

Week 7: Matthew 6:1–20

Hook



Main Point: Do the right thing for God, not for the praise of others.

Back in 2017, a story of a lady in New Jersey creating a GoFundMe page for a homeless veteran went viral. The initial story was that the homeless veteran, Johnny Bobbitt, used his last 20 dollars to buy gas for a stranger, Kate McClure. McClure did not have any cash to repay Bobbitt at the moment and promised to come back with something. Over the next few weeks, McClure and her then boyfriend, Mark D'Amico, returned with money and other gifts for Bobbitt. As McClure and D'Amico continued to learn Bobbitt's story, they decided they had to do more, so they created a GoFundMe page in efforts to raise \$10,000 for Bobbitt. This would provide him with enough money to purchase a new truck and a few days in a hotel so he could begin getting back on his feet.

LINK to original story:

<https://www.nj.com/burlington/2017/11/this-nj-couple-raised-5k-in-10-days-to-help-a-homeless-veteran.html>

Q: Hearing this story, how inclined would you be to contribute?

The story quickly went viral and the account soon surpassed \$400,000 in funds. All still seemed well, until Bobbitt sued the couple for fraud stating that he never received his portion of the money. He went on to accuse McClure and D'Amico of using the money from the GoFundMe to go on trips and fund a lavish lifestyle. By the fall of 2018, the story had completely unraveled when it was revealed that the entire story was a hoax perpetrated by the trio. They were all tried and sentenced for their roles in the fraud, and the money was returned to those who donated.

Link to updated story: <https://www.nj.com/burlington/2019/04/kate-mcclures-stunning-public-fall-complete-as-homeless-vet-gofundme-scamster-agrees-to-spend-years-in-prison.html>

Q: Now that you have heard the full story, how does it change the way you perceive GoFundMe sites and other crowd-sourced fundraisers?

Transition: The motive of Kate McClure seemed pure and honest, simply helping someone in a time of need. However, time and circumstance soon revealed the true motives of McClure and her boyfriend, Mark D'Amico. As we continue in our study of Matthew, Jesus is going to use the example of three spiritual actions to show the significance of our motives.

Week 7 – Righteousness before God

BOOK

Main Point: Do the right thing for God, not for the praise of others.

Matthew 6:1–6 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Do good works for God’s glory, not for praise and attention from people.

Q: How can you tell when someone is doing something good for attention rather than for God?

Q: Does this mean we shouldn’t ever tell others that we did something good, such as giving to a ministry and posting on social media to encourage others to give too? If not, what does it mean?

As Jesus continues to reshape our view of true righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount, He is going to look at the motivation behind our “righteous acts.” Jesus begins His discourse in chapter 6 by making a declarative statement, “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them,” and then explains, “if you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

To clearly illustrate His point, Jesus uses three examples (almsgiving, prayer, and fasting) of acts all Jewish people would have participated in, based on Jewish law. These are three cardinal examples of the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments in the Jewish law) that were practiced in the synagogues.ⁱ Jewish culture taught that righteousness was obtained by performing *all 613 mitzvot*. There were 248 positive commands (believed to be the number of limbs and organs in the human body) and 365 negative ones (believed to be the number of nerves and sinews in the body).ⁱⁱ Missing even one of them makes the *nefesh* (soul) deficient.

The statement Jesus is making is that we should not do “righteous” or “spiritual” acts for others to see or to gain approval; we do them only for God. As followers of Christ, we should apply this principle to all of God’s commandments. Paul echoed this thought in his letter to the Galatians, “Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10).

This doesn’t mean we can’t ever pray, give alms, or fast in public. There are many places in the Bible where all three acts are discussed and exhorted in a public context. Acts gives several examples about praying together as a community (Acts 1:14; 2:42; et. al.). God’s people are often called to public fasts (Ezra 8:21; Acts 13:1–3, et. al.), and we are often encouraged to push

and prod each other to do good deeds (Hebrews 10:24). This passage doesn't mean that if someone finds out about our good deeds that they don't count anymore. Paul told the Corinthians about the Macedonians' radically generous giving to inspire them to give cheerfully from the heart (2 Corinthians 8–9). He told many of his churches about all he had done for the Gospel, not to brag or seek their approval but to encourage them to do the same (e.g., Philippians 3).

