

The Life and Ministry of Christ, Part 9

The Sermon on the Mount opened with the Beatitudes. After the Beatitudes, Jesus told His disciples, “you are salt and light.” The impact of believers living in the world should be noticeable. Since we have this influence, the Lord wants us to live in such a way that we glorify our Father Who is in heaven. After showing believers the influence they have over the world, the Lord addressed personal righteousness of His disciples. He listed murder, adultery, divorce, swearing falsely, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, love your neighbor, giving, and prayer. In the next major topic in the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus deals with three important Christian practices: acts of righteousness or mercy (Matthew 6:2-4), prayer (Matthew 6:5-15), and fasting (Matthew 6:16-18). While addressing these Christian practices, Jesus told us to examine the motive behind our actions and determine why we are doing these things. Previously, the Lord said we have a major influence on the world and now He is telling us to not practice these to be seen by others.

Christian Practices – Matthew 6:1-18

Acts of righteousness or mercy (Matthew 6:2-4).

Matthew 6:1 NKJV Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Instead of “charitable deeds,” most translations say acts of “righteousness.”

It may seem strange to think of “charitable deeds” as acts of “righteousness.”

Matthew 6:1 ESV 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.

This difference in wording should cause us to pause and consider our righteous actions or charitable deeds. What does “charitable deeds” or “acts of righteousness” mean? What are these acts of righteousness? The next three verses talk about giving and the motivation behind our acts of benevolence. It is obvious that the Lord is equating acts of righteousness with mercy, grace and kindness. We should practice acts of kindness but He wants believers to examine the motive of their acts of righteousness. The Lord wants us to examine why and how we do what we do.

Does motive matter?

According to the Lord, motive matters. The reason we do acts of righteousness gets back to our true character and nature. Nature is what a person is and character is why a person acts. Our true nature and character will be revealed by our righteous actions.

What does motive have to do with our nature and character?

In Matthew 6:2-4, Jesus dealt with the motive behind our actions. He said the hypocrites do their works of charity or righteousness to be seen by others. If

you want a reward in heaven, practice your righteousness and acts of mercy to give glory to God and not to receive praise from men. Our actions must be motivated to bring God glory rather than to be recognized before men.

Why would Christ tell us to let our light shine before all men and be the salt of the earth, and then tell us to only be motivated to do what brings glory to God?

Jesus is dealing with the Christian's motive or attitude for acts of mercy and kindness. We are required by the Lord to constantly make sure that our attitude and motivation honors God. Remember that our light is a reflection of God's Own light and our salt is a result of His work in us. Some may ask, what difference does it make if your attitude is right or wrong? (Matthew 6:4) Are not the needs of others met even if we have a right or wrong motive? The answer lies in the testimony that we belong to our Father in heaven. If we are doing acts of righteousness out of pride and phoniness, we are not giving a proper testimony of our Father. We should give in such a manner that we are seeking the Father's approval rather than man's. In the text, Jesus said, "Don't announce your giving so that you will be honored by men." When you give, do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing. What does that mean? Our giving should be done with such an attitude that we are not counting the personal cost. Give freely and the Father will reward you.

The second Christian practice is prayer – Matthew 6:5-15, Luke 11:2-4.

Once again Jesus started discussing prayer by examining our motives.

Matthew 6:5 ESV 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.

Jesus was not telling us to refrain from praying aloud when we are in a crowd of people. He is telling us to examine our motive when we pray. Prayer is to be directed toward God and not toward man. Jesus said some love to stand and pray in their synagogues to be seen by others.

Matthew 6:6–7 ESV 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. 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.

Two of the Lord's parables on prayer discuss perseverance and persistence before God. The parable of the friend at midnight that keeps knocking at the door asking for bread (Luke 11:5-13) and the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8) show continued perseverance in asking. There is a difference in these illustrations and the Lord's statement, "they think that they will be heard for their many words." The pagan heathen of the Old Testament used many vain repetitions. Prayer is not an attempt to conquer God's reluctance to answer but an act of confident assurance in God's plan, promise, and

purpose. Why should we pray often and with perseverance? Perseverance in prayer illustrates genuineness and sincerity. It is the secret of all spiritual life. In Luke 18, Jesus told His disciples to keep praying, and never stop or lose hope.

What is the motive behind your prayer?

We should not be praying so that other people will listen to the dialogue of our prayer. Prayer is toward God and not toward men.

Matthew 6:7 ESV 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.

What are “vain repetitions” or “empty phrases?”

Jesus is not telling us to ask often or with perseverance, but He is telling us that God is not impressed by the mere multiplication of words. God is looking for sincerity of heart.

After giving these instructions about our motive, Jesus taught us how to pray.

