

## **Matthew 6:1-18: Piety**

### **Message:**

Friends! I'm beginning with prayer this morning! And I'm praying now, so.

### **Prayer:**

Today we're continuing to walk through Jesus' Mountain-top teaching, the "Sermon on the Mount," as we call it, that runs from Matthew 5, 6, and 7. And we're talking about piety, today.

### **Preface: On "Piety"**

Piety is a religious word. Or better than that, it's a word for religion. Let me just wade into some heavy language stuff for a second, if that's okay. For some people, "religion" is a bad word, a loaded word, it stands for all the negative stuff that can happen when institutions get powerful and a little over-committed to tradition. And we could spend all day discussing what it means to be "spiritual but not religious," which is a poster that only makes sense if you first-of-all think of faith, and belief, as only an internal thing, wrapped up in your emotional and psychological interior world.

Remember, maybe, when James says that, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world?" What James is talking about when he says "religion" is piety. Piety means the expression of what we believe. It's faith-driven expressions of our belief. And there's, you know, a standard list of Christian acts of piety, what we call "pious"--that is, piety-related--pious behaviors. Prayer, fasting, giving alms--food or cash or

necessities to people poorer than us. Reading, memorizing, and singing or reciting Scripture is a pious act. Gathering with other Christians, to do this stuff or learn how to do it more faithfully, is an act of piety. So there's this list of pious stuff, the piety that is at the heart of our regular, daily or weekly "religious observances." And the list various, but these things--praying, giving to the poor, fasting, reading Scripture, and being with other Christians--are generally on the list, you know.

You don't get a system of belief, like Christianity, without some piety that goes along with it.

The Messiah assumes that God's People are going to do things, are going to show religious observance in various ways. The idea that we wouldn't doesn't make any sense of Jesus; you can't be his follower and avoid these things, even if now and then we wish we could.

So today we're talking about piety.

### ***Three Things:***

And the passage that was read to us is concerned with three acts of piety, three things that come along with the trust in God that energizes us: Giving, Praying, and Fasting. Giving, Praying, and Fasting. He also lays out what we call "The Lord's Prayer," his model prayer that we're going to talk about soon.

### ***A Principle:***

Now and then the Church has really complicated what Jesus brings out in today's passage. And this makes sense: There are few things more basic to Christian devotion than giving, praying, and fasting. These really form the bedrock of our

“spiritual life,” the things we do. Because again, there is no such thing as a purely, only interior Christianity: To follow this Messiah is to live as this Messiah teaches us to live. Jesus’ followers would have expected him to teach them how they ought to express their religious devotion to God. There were other Rabbi’s around, you know: John was one of them, and John’s followers would have been taught by him how to pray, how to fast, how to give, how to be pious. We just happen to be taking our cues from the only one with real authority to give them--that is, if we take them at all.

### ***Rewarded Secrecy: Rewards***

There’s a double-principle at heart behind the piety Jesus expects his followers to show. It’s principle of rewarded secrecy. Rewarded secrecy.

Jesus says this:

***6 “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.***

Jesus assumes that we assume we’ll be rewarded for our acts of piety. That God will give to us because we’ve given to him--by doing these things--our time, our cash, our attentiveness. These pious acts, they act on us. They realign us toward God even as we do them out of a trust that God is real and what Jesus, Israel’s long-awaited Messiah, is true. But we’re meant to trust that God will give to us something for what we’ve given to him, not give back directly to us what we’ve given away--whether in time or cash; God isn’t recording how much, in both quality and quantity, we’ve prayed, fasted, or given to the poor. God isn’t some divine accountant, and we ought to be really, really grateful for that.

But for Jesus' followers, God's People, who live the way we ought to live, we will be rewarded for that trust that acts out in all sorts of pious behaviors. It's reward that comes down the line, after this Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus has inaugurated is fully realized at his return. Most of us would turn this language of reward into a metaphor, and say, "Well, we've been blessed now, given joy and happiness and found meaning and people who love us now because of our faithfulness." It's all true, but that's not what Jesus is talking about here. He expects us to expect to be rewarded for our piety, and not to be ashamed about having that expectation.