In fact, a few verses before, Jesus tells them to "let their light shine" so people *could see* their good works and give glory to God the Father (Matthew 5:16). Jesus' concern is the heart's motivation behind the actions. It's not about praying, giving or fasting in secret. It's about motivation. *Why* are they giving alms or praying or fasting? So other people will think they are holy, or for God's glory? Each time, Jesus says "*when you*" pray or fast or give alms, not "*if you.*" Almsgiving was not a spontaneous act of generosity; it was required of everyone. The assumption is that you will do these things. The question is how, with what attitude and heart? Keener writes, "Jesus' warning does not preclude public acts of righteousness – even with the knowledge that such acts will draw attention – as long as the disciple seeks to be seen for God's glory rather than his or her own."ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus' first example, almsgiving, is any gift to the needy given out of both compassion and righteousness. According to Mosaic law, all wealth belongs to God, so the rich are obligated to share God's bounty with the poor. The temple, and later the synagogues, set up a system of donating to the needy. The temple treasury had 13 trumpet-shaped brass boxes into which both rich and poor gave their alms. They were shaped like trumpets to keep dishonest people from taking out coins. Jesus' saying hypocrites sound trumpets when they give to the poor is a play on words referring to this trumpet shape. The word *hypocrite* comes from the Greek word for actor, someone who wore a mask and played a part in the theater. Those who give, pray, or fast for the attention of others are playing the part of a Christian.^{iv}

Jesus used hyperbole when He said our giving should be so secretive that even your own right hand shouldn't know what your left hand was doing (v. 3). Obviously, this is physically impossible. He was using a hyperbolic image to drive home the point.

In all three examples, Jesus concludes, "Truly I tell you; they have received their reward in full" (vv. 2, 5, 16). This phrase came from the statement that businessmen of the time would write on a receipt to indicate no further payment was required. Jesus was saying that those who do things for mankind's approval receive that reward on earth. They got what they wanted; they will not be rewarded again in heaven. But those who do good for God's glory will be rewarded by Him in heaven (vv. 4, 6, 18).^v

We have to be careful as well to not take this “in secret” thing too legalistically and remember it’s about the heart behind it. What if a friend asks you to give to his or her ministry and post a link on social media so others will give? That’s not keeping your giving a secret, but if your motivation is pure, if you really just want to post so others will give too, then your heart is right. On the flip side, if you only volunteer at the soup kitchen so you can post a picture of yourself being *#generous* or put it on your college application, or if you only give money to a ministry so you can put your name on the building, meet other high-profile donors, or get the tax write-off, that’s giving for your own glory instead of God’s. Jesus wants us to give generously, from a cheerful heart with the right motives.

Q: In what ways have you been tempted to do good things for the attention of people?

Q: How can you always turn the glory to God, even when people praise you for what you are doing? Give specific examples.

Matthew 6:5–15[Read]

Talking Point 2: Prayer should be simple and focused on God’s will.

Q: What two things does Jesus criticize about the way the hypocrites and the pagans pray?

Q: How does the Lord’s Prayer reflect the principles Jesus is teaching us about prayer?

The second example Jesus gives is prayer. This section is a bit longer because He adds a sample prayer, what we call the Lord’s Prayer, but its message is the same as the other two examples. Don’t do this deed of righteousness for attention from people; do it for God. Those who look for praise from people receive their “reward in full.” Pray with the right heart and motivation and God will reward you in heaven.

New Testament scholar Dr. Craig Keener explains that most Galilean homes had one or, at the most, two rooms, and the only room with a door would be a small closet or pantry. Again, this was hyperbole to make a point. It’s not that real believers can never pray in public and should literally pray in a closet, but prayer is a private thing between you and God and should not be done for the sake of looking good or holy in front of other people.

