

Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well, “God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.” These words are a proper introduction to the next section of the text we will consider. Actually, we will be breaking up this study to include verses 1-6 and 16-18 of Chapter 6. We will cover verses 7-15 (the Lord’s Prayer) as a separate lesson.

Our Lord is now deep into this sermon. He ordained the apostles after a night in prayer and began preaching to His disciples, describing the attitudes that should characterize the life of disciples in His church. He then calls them to a position of leadership and prominence in the world (salt and light) and straightens out several misconceptions about the true intent of Old Testament Law caused by traditions their forefathers invented. Now He begins to speak about three acts of worship: giving, prayer, and fasting, and explains how they were to be practiced properly. Much like their understanding of Old Testament Law, the practice of these disciplines was corrupted by tradition.

We would do well to ask ourselves some important questions. Why do I give? Why do I pray? Why do I fast? That is the crux of Jesus’ instruction in this passage. A heart intent upon the Lord (worshipping Him in spirit and truth) will give, pray, and fast differently than a heart focused upon self.

It would also be appropriate for us to ask why Jesus picked giving, prayer, and fasting. Why not choose other acts of worship such as studying, singing and service? I believe by choosing these three, He teaches us principles that can be applied broadly. Consider these three acts of worship. What makes them differ from one another?

- Giving – Giving is an outward expression of worship, necessarily involving others
- Prayer – Prayer is an upward expression of worship, part of our communion with God
- Fasting – Fasting is inward expression of worship, designed to bring us into subjection to God

What did Jesus accomplish by choosing giving, prayer, and fasting?

He picked the most obvious representatives of three expressions of worship: outward, upward, and inward. We can apply what we learn about these three disciplines to all of the others.

A Matter of Rewards (6:1)

Verse one appears to serve as an introduction to the next section of the sermon. Actually, in the King James Version, it appears to only apply to giving alms. That is because the Greek text used in the translation of the KJV (The Textus Receptus) uses the word for alms in this verse. Other older Greek texts found later have the word for righteousness here. Thus, we see some newer literal translations with the word, righteousness instead of alms. For example:

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.” – *New American Standard Bible*

Given the whole of the passage, the word righteousness makes the most sense to me. Either way, we see the same principle applied to all three acts of worship.

What attribute of God underlies His desire for sincere worship? Read Proverbs 15:8. **I believe it is His omniscience. He sees right into our heart and if our outward behavior isn't consistent with our heart, He is the first to see it as hypocrisy. He takes no joy in and provides no reward for hypocrisy. In fact, He considers it an abomination (morally disgusting).**

Hypocrisy is the last resort of an unrepentant heart when outright rebellion has failed or is feared.

As a nation, the Jews had failed miserably at rebellion. From the golden calf at Mt. Sinai to the desecration of the temple by Zedekiah, the last King of Judah before their captivity in Babylon, rebellion always left the nation destitute under the heat of God's wrath. It appears that rather than truly repent and turn to God as a nation, they turned to hypocrisy. Outwardly they would worship God and inwardly they did what they wanted to do (Mark 7:6-7).

According to verse 1, how does hypocrisy play itself out? Why? **Religious hypocrisy is manifested by an outward show of obedience to God without correspondent inward sincerity. Hypocrisy is a form of manipulation brought about by heart idolatry. Rather than have a heart-change (requiring surrender of idols – Matt 6: 19-24), men fake religious convictions and behaviors to get what they want. Perhaps they are trying to merit something from God or someone else. In Jesus' day (and ours too), a common goal was to receive praise of men. If this is all your religion is about, that is all you will get.**

Do hypocrites always recognize their hypocrisy? Read Matt. 23:1-4, 29-31, Luke 18:11 and John 9:39-41. **No, they do not. At some point they must be given a glimpse of their sham, but quickly run away, like a roach from light. Hypocrisy is a deadly sin because it can poison any good deed and soon we will begin to believe the lie ourselves.**

We will speak more of hypocrisy when we study Matthew 23, but suffice it to say that hypocrisy has no value before God and therefore no value in eternity. Read ahead in Matthew 7:21-23 and discuss the eternal rewards of hypocrisy. **The hypocrites who call Jesus, "Lord" on the Day of Judgment will proclaim the works they performed in the name of Jesus as evidence of their relationship with Him. Because they were not borne out of a real relationship with Christ, they have no merit and will be counted as complete loss as they are cast away in eternal wrath.**

Secret Benevolence (6:2-4)

Doing alms is a dated expression for giving to the poor or needy. It literally means, "doing compassion". This passage is not a direct teaching on giving to the church, although we can translate these principles there as well. I make this distinction because the text speaks explicitly about benevolence.

Jesus expects that believers will give to those in need.

In what situations did Jesus describe the Pharisees doing alms? Identify and discuss them both.

