

“FROM MATTHEW’S POINT OF VIEW”

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

SESSION SEVEN – THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT PART 2 – “PRAYER”

Doing Good Without Recognition - Matthew 6:1-4

“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

*“So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. **Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.**”*

This verse exists in tension with Matthew 5:16 – *“In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”*

This tension can be resolved with an understanding of “motivation.” In 5:16, Jesus is talking about our deeds – our example – bringing glory to God. In 6:1-4, Jesus is cautioning about doing good in order to receive personal praise or reward. It is the difference between, “Look how good God is,” and, “Look how good I am.”

Lots of work is done behind the scenes in our churches and communities. Many times, people praise the result – or give thanks to God – while the individuals who worked hard to bring the good to fruition often are not personally thanked. Jesus says, “Be happy when you are not thanked, because God sees what you’ve done, and your reward will come from God.”

“Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” is the theme of the spiritual disciplines of almsgiving, prayer and fasting.

Prayer as Personal Relationship – Matthew 6:5-8

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

“But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

Similar to doing good deeds, Jesus opens by questioning the motivation of prayer. Do you pray to look good in front of others? Or do you pray to be in close, personal communication with God?

Jesus emphasizes the personal nature of prayer, avoiding formulaic repetitions and engaging with God as a child with a parent. A good summary of Jesus' teaching on prayer is "Keep it short, keep it honest, keep it up."

The Lord's Prayer – Matthew 6:9-15

This, then, is how you should pray:

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

Give us today our daily bread.

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

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

This, then, is how you should pray:

Given Jesus' earlier warnings about "Babbling" (KJV – "Vain repetitions"), the Lord's Prayer is intended by Jesus as a model, rather than merely a formula. Nevertheless, it had been adopted by the church in its earliest days, and was incorporated into the liturgy – the regular form of worship – by adding the formula, "For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. Amen." This formula is not in the earliest manuscripts, but already appears in the 1st Century document, "The Teaching of the Apostles (the Didache)," which encourages its use three times per day.

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,

As a model, it is a powerful and intimate statement. It begins by referring to God as "Abba," a personal term of familial relationship with God. "Abba" is the Hebrew (and Aramaic) diminutive for "Papa" or "Dad," rather than the more formal "Av," or "Avot." There is no direct English equivalent; but as illustration, in German (my first language) the word for Father is "Vater." I grew up calling my father "Vati," the diminutive of the same word. We are to be in the same intimate relationship with God as a child is with a parent – a theme to which Jesus regularly returns. We have an earthly parent, and a heavenly parent; the child-to-parent relationship is to be analogous.

But this is not to imply a lack of respect. The next line of the prayer is, "***Hallowed be your name.***" A much clearer sense of that translation is, "May you be treated with reverence and respect." In Hebrew understanding, a person's character is summed up in their name. God's name of YHWH, given to Moses at the Burning Bush, was regarded as so holy, that people were reluctant to speak or write it. As a result,

people addressed God with the title, “The Name” (Hashem). To treat God’s name with respect was to treat God with respect; to disrespect the name, and therefore the person, of God, is blasphemy – literally “to do injury through speech.”

The specific wording of the prayer is doubtless a reference to the daily prayer – the Qaddish - practiced by Jews in Jesus’ day (and still today): *“Exalted and hallowed be his great Name in the world which He created according to his will.”*

Living this prayer means living in such a way that the name of God is held in honour. It is more than (but certainly includes!) refraining from cursing – literally, “taking the Lord’s name in vain.” It means regarding God with the respect and honour due the Creator, both in our words and in our actions. The prayer also says “May your name be honoured” – may all the world respect and reverence You as God.

“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

This is the whole mission of Jesus, and our mission as well – to inaugurate and spread the full realization of the Kingdom of God throughout our world. Jesus began his ministry with the sermon, *“The Kingdom of heaven has come near (Matthew 4:17).”* His preaching and teaching is summed up as *“proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom (Matthew 4:23).”* This prayer expresses the desire for, the inevitability of, and our participation in this Kingdom. As Churchill said, after D-Day established the beachhead at Normandy: “The war is won. The battle continues. May the sword not sleep in our hands until full victory is ours.”

“Give us today our daily bread.”

Daily bread should not be understood simply as “may we have something to eat today,” but it should not be forgotten that for many then, as now, this is precisely what the prayer means. In our affluent society, we’re pretty sure of our daily bread, but for us the prayer should be expanded to mean, *“May that which we truly need be provided for us today.”* It is a recognition that our needs are met by God; it is also a humbling reminder that much of our time each day is spent in pursuit of that which we don’t, in fact, truly need.

Nor should we understand, as a result of this prayer, that we should passively expect our needs to be met by God or by others, with no effort expended by us. It could be that this misunderstanding is addressed by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, a passage condemning the idle with the central line, *“The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.”* Even though we may labour for that which we have, God is the ultimate source of our needs being met.

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

The word for Matthew uses for “debt” is “opheilema,” whereas Luke, in his retelling of the prayer, uses “hamartia,” which means “sin.” This points us to an earlier Aramaic word which carries both connotations. The New Testament carries through with both meanings; Paul clarifies it in Romans 13:8 – *“Let no debt remain outstanding,*

except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.” When we wrong God or another person, we incur a debt. If I wrong you – if I sin against you – I owe you something in recompense, in order to “make it up to you.” Civil law is based upon this principle – if, for instance, someone defames me, I can sue them for reparation.

The sacrificial system of the Old Testament makes this idea clear. When a person commits a personal offense against someone, they are said to have sinned against God as well as, say, the widow and orphan they were oppressing. A sacrifice was required to restore the relationship with God; oftentimes, restitution was required to restore the relationship with the offended party as well. Both levels required a “repayment” to “set the account to zero.”

Yet Jesus adds a challenging line: “as we forgive our debtors.” Forgiveness is not complete until the circle of forgiveness is complete – including our forgiveness of those who have wronged us. This is emphasized not only with many parables and illustrations, but in a coda to the prayer itself: *For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

The benefits of forgiveness can only be realised when all parties forgive. The onus is upon us to initiate that process, even as God has initiated the process of our forgiveness in Christ. This does not teach that we must forgive others before we can receive forgiveness ourselves; rather, the forgiveness of others is proof that a disciple’s sins are forgiven and he or she possesses salvation (as in Matthew 18:21–35). Disciples are to forgive those who have wronged them to maintain a joyful experience of our salvation (cf. 6:14–15). Doing so serves as evidence that a person has truly been forgiven his or her debt of sin. If we don’t forgive, it is evidence that we haven’t experienced forgiveness ourselves. Our continued insistence on anger or revenge would prevent us from receiving forgiveness ourselves.

“And lead us not into temptation.”

Since God is not one who tempts his people to do evil (James 1:13 – “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone”), and the word rendered “temptation” (peirasmos) can be used for either temptation or testing, this prayer indicates that the disciples should pray either for relief from testing or for their testing not to become an occasion for temptation. This is similar to a standardized Jewish morning and evening prayer: “Bring me not into the power of sin, And not into the power of guilt, And not into the power of temptation, And not into the power of anything shameful.”

James adds another layer to this however. He writes (James 1:2-3): *Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.*

The more modern agreement on the translation of this line is, “Save us from the time of trial” (English Language Liturgical Consultation). The simple sense of this is,

“preserve us from situations which might cause us to waver or fail in our commitment to others and to you.” The corollary is, “Give us wisdom and discretion to avoid situations which tempt us away from what we know to be right,” as well as, “When situations arise which shake us to the core, help us maintain our faith.”

“...but deliver us from the evil one.”

Life is not only a physical battle, or an interpersonal battle, or a battle with our own will, but it is a spiritual battle. The word “evil” in the prayer carries a definite article – “The evil” or “The evil one” is a fair translation. The personification of evil in the person of Satan, “the evil one” (cf. 5:37), is a common New Testament theme, as is Jesus’ power over evil personifications (demons). Paul puts it this way (Ephesians 6:12): *For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.*

We must neither overemphasize nor underemphasize the power of evil in our world and in our lives. C.S. Lewis does a masterful job with this in his wonderful book, “The Screwtape Letters” (read it if you haven’t!). Jesus teaches his disciples that they must rely on God not only for physical sustenance and forgiveness of sins, but also for moral triumph and spiritual victory in all of the spiritual battles of life.

Treasures in Heaven – Matthew 6:19-24

19 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...”

24 “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

The focus of the “treasures in heaven” passage are verses 21 and 24. Jesus often cautions against wealth, going so far as to say (Matthew 19:24-26): *“it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”* This is so counter to the way the world seems to work that the disciples react: *“They were greatly astonished and asked, ‘Who then can be saved?’”* Jesus responds with, *“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”* Only with God’s help can the wealthy hope to rely upon God for their salvation.

This is not “picking on the rich,” but a realistic assessment of the dangers of wealth: to rely upon yourself and your accumulated resources as the source of your security and hope, rather than upon God. “I have everything I need. What do I need God for?” This is likely the basis also for the Beatitude, “Blessed are the poor.”

Jesus introduces the essence of the struggle: who is your master? Who do you serve? To what does your allegiance lie? *“You cannot serve both God and money.”* For the word “money,” Matthew uses “Mammon,” the personification of money. “Mammon” is based on an Aramaic word meaning wealth, riches, or property. Matthew maintains the Aramaic, rather than translating it to the Greek word for wealth, to maintain the personification. Mammon and God are seen as rival deities, between which we must choose.

Paul, in 1 Timothy (6:6-10) continues the warning: *“Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”* But there is hope for the wealthy (1 Timothy 6:17-19): *Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.*

Do Not Worry (Matthew 6:25-34)

25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”

33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

All of this is building to Jesus’ conclusion: Do not worry. It won’t help anything. Instead, live according to the principles of the Kingdom: trust only in God; serve only God; prayerfully live in forgiveness and love; and your heart will be at peace. You are living in the Kingdom of God.