Again, Jesus criticizes the hypocrites for praying publicly for attention (v. 5), but He adds another group here, the Gentiles. The Greek word translated “heap up empty phrases” is an obscure word that in the Bible is only used here. It literally means to “stammer” or “babble,” but it doesn’t refer to someone who stutters or stammers when they pray, struggles to know what to say, or sincerely prays a memorized prayer with an authentic heart. It refers specifically to a Gentile practice of saying prescriptive incantations, almost like magic spells, over and over,

to try to convince their god to do what they asked. As if saying just the right words in just the right way, enough times, or with the right voice inflection, would assure that God did what they wanted.^{vi}

But Yahweh does not stand for this kind of manipulation. He intentionally did not give His people incantations to say in their sacrificial system for that reason. For Him, worship, sacrifice, and prayer are about the relationship between God and man – either thanking God, praising Him, or repenting to seek restoration of the relationship that was broken by sin. Prayer isn't about getting God to do what we want, as if He is a genie or Santa Claus. It's about getting us on board with God's plan. God already knows what we need before we even ask. So, prayer isn't for show or to manipulate God to do what we want. It is "an expression of trust in a Father who already knows one's need and merely waits for His children to express their dependence on Him."^{vii}

It is in this context that Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer in Matthew. The command is to keep it simple, focused on God, and not to be noticed by other people:

- **Our Father:** Our prayer is based on an intimate relationship with God, a dependence on Him as our Father who cares for us and knows what we need better than we know ourselves.
- **Hallowed be your name:** We praise before we request. Hallowing God's name was "the most characteristic feature of Jewish ethics"^{viii} and something His people could do with their words *and* their actions. Everything we do can bring either honor or dishonor to God's name.
- **Your kingdom come:** Disciples long for God's kingdom to come, not just in the future in heaven, but for His will to be done here on earth. This is a prayer for God's will in your own life as well as for His justice, mercy, and will to be done in the world. This is a line we often say without really thinking, but Keener says, "This is a prayer for the desperate, who recognize that this world is not as it should be and only God can set things straight."^{ix}
- **Daily bread:** The only request mentioned in this sample prayer is for "our daily bread" – just the basics ("bread") of what we need for today ("daily") and this for everyone ("our"), not just for ourselves. This would remind Jewish hearers of God's gift of daily manna in the wilderness, when they were only to gather enough for one day, trusting God to give them more the next day (Exodus 16). This is the prayer of a person willing to live simply and dependently on God for what they need.
- **Forgive our debts:** Debts represent sins (Luke 7:36–50). Here and in verses 14–15, Jesus explains that our forgiveness from God is tied up with our willingness to forgive others, just as we cannot say we love God if we don't love our neighbor (1 John 4:20).

- **Temptation:** This word means trial, temptation or test. God does not keep us from all suffering, trials or temptations, but He uses them to work in our lives (Romans 5:3–5). God Himself never tempts us; that is the work of the Evil One (James 1:13). God will not let us be tempted beyond what we can bear with His help but will give us a way out (1 Corinthians 10:13). He gives us His armor to stand firm against the Evil One (Ephesians 6:10–18).

This short, simple prayer is focused on seeking God’s kingdom, submitting ourselves to God’s will, and glorifying Him with our lives. Keener writes, “Effective prayer is not a complex ritual, but a simple cry of faith predicated on an assured relationship”^x When we know that God is in control, that He loves us and delights to give us everything we need like a good Father (Matthew 7:7–12), we don’t have to try to manipulate Him to do what we want. Prayer transforms our heart to do what *He* wants.

Q: How would you summarize this prayer in your own words? What would you say it focuses on most? What things does it leave out and why?

Q: In what ways have you made prayer more complicated than it needs to be?

Q: In what ways have you made prayer more about yourself than it should be? How can you keep your prayer focused on God and have the right perspective on your relationship?

Matthew 6:16–20 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Store up treasures in heaven, not on earth.

Q: What is the purpose of fasting? What has been your experience with fasting?

Q: How is keeping your righteousness focused on God’s glory, not attention from man, “storing up treasures in heaven”? How are the two connected?

