

# Matthew 6:1-18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 17 February 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     Matthew chapter 6 verses 1 to 18 And when 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.
- And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your father knows what you need before you ask him.
- Pray then like this, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
- Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
- For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.
- [ 1 : 4 7 ]     When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward.
- But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others, but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.
- In Matthew chapter 6, Jesus is continuing the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. And his teaching is about the distinct forms of morality, worship, and social relations that should characterize his disciples, as they are to be salt and light in the world.
- This is the sort of righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. He's already discussed the law and its commands, particularly the second table of the law. And now he moves to discuss Christian forms of religious practice.
- Jesus' disciples are supposed to behave in a way that bears witness to the truth of God and the kingdom. And there's a repeated contrast between them and the hypocrites, who act to be seen by men.
- [ 2 : 5 3 ]     That language of hypocrisy originally comes from the world of the theatre, but it had already been adopted by Jewish teachers to refer to moral pretense. They are hypocrites because they are ungodly, yet trying to project an image of godliness to other men, with whom they are really concerned.
- What really matters to them is how they appear to other men, not how they are in relationship to God. They give little thought to God's judgment, but a great deal of thought to the judgment and approval of other men.
- It's important to notice that Jesus is not primarily concerned with motivation here. His instructions are not about the realm of motivation, avoid bad motives for actions, but rather it's about concrete and specific approaches to action.
- The change in our manner of approaching the action will impact our motivations, but it is not directly aimed at them. So you can see in Jesus' calls, he's giving concrete changes of action, and they're far harder to dodge than challenges to our motivations alone.

It's very easy to say, don't do these things to be applauded by other people. It's a lot more challenging to starve the desire for applause, because we can very easily hide our desire for applause in different ways to ourselves.

[ 4 : 07 ] We are practiced at deceiving ourselves concerning our true motivations. The best way to reveal our truest motivations is to begin to starve bad motivations by changing practice.

So the wisdom and practicality of Jesus' teaching at such points should stand out to us. He recognizes that those who desire the praise of men are driven by that motivation to particular forms of practice, to the broadcasting or even the trumpeting of their righteousness before men.

And so by forbidding the broadcasting, the motivation itself is starved. By instructing his disciples to pursue their righteousness in secret, the conditions are created for the nurturing of different motivations.

So Jesus is not generally focused upon disputing his contemporaries' understanding of the content of ethical practice, so much as their hypocritical behavior and the manner of their piety.

He's not saying that we shouldn't do charitable deeds, or that the charitable deeds that these people are doing are completely misguided. Rather, it's the way that they're approaching them, a way of approaching them that is completely focused upon how they appear to other men.

[ 5 : 13 ] And that's often how we approach our righteousness. We want to be seen by other people. We want to be seen as morally upstanding, to gain social status through these things. In these teachings, Jesus is continuing the triadic logic, the logic of the traditional teaching or practice, the vicious cycle, and then the transforming initiative.

Jesus begins by speaking about the manner in which we should practice our righteousness, and that statement is the heading for the teachings that follow, concerning almsgiving first, then prayer, then fasting.

And Jesus takes it for granted that all these things would be part of the continued practice of his disciples. As people rooted in the Jewish tradition, it would be expected that they would continue its core religious practices.

The first form of righteousness in view is acts of almsgiving to the needy. In the first century, there were established structures of relief and support for the poor, depending upon the tithe for the poor and voluntary contributions.

And Jesus describes a hyperbolic situation where almsgivers sound a trumpet before them to broadcast their practice to others in order to be praised by them. And such people do get the reward that they seek, but it's a paltry reward.

[ 6 : 26 ] They do not realise just how great the prospect of being rewarded by our Father in Heaven is. Note that Jesus is quite happy to present rewards as a fitting motivation, but it depends what rewards we're seeking.

The alternative transforming practice is almsgiving that is so secret that your left hand can be completely unaware of the actions of the right. And note Jesus using body member language here again, like in his teaching concerning lust.

The you here is singular, in contrast to the plurality of the hypocrites. Their religiosity occurs in the realm of the social spectacle, whereas ours should be in the presence of God alone.

Religious practice easily gets conscripted into the activities of social display, used to broadcast our virtue to mark out with whom we are associated and whom we are distanced from, etc.

And the practice of Christian faith before the world can so often and easily be hijacked by a desire to win the applause and the approval of certain people. We want to make clear that we hold the right political and social and ideological views that can give relatively little thought to the approval of God.

[ 7 : 40 ] The danger of this is quite acute within an age of social media. We should be mindful of the fact that Jesus gives a lot of attention to the context of our action here and the way that different contexts can encourage virtue or vice.

The danger so often is that we want to project an image of our relationship with God designed to maintain and manage our relationship with others. And there is such a danger here in the realm of spectacle.

When we are seen by others, everything that we do will be an action that is performed not just for its own ends, but for how it is perceived by those people around us.

Which is why Jesus challenges this at the very root. From almsgiving, Jesus moves on to discuss prayer. The hypocrites love to be seen and heard in the act of prayer, but Jesus' followers must not be like that.

Jesus' encouragement of secret prayer is not a denial of the place for corporate prayer, but an emphasis upon orientation. The designed audience for our prayers should be God alone, and we should think maybe here of Jesus' own practice of secret prayer.

[ 8 : 48 ] In the next teaching Jesus gives concerning prayer, the contrast is not between his disciples and the hypocrites, but between them and the Gentiles, the people who are religious outsiders, who are not God-fearers presumably as well.

Their prayers are characterized by meaningless babbling and much speaking, and often this can be a way of gesticulating at God with our words, hoping that God will notice us.

Treating prayer as a magical and somewhat mechanical thing, rather than as communication and turning our hearts towards our Father in Heaven. The prayer that Jesus gives is condensed and focused.

The words are very few, but they're to the point. We're not, in this case, verbally gesticulating at God to get his attention. His eyes are already upon us. He's aware of our needs.

Rather, prayer is a turning of our hearts towards God. Now, we know from the early church that the Lord's Prayer was used in daily prayer from very early on. The Didache refers to praying it three times daily.

[ 9 : 49 ] And the poetic form of the prayer suggests also that it was designed for memorization and non-mechanical, mentally and spiritually engaged repetition. The form of the prayer suggests not merely a model prayer, and it is a model prayer, but a specific prayer that is given to us that we should pray this as an alternative to the prayer practice of the Gentiles.

And there's a structure to the prayer as well. It begins with the address, Our Father in Heaven, and then moves into three You petitions, followed by three We petitions.

And the things that are forefront are the name, the kingdom, and the will of God. The address is to Our Father in Heaven. And perhaps more than anything else, what comes into strong focus in this chapter and the end of the previous chapter is the fatherhood of God.

There are ten references to God as our father in verses 1 to 18 of Matthew 6. And in the Old Testament, there is recognition of God as father, but it is so much rarer.

You don't see it very often. It really comes into clearer focus in the New Testament, particularly through Christ's own relationship with his father. And we can see the way it comes into the foreground at times of redemption as well, the language of God as our father.

[ 11 : 11 ] There is a danger of over-intimatising the language of father. Many have seen in the language of Abba, for instance, the concept Daddy, whereas this does not seem to be the proper sense of the term Abba.

The other thing we should notice here is that God is spoken of as Our Father, not My Daddy. That language can often suggest the child's relationship with the father when they're about four or five years old.

Whereas in Scripture, the emphasis is upon the son as a grown adult. The son is the one who represents the father in the world. The son is the one who does the father's work.

The son is the one who's given a bride by the father. The son is the one who bears the name of the father and stands for the father. The son is the one who will inherit all that the father has.

The son is the one who bears the image of his father. And in all these ways, we need to shift our understanding to think of the son as an adult. And when we're praying this prayer, we're praying it not as infants or young children in the house of God, our Father, so much as adults who are working and acting in His name.

[ 12 : 18 ] As we go out and we act in the world in this way of saving righteousness, the way that has been described in the previous chapter, we will be marked out as the sons of God.

That's what will mark us out, not as those who are just passively receiving the love of our Father, but as those who are acting and working and expressing a saving, transforming, healing righteousness in His name.

As those who work with our Father, we are identified as His children. This does not mean there's no place for the concept of childlike dependency upon God and a sense of God as the good giver who's as a father giving to his young child shows care to give what's good for the child.

That is all there in the New Testament, but that needs to be held alongside these other images that foreground an adult child relating to their father. Another important thing about father language is it refers to the other party in a way that reminds them of their relationship with us.

It calls upon them to act in the light of that fact. It calls God to recognise us as His children calling to Him for aid and to act on our behalf. In Isaiah chapter 63, for instance, we read in verse 15 following, Look down from heaven and sea, from your holy and beautiful habitation.

[ 13 : 38 ] Where are your zeal and your might? The stirring of your inner parts and your compassion are held back from me. For you are our father. Though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us, you, O Lord, are our father.

Our redeemer from of old is your name. O Lord, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so that we fear you not? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage.

Your holy people held possession for a little while. Our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. We have become like those over whom you have never ruled, like those who are not called by your name.

Now the point here is, we bear the name of God. We are those who are His children. And so when we call to Him as Father, we are calling Him to act accordingly. The first petition of the prayer expresses the desire that God's name be hallowed.

We see God's concern for the holiness of His name in places such as Ezekiel 36. God says, But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, These are the people of the Lord.

[ 14 : 50 ] And yet they had to go out of His land. But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God, It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.

And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.

As passages like this make clear, the call for God to hallow His name is not just a statement of fact. The petition is not just saying your name is a holy name, but it's a desire that God act in the world to display the holiness of His name through action.

God is ultimately the one who will hallow His own name. The second petition calls for God's eschatological kingdom or reign to come, His reign that He will bring in at the end, for God's rule to be seen in the situations of history.

