
LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 6:1-18

To understand the heart behind the spiritual disciplines of giving, praying, and fasting.

Your Audience Matters

There are certain routine patterns that happen in our lives with varying frequency. For example, every day my alarm goes off to wake me up. Every week (Wednesday nights to be exact) we roll our trash cans out to the curb for trash day the next morning. Every month I change the filter in our AC unit (or if I'm being totally



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honest, *mostly* every month). Of course the big yearly routine is my birthday, and the birthday of all of my loved ones. There is pressure for the birthdays though, isn't there? The pressure of what to get or what to do? The pressure of remembering them in the first place. One growing pressure with the advent of social media is the pressure to make the most ornate, polished, and thoughtful post for the birthday boy or girl *for everyone to see*. It usually includes a picture of that person, some meaningful memory or tribute, and a variety of hashtags.

I've been married now for long enough to not care as much about the public perception of my marriage. I'm far more interested in the *actual* health of my marriage, not the perceived health. It finally occurred to me a

couple of years ago to ask myself this question: “Why am I writing happy birthday to my wife on Facebook? It was the first thing I told her this morning. Why am I just repeating this on here?” And then it hit me: “I am not doing this for her. I’m doing it for everyone else. I have the wrong audience.” I never did it again after that.

This is very similar to the problem that Jesus addresses in Matthew 6:1-18. Jesus teaches on the topics of giving, praying, and fasting, and in each of these instances He directs us to do so in such a way that is less public and more intimate. The allure to do these things publicly was great then, and just as great now. When we give publicly, we draw the affection of our peers. Even if we aren’t totally willing to admit it, we like the fact that people will think we are extra-spiritual when they see us giving, hear us praying, or know we are fasting, and yet Jesus warns us: “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 6:1). In other words, “Be careful who you are doing these things for; your audience matters.”

Don’t Toot Your Own Horn

There are three major topics that Jesus covers in this passage, and all of them have the same thing in common.

GIVING

The first topic Jesus expounds on is the topic of giving. Historically, giving formed a significant part of ancient Jewish life. For starters, it was an action commanded by God (Deuteronomy 14:28–29; Exodus 23:10–11; Leviticus 23:22). Second, it was also strongly commanded to strive for justice for the poor (Isaiah 3:15, 10:1–2; Amos 2:6–8, 5:11; Micah 6:8), and this concept carries into the New Testament as well (James 2:1–6, 5:1–6). There is an assumption that is being made by Jesus here. Notice He does not say, “If you give,” but rather, “When you give.” The Lord does not leave it up for debate; you will give if you have been born again.

But how should we give? Jesus tells us at least, how *not* to give: “Do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men.” Whether this is literal or figurative is not clear. It seems impractical for someone to literally blow a horn every time they give. More likely, it’s a figure of speech signifying the attention being drawn to the action. It could also refer to the clinging of coins as they land in the coffer. You’ve heard it said before, and it applies to giving as well: “Don’t toot your own horn.”

PRAYER

The second topic Jesus teaches is that of prayer. We’ve all been there. You are in a church service or some formal setting, and someone is asked to do the invocation. The person steps up and begins praying, and their words more closely resemble a Shakespearean soliloquy than a prayer from the 21st century. “Why are they praying like that,” I usually ask myself. Surely, they don’t speak like that to anyone else. Once again, Jesus is attacking the motive of the action. In the end, we are told to pray in the same way we give: “In secret.”

Jesus follows the model prayer with a shocking revelation: The children of God who have broken relationships with one another that they have no intention or desire to fix also have a broken relationship with God Himself. Love between believers is a critical attribute and one that signifies to the dying world that we truly belong to Jesus (John 13:35). This implies something about the way we relate to and understand forgiveness. If we are forgiven and we understand the depth of meaning in that forgiveness, it will be impossible for us to live a life of withholding forgiveness from other individuals (Matthew 18:21–35).

FASTING

The third topic Jesus expounds on is the topic of fasting. There are perhaps not many more misunderstood practices in the church today than that of fasting. Between a large majority of individuals who simply do not fast and various misunderstandings of this passage on fasting in particular, it's a lost practice to say the least, and yet the Lord assumes it will be done. The heart of this teaching is identical the first two topics: "Your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret" (Matthew 6:18). And therein lies the greatest misunderstanding. The consensus is that fasting should be done without anyone knowing it, despite the numerous examples in Scripture where that simply isn't the case. In Leviticus 23:27, the people of God are called to fast for the Day of Atonement. They were done in times of national emergency (Joel 2:15). When Judah was invaded they were called to fast by King Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:1-4). The Jews in exile fasted before their return home as commanded by Ezra (Ezra 8:21-23). The crux of this passage, not only for fasting but for prayer and giving as well, is to do these things with your heart oriented towards an audience of one, not to militantly do them in secret for the sake of secrecy. As Jesus normally does, He is calling us here to examine our hearts with regard to our motive for why we do these things when we do them.