- In the **synagogues** – It appears the Jews collected organized benevolence in the synagogues. This would then be distributed to those in need.
- In the **streets** – We see throughout Scripture that beggars were common in the ancient world, especially in certain areas of Jerusalem. Everyone who traveled would encounter them.

BLOWING YOUR OWN TRUMPET

In my study, I have not found clear indication that trumpets were actually blown by the Pharisees when they gave to the poor. This may be a figure of speech used to convey that the Pharisees were seeking attention. The People's New Testament Commentary says, "This seems to be a proverbial expression to denote the making of a thing publicly known. The meaning is, when you give to the poor, do not make a show of it." This figure of speech has continued with us today. When someone brags about themselves it is called, "blowing your own horn".

Like the Jews of Jesus' day, we have similar opportunities to give. Many churches collect offerings for the purpose of benevolence. This is a Scriptural practice (see 1 Corinthians 16:1, Galatians 2:9-10). Opportunities also arrive in our daily life as we encounter individuals with needs to which we need to respond biblically (see Acts 3:1-6 and 1 John 3:17). Giving of alms requires sacrifice on our part. What benefit do we derive if we make this sacrifice with the hopes of being seen?

Jesus says they have their reward. This literally means they already have full payment for their deeds. Nothing more is due them. There is nothing more to look forward to, definitely no ROI!

THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING

We encounter yet another figure of speech used by Jesus that is not meant to be interpreted literally. Figures of speech are more common in Scripture than we realize. Because they are often unique to a language and culture, we don't always catch them easily. A good resource is E.W. Bullinger's, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible. It is a bit bulky and complex but there is a fantastic Scripture index at the back of the book. Just look for the passage you want to study and it will direct you to the right page in the book, which will describe any figures of speech used in the passage. In Matthew 6:3, Jesus tells us that when we give, "let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth". Obviously, our hands do not have minds of their own. This figure of speech means that we should give without seeking any attention. We shouldn't even dwell on it ourselves.

What reward awaits those who give alms without show or pretence? Read Matthew 10:42, 25:31-40.

By giving of our resources, time, prayers, encouragement, etc... to those in need, we are giving to Christ. He will publicly (before all nations, tribes, and tongues) acknowledge this generosity and will reward our labors, inviting us into our reward. Depending upon your view of the end times, you might time this event with the "sounding of a trumpet" (1 Corinthians 15:52). He will reward us openly!

To prevent getting too legalistic about this, consider the following question. What happens if you give privately but others somehow find out? Read Acts 4:32-37.

Barnabas' gift was cited as an example of his righteousness and benevolence. It was his intention and follow-through that the Lord looked upon favorably. The Lord chose to make this known, just like the poor widow who could only cast in one mite. The point is that we should not endeavor to make our giving known. If God allows others to find out for some purpose, He can, and that is His prerogative.

How seriously should we take this command? Read Acts 5:1-11.

Ananias and Sapphira were killed by the Lord because of this kind of hypocrisy. They sold a piece of property and gave a portion to the church, representing that it was the whole price of the property. They knew others were giving generously and they wanted the same notoriety from men. This is the same spirit Jesus warns against. We should jealously guard ourselves against it.

Secret Prayer (6:5-6)

Psalms 5:2 says, "Hearken unto the voice of my cry, my King, and my God: for unto thee will I pray."

What a fantastic summary! In its essence, prayer is communion and conversation with our Father.

While it is a duty, it is more so a privilege and honor to go directly to the throne and gain access to the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, who will hear our every cry. To use prayer as pretence for the approval of men is offensive to God and it should offend us as well. The privilege of prayer was purchased by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 4:14-16 and 10:19-22).

What is the potential of prayer offered in pretence? Read Judges 2:1-3 and discuss the similarities.

To offer prayer in pretence is tantamount to trusting men rather than God. It is to seek to gain their approval and favor (again manipulation) rather than entrusting yourself to God. The reward may seem sweet but it will be a thorn and a snare and is ultimately powerless.

What is the potential of private prayer? Read Psalm 145:18, Isaiah 65:24, and Matthew 7:7.

The Lord is near those who pray to Him sincerely, already moving to answer their prayer, whatever it might be, in accordance with His will. There is infinite potential in private prayer.

It is a matter of faith. Why settle for the applause of men if you can have the attention of God?

Beyond the reasons mentioned above, what advantages are there to private prayer?

There is greater privacy (we can truly open up before the Lord) and fewer distractions.

Consider the precedent we have for private prayer in Scriptures. Read 2 Kings 4:32-34; Daniel 6:10; John 1:48-49; Acts 9:40 and 10:9.

