

Part Seven

The Lord's Prayer and Fasting

Matthew 6:5-18

The Lord's Prayer

⁵“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶But 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.

⁷“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰Your kingdom come,
your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us this day our daily bread,

¹²and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Fasting

¹⁶“And 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. ¹⁷But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸that 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.

STUDY

1. READ

- a. What are the two groups that Jesus is calling out, and telling us not to be like? What are their practices that he specifically criticizes? What are their motives? What is their reward?
- b. When we pray, what should we ask for in terms of (1) God, (2) our relationship with Him, (3) our relationship with others?

2. MEANING

- a. Jesus makes several references to “*your Father who is in secret*” or “*your Father who sees in secret*”. What does this tell us about how we should approach God in prayer and fasting?
- b. Why do you think Jesus’ model of prayer is so short? What are His key themes?

3. APPLY

- a. What would be examples today of the behaviors Jesus' warned against? How can we apply the principle of approaching God "in secret"?
- b. More specifically, what are some examples today of "*heaping up empty phrases*" in prayer, as described in v. 7?
- c. Most believers experience significant struggles and challenges with prayer. How does Jesus' model prayer help us face these challenges?
- d. Which elements of the Lord's prayer do you find most challenging, or need to emphasize further in your thought and prayer life?

NOTES ON THE PASSAGE

v. 5 - In calling out the "hypocrites", Jesus clearly has the Pharisees in mind, who loved to publicly display their righteousness. But the principle applies to anyone who touts their moral superiority and spirituality.

v. 7 - Note that Jesus switches his criticism from the Jewish Pharisees to the Gentiles, who practiced other forms of religion (e.g., idol worship).

v. 10 - God's kingdom denotes His royal rule and authority. To pray "*your kingdom come, your will be done*" is to ask for the continued expansion of God's influence and righteousness in our fallen world, the spread of the Gospel, and the ultimate return of Christ, when God rights all wrongs, fully abolishes evil, and establishes a new heaven and earth.

v. 14 - Jesus' point is not that we earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others, but rather that if we are unwilling to forgive, we have not truly understood and accepted the depths of God's grace and mercy towards us.

v. 16 - Jesus assumes that His followers will fast. Interestingly, once Jesus began His public ministry He and His disciples did not fast. When questioned about this, Jesus explained "*How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn when he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, then they will fast.*" (Matthew 9:15) This practice is largely neglected in our churches today and deserves further thought and attention.

COMMENTS

In this passage Jesus continues to develop his theme from Matthew 6:1, *“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.”*

It is human nature to crave the approval of others. We like to toot our own horn, promote our virtue, and seek validation from our peers. In these verses, Jesus challenges us to focus on pleasing God, rather than our fellow man. This can be seen both in His admonitions against self-centered prayer and fasting, and in the Lord’s prayer itself.

The Lord’s prayer, whether verbatim or as a model (*“pray then like this”*) is remarkably concise, yet richly profound. Every phrase is worthy of heartfelt reflection. For example, the opening phrase, *“Our Father in Heaven”* reflects three great truths: 1) God is personal -- as opposed to a mere “force”, 2) He is loving, as a father towards His children, 3) He is powerful (“heaven” primarily referring to His authority and power as creator and ruler of all things). Taking it a step further, just the subject of *“Father”* is a huge theme throughout the Bible, deserving our study and deep contemplation.

While there are a variety of ways to outline or summarize the Lord’s prayer, it is helpful to see two overarching themes. First a focus on God: *“your name... your kingdom... your will.”* Second, a focus on our needs: *“our daily bread... our debts... “deliver us from evil”*. This aligns fully with Christ’s command shortly thereafter in this sermon to *“seek first the kingdom of heaven, and all these things will be added to you”* (Matthew 6:33).

This priority pattern is also reflected in the Ten Commandments; the first four focus on our relationship with God; the last six concern our relationships with others. The pattern is evident yet again in the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes. The first four characteristics: poverty of spirit, mourning of sin, meekness (humility), and a hunger and thirst for righteousness are focused on our relationship with God. The later beatitudes show the outworking of those character traits as we relate to others: showing mercy, making peace, acting with pure motives, enduring persecution. Finally, Jesus reinforces these priorities succinctly in response to a cynical Pharisee who asked:

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.³⁸ This is the great and first commandment.³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:36-39)

Following these priorities will keep us from the hypocrisy and self-promotion that Jesus condemns in this passage, and more broadly throughout the Sermon on the Mount.