The Lord's Prayer

There is much that could be said regarding the Lord's Prayer, and this week you will pull apart and observe the prayer more carefully. There is one interesting point that is worth mentioning. In many modern translations, verse 13 is rendered, "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from *evil*." There is perhaps a better way of translating this. The Greek here suggests a more personal translation because of the direct article (in the Greek it is, "τοῦ πονηροῦ," literally, "the evil"). It is also unclear whether it is masculine or neuter, since both forms of the word are identical in this instance. With the current reading, it is being treated as neuter, and thus it simply conveys the concept of evil. However, because Matthew often depicts Satan as being one who leads people into temptation (the very thing we saw him try to do with Jesus just two chapters before this), it makes more sense exegetically to treat this word as masculine, not neuter. The translation would then read, "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from *the evil one*." There is no right or wrong answer here. Both make fine sense grammatically and theologically. However, exegetically, the masculine rendering is more cohesive with Matthew's Gospel as a whole.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Matthew 6:1. The words, "Be careful," in the Greek connote the idea of, "focusing on the right thing" when practicing righteous deeds. Why is this important according to this verse? What is at stake?
2. Read Matthew 6:2-4. Write in your own words what Jesus is saying here. Read Isaiah 3:15, Amos 2:6-8, and Micah 6:8. How important is giving to the poor? Why is it so important? Why should we pay careful attention to doing it for reasons that do not draw attention to ourselves?

Day Two

1. Read Matthew 6:5-6. In your own words, describe how this verse could be applied in your every day life? What would this look like, practically speaking?
2. Read Matthew 6:7-8. How should we speak to God when we pray according to these verses? Give examples.

Day Three

1. Read Matthew 6:9-10. What does it mean that God's name should be, "hallowed." What does it mean for God's Kingdom to come and for His will to be done? What do you think the difference is between how things go on earth and how they go in heaven?
2. Read Matthew 6:11-15. How does the prayer change beginning in verse 11? What is the significance of the word, "daily?" In your own words, write down what verse 13 is saying. What is the correlation between the way we forgive others and the way God forgives us?

Day Four

1. Read Matthew 6:16-18. What is the main idea of these verses? Why is it ok to fast with other people and thus not do it, "in secret" (Hint: Look at the OT verses in the lesson above)?
2. The point of these verses is that it is possible for Christians to do all of the right things for all of the wrong reasons, and when that happens, they cease to be of benefit to us for any future blessing. What other Christians practices should be done with the same mindset as what is prescribed in this passage?

Week 9 Discussion: The Right Stuff

Jesus teaches us that the right heart is *as important* as the right actions. We should always examine why we are doing what we are doing, especially when it is an act of obedience towards God. It is interesting that these actions are all assumed by Jesus to be actually happening in the life of His followers, and yet, one wonders how frequently they are being practiced. Spend some time as a group and discuss your successes and struggles with giving, prayer, and fasting.

1. Icebreaker: Of these three practices, which of these are you the most successful in practicing on a regular basis? Which of these three are you the least successful in practicing on a regular basis? Why do you suppose that is?
2. Read 2 Corinthians 8:12 and 9:7. What should the quality and quantity of giving look like? How important is giving to you? How important is it according to your actions?
3. Read 1 John 5:14. How often do you practice asking God for what you need? Now read Matthew 5:44. How often do you practice this kind of prayer? Which of these two is more challenging? Why?
4. Read Luke 2:37 and Acts 13:2. What other thing is often present with fasting? What is the purpose of fasting? When was the last time you fasted? If you have never fasted, talk about why.
5. One of the realities of this passage is that there is a reward one receives when he or she practices these things openly so that others will see them and think highly of them. The problem is that this reward pales in comparison to what is received when done wholly unto the Lord. Share with the group a time when someone did something to bless you secretly. How much more special was it to you because it was a secret? How would it have felt if that same blessing had been given in a big, public spectacle?

Takeaways:

1. Practicing the disciplines of giving, prayer, and fasting must not only be done (because they are commanded) but they must be done the right way with the right heart as to an audience of One.
2. The way we forgive others directly correlates to the way the Father forgives us.

PRAYER REQUESTS: