

What you see is what you get

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[0 : 00] Anyway, it's good to see you, and we're beginning a series in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapter 6 and 7, which is a continuation of a short series we did some months ago on chapter 5, and today we're beginning with Matthew chapter 6, verses 1 to 18.

So let's begin by reading the passage. It's on page 811. Jesus said, Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward.

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward.

[1 : 24] But 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.

When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases, as the Gentiles do, where they think 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.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

[2 : 26] 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. Amen. That is the word of the Lord. So let's pray together. Lord God, as we listen to these powerful words spoken 2,000 years ago, nearly and yet penetrating and powerful and challenging, we realize that there is so much in our own lives that is self-advertisement.

So much of our praying is riddled with insincerity. And so many of the things that we do, we love to tell others about.

But as we consider these words together, help us indeed to take them to heart. Help us to not to be put off by the challenge, but also strengthened by the encouragement that our Father who sees will reward.

[3 : 53] And so bless us now in these few moments as we draw aside from the good things and the bad things. As we spend some moments listening to what you have to say to us, we pray that your gracious Holy Spirit will take the words of our Lord Jesus Christ and apply them to our lives.

And we ask this in his name. Amen. I live by the Sermon on the Mount, said the man.

Neither a borrower nor a lender be. Unfortunately, that's not in the Sermon on the Mount. It's not even in the Bible. It's in Shakespeare's Hamlet.

And much as I love Shakespeare, I don't live my life by Shakespeare. But that kind of vague statement, a kind of half memory, is the way that many people like to look at this sermon, this Sermon on the Mount that Jesus spoke, because it helps us to evade its cutting edge. And it helps us to feel that we can safely avoid it. On the other hand, some try to make this a rod to beat us with, a kind of legalistic ticking of, oh, a man is all right today on hypocrisy.

[5 : 18] Admittedly, I didn't do too well on selfishness. And so on. It's not like that. This is the, if you like, the behavior of Christ's kingdom, which will only fully happen when that kingdom fully comes.

But as his people, we are asked on earth to anticipate that kingdom. We'll never do it fully. We'll never do it absolutely. We'll keep on failing. But this is what Jesus says, because this sermon is addressed to his disciples, as it says in 5.1.

This is not the way to become a disciple. This is the way to behave if we are disciples. And it's interesting, both giving and praying, indeed fasting, are assumed.

Verse 2, when you pray. Verse 2, sorry, when you give. Verse 5, when you pray. And verse 16, when you fast. It's not if.

It's assumed that this will be part of the lifestyle. And Jesus is not saying be invisible in the world. After all, he said in 5.16, let your light shine, so that they may see your deeds and glorify your Father.

[6 : 34] That's the important thing, glorify your Father, not glorify you and me. Wesley said, do good by stealth. Essentially, don't advertise our good deeds.

And as we look at this, there are three particular things I want to say. First of all, in verses 1 to 4, Jesus speaks of sincere behavior.

Now, I've called this, what you see is what you get. Now, we like meeting people like that, don't we?

People who, when they say something in somewhere, don't go back on it somewhere else.

People who are honest, people who are open, people who are not setting out to deceive or to impress. Now, once again, of course, we all know the temptation to impress, the temptation to deceive, the temptation to be highly thought of.

And, of course, that's what the word hypocrite originally means, play-acting. Now, play-acting is great on the stage. That's what the stage is about. But play-acting in ordinary living, particularly Christian living, is a bad thing.

[7 : 48] So, Jesus is saying, whose praise matters? Now, let's be honest, we all love the praise of others, don't we? The spoof, the attitude says, blessed is he who blows his own trumpet, otherwise his trumpet will not be blown.

And that draws attention to a very real temptation for all of us. And we still use the phrase, don't we, blowing our own trumpet. He's not talking literally about, although probably the time, literally people going, people blowing trumpets ahead of someone, just as, for example, when later in the Gospels, the rich men throw their purses into the treasury and chill for that off.

Now, it's relatively easy to do good when people are praising us, isn't it? It's relatively easy when the trumpet of praise is blowing.

Problem is giving and other deserving acts if there's no praise forthcoming and no one knows about it. But the problem, Jesus says, is they have their reward.

In other words, if we do these things, good things in them, I mean, after all, he's not saying it's not good to give to the needy. What he's talking about is the way and the motivation.

[9 : 11] And Jesus says, if you give to the needy, that's a good thing, but if you do it to win praise, then you've already got your reward. That's what he's saying. So, who is it done for?

Verse 3 is striking, isn't it? When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. In other words, not only don't go around telling others, don't dwell in it ourselves.

Don't be continually congratulating ourselves on how much we give. Now, I know, of course, giving has to be planned as well as spontaneous. But Jesus is saying, don't keep on congratulating ourselves on how generous we are.

