Commentary and Lesson on Matthew 6:1-18
by Dr. Knox Chamblin


A. The Subject.

Three themes, are united in this passage: whether giving (6:2-4), praying (6:5-6), or fasting (6:16-18), one must beware of doing so "in order to be seen by men" (6:1, 5, 16), and must be attentive instead to the judgment of "your Father, who sees what is done in secret" (6:4, 6, 18). Verse 1 stands over the whole discussion: "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven." As a comparison with 5:16 makes clear, the crucial matter is one's motive. Almsgiving, fasting, and prayer were considered the "three pillars of Judaism." Cf. Tobit 12:8, "Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving, and righteousness" (RSV). Note that Jesus, besides speaking of the three pillars individually, comprehends all three under the term "righteousness," dikaiosynê, 6:1.

B. The Hypocrites.

In each section, Jesus admonishes his followers to be different from the hypocrites (6:2, 5, 16).

1. The nature of hypocrisy. "Hypocrisy" (hypokrisis) means that what one appears to be is different from what one is. Cf. 15:7-8, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.'" The verb hypokrinomai means "to play a part, hence...to simulate, feign, pretend" (Thayer, s.v.). Thus in the case of each practice discussed in 6:1-18, the individuals in question appear to be serving God, but in fact they are serving only themselves: "to be honored by men" (6:2); "to be seen by men" (6:5); "to show men they are fasting" (6:16).

2. The cause of hypocrisy. It is pride that moves one to play the hypocrite. Pride is essentially competitive, as C. S. Lewis taught us in Mere Christianity, in the chapter on "The Great Sin." The hypocrites are not merely proud of being spiritual; they are proud of being (and of being thought to be) more spiritual than others, the others who have such respect for them and render them such honor. For pride's survival, it is vital that one be above the rest. None of the
three exercises is really directed towards God; indeed, pride insists that God - the true and living God - not be brought into the picture. The proud person must be supreme; thus the sovereign God is the most threatening figure of all. They want to be "seen by men," but not by God (6:1).

C. Christian Almsgiving. 6:2-4.

1. Attentiveness to human need, v. 2a. The practice is presupposed: "When you give to the needy."

2. Inattentiveness to oneself, vv. 2b-3. Giving must not be unduly self-conscious; the self should not tell the self what is happening. Perhaps the words are meant to be taken literally as well as figuratively: "A gift should be slipped unobtrusively to the receiver with the right hand alone, not offered with both hands in a fashion designed to attract the attention of others nearby" (Gundry, 102).

D. Christian Praying. 6:5-15.

1. An established habit. Jesus begins, "When [or whenever] you pray..." (6:5, 6, 7). An established habit is presupposed. The critical issue here, as in the case of almsgiving, is how one prays, with what attitude and with what motives. V. 5 reflects Jewish custom. In Jesus' time it was customary for a devout Jew to offer prayer at three set times during the day. There was first a prayer at dawn (cf. Ps 5:3). There was an afternoon prayer at 3:00 (cf. Acts 3:1, "Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour"). And there was a prayer after sundown (cf. Ps 141:2). With respect to the specific background of 6:5: At the moment of the afternoon sacrifice in the temple, there would have been a congregation gathered there, but also many engaged in commerce and other matters out in the streets and marketplaces of the city. To remind people out in the city that the hour of sacrifice had arrived, loud trumpets were sounded from the temple over the city - so that people might pause amidst their business and offer a prayer.


a. The privacy of prayer. We find an interesting shift between 6:5 and 6:6. "But when you pray" (5), has the plural "you"; "when you pray" (6) has the singular (for the same shift, see 6:16, 17). The teaching is directed to the individual disciple. He or she is to seek solitude: "Go into your room, close the door and pray..." The "room" is apparently a small storeroom attached to a typical Jewish dwelling - the only room equipped with a door.
b. The **negative antidote to pride**. By praying alone, the individual avoids the gaze of other people. The prayer is now "that which is done in secret" (v. 6b), in stark contrast to public prayers (v. 5).

c. The **positive antidote to pride**. The counterpart to b. is found in the words, "Pray to your Father." The individual who enters the room in private may single-mindedly and without distraction seek the face of God. Preoccupation with God, with the true God, "the Father in heaven" (v. 9), is the best antidote to the pride condemned in v. 5. The words "pray to the Father" have no counterpart in v. 5 - for that prayer is in fact not directed to the Father, but instead to oneself and to other people. The one who truly seeks God is not in the least impressed with what he is doing, he is not praying for effect, his is not a studiedly self-conscious prayer. He is not preoccupied with the difference between himself and the hypocrites, not feeling superior to those who feel superior. He is not congratulating himself for having sought out the secret place, in contrast to the boastful hypocrites, which would hatch a new pride of a very subtle kind. He is not thinking of the reward he will receive; he is too occupied with God for such thoughts. Cf. Mt 25:37-39. There is still room for serious reflection on the content of one's prayer; again motive and attitude are all-important.

