

Matthew 6:1 – 18

¹ Beware of practicing your righteousness before people to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. ² So when you give to the poor, 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. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. ⁵ When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by people. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ⁶ But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. ⁷ And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. ⁹ Pray, then, in this way:

Our Father who is in heaven,	¹² And forgive us our debts,
Hallowed be Your name.	as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹⁰ Your kingdom come.	¹³ And do not lead us into temptation,
Your will be done,	but deliver us from evil.
On earth	For Yours is the kingdom
As it is in heaven.	and the power
¹¹ Give us this day	and the glory forever. Amen.
Our daily bread.	

¹⁴ For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. ¹⁶ Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by people when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ¹⁷ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face ¹⁸ so that your fasting will not be noticed by people, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

Historical and Cultural Background:

- *Israel's Exile*: The Jewish people knew that they had sinned and were in exile. This exile began with Babylonian captivity in 586 BC but it continued under the Persians, Greeks, and Romans.
- *The Kingdom of God*: The Old Testament expressed unflagging hope that God would rescue Israel and restore them to His reign. This was called 'the kingdom of heaven' or 'kingdom of God'. Almost all Jews interpreted this to mean a military Messiah (anointed king) who would unite Israel and defeat the Romans. Jesus, however, understood these passages to mean a deeper and more profound transformation in human nature, which he had to accomplish first in himself (Mt.3:13 – 4:11), and then in his followers. Jesus had just announced 'the kingdom of heaven' (Mt.4:12 – 25), triggering all kinds of questions, hopes, and expectations.

- *Jesus' Transformation of the Human Heart:* Recall that in Matthew 5:1 – 16 Jesus was describing how his process of transforming people will have a certain kind of influence in the world. In this section, called The Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5:1 – 7:28), Jesus is laying out his transformation of the human heart.
- *Almsgiving, Prayer, and Fasting:* These were basic and central practices in Jewish life. They were done publicly in addition to privately.

PART ONE

Questions: Secrecy

...⁴ your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you...⁶ your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you...¹⁷ your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

1. EARLY APPLICATION QUESTION: When do you expect the most THANKS or RESPECT, and if you're a Christian, especially from other Christians?
2. Look at the passage. Trace the theme of secrecy through it. Notice that giving, prayer, and fasting DO NOT make Christians different from other people. EVERYONE gives, prays, and fasts! What makes Christians different is HOW we give, pray, and fast, and WHEN, and WHAT is what our understanding of God as our Father.
3. (Note: I don't think Jesus means that we are to *never* actually pray in public, etc. The motivation matters, and also the practice of secrecy matters. The two are actually separate issues.)
4. How many times does Jesus say 'in secret'? Is this just about our motivation? For example: A person becomes a leader. He prays in meetings a lot, and says that he doesn't pray much in private. But he says he really wants God to be glorified and thinks it maximizes effort to pray in groups more than individually. What would Jesus say to this person?
 - a. This is important, because it gets at the fact that Jesus is NOT only talking about motivation, although motivation is important, too. Jesus is talking about secret time with God. Notice that Jesus does not say, 'When you fast, let people know because that will draw glory to God, but just get your internal heart motivation right.' He says, 'When you fast, don't let anyone know.' The same with giving. Why would Jesus want to conceal these aspects of our lives from the public?
 - b. Jesus is aware that even if we keep our motivations good while we are in public, that we will burnout. What prevents burnout is a sense of 'shared jokes' and 'shared secrets' we have with God. It's to be someone who prays or fasts for something without telling anyone, and then has God answer that, and it's a 'shared secret' between God and that person. What a rich spiritual life!!
 - i. Praying for a non-xian, who then has these small 'revelations' or 'encounters' which lead to larger questions, who then becomes a Christian. You don't have to tell the person. Your prayer is a 'shared secret' between God and you.
 - ii. Jesus wants us to treat God as fundamentally separate from EVERYONE ELSE.
 - iii. Does it have to be alone? Is 'in secret' the same thing as 'in private'? No, it could be when other people are around, but you don't tell them what you're doing. Notice with fasting in v.16 – 18, this is the case – you groom yourself as you would on any other day. No outward signs, no complaining, no announcing.
5. What kind of community would it be where everything was for thanks, evaluation, and even show?
 - a. Verbally appreciative: Expectations are known, positions are defined, approval is given
 - b. Flattering for some: Some people just become good at doing what gets thanked.
 - c. Tiring. It could be lots of work
 - d. Hypocritical. Our inner being would become subsumed into our outer façade
 - e. Socially cliquish. We'd hang out with people who prayed well. We'd rank things, and then 'love those who love us.' Notice that this is the key dynamic that keeps us from loving our enemies, as Jesus talked about in 5:38-48. There is continuity between that section and this one.
 - f. NOT EVANGELISTIC: Because we're so busy serving other Christians, we don't do the thankless work of reaching out to non-Christians, particularly our enemies, the last, the least, and the lost. THIS IS CONTRARY TO JESUS' MISSION.
6. The word for 'hypocrite' in Greek means literally, 'stage actor.' What kinds of connotations does that have for you?
 - a. A stage actor's public persona matters more than what's really there on the inside in reality
 - b. A stage actor is always aiming to please a broad audience and get applause
 - c. A stage actor is virtually defined by the audience
 - d. A stage actor tries really hard
 - e. (Say: in all these ways, we are not to be stage actors. We are to have vibrant and real inner lives that are never totally on display. It informs what other people see and experience from us, but our

