

The Sermon on the Mount

Session 8 – “Piety and Prayer” – Matthew 6:1-15

Verses 1-4. *Beware of practicing your piety [acts of righteousness] before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ²“So whenever you give alms [giving to the needy], do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

1. In our day, when you think of acts of righteousness or piety, what specific things come to your mind? In Jewish life at that time, the three specific things were almsgiving, prayer and fasting, which is what Jesus deals with here. In each instance, Jesus warns against doing them “as the hypocrites”. The Greek word used here is “hupokrites” which referred to an actor that was playing a role. In the Greek theater, since actors frequently played more than one character, they would wear different masks to indicate which character they were playing. Thus a “hypocrite” was one who wore a mask, so the observer didn’t know the real person, only the character they played.

Jesus makes it clear that it is possible to do the right thing for the wrong reason. There was an old rabbinical saying: “The one who gives alms in secret is greater than Moses.”

2. What are some possible motives for doing “acts of piety”, both good and bad? (Some might be a sense of duty, desire for prestige, or compulsion from a sense of overflowing love.)

In verse 2, when Jesus indicates that those who receive public acclaim for their deeds, the term that is used was one that was usually used in business that meant “paid in full.” In other words, your public acclaim is all the reward you will receive. Verse 2 is contrasted with verse 3 where Jesus says that giving is not to be done publicly.

Side note: this is one of many verses in the Bible that have come to be common aphorisms. “The right hand doesn’t know what the left hand is doing” has become such a common saying that many don’t know that it comes from the Sermon on the Mount. (I remember my mother using it when I was practicing the piano!)

Our pattern for giving is in Jesus. 2 Corinthians 8:9 (NLT) says, *You know how full of love and kindness our Lord Jesus Christ was. Though he was very rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich.*

The bottom line is whose approval are we seeking – the approval of people or of God?

Verses 5-8. *And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, 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. ⁷When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

3. What was wrong with the way hypocrites prayed in Jesus' day? In what ways do hypocrites pray today?
4. How do pagan prayers differ from the persistent prayers Jesus Himself offered (Matthew 26:44 – *So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.*)?

Here are seven problems with prayer both in Jesus' day and today:

- (1) It had become formalized; for example the "Shema" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) Rituals always have the risk of being done without thought.
- (2) There were stated prayers for every occasion.
- (3) Set times for prayer.
- (4) Connection of prayer with certain places (e.g., the synagogue, see Acts 3:1).
- (5) Tendency to long prayers (see Ecclesiastes 5:1-2).
- (6) Almost hypnotic repetition.
- (7) Praying to be seen by others.

5. As in verse 2, Jesus essentially says that each one has a choice: to be rewarded by others, or by God. How do you think the reward the Father will give us differs from the reward we receive from others?

6. In what ways might we be guilty of mindless, meaningless prayers? In verse 6, Jesus begins His instruction on personal prayer. (Notice He says, "when you pray" not, "if you pray"!) Here are the main points:

- (1) It is to be directed to God, not for the hearing of an audience.
- (2) When Jesus says to pray "to your Father," this is more than just the word we use, it indicates a conversation with one in a personal relationship.
- (3) God is interested in the quality of our prayers, not the quantity of our words.

7. There are some who read the phrase, "*your Father knows what you need before you ask Him*" and say, "Then why bother to pray?" How would you answer that? (You might think in terms of a child asking a parent for something.)

As we come to the "Lord's Prayer", the first half deals with God and His glory and the second half deals with our needs necessities. Note the order!

In Luke 11, this is Jesus' "answer" to the question of one of His disciples, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Verses 9-15.... *Pray then in this way:*

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

10 Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

11 Give us this day our daily bread.

12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13 And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;

15 but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Let's take it one phrase at a time:

Pray then in this way:

This is a pattern for prayer. Jesus was not saying that we have to use these exact words. When we do say

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these words together, especially in the light of the previous verses, we should pray (not just recite) with sincere thought about the meaning of the words that we are saying.

Our Father

This was really quite novel in that in the Old Testament God is referred to as the Father of the nation of Israel, or of a specific individual, but with the coming of Jesus, the Fatherhood of God is more indicative of a personal relationship.

in heaven

Most of the time, our view of heaven is rather limited and informed more by popular “cartoonish” ideas than sound, biblical theology.

hallowed be Your name.

