

## Concerning Religious Practices

When it comes to names hurled against a Christian, or against any person of faith, the label *hypocrite* is among the most damning. In the strictest sense of the word, a hypocrite is someone whose behavior doesn't live up to the moral standards or beliefs that they claim to follow. It's an effective charge because practically no one wants to be called a hypocrite, while at the same time almost everyone is guilty of some kind of hypocritical behavior.

In the first 21 verses of Matthew 6, Jesus calls people *hypocrites* not once, not twice, but three times. That doesn't sound very nice, but it gets his point across. In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible the titles given to the four sections of this passage are Concerning Almsgiving, Concerning Prayer, Concerning Fasting, and Concerning Treasures. Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting were three of the most important religious practices of the Jews in Jesus' time. The word *concerning* would be an appropriate description of Jesus' teaching when used both as an adjective and as a preposition. For Jesus, the actions of some people were concerning practices; they were cause for concern. And so he provides teaching on the subject of – concerning – these religious practices. In this passage, Jesus gives his followers – and that includes us – some clues about how to avoid hypocritical behavior. A familiar part of this scripture is the prayer we pray together as a congregation every Sunday. This is commonly known as The Lord's Prayer. It could also be called The Jesus Prayer.

Matthew 6 is the middle chapter of the Sermon on the Mount, one of five teaching discourses (I suppose we could call them lectures) found in the Gospel according to Matthew.<sup>1</sup> The first verse states the overarching theme of the next seventeen verses. *Be careful that you don't practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.*<sup>2</sup>

The next three sections of this passage follow a similar pattern and use many of the same words. Each section begins with a description of the incorrect way of showing devotion to God. The wrong action is performing in public as play actors, also known as hypocrites, in order to be praised or noticed by other people. Next, Jesus names the desired result of these incorrect actions – being seen, praised, or admired by other people. Finally, Jesus condemns all three actions using the exact same words to pronounce that the play actors – the hypocrites – are already receiving their full reward.

A description of the correct way to practice piety follows the condemnation of incorrect conduct. Each action is to be performed in private for the benefit of God. Again, the same reward is promised in all three sections to describe the result of the correct conduct – your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

Instruction about performing religious rituals was important in ancient times so people would know the appropriate way to approach their gods. Ancient peoples were greatly concerned about tradition, timing, preparation, attitudes, performance, and personnel when practicing their piety. The goal was that the worship practices be acceptable to God.

According to one commentator, the three most controversial rituals in ancient times were sacrificial offerings, prayer, and forms of abstinence. Jesus addresses all three of these issues. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Sources consulted include Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount, Hermeneia-A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*, Fortress Press, 1995; Glen Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance*, 2006; Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew*, Believers Church Bible Commentary, Herald Press, 1991; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, Augsburg-Fortress, 1992; and Working Preacher Narrative Lectionary Podcast, [#522: - January 29, 2023 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:1, *Common English Bible*

Jesus is more concerned with the proper expression of the underlying theological ideas than with the exact rules for proper behavior. Let's take a few moments to look at each of these activities.

**Concerning almsgiving:** Almsgiving is a benevolent activity for the poor and needy given out of compassion and mercy. Alms can be money, food, or actions. The practice of almsgiving can be traced back to the Torah, the laws and instructions found in the first five books of the Old Testament. God often commanded the Israelites to remember the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. These acts of benevolence were to be performed in response to God's acts of deliverance in the Exodus. Systems of organized almsgiving included giving a tithe of produce and leaving the land fallow every seventh year so the poor could eat from it. Although we don't have a record of Jesus referring to almsgiving other than in Matthew 6, he frequently challenge people to reduce their personal wealth and give money to the poor.

Sometimes offerings were given in public gatherings. The rabbis encouraged that this be done quietly, but occasionally a person would make a public announcement of their gift. Although some commentators suggest that a trumpet might have been blown for public fasts or that flinging money into a trumpet-shaped money-box might have made a loud sound, it seems more likely that "sounding the trumpet" was a common figure of speech used to describe calling attention to oneself or making a big production out of an action.

So then, should all our acts of giving be anonymous? I don't think so. But our motivations matter. Giving of our money, food, and time reminds us that the things we have aren't strictly our own. They are gifts from God. Because of that we should be generous with what we have and share with others.