There's a part of me that really wants to do for God out of love, you know, only? That somehow, that's "higher" or "better," but the truth is that we're neglecting a major motivation, and a helpful one, if we forget that our faithful choices here will be rewarded in some way we can't quite pin down when Jesus returns and the world is resurrected. The truth is that when Bo does something good, something that I think she ought to do, I reward her in one way or another. That's what a good parent does; I want her to experience my pleasure for the show of integrity that she's displayed. And it's okay for her to be motivated by reward. Our piety will be rewarded. We simply have to get used to the idea.

It's very weird to me that we adult Christians love the idea of rewards everywhere but when it comes to Christ, whether we want great work bonuses or points at our grocery store. Let's just embrace it, you know? This doesn't mean if we give a dollar today we'll get three tomorrow; it's not a promise of material gain. Generosity for God isn't a sure bet or a financial planner's best investment. I do wonder, sometimes, if we have neglected rewards when Jesus returns simply because we don't believe them.

### ***Rewarded Secrecy: Secrets***

But these “practices of righteousness,” these acts of piety, if we do them “in order to be seen by others,” then we give up our right to be rewarded by God for them. Actually, what we’re doing is giving up on the relationship we have with God, in which God rewards our show of trusting integrity through a gracious reward, that God Himself enjoys giving. We just give up on it.

Instead we do what people have always done when they give up on God; we make our own way, one that meets our immediate needs and gives us a sense of being special.

We prioritize the attention of others over God’s attention, and we reject trust that God sees our faithfulness for the certainty--and certainty can feel so good--the certainty that others notice. I doubt we realize that we’re doing this at the moment, but it’s what’s going on.

Jesus doesn’t tell us to pray, fast, and give in secret for no reason. He does it for a very specific reason: He’s contrasting the way his followers are to be with the way the Pharisees, the Scribes, the Teachers of the Law are being. The Pharisees are the negative example. They’re the ones who would rather do things for people than do things for God. They are the ones whose priorities are broken, the “hypocrites,” Jesus calls them. And they are fundamentally hypocrites, because the reason to do the things they do is their trust and gratitude and love for God; and yet they aren’t doing it for God. To call them hypocrites is to call them out.

They are the ones who “give to the needy” or “pray on the corners” or “disfigure their faces”--that is, make expressions of struggle and exhaustion when they fast to be honored or

seen by others. They want to be celebrated for what they are doing, and the celebration, the attention, the public honor that they are gathering up for themselves, the name they are making for themselves as great givers, prayers, and fasters, that's their reward. It's self-achieved. It's got nothing to do with God.

### ***Doing For People: Fasting***

And we can try to make it "obvious to people" that we're fasting instead of letting it only be obvious to God without any problem at all.

Except, well...we're not fasters, not by and large. Fewer of us pray regularly than we give to the needy regularly, and fewer of us fast regularly than we pray regularly. It's last on this list of three. And that's very much because we've been so deeply shaped by the culture around us. We live in a society, a world, built on consumption of one thing or another, and to not consume, to go without anything for any period of time, is first of all to reject our civic economic duty, and second of all, takes effort. It takes strategy, because it demands that we manage our wants, our hungers, our desires, and discern ways to say no to them so that we can provide space for God.

When it comes to this act of piety, I'd almost suggest that in our case, we expand that realm that's "private" outward, and gather one or two to fast with us, fast together. It's a practice that creates space in our lives that the presence of our Father will fill if we invite Him in, it separates us from the things that we think we depend on, and reminds us of our true dependence on God, and it helps us to think critically about what we buy and what we buy into--what about this world tempts us, and what in us finds the temptations of the world so desirable.

**Doing For People: Giving**

We can give “to be honored by people” instead of by our Father. It’s not hard. Make sure people around you know just how much you give to the poor, to the church, to this or that group. Talk up the sacrifice you’re making, whether in time or money, because some of us don’t have much money to give, but do have time to go out of our way to help others. Start up little conversations where you can just slightly compare yourself to others, to feel good about yourself, and if they notice, and feel good about you too, then that’s great. Keep a ledger in your head of what God owes you for what you’ve given, and grow resentful over time for what faith has cost you, forgetting that our Father grants us everything.