“Hallowed” is the same as holy, that is separate. From the time that God revealed His name (YHWH or Yahweh) to Moses, the name of God was very important to the Hebrew people. (Many biblical names were very significant in their meaning, and were sometimes changed to indicate some significant change in a person.)

Psalm 9:10 says, *Those who know Your name will trust in You, for You, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek You.* In other words, those who really know who God is – His very nature, including His faithfulness – would naturally trust in God.

8. What does it mean to you to “hallow” God’s name? How might you do that specifically?

Your kingdom come.

What is the kingdom of God?

- (1) It was what Jesus preached (Luke 4:43)
- (2) It was in the past – including Abraham, Isaac, etc. (Luke 13:28)
- (3) It is present (Luke 17:21)
- (4) It is in the future (we pray that it will come).
- (5) It is synonymous with the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 8:11)

9. God is already King. In what sense are His kingdom and perfect will still in the future?

Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

God’s kingdom comes as we, and others, do His will. (This is an example of classic Hebrew parallelism – as in the Psalms – where the first phrase is expanded upon in the second.) It makes the kingdom of God personal as we submit our own will to His. How do you say “Your will be done”? With defeated resignation, with bitter resentment, or with love and trust in the wisdom, purpose and love of God?

It is good to remember when we pray this phrase what Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Knowing what was ahead, and humanly speaking, He would have desired not to go to the cross. But He prayed, *My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.* Matthew 26:42

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Give us this day our daily bread.

The word for “daily” can also mean “that which is needed”. Actually an unusual word that was found by archeologists on a shopping list!

This phrase tells us a number of things:

- (1) God cares for our bodies.
- (2) We are to live one day at a time. (Jesus will expand on this in verses 25-34.)
See also Exodus 16:1-21 where God provided the daily manna in the wilderness.
- (3) God is our supplier.
- (4) Prayer implies a willingness to work.
- (5) Note the word is “us” – it is collective. Sometimes the answer to this prayer is in our sharing with others.

Not only is our “daily bread” physical, it is also spiritual. And God meets that need in Himself. God, the Father is the sustainer of our life; God the Son, Jesus Christ, is our Savior and Redeemer; God the Holy Spirit is our Comforter, Counselor and the source of our strength.

And forgive us our debts,

Some say “trespasses,” others say “sins.” In any case, this is not the usual word for sin in the Greek. The word used here refers to a moral failure, that which is owed, or should have been done. We must always be willing to admit our sin. As 1 John 1:8-10 says, *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.*

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

This is a dangerous thing to pray! Are you really willing to forgive as God has forgiven you? In Ephesians 4:32, Paul reminds us of the motivation for our forgiveness of one another: *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.* (More on this in verses 14-15.)

And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

(Classic version: And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.) The Greek word has the sense of putting to proof, thus a trial more than just a temptation. (Though a temptation can surely be a trial!) It is a testing of loyalty and obedience. It is also an acknowledgment that evil in the world is real.

It is good to remember at this point 1 Corinthians 10:13, *No temptation has seized you except what is common to all. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*

14. In what ways do your prayers need to more closely resemble this model prayer? At this point, Jesus expands on verse 12.

Verses 14-15... *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

This is a call for us to understand, forgive and love others. Jesus expands on this in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Matthew 18:21-35.

Martin Luther, in commenting on this passage, quoted Augustine:

“Surely, we must not indifferently pass over the fact that of all those texts in which the Lord has commanded us to pray, He declared that special emphasis should be laid on the petition which has to do with the forgiveness of sins...For in no other text do we pray in such a way that we, as it were, enter a contract with God, saying as we do: ‘Forgive us as we also forgive.’ If we lie in that contract, the whole prayer has no value.”

When the famous Scottish author, Robert Louis Stevenson, lived in the South Pacific, he would always conduct family worship in the morning for his household. It always concluded with the Lord’s Prayer. One morning in the middle of the Prayer, he arose and left the room. His health had always been precarious, so his wife followed him thinking that he was ill. “Is there anything wrong?” she said. “Only this,” said Stevenson, “I am not fit to pray the Lord’s Prayer today.” As William Barclay commented: “No one is fit to pray the Lord’s Prayer so long as the unforgiving spirit holds sway within their heart. If one has not put things right with others, he cannot put things right with God.”