public persona never takes over. We are aiming to please an Audience of One, not of many. We are not defined by the response we get from others, but from God alone. We are not to try really hard, but to

7. Provide an illustration of someone who has much more hidden spiritually than they are sharing, and how centered and rooted that person is.
 - a. Illus: my friend who does dance and skits, i.e. very public gifts, but has way more than she ever shares, because she also does dance and skits that are just for Jesus alone.
 - b. Analogy: The movie Roman Holiday is powerful because Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn share a secret. It's just between them.
 - c. Illus: I want to be that person!! Because my life is so public, there are things that I have to do in private with the Lord that I don't share with anyone, sometimes not even my wife.
8. State: God does not just want to use you and work through you, although He does want to do that. He also just wants you. He wants to be with you, and share stuff just with you.
9. Why is secrecy hard?
 - a. Sometimes because there's a felt need to serve people all the time. For instance, praying with a younger Christian to teach them to pray. We do it to talk to God, but also to help them learn to pray.
 - b. Because we often want public leadership roles to pad our resumes. It's like this: 'How will this 'leadership role' translate into helping me get into med school???'
 - c. Because we crave response or validation from others. How do we deal with that?
 - d. Is this harder for extroverts than for introverts? There are probably slightly different dangers for both. Extroverts may find it hard to spend time with God alone, and need feedback to process whatever happens between them and God, so that nothing stays secret. That's a danger. But introverts may spend time just working on their private world rather than really spend time in God's presence. They may shine and polish what they're going to say in public so that when they do share it, people will say, 'Wow, you're deep.' That's a danger introverts encounter.
10. What kind of rewards does the Father give?
 - a. Himself!!
 - b. Deeper character
 - c. The ability to be faithful when people are thankless.
11. How have you experienced that? And how would you like to experience that more?
12. Application: Think of secrecy as a spiritual discipline – something only you and the Father know about. Pray about how the Lord might want you to practice that this coming week. Especially because many of you are going to be leaders in the Christian community in some way. Leadership is great – it helps you grow. But the danger in leadership is that your whole life becomes public. You need to have a part of your life be secret, shared with only God alone.
13. Read Max Lucado's *You Are Special* to close. May this be a living parable for you and me!
14. Is God good enough that you can make time for Him alone?

PART TWO

Questions: Giving & Fasting

1. How can we give without letting our right hand know what our left is doing?
2. Why is giving important? What does it do for others? For us?
3. What is fasting important? Does it have to be from food only?

Questions: Prayer

1. What things strike you about this prayer in v.9-13?
2. (Note: Is this prayer an example not to be recited or meant to be recited? This prayer is both an illustration of a simple prayer and a real prayer. It's an illustration in the sense that it is not meant to be imitated slavishly. Notice that in Luke 11:1-4, Luke abbreviates this prayer down even further; it's half as long! So clearly Luke didn't see it as needing to be imitated slavishly. But it's also helpful as a real prayer because it focuses on the *kingdom*. There are times when we really don't know how to pray, or what to pray for (e.g. after 9/11, or after we experience some tragedy, or any number of things) and it's helpful just to say, 'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

3. How is this prayer an example of a prayer that is not repetitious and not telling God what He doesn't know?
 - a. Illustration: in 1 Kings 21, Elijah does battle with the prophets of Baal. Those prophets chant mindlessly, 'Baal, Baal...' Elijah retorts, 'Maybe he's out taking a leak.'
 - b. Why does it actually demonstrate more faith?
4. Jesus seems to want us to pray individually using corporate 'we' and 'us' language. Why might he want us to do that?
5. Closing: What are some characteristics of God that we find through this teaching of Jesus in v.1-18?

Illus: Praying with Jennifer Espinosa and a Catholic nun. The depth of their relationship with God opened up before me by the way they prayed.