**Doing For People: Praying**

We can pray to be “seen by others” instead of by our Father. It’s not hard. We know that Jesus’ people are “supposed to” pray. We recognize it. And, for those of us who really like it when people we like think highly of us, it’s the first thing we fake, you know? The lowest bar. We say to each other “I’m praying for you,” even when we’re not, or “I’ll pray for you,” when we know we won’t. Sometimes we simply use this as shorthand for “I care about you,” but we aren’t praying but really do care about the person. Let’s not forget, though, that actively praying for someone’s good and wanting them not to get destroyed by life aren’t the same thing.

Jesus, in his section on prayer here, points out the failures of the insiders--the Pharisees who pray to be seen--and the pagans, who pray lots of things, because they confuse the importance of the person they’re praying to with the prayer itself. We’re meant to go a better way than both these examples, as Jesus’ followers, and trust that God who knows what we do, the one who, as Isaiah says, “answers before we

call” will hear our prayer even if no one else does. Our father will hear our prayers without us needing to pile a lot of words on top of each to make it happen.

And the fact that we as a default pray silently rather than out loud can actually be a benefit to us here: we can be praying all the time in secret, even as we go about our days, and no one’s the wiser except God who we’re trusting to hear us and answer us.

***Expectations:***

Jesus’ followers would have expected him to talk to them about these things. They would have expected him to teach them about prayer, how to pray. And he does.

Jesus says this:

**9 *“This, then, is how you should pray:***

***“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
10 your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
11 Give us today our daily bread.  
12 And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
13 And lead us not into temptation,[a]  
but deliver us from the evil one.[b]’***

Or, he maybe says this. It’s hard to talk about the Lord’s Prayer, as this prayer get’s called, because Luke presents it differently than Matthew does, and it gets translated differently from one version of the English Bible to another,



so a congregation who wisely memorize Scripture, we end up with a roomful of different versions that we each can't help but pray when we go to pray this. But this is what Matthew gives us, so this is what we'll talk about now.

### ***What To Do With This Prayer?***

So is Jesus saying "Disciples, pray this exact prayer?" Or is Jesus, in these few sentences, painting broad strokes about what it means to be a disciple, to follow him? Because there are significant themes that he touches on in this prayer of his. This is a tension. Is Jesus' prayer something we should pray, because he says so. Or should we pray as he does, with the same concerns at the front of our minds?

Synagogue-goers at the time of Jesus were used to saying routine prayers, prayers that they knew and had in common; it wouldn't have been weird for these disciples of Jesus to get their own sort of thing, right? They would have heard in Jesus' "say this" a command to, in fact, "say this." To pray this prayer. And early Christians did pray this prayer, three times a day, as a replacement of the Shema prayer that Israelites around Jesus' day would have prayed. So.

Let's just assume we're called to do both. To pray the prayer and to live up to it.

We say this prayer because he said "Say." But beyond that, whenever we repeat it--or some version of it--we're reminded of great big things that are critical for our discipleship.

Let's talk about those great big things the Lord's Prayer touches on. And we're going to go really fast. That never works out poorly, right? Especially when we're talking about great themes and ideas that are critical for us to own if we're

going to be excellent disciples of Jesus?

***Lord's Prayer: "Father"***

The prayer begins with "Father." Not "Lord Most High." Not "Great God of Gods" or "Light of All Lights". It begins with "Father." And "Father" is personal and relational, and specific. It implies a closeness to God that, if we thought about it, is a little bit ridiculous, except that it's true.

One of the things that made Paul the Apostle so great was that he got this, got it in his gut, that God was his father in a "daddy," sort of way.

Properly, of course, the prayer begins with "our" in front of this Father, but it doesn't change the intimacy with which we address God, it only reminds us that God isn't just my Father, but your's too: that we're children with many siblings, with with a Father who loves all of us, and has all our concerns in mind.

To be a disciple of Jesus means that we own this relationship God has with us. We depend on God as a father who can and will meet our every need, and answers our cries for help. A father who is at the ready to meet whatever needs we have.

***Lord's Prayer: "...Hallowed..."***

But, while we can be close to our parents, it's generally not great for them to act like our best friends, and contrary to the "Jesus is your buddy" movement that's popular in the Church, God is different from us. Calling God our Father can be a powerful metaphor for all sorts of dependance and intimacy and providence. But God isn't our peer, you know? He's not our bro or our girlfriend.