**Concerning prayer:** Prayer was an important part of Jewish piety both in private and in public worship. Morning, noon, and evening prayers were to be offered daily. The times of the prayers were not strictly fixed; however, they needed to be prayed within a certain interval of time. The synagogue was the preferred place of prayer for the ancient Jews, but a person could pray in any place. It appears that people frequently prayed on the streets (if that is where they were at the appointed time) and, sometimes, people would cause attention to themselves by praying loudly and visibly on street corners. The private room to which Jesus refers was a storage room, usually a small interior room without windows that was always present in a house.

Jesus then offers an example of how his listeners might pray. The Lord's Prayer comes at the center of the Sermon on the Mount. The center of many biblical passages is the high point, the central pivot that contains references to all the main points that come before and after it. In many ways, The Lord's Prayer serves as the organizing center of the entire Sermon on the Mount. Let's see how this works. I'll use the words we pray each Sunday.

*Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.* Speaking to God as "our Father" points to Jesus' closeness to God, and to God's presence in our lives as well. Praying "hallowed be thy name" reminds us of God's holy name being revealed to Moses at the burning bush and when God gave the Ten Commandments. God is identified as the one who delivers us from oppression and bondage, from our disobedience, and from a sense of God's distance and remoteness. In this prayer we connect with Jesus going up onto the mountain like Moses did. We see God being present in the teaching, compassion, mercy, justice, and healings of Jesus.

*Thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth, as it is in heaven.* Asking for God's kingdom to come connects with Jesus' teaching of the beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-16. Praying for God's will to be done connects with Jesus' explanation of how to obey the Ten Commandments found in Matthew 5:17-48. The beatitudes express the joy found in participating in the reign of God that is already present but not yet complete in this world. In God's kingdom there is deliverance, comfort, justice, satisfaction, mercy, presence, and relationship. Through this prayer, we envision conflict being resolved, relationships healed, truth told, and people faithful to one another. God's will includes breaking vicious cycles of retaliation and creating new communities through forgiveness, reconciliation, and peacemaking.

*Give us this day our daily bread.* In Matthew 6:19-34, Jesus instructs his listeners against anxiously hoarding treasures, food, and clothes. Asking God for the basic needs of the day is a prayer of

faithfulness and trust in God. It reminds us that if we put our efforts into God's reign and restorative justice, people will have all they need and more. As we pray for our basic needs we also pray for our own commitment to the justice and fairness that God's kingdom brings.

*And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.* Asking for and offering forgiveness follows Jesus' instructions in Matthew 7:1-5 to not judge others and to take the log out of our own eye before condemning the speck in our neighbor's eye. Forgiveness faces the reality that something hurtful or harmful happened. It helps to overcome the vicious cycle of bitterness and seeking revenge in which many people get stuck. It acknowledges an awareness that I have hurt someone else sometime in the past. It states a willingness to restore relationship with the guilty person if this is healthy and possible for both parties.

*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* This request connects with themes in the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:6-29. Jesus warns his listeners against putting their trust in unholy people and in false prophets. Instead, put your trust in God who can deliver you from the temptations and tests that definitely will come your way. Ask God for help, treat others the way you want to be treated, be honest with yourself, and be sure to do more than simply listen to what Jesus says. Don't just say the right things; do the right things.

The Jesus Prayer incorporates the main points of the Sermon on the Mount, which many people consider the cornerstone of Jesus' teaching. It expresses confession and dependence. It acknowledges the communal aspect of our faith. As we pray this prayer together each Sunday, we draw closer to God and to each other.

**Concerning fasting:** Fasting is the deliberate, temporary abstention from food for religious reasons. In ancient Israel it was accompanied by other physical performances: weeping, lamenting, tearing one's clothing, wearing sackcloth, applying ashes to one's head, or falling to the ground. In the Old Testament, fasting usually indicated some kind of distress and served as a form of mourning. Fasting could be performed by individuals or by groups. The only annual national fast day prescribed by Old Testament law was the Day of Atonement. The number of annual public fasts increased after the Jews returned from their exile in Babylon.

During the time between the Old and New Testaments, fasting came to be commended as an act of devotion along with almsgiving and prayer. It became a common part of personal piety in early Christianity. