



“Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them; otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 6:1)

Closet Devotion

Lesson Subject: All Christian service must be done unto God and for His glory.

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Topic: Jesus: Teachings of.

Ancient Jews believed the three great acts of religious devotion were almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Jesus agreed with that. He was concerned that those acts be performed in the right spirit — not for the intention of bringing praise to the doer, but instead glory to God.

Three times Jesus said. “*Verily I say unto you, They have their reward*” (verses 2, 5, 16). That is not a threat, meaning, “They will get what they deserve.” It is a simple statement that they receive now all the reward they will ever get. The term “*reward*” simply means “payment in full.”

If a person gives alms, prays, or fasts in such a way that he seeks for others to see and praise him, others see and praise him. He has his reward. God will not respond to such good religious acts because they are performed with the wrong motive. The person is paid in full. That is all he will ever get from those works of righteousness.

This lesson offers a challenge to each reader to examine his own heart. How much would you pray if no one ever knew you were a person of prayer? How much would you give of your money if no one ever knew that you gave a cent? What kind of consistent service would you render if no one ever thanked you for serving? Do you work to be appreciated by men or to be approved of God? All Christian service must be done unto God and for His glory. That principle applies to Christian giving (verses 1-4), praying (verses 5-8), and fasting (verses 16-18).

I. GIVING (Matthew 6:1-4)

A. Principle: *“Do not your alms before men, to be seen of them”* (verse 1). Jesus accepted the fact that people would do alms — give to relieve the needs of the poor. That was taught through all the Old Testament, though the word alms does not occur there. The Jews were required by law to provide for the poor (Leviticus 19:9, 10; Deuteronomy 15:11). It was not whether the people gave alms, but with what spirit they gave. Almsgiving was considered by ancient Jews to be the most sacred of their acts of personal religion.

B. Parade: *“When thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men”* (verse 2).

Why do people give? Some give from a sense of fear that God will punish them if they do not give. Some give from a sense of profit, believing that God will reward them if they give. Some give from a sense of duty, knowing there is a need which can be met only if someone gives. Some give from a sense of pride to show people how much they have and how generous they are in their giving. But blessed is the person whose gifts to others are truly given from the heart to God and for His glory alone.

The person who gives to be seen and praised by others is a hypocrite (the Greek term means “a play-actor”), not a worshiper of God. The praise he receives from others is all the reward he will ever receive.

C. Privacy: *“When thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth”* (verse 3). *“Thou”* is the first word of that sentence in Greek and is emphatic in its use. It means, “But as for you, when you give alms.” It distinguishes the Christian's giving for the glory of God from other people's giving for praise of self.

For the left hand not to know what the right hand does simply indicates the absence of self glory in giving. It is not a prohibition of public offerings. (Some well-meaning Christians refuse to give in church in such a way that any other person knows that they give or how much they give. Jesus is not dealing with that issue, but with special gifts to the poor.) It is motive, not amount, which is under consideration here. Since a wrong motive of pride requires public display, the Lord recommends private giving as an indication of a right motive of loving concern and humility.

D. Promise: *“Thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly”* (verse 4).

Almsgiving which is motivated by the desire to obey and glorify God in

the relief of the poor will be rewarded by God. How and when He rewards is of His own option. But when the blessings come, they will be evident expressions of His reward for faithful giving.

Jesus Christ is our pattern in Christian giving. *“Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich”* (II Corinthians 8:9). Our giving must never be from a grim sense of duty, or for our own glory and praise of men, but the outflow of the love of God which is in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). We must give as Jesus gave.

II. PRAYING (Matthew 6:5-8)

Thank God for the privilege of prayer. Think of it! A mere mortal can have an audience with God, speaking to Him and being spoken to by Him, through the medium of prayer.

The devil knows the power which comes through prayer. Therefore, he is set to pervert the practice, defile the motive, and destroy the effectiveness of intercession. Jesus deals with some of the problems of an effective prayer life in Matthew 6:5-8.

A. The problem of public prayer: vain display (verse 5). Who perverts prayer? *“Hypocrites.”* Where do they pray? *“Standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets.”* Why do they stand there? *“That they may be seen of men.”* With what results do they pray? *“They have their reward.”*

The text carries no criticism of the public act of worship. Public prayer is not condemned. (The Model Prayer of Matthew 6:7.13 is intended for public use as indicated by plural pronouns as our, us, and we.) The thing Jesus condemned was a spirit of exhibition in prayer offered in public.

