

Piety That Honors God

Bible Background • ECCLESIASTES 5:1-6; MATTHEW 6:1-8

Printed Text • MATTHEW 6:1-8 | Devotional Reading • LUKE 11:1-13

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: UNDERSTAND Jesus' teachings about not practicing one's piety in order to be noticed by others, REPENT of making a show of religiosity in order to receive praise from others, and PRACTICE simplicity and humility in our devotional lives.

In Focus

Georgia and James sat at their desks with hands folded, heads bowed, and eyes closed. It was the lunch hour, and they had decided to forgo lunch and pray. Georgia and James needed to hear from God. After ten years of employment at the university, they were both wondering if they would be laid off.

Georgia had transferred into the position only seven months earlier when her former job had been phased out. Up until now, her work record had been impeccable. Now her new supervisor was telling her that her work was unsatisfactory. James had worked in his department for seven years.

“Dear Lord,” Georgia prayed. “Please give us the strength to endure whatever comes our way and help us have the right attitude, especially toward my supervisor. I trust in you and not the situation. Show us what to do, Lord, as we prepare for our immediate and distant future.” After work, James and Georgia decided to call a couple of their good friends and invite them over for dinner on Friday evening. This would be a good time to discuss what their future may hold with close and trusted friends. On Monday, they would know for sure what would happen.

Where did you turn in times of trouble? Is God your first choice for help and are you willing to trust God's Word?

Keep in Mind

“Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:1, NLT).

Words You Should Know

Decapolis. de-KA-poe-liss.

Say It Correctly

A. Secret (v. 4) kruptos (Gk.) — Hidden, inner, private

B. Closet (v. 6) tameion (Gk.) — An inner storage room in a house

KJV

Matthew 6:1 Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.² Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

3 But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth:

4 That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

5 And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

6 But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

7 But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.

8 Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

NLT

Matthew 6:1 “Watch out! Don’t do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven.² When you give to someone in need, don’t do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get.

3 But when you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

4 Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

5 When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get.

6 But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

7 When you pray, don’t babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again.

8 Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!”

The People, Places, and Times

Prayer. Any kind of communication from the heart of man to the ear of God can be called prayer. Throughout the Scriptures, we find God answering the prayers of those people who need Him. Abel’s blood cried out, and God heard and avenged him (Genesis 4:10–12). The Hebrews, while in Egypt, cried out because of their hard taskmasters, and God sent Moses to deliver them (Exodus 3:1–4:17). David prayed for forgiveness and restoration after being caught in sin, and God heard his prayer (Psalm 51). Elisha prayed for his servant’s eyes to be opened to see the army of the Lord, and God made it so (2 Kings 6:17). The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray after they had watched Him (Luke 11:2–4). Peter prayed, and Tabitha woke up from the dead (Acts 9:40–41). Both faith (Mark 11:24) and forgiveness (Mark 11:25) are needed in order for prayers to be answered.

Background

The Gospel according to Matthew emphasizes the authoritative teaching ministry of Jesus Christ and records five sermons. These are found in chapters 5–7; 10; 13; 18–20; and 24–25. There are more sermons recorded in Matthew than any of the other Gospels. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew uses terminology and references that would be well-known to Jews because he is writing to prove to them that Jesus is their Messiah, and the promised King.

The first sermon is frequently referred to as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). The multitudes followed Jesus “from Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and beyond the Jordan” (Matthew 4:25). They were witnesses as Jesus healed the sick, the paralyzed, the demon-possessed, and the diseased. After they gathered, Jesus began to teach His disciples in the presence of the multitudes. Teaching regarding a new view of life was necessary because these followers, mostly Jewish, would have been largely familiar with and influenced by the Pharisees, who were well learned, religious experts, but legalistic and hypocritical, far from the heart of God.

How can Jesus’ example of meeting the needs of the people before He instructs them on the way to live affect the way the church serves unbelievers?

At-A-Glance

1. Giving in Secret (Matthew 6:1–4)
2. Praying in Secret (vv. 5–8)

In Depth

1. Giving in Secret (Matthew 6:1–4) Jesus addresses three acts of righteousness often touted by Pharisees to prove their piety, or devotion to God: giving, praying, and fasting. This lesson, however, focuses on two of those areas: giving and prayer.