The third petition calls for God's will to be done on earth as in heaven. This is a redemptive righteousness, the pattern of heaven worked out in the earth. We can think about ourselves as light bearers, reflecting the light of heaven itself and bearing that light out into the world.

[ 16 : 19 ] And we should see that each one of these first three petitions are practicing us in the posture of longing for God's action and calling for God's action in history, for hungering and thirsting after His righteousness.

All of this is about conforming us to God's will, teaching us to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. And the fourth petition turns to our need for bread, perhaps an allusion to manna, our daily bread, a recognition of our utter dependence upon God for our daily sustenance and our immediate provision.

We receive all of the good things of the world as a constant gift, and there's a recognition here of a hand behind our own human providence. We may prepare our food, but ultimately that food comes from God Himself.

The fifth petition speaks of forgiving debts. The new covenant involved the general release from Israel's debt as the nation was forgiven its sins. I've already spoken about the importance of Isaiah chapter 61 as a background, the year of the Lord's favour as the year of Jubilee.

And there is a reciprocal element to this. We request forgiveness as we have forgiven others. As Jesus goes on to stress, immediately after the prayer, if we do not forgive others, we ourselves will not be forgiven.

[ 17 : 34 ] This means that we need to live as those who have remitted all debts, even the debts of gratitude and compensation that we may believe that people or God owe us.

We live as people who relinquish the claims of those types. We put ourselves in the hands of God and in our neighbours. And all the demands of the ego that we place upon people and upon God must be relinquished.

As people who depend upon God's giving and his forgiving, we can give up our claims upon others. God is the guarantor of all our debts. As Paul can say, my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in Christ Jesus.

As his response to the charity that other people gave to him, he recognises that God is the one who backs up all his debts. The other thing that we can see here is that God makes us participants in his giving and forgiving process.

When we think about the Old Testament Exodus, for instance, God brought his people out of Egypt but also gave them the calling to give rest to their servants, to be people who gave rest to others, who extended the principle of Exodus and of Sabbath to the people who worked for them.

[ 18 : 45 ] Now we're supposed to do that as well. We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit as the church but we've been given that in a way that God makes us participants in his giving process. We are those who exercise spiritual gifts that represent the one spiritual gift that has been given to the whole church.

Now as we exercise those gifts, we participate in that one gift but we also become participants in the giving process. And in the same way, if we're not actually forgiving, we're not truly participating in the release from sins and all these other things that the kingdom has brought in.

We're trying to stand with one foot in and one foot out of the kingdom and that's just impossible. To participate in the life of the kingdom is to become an active participant in the life of the kingdom.

Someone who's extending its forgiveness and its grace to others. The final petition is a prayer for deliverance from the time of testing and the evil one. We can think of Jesus' own experience in the wilderness.

He was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness and that testing is one in which He's led by the Spirit into temptation and we recognize our limitations.

[ 19 : 58 ] We are people who are weak, sinful human beings who are fallible and flawed in a great many ways and we know that if we are brought into the utmost testing we will fail and so we pray that God will keep us from the utmost testing, that He'll keep us from the time of tribulation and this is something that Christ does for His disciples.

He takes the tribulation upon Himself so that they can be released. These are extreme situations where our faith will be tested to breaking point and so we pray to be delivered from those things and from the evil one.

Some manuscripts conclude the prayer with a doxology as do many of the ways in which we pray it within the life of the church. We can see an example of such doxology in 1 Chronicles 29, verse 11.

Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all.

This is the sort of statement with which you might end a prayer. Jesus concludes this section by teaching concerning fasting. There's a sort of ironic reversal here where Jesus teaches us to anoint our head and wash our face so that we might be seen by others to be in really good health and radiant and happy whereas in fact we're fasting in relationship to our God who is in secret and he will see us and reward us.

[ 21 : 26 ] The reversal is the hypocrites were very concerned to put on a mask to be seen by others to be very pious to be those who engage in fasting, almsgiving, etc, etc.

whereas in some sense we're engaged as a different sort of hypocrite. We're wearing a mask but our mask is designed to cover up the fact that we are fasting. We will always do our actions toward an audience but we are really concerned that the actions that we do are towards the right audience and that audience must be God himself.

The more that we do our actions in a way that's seen by other people, the more we will find the gravity of that audience drawing us away from the audience to whom we should truly be acting, God himself.

A question to consider. In this section Jesus pays a lot of attention to concrete practice and context, to things like where we pray, to how we look when we fast, to the words that we use when we say our prayers, and to things such as the context in which we exercise our charity.

what are some of the contexts in our lives that we may need to step away from as they draw us into the activity of performing to others rather than performing to God?

[ 22 : 45 ] Where do we find the secret place where we can address God in secret? What are some of the ways in which we can anoint our heads and wash our faces so that we do not appear to be fasting to men?

How can we perform a righteousness that is driven by the desire to please God above all others?