

For first century Jews, there were three great tasks of the religious life, three great pillars on which the good life was based: giving, prayer and fasting. We will not get to the topic of fasting today, but it has implications for following Jesus today as it did then. Jesus would not for a moment have argued the importance of any of these practices. What troubled him was that so often in life the finest things are done from the *wrong motives*. It is a strange truth that these three principal good works so easily lend themselves to *wrong motives*.

Alright then, let me show you my hand before this card game begins. Jesus emphasized giving for the sake of righteousness, that is, for fellowship with God. If our aim is to gain the world's rewards, we can no doubt receive them, but in so doing we will miss the eternal dimension of rewards from God. Jesus' warning is that when these things are done with the sole intention of bringing glory to the doer, they lose the most important part of their value by far. People may for instance give donations that are not really to help other people, but simply to demonstrate the donor's generosity or to bask in the warmth of the recipients' gratitude or the praise of friends. Some people may pray in such a way that their prayer is not really addressed to God, but to those around them. Their praying may simply be an attempt to demonstrate their exceptional faith in a way that no one within earshot can miss. But let's not get the wrong idea.

William Barclay, the 20<sup>th</sup> century NT scholar, discusses rewards in his commentary on Matthew, saying, “If there are no rewards and no punishments, there is no point in being good, and no special reason why we should live one kind of life instead of another. To eliminate all rewards and punishments is really to say that in God there is neither justice nor love. Action is meaningless, and all effort goes ineffectively whistling with the wind. But having reached this point with the idea of reward in the Christian life, there are certain things about which we must be clear: 1) When Jesus spoke of reward, he was very definitely not thinking in terms of material reward. It is quite true that in the Old Testament the ideas of goodness and prosperity are closely connected. If a man prospered, if his fields were fertile and his harvest great, if his children were many and his fortune large, it was taken as proof that he was a good man. The very idea that the Book of Job was written to contradict is that personal goodness and material prosperity go hand in hand. It was certainly not material prosperity that Jesus promised his disciples. He in fact promised them trial and tribulation, suffering, persecution and death. Jesus did not think in terms of material rewards.

2) The second thing which it is necessary to remember is that the highest reward never comes to those who are seeking it. If people are always looking for a reward, always adding up that which they believe themselves to be earning, then they will in fact miss the reward for which they are seeking. And they will miss it because they are looking at God and looking at life in the wrong way. People who are always calculating their reward are thinking of God in terms of a judge or an accountant, and above all they are thinking of life in terms of law. They are thinking of presenting an account to God and of saying: ‘I have done so much. Now I claim my reward.’ The big mistake of this point of view is that it thinks of life in terms of law, instead of love.

People who are in love are always in debt; the last thing that enters their minds is that they have earned a reward. If people have a legal view of life, they may think constantly in terms of reward that they have won; if they have a loving view of life, the idea of reward will never enter their minds.

The great paradox of Christian reward is this: those who look for reward, and who calculate that which is due to them, do not receive it; those whose only motive is *love*, and who never think that they deserve any reward, do in fact receive it. The strange fact is that reward is at one and the same time the by-product and the ultimate end of the Christian life” says Barclay. (Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume One* (New Daily Study Bible): 1 (p. 210). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.)

For centuries, the rabbis argued that the most essential faith practices were giving, prayer and fasting. We could say: faith in relation to others—giving; faith in relation to God—prayer; and faith in relation to our own body—fasting. It’s natural that Jesus, the great Rabbi, when he talks about piety, turns to these things too. And notice that Jesus assumes his disciples are doing all of them. He says, “*when you give to the needy*” and “*when you pray*” not “if.” Jesus does not need to make a case for these practices. It’s a given. What Jesus does is to prop open the hood and motion for us to take a look at how the engine works. Is our righteousness running on the cylinders of Self? Or is something else powering it? How do we know?

Well let’s consider a phrase that is repeated by Jesus 4 times in today’s Scripture, the phrase “*in secret*.” The Greek word here is *krupto* which means to hide, conceal, or keep secret. It is the word from which we get our English word “cryptic.” The meaning of Jesus’ instruction seems very clear. We are to give and pray for an audience of One. Our Father who is “*unseen*” is fully aware of our giving and our praying. In verse 6 the NIV translates the fourth use of the Greek word *krupto* as “*unseen*” to describe our Father, whereas the more literal Bible translations render verse 6 as “*in secret*.”

Now to back up for a moment, in verse 3 we hear Jesus say, “*do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,*” which in the context of doing charitable deeds implies these things are to be done in secrecy. This was not an unknown practice for the Jews because there were always those who wanted to be completely anonymous in their giving, as some people do today. Jesus’ words sound similar to a Jewish proverb that mainly means to avoid all scheming or planning for our own advantage or to receive the attention of others. Basically, I think, Jesus was saying there is good in the act of giving *itself* rather than giving for any personal benefit or for recognition.

As applied to prayer, we ask: Is our prayer life powered by notice from others or the notice of our hidden God? To put it another way: Do we seek glory, or do we seek God? Jesus says it’s possible for even a good thing like prayer to be driven by bad motives— a desire for control, applause, or image-management. A good way to check our heart on this, says Jesus, is secrecy. Move prayer from the street corner to a private room. “The truest measure of a person is who they are when no one is looking.” But Someone is looking; the One with whom we want a relationship. How would a lover feel if you only paid attention to him or her in public? Used. Might the Lover of our souls feel the same way?

If our prayers are about a relationship, then it’s not about manipulating outcomes. In verses 7-8, Jesus challenges the kind of prayer that thinks it can merit a hearing from God, given the right prayer statistics. If I just pray long enough, intensely enough, with the right words, and repetition of words, then God must answer my prayer. This too is Self-powered prayer where prayer becomes a formula or technique to control God. The point here would be not about the relationship, but about what I want.

What an anxious way to pray, anyway, having to make the correct diagnosis, given in the proper petitions, and with the right quality of fervor. What peace we are given to read in verse 8 that our Father knows the diagnosis even before we kneel to pray. Think about that for a moment. After Jesus exposes the wrong engine for prayer, he gives us the blueprint for what a grace-powered, child-postured prayer looks like. We fill out this skeleton, with the particularities of our times and place. Many have said that this prayer is better termed “The Disciples’ Prayer” instead of the “Lord’s Prayer, but much of John chapter 17’s Lord’s Prayer flows out of the structure given here.

Right off the bat, we see these 2 things: 1) Prayer is not, first of all, about us. And 2) It is predicated on a relationship with “Our Father.” We can see the first half of the prayer puts first things first, the adoration of God. Truthfully, the prayer adores God all the way through: He’s above us in the heavens, He’s holy, He’s personal, He has a name, He’s King, His will is good, He cares about big things—like “earth becoming as it is in

heaven,” He cares about small things—like being a Giver of groceries for today, He’s a forgiver, a sovereign and a deliverer. One of the most important things for our faith is to get our magnifying glass off our fighting and fears, and on our Father. Only then will our hearts find rest. Only then will we give his concerns the priority they deserve (Thy Name...Thy Kingdom...Thy will.)

While this prayer places all our needs in a second-place position, it does not eliminate them. All our cares, from physical to spiritual to communal to moral are to be brought to our Father. Did you also notice the predominance of the first-person plural in the second half of the prayer? Eight times we pray “us, our, we.” We are not just praying for our own needs; we are interceding for others. This prayer makes us automatically concerned for those who have no bread, who are in debt, or who may be tempted.

We must take the horizontal gospel so seriously that we ask God not to forgive us *until* we forgive others. Does that surprise you? Go back and carefully read verses 14 and 15. Jesus’ teaching on prayer includes a litmus test of whether we live grace-based lives or whether we live a merit-based, self-centered life. One way forgives others and keeps our lives open as a conduit of God’s forgiveness; the other prevents those things from ever happening. What if we lived every moment as though God was all around us? What if we lived as though nothing could happen to us that God could not take care of?

A Roman emperor returned from a great victory. A little boy was seen burrowing his way through the cheering crowd to get to the emperor. Immediately a burly bodyguard scoops him up and scolds “Hey kid, you can’t do that! Don’t you know who is in that chariot? That is the emperor!” The boy replies, “He may be your emperor—but he is my father.”

God is much more than an emperor to us. Truly, the majestic, cosmic God, has become “Our Father” through Jesus the Son. Jesus commands us to pray in precisely this way because we are now God’s children. The Apostle John says, “*See what great love the father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*” (1 John 3:1).

So, what are the children of God to do? It’s as plain as the nose on your face: GIVE and PRAY. A new year may be the ideal time to consider more giving and more praying. Give *in secret* the way Jesus taught us. Pray *in secret* the way Jesus taught us. And your “*Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you*” (vss. 4 & 6). Amen.