Jesus warns His disciples not to follow the example of those who give so that they can be seen and praised by people (vv. 1–2). Their actions do not show authentic worship of God. The word “alms” refers to what is given by someone for the benefit of a person in need. When He uses the word “when” instead of “if,” Jesus is making it clear that everyone is expected to give alms; however, the manner and attitude of the good deed counts. Jesus uses entertaining exaggeration throughout this sermon (e.g., Matthew 7:3–5). Here, obviously, no one was going to the synagogue blowing a horn to announce their arrival at the offering box. Sounding a trumpet is a figure of speech that makes its point by exaggerating the fanfare these hypocrites’ desire by looking for praise. Jesus cautions that improper motives carry their own reward because the actions are acknowledged only by others, thus forfeiting any reward from God.

Christ then provides instruction regarding how God expects good deeds to be done (vv. 3–4). “Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth” doesn’t seem to make literal sense. Jesus is using a figure of speech that explains a concept that should be taken to heart. We might rephrase this to say, “When your right hand does a good deed, don’t lift your left hand to pat yourself on the back!” When good deeds are done secretly and without fanfare for “thy Father which seeth in secret,” that will openly let others know that you are devoted to Him.

The Greek word we use for “hypocrite” can mean a play actor or pretender. How does this information affect your understanding of the word hypocrite as Jesus uses it?

2. Praying in Secret (Matthew 6:5–8) Again, Christ warns His followers to not be like the pharisaical play-actors who pretend to have a relationship with God by showcasing their prayers in public. We cannot take this to mean that Jesus was condemning public prayer. After all, when He teaches His disciples later in this same sermon (Matthew 6:9–13), He is not only modeling a prayer but praying one! Jesus’ concern is the internal

motivation for praying in public. One should not pray in public to be heard and praised by others. Jesus gives the example of hypocrites who enjoy making a show of praying by “standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets” to be seen by others. He again reminds them how doing so cheats them of a greater reward.

Jesus teaches them the proper attitude for prayer (v. 6). He contrasts the “corners of the street” with going “into thy closet,” and praying privately. A “closet” refers to an inner chamber used for storage (usually of food). Jesus wanted His listeners to understand the secret, private, and personal nature their communication with God should have.

Jesus warns his audience about praying like the pagans (v. 7). Greek prayers would mindlessly repeat as many of the names and titles of their gods as possible, endlessly listing favors and sacrifices performed. These prayers were like business contracts. Their hope was to inform, to gain the gods’ or goddesses’ attention in order to earn a response. Christ reminds them that God is different. He is not a business partner. He is their God and Father. The all-knowing, ever-present Lord does not need to be informed or reminded of their past actions. He already knows their future.

Why do you believe prayer is still important, when “your Father knows what you need before you ask Him”?

Search the Scriptures

1. What contrasts about attitudes and actions are made in these verses?
2. What does Jesus say the Father will do as a result of the proper attitude in giving and in praying?
3. What words are repeated in Matthew 6:1–8?

Discuss the Meaning

1. What does Jesus’ teaching in these verses tell us about His views on prayer and giving?
2. We offer public prayers in churches and gatherings all the time. How can public prayer maintain the proper attitude that Jesus describes? What examples can you offer when public prayer did not demonstrate the proper attitude?
3. Consider how modern churches collect offerings. How can we avoid giving with the wrong attitude? What would be modern examples of an improper attitude in giving?

Liberating Lesson

The Pharisees were men who knew the law of Moses and studied the prophets, but somehow, they still missed the Messiah and failed to apply His teachings. This is a potential danger in today’s churches, too. We can become so focused on maintaining our individual comforts and images that we neglect following Christ’s commands to simply love God and love others.

Social media feeds into this temptation. It provides us with ample opportunities to give the illusion of righteousness by posting photos of good deeds as “examples” to others, announcing quiet times and lessons learned from them. If we are not careful, what begins as a great intention can easily slip into an improper motivation. When this happens, that disenfranchised community, that foreign village, that worthy cause, that life-changing revelation becomes a tool to gain attention, likes, or followers. And sadly, that becomes its own sham of a reward.

Application for Activation

This lesson suggests three things you can do this week to evaluate and demonstrate the attitude Jesus describes.

1. Pay attention to those around you who may be in need. It could be a co-worker who needs assistance, your child who needs you at an inconvenient time, someone at church who needs support, or a homeless person on the street who needs a meal. Meet the need. Then, tell no one. If you are not thanked, choose to be at peace, knowing that your Father in heaven rewards.

2. Be intentional about prayer this week. Set aside time with your Father, not just because you have a need, but to continue to develop an intimate relationship with the One who loves and knows you.
3. If you are on social media, pay attention to the things you choose to post this week. Evaluate your motivation for posts, photos, responses, or shares.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Matthew 6:1–8 In this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about two important aspects of the holy life: almsgiving and prayer. The overall theme is that these activities of righteousness should be done with the right motivation.

