

The Sermon on the Mount

Lesson 9: Giving, Praying, and Fasting for God's Eyes -- Matthew 6:1-18

There is a question that quietly shapes far more of our lives than we would like to admit: who is watching? We dress a certain way, post a certain photo, drop a certain comment, all with one eye on the audience. We are performers by instinct, forever managing the impression we make. And the most dangerous place for this instinct to operate is not the stage or the office but the most sacred corners of our lives, our giving, our praying, our worship. Jesus knows this about us, and in this passage he gently, firmly pulls back the curtain.

"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them," he begins. Then he takes the three great pillars of devotion in his culture, giving to the needy, prayer, and fasting, and addresses each in turn with the same searching pattern. Do not give to be admired, as the hypocrites do, sounding a trumpet so everyone notices. Do not pray to be seen, standing on the corner for an audience. Do not fast to look spiritual, disfiguring your face so people know you are suffering for God. In each case the warning is identical, and so is the verdict: if you do it for human eyes, then human applause is the only reward you will ever get. You will have been paid in full, in the cheapest currency there is.

But Jesus is not telling us to stop giving, praying, and fasting. He is telling us to do them for a different audience. 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. Give so quietly that your left hand does not know what your right hand is doing. The whole thing turns on a single, life-changing realization: there is One who sees in secret, and his seeing is the only seeing that finally matters. At the very center of the passage, Jesus even hands us a model for how to talk to this Father, a pattern of prayer so simple a child can pray it and so deep we will never exhaust it.

So this lesson invites us to examine the hidden motives beneath our most religious activities, the part of us that wants to be seen being good. It is uncomfortable work, because the desire for human approval hides so well behind genuine devotion. But Jesus does this surgery in love, to free us from the exhausting treadmill of performance and lead us into the joy of a life lived for an audience of One. Before you read another line, ask yourself honestly: when I give, pray, or worship, whose eyes am I really seeking?

Group Discussion: Jesus warns three times against doing righteous acts to be seen by others, and three times points us instead to the Father who sees in secret. Why is the craving for human approval so persistent even in our most sincere acts of devotion, and what changes when we truly believe that God sees what is done in secret?

Personal Reflection: Think about your own giving, praying, and worship. Where do you catch yourself performing for an audience, wanting to be seen as generous, spiritual, or devout, and what would it mean to do those same things for the eyes of your Father alone?

Read Matthew 6:1–18

Study Questions

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

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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.
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Reflect on these passages: Matthew 23:1–12, Jesus' rebuke of religious acts done to be seen by others; Luke 18:9–14, the Pharisee and the tax collector at prayer; Colossians 3:23–24, working heartily as for the Lord and not for people; 1 Samuel 16:7, the Lord looking on the heart rather than the outward appearance; Philippians 4:6–7, bringing every need to God in prayer with thanksgiving.