Many modern believers don’t have a lot of experience with fasting, but it was a regular part of religious life for God’s people in Scripture. Jesus says, “*when* you fast,” not *if*, assuming that all believers would fast regularly. Fasting was a time of drawing near to God by demonstrating your commitment to Him and dependence on Him even more than on food (Matthew 4:4). Jesus fasted for 40 days preparing to be tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Yet many of the prophets criticized God’s people for fasting as a religious ritual while their hearts were far from Him (Isaiah 29:13). Joel said those who were truly repentant would rend their hearts and not their garments (Joel 2:13). Isaiah declared that a true fast was to seek justice and care for the vulnerable (Isaiah 58:1–10).

Jesus says the hypocrites “disfigure their faces” when they fast. This is another play on words, since originally “hypocrites” were actors in the theater. The word for *disfigure* is very strong; it is intentionally hyperbolic like the other examples Jesus used. Anointing oil was used to anoint priests and kings for service, but it could also be used to clean the skin or as a kind of perfume on special occasions. The meaning is clear – don’t make a show of fasting. Let it be between you and God. Of course, your family, and maybe even your coworkers, will realize you’re fasting when you don’t eat with them, so it’s not about keeping it a secret as much as it is about *not* making it a show. Fast for your personal spiritual growth and nothing else.

Jesus ends this section with the command not to store up treasures on earth but to store up treasures in heaven instead. It’s important to see these verses in context. Jesus keeps telling the people that these hypocrites already have their “reward in full,” but God’s people will be rewarded in heaven. We don’t do these acts of righteousness to get a reward in heaven. We do them to grow closer to God and to serve others. But doing these things with a pure heart and the right motivation is what it means to store up treasures in heaven. As we pray, “Your kingdom come,” instead of putting our hope in this world, we store up treasures in heaven. As we live out our faith in the real world, serve others out of love for God and not selfish gain, connect with God through prayer and fasting and other spiritual disciplines, and grow more like Him in character and in love – this is how we store up treasures in heaven.

Week 7 – Righteousness before God

TOOK

Main Point: Do the right thing for God, not for the praise of others.

The Bible often talks about the heart as the center of life. In Proverbs 4:23, Solomon tells his son, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.” Jesus continues this theme in Luke 6:45 by stating, “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”

We must constantly be evaluating the motives of our hearts and making sure they line up with God’s Word. Here are two questions we can ask ourselves to help us keep our heart in check:

Q: How is God challenging you to practice fasting and other spiritual disciplines more regularly, with more intention and with the right heart?

Q: What things do you need to change about your life and actions to be sure you are doing all for God’s glory and selfless love of others, not your own personal gain?

THINK: In what particular ways do you struggle with making your faith more about yourself than about glorifying God and serving others? It could be making a show of your religious deeds, or it could be some other way entirely. Think through how God is asking you to humble yourself, strip away all that is not of Him, and refocus your life on bringing Him glory alone.

PRAY for God to work in your heart, to show you any way that you need to change. Ask Him to convict you in any areas of hypocrisy, self-centeredness or sin and then hold you accountable for changing them. Pray for God to bring you a solid Christian friend who can hold you accountable for changing.

ACT: Do a secret act of kindness and generosity for someone. Try to make it as secret as possible, just between you and God. Don’t post on social media, don’t tell your small group, don’t even tell the person for whom you did it if you can. If that person has to know about it in order for you to do it, give all of the glory to God. Just do something sacrificial and generous for someone else and ask God to work in your heart through it.

Hook, Took & Editing by Josh Steckel

i

▫ Tobit 12:8; Kaufmann Kohler, “Alms” *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906).

ii

▫ Michael A. Fishbane, Adele Berlin, and Marc Zvi Brettler, “The Bible in Jewish Life and Thought” *The Jewish Study Bible* (Jewish Publication Society, 2004).

iii

▫ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

iv

▫ Kaufmann Kohler, “Alms” *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906).

v

▫ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

vi

▫ R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985).

vii

▫ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

viii

▫ George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era, Vol. 2* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1971).

ix

▫ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

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▫ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).