Jesus prays “Hallowed be your name.” It’s so poetic, but basically meaningless. This is English, but not our English. “Hallow” means “to regard as holy” or “to set apart as sacred, holy, special in a unique way,” maybe even “exclusive.” Remember Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows? The only pop culture reference to “hallows” since, oh, the 1700s? The Hallows are special, unique things, unlike any other things there are in the world.

We’re praying that God “hallow” his name; and “your name,” can be shorthand for you and all that’s done for you, done in it, with your authority. Jesus prays that God be revealed as unlike any other being in the world.

“May your name be made--or kept--holy. It’s a prayer that God would keep himself faithful--would reveal himself as God by doing all the things God does: provide, love, care, shepherd, intervene in love and reveal how we should and shouldn’t live. But in praying “May your name be made holy” we’re also reminding ourselves that we bear witness to the name of God; our lives can affirm who God is or bring him slander and distrust.

To be a disciple of Jesus means that we set apart God as God. That we long for God to be faithfully God, as the Bible reveals him to be: loving, patient, kind, providing all we need and deserving all of our worship, our trust, our obedience. It means that we don’t forget the way our speech and behaviors teach others what they should believe about God. We implicitly invite God to use us to reveal his true self to those around us...which may interrupt our habits now and then.

***Lord's Prayer: "...Kingdom..."***

Jesus continues: "Your Kingdom Come."

"Kingdom of God," or as Matthew puts it, "of Heaven" language isn't crazy to us by now, I pray. We've talked about the Kingdom of Heaven often: the way Kingdom in English implies a place where there is one ruler, a King, whose will is law. In Greek, however, the emphasis isn't on the place so much as on the one who exercises their will, on the capability of that ruler to do what they see fit.

Jesus is praying that God's full reign, full ruling capacity and strength, would be revealed. And we add "on earth as it is in heaven," now and then, but all that does is make explicit what is implicit.

Here in this knock-on-wood, blood-and-guts, stop-and-smell-the-flowers world, we need God's "Kingdom to Come," we need God's will to be fully expressed.

To follow the Messiah means that we want this, we pray for it, we long for it, and we also bear witness to it. We are people who allow God's will for us to be fully expressed in our personal lives and our life together. And to pray "May your will be fully realized" is, in some ways, to pray with Paul, "Maranatha," which means "Come Lord." It's to pray for Jesus' return, because only at Jesus' return will the will of God completely shape the world. In the meantime, we who follow Jesus have to navigate the difficulties of following him in this world that is sometimes on God's side, sometimes against it, sometimes disinterested entirely. That takes all sorts of virtue.

***Lord's Prayer: "...Give...daily..."***

Maybe the greatest virtue it takes is dependance on God, and when Jesus continues, praying "Give us today our daily bread," we're reminded that we didn't cause ourselves to be born, as Frederick Buechner puts it. We don't, by straining really hard and focusing, cause ourselves to be fed, clothed, cared for.

Every need we have that is met is a grace, a gift from God, and while we get used to acting in a way that we feel meets our own needs, ultimately--and this is usually only discovered in the face of what we call tragedy or an accident--life is capricious and we depend on God's providence for whatever keeps us alive. Fasting and giving to the needy, turning to God in prayer, these acts of piety, they remind us of this, even though we so often forget.

But this is an interesting verse in other ways. We translate the phrase Jesus says here "daily bread." But that "daily word" is a tricky one. It only shows up in Scripture in the Lord's Prayer. It probably means something more like "things necessary to our existence," "that which is needed to survive the day" or "survive tomorrow." In this case, Jesus is praying "Give us every day the bread that we need to survive." Give us what we need to survive the day, Lord. Bread is shorthand for sustenance, for livelihood.

Disciples pray "Give me what I need to survive the day." This is prayer for providence, for mercy, for help, to our Father and our God, whose desire for the world around us is our desire, too. Jesus' disciples are taught to depend on God, to ask God to give us whatever we need to make it through today. We focus on the present--it doesn't mean we aren't strategic, we aren't thoughtful, we don't plan, but it does

mean that our focus is on God's providing heart for today, rather than on anything else. And finally, this does remind some of us, maybe, of the way God met the daily needs of His People Israel as they wandered the desert on their way to the land God promised them. As Jesus' disciples, when we pray this we are reminded that we are part of a great chain of people who have trusted God, who God has worked through to bless the world and teach others about him.