1 Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.

Verse 1 starts with a warning to take heed. Jesus wants His audience to take special care to understand the teaching He is about to give. He begins with the issue of alms. These are the gifts one brings to share with those in need. Jesus tells His listeners not to bring alms to seek the attention of others. If one seeks attention from others, then the reward of others is all they will receive. There will be no reward from God. If one's actions are for the benefit and admiration of others, then they accomplish nothing. Jesus is directly contrasting His teaching with the actions of the Pharisees his hearers would have seen often publicly. The Pharisees were regarded as very pious for their devotion to the Law of God, but Jesus is teaching that following their actions to be seen rather than giving of out of humble obedience to the Law of God is unrighteous.

2 Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 3 But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: 4 That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

Those who do such outlandish giving (v. 1) are called hypocrites. They look pious and righteous, but they are seeking to glorify themselves and not God. Jesus tells us that to give with an expectation of being noticed and rewarded by people is to give with the wrong attitude. Today we call this “blowing our own horn,” and Jesus uses a similar phrase here, “sound a trumpet” (Gk. *salpizo*, *sall-PEED-zo*). We might do this by naming the amounts and frequency of our donations. Some people might expect to be rewarded and acknowledged by those in authority or by having their names placed on a pew or an offering plate. Such vanity in giving will be the extent of the reward.

Jesus expected that everyone would give alms. He makes this clear by saying “when” you give alms. Yet He goes on to say, “Let not your left hand know what thy right hand doeth.” This figure of speech cannot be explained literally. The right hand generally refers to a good deed or a proper position while the left hand implies a negative action or a bad position. Jesus uses this same concept in Matthew 25:33 when speaking of judgment where the sheep are on His right hand, but the goats are on the left. By using this idiom, Jesus tells His listeners that if they wish to please God, they must avoid letting their ego and pride exaggerate what they have done. We must do our giving in secret, even from ourselves to some extent. There is a human tendency to brag, to tell ourselves what we can expect from God in response to our generosity. We should not feel a sense of self-importance and pride in doing something that we are supposed to do in humility and reverence for God. We are simply to do what God commands.

Jesus emphasizes the importance of our actions being done in “secret” (Gk. *kruptos*, KROOP-toce). This word is often used in negative contexts but can also simply refer to inner, private matters as it does here. When we give in secret, we give because it is the right thing to do, not because we will get something out of it. Still, this verse does assure us that if we give without seeking attention, God will see and reward us openly.

5 And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 6 But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

Jesus applies this same “secrecy” principle to prayer. Jesus declares that praying to impress others makes people into hypocrites. He describes the hypocrites as those who find conspicuous places to stand and pray in the synagogue and even on the street corners. Their objective is to have everyone see them and admire their devotion and dedication. Instead, we should go into a secret closet (Gk. *tameion*, tah-MAY-on). This does not refer to a modern closet used to hang clothes or coats but to an inner room in a house, often used for storage. Even though no one else may know what we are doing, God will see, know, and reward us. This is not to say we should avoid praying in public, but we should not pray to show the public how pious and spiritual we are. Even in public, our motivation should be to glorify and seek God and God alone.

7 But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. 8 Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

Jesus continues His instructions about prayer (v. 7). Not only are we to avoid praying in order to be seen by others, but we are to avoid the practice that was common to the Gentiles of using lots of words to try to impress or manipulate God.

The Gentiles had so many gods and so many names for them that they would try to list them all to make sure they included the right one. Also, they would try to flatter the gods in order to convince them to answer the prayer. Their prayers would often include mantra-like repetition, thinking that if they said the right words the right number of times, their god would have to respond. Jesus said specifically not to be like them. He assures us that God, our Father, the omniscient One, knows already what we need even before we ask. And God cannot be manipulated. God stands ready to answer our prayers and bless us because of the love He has for us.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Listen and Act with Integrity
(Ecclesiastes 5:1–6)

TUESDAY

Work and Play Are God's Gifts
(Ecclesiastes 5:18–20)

WEDNESDAY

Express Your Faith through Actions
(Isaiah 1:11–17)

THURSDAY

A Doxology of Praise to God
(1 Chronicles 29:10–13)

FRIDAY

Forgive from the Heart
(Matthew 18:21–35)

SATURDAY

God's Will and Our Needs
(Matthew 6:16–21)

SUNDAY

Piety That Honors God
(Matthew 6:1–8)