That's what he's saying. Remember, Paul says a similar thing in 1 Corinthians 13, though I give all my goods to feed the poor, my body to be burned, I don't have love. It matters nothing.

Neither Jesus nor Paul is saying, don't do these things. He's saying, don't do them for the wrong motives. And someone is watching. You notice that phrase repeated, your father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

[10:20] Whose well done matters. That's the thing. Now, and that, of course, is a true assessment. He knows. He sees exactly what we're doing.

He sees exactly what we are. So that's the first thing, then, sincere giving. Now, the second thing is sincere praying, verses 5 to 15.

Once again, the inner nature of prayer and the question of motives. Now, there are two wrong kinds of prayer, and one right kind of prayer that Jesus talks about.

First of all, there's what you might call the showing off prayer. Verse 5, when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. They'll have to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners. Probably not been a great temptation for most of us here. But, in that society and in that community, it was a great temptation. See what a, see what a great prayer warrior that guy is.

[11:21] And, of course, he's not saying, don't pray in public at all. We couldn't carry on our meetings if we didn't pray in public. But, go into your room, he says.

Now, of course, there isn't a sacred place on earth where prayer will be heard more than some would ask. You can pray from anywhere. After all, Jonah prayed from the middle of a fish in the ocean.

We can pray from anywhere. Nevertheless, since prayer is difficult, if there is a place in your own home, perhaps, in the countryside, where you find it more, where you find that prayer comes more easily, then don't despise that.

I think that's what Jesus is talking about here. Find a place and go to that place, although you can pray from anywhere. And the private place where God is waiting, pray to your Father who is in the secret.

He's in the private place. And then, that's the showing of prayer. Then the second type of wrong prayer is the repetitive prayer. Do not keep up empty phrases.

[12:29] Dindale, the Bible translator, says, don't babble. It actually represents very well the Greek word, a torrent of idle words. Words upon words upon words.

You know, sometimes I feel it's almost as if the Lord wants to say, you know, I heard you the first time. You know, keeping on and on and on. The idea that the longer we pray, the louder we pray, the more noise we make.

That's the way back in 1 Kings 18 when Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal. Prophets of Baal had an all-day prayer meeting, shouting, foaming at the mouth, even stabbing themselves, hammering at Baal's door.

Trouble is, Baal wasn't in. And all the repetition came to nothing. No one answered, says the author. No one heard. No one paid any attention.

Now, that lies behind, behind that, sorry, lies the idea that prayer itself is meritorious. Prayer changes things.

[13:34] Now, I know what people mean when they say that. But in fact, prayer doesn't change anything if it's simply babbling, repetitive, show-off prayer. What prayer does, it puts us in touch with God who changes things.

That is the important thing. We better say God changes things rather than prayer changes things. It's ultimately, what kind of a God do we believe in? A God who knows us.

A God who knows what our needs are. Verse 8, your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Well, you might well justifiably say, well, why pray at all? The point is, we don't always know what we need.

And often in prayer, the Lord will guide us into our real needs. We tend to pray for our felt needs, don't we? That's not wrong. It's not wrong.

Indeed, it's right to pray for people who are ill. It's not wrong to pray for people who are going through problems. It's not wrong to pray about our own problems. But if prayer is confined to that, then it will become simply almost talking to ourselves, a self-centered exercise.

[14:42] Our Father wants us to share our concerns with Him. Those of you who are parents, know that when your children grow up, you want them to share with you. And sometimes you're, now unlike, of course, our Heavenly Father, we don't know everything, but very often you're conscious of something wrong.

And many of you will remember this from your own youth and childhood. And your parents are anxious to hear you and to talk with you. And that's what it means. Because remember, to whom we're praying to our Father.

And that brings us to the third type of prayer, our genuine prayer, a prayer we sometimes call the Lord's Prayer, our Father in heaven. Hallowed be your name.

Now, obviously, this could make a whole series in itself. And I've done that in the past. Quite a good series, actually, if you go through the various petitions and a good thing for a series of talks.

Today, I'm only going to mention one or two things. The first thing to notice is that it is not just a prayer to be said. It is a pattern. Now, it's not wrong saying it, of course.

[15:49] And it's, the difficulty about keeping on saying is that in itself it becomes repetition. The words just blow off our lips without really, really thinking about them. Notice the God we pray to.

He is our Father. Children coming to their parents, as I say. But notice, he's our Father who is in heaven. Now, these two things balance each other, don't they?

There's the intimacy and there's the worship. That's why I say, hallowed be your name. Now, of course, his name already is holy. We don't make it holy by saying, hallowed be your name.

What I think the prayer is talking about here is, as in, your kingdom come, hallowed be your name. Your name is holy. But people need to know that.