***Lord's Prayer: "...Forgive Us..."***

"Forgive us our sins, or our trespasses, as we also have forgiven everyone who sins against us," Jesus continues.

Not really, though. We've just memorized the prayer this way. It's a version of Luke's version of the prayer. The best, most thorough collection of greek manuscript of the New Testament doesn't have this as what Luke says, much less as what Matthew writes.

What Jesus prays is "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

The closeness we have here with "sin" isn't an accident. We're reminded that sin is something like a debt to God, a debt that, in Jesus' death and resurrection, God writes off, forgives, if only we trust him to forgive it.

And--this is a little scary, I think--Jesus assumes his disciples are people who forgive--let go of--whatever restitution is owed to them. We are people who let go of whatever restitution is owed us. Debt or making up for a wrong. We forgive it. We don't demand people make up for their sins against us, but forgive them, we don't demand people pay us back, but we forgive them. And scarier than this, Jesus

expects us to pray for forgiveness because we have forgiven.

In fact, Jesus follows this prayer in Matthew with this:

***14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.***

There's something about being Jesus' disciples that makes it impossible to be both a person who doesn't forgive and someone who expects God's forgiveness. This is a difficult thing to live out, but what's not, you know? This is what we have been made for. We don't demand restitution. And practicing forgiveness is a great gift, ultimately, because it helps us face the truth that when it comes to the hurts and sins that have been done against us, no amount of money can ever pay them back, no restitution can be made. We're always absorbing hurt and pain in this life. It's a fiction that you can make up for anything in the world; forgiveness is, in the end, our only option: to accept the Lord's, and dole it out.

***Lord's Prayer: "...Temptation..."***

The prayer ends with "Lead us not into temptation."

This assumes that we'll be led, and where we're led, we'll follow. It assumes that God knows where temptation lies, and will protect us from it. Think of God as a guide, leading us on a hike down a path that we've never been on before, but He knows intimately. A good guide doesn't lead the ones he's guiding into a life-threatening place; he leads them safely. We remember Psalm 23, maybe: "He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul; he leads me in right paths for his name's sake...even though I walk through the valley of death,

I fear no evil...”

And Matthew adds, “but deliver us from the evil one.” The point being, of course, that it isn’t the guide who lays traps that tempt us to sin; it’s the enemy of God. God is wise and capable enough to keep us from those traps, if we do follow him, that is.

Jesus’ disciples are those who invite God to lead them, to guide them through life, and follow His guidance. We’re the ones who see Jesus’ own period of testing in the wilderness, and ask that we can avoid that same test.

### ***We must pray!***

These are some of the implications of this prayer for our life of discipleship; but the very fact that this prayer of Jesus happens is because, of course, we’re called to pray. We must pray.

We should be prayers. You know that. We know this. Basic to following Jesus is the idea that our Father God is moved by our prayers, the same way a parent is moved by a child’s questions, needs, hurts--whatever the child gives voice to.

Prayer is a tricky thing to talk about because often we end up feeling either guilty about it or self-righteous about it. But at base, prayer is something like a preservative for discipleship--it keeps our faith useful, relevant, fresh. It preserves discipleship the way any intimate communication preserves any relationship. And the Lord’s Prayer, with the great themes that it touches on, is maybe so popular because it such a great preservative of what it means to be Jesus’ disciple. It helps us to be the salt the world needs,



**Conclusion:**

About generosity, I don't need to encourage us. When it comes to fasting, I can only ask us to consider how we might let this pious act, which Jesus expects of us, create space for the presence of our Father in our lives, and separate us from the things we think we have to have to survive. And regarding prayer, if it's not the Lord's prayer we pray, that's okay, but are we intentional enough in our prayers that we're reminded of these great things that Jesus lays out for us here?

If we're going to be people of religious devotion, those who do the acts of piety, acts of righteousness that Jesus expects of us, let's be the best one's God's grace helps us to be. This probably means that most of us ought to take stock on just how much fasting, praying, and giving to the poor are a part of our lives. These things, which we do for God, not others, will be rewarded.