In Matthew 6, this prayer is included in the Sermon on the Mount. In Luke 11:1-4, after Jesus had prayed, His disciples asked, *“Lord, teach us to pray.”* The exact timing of when Jesus gave this prayer is not clear. It is possible that during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus prayed and then gave this teaching and model prayer. In both instances, the purpose for giving this instruction was so they would use it as a model or pattern of prayer. We should keep Matthew 6:7 in mind when we pray this or any other prayer.

God cannot be manipulated through repetition or specific phrases.

Repeating this prayer multiple times does not impress the Father. This prayer does not have magical words that produce a desired result just by reciting them. The motive behind the Lord’s prayer is not to teach phrases, but method or manner. This prayer consists of seven petitions. The first three are addressed to God and refer to His glory and purposes.

Matthew 6:9–10 KJV After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

Notice the word “manner” gives us the motive behind this prayer. Jesus is not saying, “use this prayer verbatim when you pray,” but use this as an example of how to pray. Prayer should be addressed to God our heavenly Father. This is a recognition of Who He is. Our Father in heaven is the sovereign of the universe. He is the transcendent, all-powerful, creator LORD and God.

“Hallowed be thy name” gives due reverence and honor to God our Father. The disciples prayer has parallel phrases that are similar to the Kaddish Prayer of the synagogue.

“May the great Name of God be exalted and sanctified, throughout the world, which he has created according to his will. May his Kingship be

established in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of the entire household of Israel, swiftly and in the near future; and say, Amen. May his great name be blessed, forever and ever. Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, honored, elevated and lauded be the Name of the holy one, Blessed is he – above and beyond any blessings and hymns, Praises and consolations which are uttered in the world; and say Amen. May there be abundant peace from Heaven, and life, upon us and upon all Israel; and say, Amen.” (The Kaddish Prayer of the Synagogue)

Matthew 6:9–10 KJV After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

The word “*hallowed*” comes from the Greek word *hagiazō* which means to be held in reverence and holy awe. The name of our God is not common or to be profaned but it is to be revered and kept holy. “Thy kingdom come” addresses the establishment of God’s rule and reign on earth, as it is in heaven. This begins with the surrender of our will to His. “Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven,” is a surrender of our will to His will. The last four verses of the prayer relate to our needs.

Matthew 6:11–13 KJV Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

After giving honor to God and surrendering to His will, we are encouraged to begin asking for our spiritual and physical needs. “Give us this day our daily bread” addresses our physical and spiritual needs which are vitally linked with the concerns of the kingdom of God being established. “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,” connects our being forgiven with our willingness to forgive. “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” requests God’s strength and help to withstand moral failure and deliverance from the evil one. The last phrase, “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.” is omitted in the majority of translations and manuscripts. It is a perfect summation of the motive behind our prayers. When we pray we are coming before the almighty sovereign heavenly Father. Our Father is the King Who rules with power and glory forever. Matthew 6:14–15 is not part of the prayer but an explanation of the fifth petition.

Matthew 6:14–15 NKJV “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Why does it matter if we forgive others or not? This gets down to the heart of the matter in our lives. Dare we think that our prayer ascends to the Father if we harbor malice and hate toward others. Our acts of forgiveness are a reflection of what God has done for us. We are enabled to forgive others

because our heart has been regenerated and made new. Those who do not forgive have not truly understood the mercy and grace that they have received.

The third Christian practice that Jesus deals with is fasting (Matthew 6:16-18).

All three of these disciplines (acts of mercy or kindness, prayer, and fasting) require proper motive. Without the proper motive, the discipline becomes unfruitful.

Matthew 6:16 ESV 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.

The hypocrites' fasting was to be seen by others as a sign of their holiness. What is the reward of fasting with a wrong motive? There is some physical benefit from fasting, but the spiritual component is lost when fasting is done to be seen by others.

Matthew 6:17–18 ESV 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.

Jesus is telling you that your Father in heaven is attentive to your secret and personal spiritual life. The Father in heaven is not just watching our outward actions, He is attentive to the motive behind what we do.

Throughout this section, Jesus constantly referred to the motive behind our actions.

Why is motive important in these areas? Why does motive matter? If we exercise kingdom practices without kingdom motives, we cannot reap the proper reward. The practice of our Christianity must always be done with proper motives. Thus far, the Sermon on the Mount has been dealing with attitudes and motives. As you consider the life and action of kingdom people, these principles are very important. Your inner life before God is of great importance. All of our actions must be governed and controlled by the right attitude and motive. According to what Jesus said, our actions are controlled by our heart. To reap an eternal reward, our heart must be controlled by the Holy Spirit.

Luke 6:45 ESV The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.