d. The **reward**. The hypocrites of v. 5 "have received their reward in full" - namely the approval of men which they sought. Correspondingly, the disciple's reward is the **approval of God**, v. 6b. What higher reward could there be? And how does God show his approval? By means of the very communion that is taking place - by its becoming an ever deeper and more intimate communion, until there is a closeness of fellowship far beyond what the person could have envisaged at the outset. (For comparison, consider that the proper reward for being in love is not inheriting a fortune from your beloved's parents, but marriage; and that the proper reward for writing a book is the book itself, not the royalty that one receives.) Is it not here that we find the best explanation for the words of Mt 7:7-11? Does not the assurance that an answer to a prayer is forthcoming, arise out of the intimacy of communion, in which one becomes increasingly sensitive to the voice of the heavenly Father? Cf. Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*.

e. The cruciality of **attitude**. The fundamental question is not where one prays, but with what attitude. V. 5 does not prohibit public prayer. Jesus himself on occasion prayed in public: the prayer of 11:25-26 e.g. is offered in the hearing of the crowd. The attitude of pride may creep into the prayer of the inner chamber (as one places himself above the hypocrites out in the marketplace). Once the attitude has been shaped by private prayer, one may be trusted to pray in public. (As noted, it is motive that explains the difference
(between Mt 5:16 and 6:1.) Think of the danger besetting a minister who prays regularly in public. How does one effectively lead a congregation in prayer, without praying to the congregation? This is an area in which one observes progress over years rather than weeks. By the same token, 6:6 is not meant to limit the places for private prayer. The inner chamber is introduced as the best place for molding attitudes, not as the only correct place for private prayer. I may pray as I mow the lawn or drive to work or watch a football game.


   a. Introduction. Observe the shift of emphasis from Jews to pagans, and from appeals to men, to appeals to a god (or gods). The latter distinction explains the absence of the term "hypocrites" in 6:7-8. The pagans in question are not playing to a crowd. They are centered upon, and they address, a god or gods, and they expect an answer. Why does Jesus say, "When you pray...do not be like them" (6:7a, 8a)?

   b. The pagan mentality. (1) The term *battalogeō*. This verb, 6:7a, is variously translated, "do not use vain repetitions" (KJV), "do not heap up empty phrases" (RSV), and "do not keep on babbling like pagans" (NIV). The best clue to the verb's meaning comes from the latter part of the verse: "they think they will be heard because of their many words." To "babble" is to heap up words. This does not necessarily mean that there is no thought behind the words; indeed the critical question is the kind of thinking that underlies this kind of prayer - which leads to the other points. (2) The search for a listener. One explanation for this kind of praying, according to Gerhard Delling (TDNT 1: 597), is the bewilderment that attends polytheism. "The non-Christian, and non-Jew, thinks that by heaping up the names of God, of which he does not know the true and relevant one, he can include the deity which will grant his request...." (It is rather like a person who has a complaint to register with a huge corporation, who feels a great sense of helplessness in trying to track down just the right person to talk to.) (3) The *fatigare deos*. This idea, that of "wearying the god," is prominent in verse 7. If the petitioner continues to pile up the words, the god will in the end grant his request just to get rid of him. (Cf. repeated appeals to the General Assembly, or to a parent.) This may help to explain the rantings of the prophets of Baal, 1 Kings 18:26,29.

   c. The disciples' view of God. Jesus says, "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (1) He is the one God, "Lord of heaven and earth" (11:25). There is thus no room for the kind of searching described above. (2) He is the omniscient God: "your Father knows...." Thus prayer does not inform God of things of which he is unaware. He
already knows what we need (cf. 6:11-13). (3) He is the omnipotent God. Behind the fatigare deos, is the attempt to manipulate God in order to gain one's desires. But because he is truly God, he cannot be manipulated (he gives by his own free choice; he cannot be made to give us wants that we do not need). And because he is our Father, he need not be manipulated. He knows far better than do his children, what they need; and he is more eager than they are, to see their needs supplied. Cf. Ps 103:13.

