against the opposite danger, mechanical, going-through-the-motions religion. If God merely watched our outward acts, we might still go through empty motions. But Jesus reveals a Father who sees in secret, into the heart itself. That makes rote, heartless religion pointless, since the One we serve looks straight past the performance to the inner person. The Father who sees in secret calls forth not a better performance but a real relationship.

Press the intimacy the gospel makes possible, because this is the deepest note. Jesus does not merely say God sees; he says your Father sees. Through Christ, the God who sees in secret is not a distant inspector but a loving Father who has welcomed us as his children. The gospel reconciles us to God and gives us his Spirit, by whom we cry Abba, Father (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6). The whole passage assumes this relationship: we give, pray, and fast not to earn a stranger's notice but as beloved children living before a Father who already delights in us.

Bring it home with warmth. The Christian life is not a performance staged for human eyes, nor a set of empty rituals, but a life lived in the loving gaze of a Father who sees everything done in secret and treasures it. To live before the audience of One is not a burden but a liberation, freeing us from the exhausting treadmill of impressing people and drawing us into the joy of a hidden life with a God who sees, knows, and loves us completely. Send your students home not anxious that God is watching, but glad that their Father is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Father who sees in secret as the cure for performance religion (v. 4, 6, 18)
- Freedom from the craving for human approval through being already seen and loved by God
- The Father seeing the heart, which makes mechanical religion pointless
- The intimate father-child relationship the gospel makes possible (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6)
- Living before an audience of One as liberation, not burden

Discussion Prompts

- How does believing the Father sees in secret free us from needing human approval?
- How does the same truth guard us against empty, going-through-the-motions religion?
- How does knowing God as a loving Father, not a distant inspector, change your devotion?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Jesus has exposed the hidden desire to be seen and called you to a life lived for an audience of One. Where is he putting his finger on your motives, and what is one specific way you will pursue genuine, secret devotion to your Father this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone asks students to name where Jesus is putting his finger on their motives and one specific way they will pursue genuine, secret devotion this week. After a lesson that has exposed the hidden desire to be seen, this question converts conviction into a concrete, hidden practice.

Help students choose a step that is both specific and, ideally, hidden: a deliberately unseen act of giving, a renewed commitment to private prayer behind a closed door, a quiet fast, a good deed no one will know about. The very hiddenness of the step is part of its power to retrain the heart toward the Father's eyes.

Close on the joy of the audience of One. Send students home not weighed down by the exposure of their mixed motives but lifted by the discovery that their Father sees them in secret and loves them. Remind them that genuine devotion grows not from straining for pure motives but from resting in the gaze of a Father who already delights in his children.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Converting conviction into a concrete, often hidden, practice
- The power of deliberate hiddenness to retrain the heart
- Resting in the Father's loving gaze rather than straining for pure motives
- The joy of living for an audience of One

Discussion Prompts

- Where is Jesus putting his finger on your motives?
- What one act of genuine, secret devotion will you pursue this week?
- How does resting in the Father's loving gaze change the way you give, pray, and worship?