We need to know that and the world needs to know it. And notice, we begin with his concerns. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

[16:56] Now, when his will is done on earth as it is in heaven, then this sermon will be fully realized and the fact that we pray that means that we are wanting to see it happening already, being anticipated.

So, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. That will fully happen in the new creation when everything is transformed.

And then, we come to, if you like, our own concerns. Give us, this day, our daily bread. Bread here, excuse me, not just bread, literally, but the necessities of living.

Give us the necessities of life as part of your father's care. And sin, sin is a debt we cannot pay. That's why, that's, that's why we need forgiveness.

And, being forgiven ought to make us willing to forgive. Now, this isn't tit for tat. I was not saying if you don't forgive others, I jolly well won't forgive you.

[18:10] That's the wrong way to understand it. I think the right way to take it is saying if you don't forgive others, you'll gradually become so self-centered, so twisted inside, that you won't be able to receive forgiveness.

Receiving forgiveness is difficult, isn't it? That's why so many people hate the gospel. The gospel of grace. Many people absolutely hate it because grace says the bad news, you're not good enough. And you never will be good enough. But, the good news is that God in his grace forgives us and makes us what we cannot be in ourselves.

And it's a good thing, I say, not necessarily to say the words of this prayer every day, but to shape our prayers in that way. There will never be a time in this life when we don't need to be forgiven. That is why when we meet publicly, we always confess our sins. We always need to say sorry, both individually and collectively.

[19:14] and the evil one, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us probably better from the evil one. The evil one always attacks us, so we need protection.

Now, the letter of James tells us God does not lead us into temptation. I think what Jesus is saying here is temptation is all around us. Satan is always tempting.

So is the world, so is the flesh. The world, the flesh, and the devil are three great enemies. And because of that, we need protection. We need protection from the evil one.

Because prayer is the place where victories are won. I'm not saying prayer changes things, but when we pray, we are in touch with the one who can conquer the devil.

We try to deal with the devil in our own strength. We'll fail. The old hymn says, you're, the arm of flesh will fail you. You dare not trust your own.

[20:15] I think of so many times in my life when the arm of flesh fails, and therefore, we need the armor of God. So you see, prayer is to do with the whole of living.

Genuine praying. And then finally, the last, verses 16 to 18, I'll call this sincere discipline. When you fast.

fast. I suspect most of us have not heard many sermons on fasting. There are many sermons on sin, many sermons on prayer, probably very few on fasting.

And I think many people seem to think it's an act which takes us back into the realm of law, to the realm of ritual.

Now, I think as Christians, we need to consider this more often than we do. Because Jesus says, when you fast.

[21 : 16] He doesn't say if you fast. So what he says is this is about discipline. This is about living a life, a disciplined life, that befits citizens of the kingdom.

many of you here are older, as I am. And one temptation that comes as you get older, I find increasingly, is to become sloppy, become careless, to, you see, all that discipline, all that effort was for younger people.

I just mention that because it seems to me that one of the things we don't consider often enough. And it's absolutely right, by the way, and I'm totally behind this, all the work we do with young people and students.

That's great. Back to see more of it, not less of it, and work with children. I don't think often enough we think about helping people who have been running the race a long time, helping them to keep on the race, helping them to keep going.

And I think, I just mention that because fasting is something, I'm not going to pontificate about fasting, and I'm not going to give any advice about it, but say it's about discipline.

[22 : 34] The second thing is, it is private. The problem with fasting, Jesus says about fasting, what he says about giving, what he says about praying, is it's not about showing off.

Now, in the, in that day when people fasted, they tended to, they did it publicly. You could see they had been fasting.

Jesus says, well, look, if you've been fasting, get up, wash your face, go out, and don't talk about it. And that's what removes the realm of legalism.

If we say you must fast at certain times, you must pray at certain times, you must give a certain amount, we're a million miles away from this sermon.

Jesus is saying, it's about our private relationship with God. And just as I finish, I mean, it's so easy in public praying to forget that we're not talking to the people around us.

[23 : 38] So easy to want to impress. That's a little story to illustrate this. A minister visited an elderly man in his congregation who was deaf.

And at the end of the visit, he says, now I'm going to pray. The man's wife says, there's no point in praying because Sandy won't hear you. And he replied, it's not Sandy I'll be speaking to.

And I think that is a very simple story, but it does make the point. When we pray, we are praying to the Father. Obviously, if we're praying in public, we need to lead the prayers of others, but that's not what it's about.

So, Jesus says, when you give, when you pray, when you fast, someone is listening, someone in secret who will reward us. Amen.

Now let's pray. Lord, as we look into our own hearts, we are filled with despair of their sinfulness. And yet, we look away to the cross where those sins are forgiven.

[24 : 44] And we thank and praise you for the grace. that not only saved us when we first came to you, but for that grace which saves us day by day, and will eventually save us and bring us to glory.

We thank you for this. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.