Elisha healed the child after private prayer. Daniel prayed three times a day in his room, the windows open toward the site of the temple in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 7:14-16). Nathaniel (Bartholomew) prayed alone under the fig tree. Peter prayed alone before raising Dorcas and then was praying on the roof alone when the Lord called him to go to Cornelius. Godly men have always maintained this practice.

Now consider the Son of Man, Christ Jesus in prayer. What do we learn about the necessity of private prayer from His practice? Read Matthew 14:23, 26:36-39; and Luke 6:12-20.

Even the Son of Man, God in the flesh, found it necessary to regularly slip away and pray. It is important to remember that though He is God, He came as a man. He lived with the limitations we have (without sin) and was forced to seek His Father's will through prayer and act by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, just as we must. If He found frequent private prayer necessary, must not we as well? He even found it necessary to pray all night before preaching this sermon we are now studying!

What about public prayer? Is it Scriptural to pray with others and in what context? Read Matthew 18:19-20; Acts 1:13-14, 2:42, 4:23-24 and 31; and James 5:15-16.

It is absolutely Scriptural to pray with others. The example we see in Scripture is of brothers and sisters joining together in prayer. In fact, Jesus speaks of the power available to churches when we come together and agree in prayer. This power was witnessed by the Church of Jerusalem when they prayed for boldness in their witness. Prayer is our obligation and privilege when we come together as a church. In the Scriptural context, public prayer is generally a group (corporate) prayer. Stephen is a notable exception in Acts 7:59-60.

Public prayer is generally corporate prayer and is not a replacement for private prayer!

Secret Fasting (6:16-18)

Fasting is one of the least understood and practiced spiritual tools available to Christians today. This may be because of abuses practiced by some religions over the last few hundred years. However, I believe that it is largely due to our unwillingness to sacrifice our desires and perceived needs for the Lord. Before we discuss the text, I believe we must first understand the practice of fasting.

"Man lives on one quarter of what he eats. On the other three quarters lives his doctor."

– Inscription on an Egyptian pyramid, circa 3800 BC

Fasting is abstaining from **food**, but not **water**, usually for a day or more. Read Luke 4:1-2.

Why would we fast? We must first understand the nature of our inner warfare. Read Romans 7:14-25 and discuss the battle Christians face between the inner and outer man. Recognizing that the outer man (flesh) is sinful and the inner man (soul) is clean, how does fasting help us to allow the inner man to have greater success in conquering our outer man? Read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 and Matthew 17:19-21.

Fasting brings the flesh into subjection and allows us to focus on things that are spiritual. By denying the flesh, we learn to lean more heavily upon the Lord, maturing our ability to resist temptations within and without. There are some obstacles we will face as Christians that won't be easily resolved by a Bible verse, counseling, or even a little prayer. We will have to wrestle with the Lord and work these things out through periods of prayer and fasting. If Jesus found it necessary we will too!

Biblical fasting starves the flesh and feeds the spirit!

Below are some of the effects of fasting upon our spiritual lives:

- Fasting causes us to afflict (**humble**) our souls before God (Psalm 35:13, Isaiah 58:1-5)
- Fasting helps to break the **bondage** of sin in our lives (Isaiah 58:6, Mark 9:28-29)
- Fasting promotes **righteousness** in our lives (Isaiah 58:7)

Fasting is a tool like prayer, meditation, or studying God's Word, designed to draw us near to God.

Understanding the effects of fasting enables us to apply this practice. As we look at Scriptures, we see fasting employed for the following reasons, still applicable today.

1. To **Repent** of Sin and Return to God (Joel 2:12-13)
2. To **Grieve** (1 Samuel 31:13)
3. To Seek the Lord and His **Intervention** (Ezra 8:21-23)
4. Before making a Solemn **Covenant** (Nehemiah 9:1, 38, 10:29-30)
5. To Draw **Near** to God (Daniel 10:2-3, 12) – **This is really the whole crux of fasting.**
6. Before **Ordaining** someone (Acts 13:1-3, 14:23)

While the above mentioned reasons are illustrated in Scripture, I don't believe they are exclusive. By this, I mean there may be other situations in which fasting is appropriate. Generally, if our desire is to humble our hearts before God, break the bondage of sin, and seek righteousness, fasting is a great tool.

As we understand the purpose of fasting, we better understand why Jesus found the Pharisee's fasting practices to be unacceptable. What do we learn from Jesus' teaching on fasting in Matthew 6:16-18? **Fasting is a generally a personal discipline, like prayer and giving. There are times it is appropriate to have a general collection and public prayer. There are also times it is appropriate to have a group fast. We see this example is Scripture. Generally, fasting should be practiced personally and without drawing attention to yourself. If you are seeking to be seen by men, you are doing nothing more than extreme dieting. If you avoid attention and practice fasting before the Lord, He will bless your effort to draw near to Him.**