The one who prays in a congregation of Christians must “lead” the people in prayer. He must be aware of the needs and desires of all in wording his prayer. However, he must not become so people conscious that he is not God conscious. He must speak to God in behalf of the people, and not just speak so the people will be pleased with what they hear.

The Christian must keep constant guard that he keep his prayers Godward. Otherwise, he falls into the trap of the devil.

B. The promise of private prayer: an evident answer (verse 6). The time: *“when thou prayest.”* The place: *“enter into thy closet, and . . . shut thy door.”* The person: *“pray to thy Father which is in secret.”* The assurance: *“thy Father . . . seeth in secret.”* The promise: *“thy Father . . . shall reward thee openly.”*

To enter the closet is a metaphorical way of denoting privacy, particularly the absence of pious admirers. The one sure way to pray to God is to pray alone. In fact, the true quality of one's prayer life is indicated by how much time he spends with God in prayer when no one else knows of it. You ask privately. God will give publicly. Jesus himself promised it.

C. Procedure in pronouncing prayer: simplicity (verse 7). Jesus encourages brevity in praying. He admonishes, *"Use not vain repetitions."* Those who are deceived *"think that they shall be heard for their much speaking."*

How does one violate that injunction? It is violated when one prays for every subject he can bring to mind, whether it is truly a concern of heart or not. It is violated when one thoughtlessly uses titles and descriptions of God. (One such prayer begins: "Blessed, praised, and glorified, exalted, extolled and honored, magnified and lauded be the name of the Holy One. ") It is violated when one continues praying on and on to the dismay of a waiting congregation.

God is not impressed with human oratory. He looks in the heart to know the truth about the prayer we offer. A good principle to follow is, *"Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few"* (Ecclesiastes 5:2).

D. Privilege of parental prayer: Father-child conversation (verse 8). What a consolation to hear, *"Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him."* The effectiveness of your prayers does not depend on how well you can name every need and phrase every petition. It is based solely on your child-Father relationship with Him in Jesus. He is your Father who delights to hear and answer your prayers.

III. FASTING (Matthew 6:16-18)

Fasting is one of the finest spiritual disciplines, but it is largely absent from the lives of Christians today. That absence is to our spiritual loss. Jesus condemned the wrong kind of fasting, but He never suggested we should not fast.

Fasting was commonly practiced in Bible times. It was sometimes a sign of repentance (Leviticus 16:31; I Samuel 7:6), a preparation for meeting God in a special way (Exodus 24:15; Daniel 9:3), and for personal discipline of the flesh. Nowhere did Jesus condemn that kind of fasting.

The fasting Jesus condemned was that which was accompanied by demonstration of the fast so as to gain praise of others. In New Testament

times, some did fast for show. They walked through the streets of the town with hair disheveled and clothes deliberately disarrayed. Some even whitened their faces that they might appear pale as an indication of fasting. Jesus severely condemned that. That was vain display and accomplished nothing of spiritual significance.

What is the proper procedure in fasting? Verses 17 and 18 give these guidelines. (1) Dress your body as when you are not fasting. (2) Do not pass the word to anyone that you are involved in a fast. (3) Be assured that God will know what is happening in your life. (4) Be confident that God will reward you for the purpose you had in fasting.

Our American culture is tuned to self-indulgence. We eat foods far too highly seasoned for good health. (The amount of sugar and salt consumed in our foods is making us sick!) We need the discipline of mind over body to demonstrate that we are not slaves to our physical appetite. It is a good act of self discipline to fast one day each week.

Fasting and prayer are commonly associated in the Bible. Therefore, times of spiritual need should be accompanied by a period of fasting and prayer. The Bible sets that out as an ideal way to meet God and deal seriously with Him.

Take care lest giving, praying, or fasting become a little ritual without spiritual content. Each loses its effectiveness when that happens.

“Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:23, 24).

Remember the central truth of this lesson: “All Christian service must be done unto God and for His glory.” *“If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.”* (I Peter 4:11).

Questions

1. What is meant by *“they have their reward”*?
2. Why does God not accept works motivated by personal pride?
3. How can you be sure your giving is not for show?
4. What promise does God make to the faithful giver?
5. How can one keep from show in public prayer?
6. Why is private prayer so important to the Christian?
7. How might people use *“vain repetitions”* in prayer today?
8. Why is fasting important to the Christian today?

9. What occasions should prompt a Christian to fast?

10. How can you make giving, praying, and fasting acts of worship for you?