d. The place of asking. The Father "knows what you need before you ask him" - not "knows what you need, therefore do not ask him." Disciples are commanded to make requests of God (7:7); there is no contradiction between the Father's already knowing the need, and his children's asking him to meet the need, as is clear from the prayer that Jesus is about to give. Why does God will that his people should ask for things which he already knows they need? The command reminds us of our dependence upon Him, that "we [may] become accustomed in every need to flee to him as to a sacred anchor" (John Calvin, Institutes, Battles 852). Furthermore, the command moves us to gratitude and appreciation for his many kindnesses to us (ibid.). The comparison with human fatherhood (7:7-11) is instructive. Good fathers know how to give, and want to give, good gifts to their children (7:11). It delights the father when the child views the gift as a gift, not an inevitability or a right, and expresses gratitude accordingly. Is not the present subject an aspect of a larger reality, namely the way of salvation, "by grace through faith" (Eph 2:8-9)? The response is necessary although it is not meritorious.


E. Christian Fasting. 6:16-18.

1. The importance of fasting. As with almsgiving and prayer, Jesus presupposes an existing practice: "When you fast" (6:17). The place of fasting in the cultivation of a relationship with God, is clearly affirmed in v. 18. The legitimacy and importance of the practice is not in doubt.

2. The purpose of fasting.

   a. The warning, v. 16. What Jesus condemns here, is sufficiently clear from the discussion of almsgiving and prayer.

   b. The appeal, vv. 17-18. Here (corresponding to 6:6 vis-a-vis 6:5) Jesus instructs that one is not to call attention to one's practice of piety. However, the description of v. 17 is not neutral (as would be the case if one merely refrained
from rending his garment or covering his head with ashes). T. W. Manson moves in this direction when he says, "They are to appear as they normally do, or even as if prepared for a feast" (The Sayings of Jesus, 172). I suggest that this last is positively in view. Even when one fasts, his appearance is to be festive, reflective of his joy over having heeded the gospel of the kingdom (4:23) and having received its blessings (1:21; 5:3-10; etc.). "Repentance [4:17] is a head anointed with oil (Matt. 6.17), not as a new form of hypocrisy, but as an expression of joy at the salvation that has been given" (Jeremias, NT Theology, 1: 157-58). Fasting is a means of communion with God, one important ingredient of which is joy and praise over the experience of the life of the New Age.

SUGGESTED TEACHING OUTLINE

Main point: Christians must not perform as if they were devout for the sake of man’s approval, but must be devout for the sake of God’s approval.

I. Alms
   A. Hypocrites call attention to giving
   B. Christians give in secret

II. Prayer
   A. Hypocrites pray:
      1. publicly and proudly
      2. for man’s approval
      3. with an improper view of God
   B. Christians pray:
      1. privately and humbly
      2. for God’s approval
      3. with a proper view of God

III. Fasting
   A. Hypocrites make their fasting evident
   B. Christians fast with the appearance of preparing for a feast

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do prayer, almsgiving and fasting have to do with righteousness? How appropriate are these acts of righteousness today? How does your church emphasize or de-emphasize these acts?
2. What characterized the hypocrites in this passage? How do you resemble the hypocrites and/or the Christians? In what ways do you differ from both groups?
3. What causes/motivates hypocrisy? How prevalent is this cause in the church today? How prevalent is hypocrisy? What can you do to fix these problems?
4. How attentive are you to the needs of others who are not in your immediate family? How attentive are you to your needs and your family’s needs? How appropriate is the difference between these different levels of attentiveness?
5. What was “almsgiving”? What are some modern examples of “almsgiving”? Is this something you think is important? How often do you engage in almsgiving? Explain why almsgiving is or is not important enough that Christians should sacrifice what is rightly theirs in order to give to others.
6. How often did the ancient Jews pray? How often do you pray? What was hypocritical about the hypocrites’ prayers?
7. How do “rewards” pertain to Christian prayer? With what attitude should Christians pray?
8. Why shouldn’t Christian prayer be repetitious? Why should Christians pray if God already knows what they need?
9. What is to be gained by fasting? Have you ever fasted? If you have fasted, did you tell anyone you were doing it at the time? If so, why? Why should (or shouldn’t) Christians fast more often?
10. How does this section of text relate to the rest of the Sermon on the Mount? In what ways does it seem to be just another section in an unrelated collection of teaching? In what ways can you find unity and a logical sense of progression in the Sermon?
11. How is the teaching in this part of Matthew’s gospel relevant to Matthew’s overall message?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. How does persistence in prayer (Luke 18:1-8) differ from repetition? How can one be persistent and pray without ceasing while avoiding repetition and the use of “many words”? Is it wrong to try to manipulate God? Is it wrong to try to influence God? Is there really a practical difference between the two? If so, what is it?
2. Is fasting normative for today? Why or why not?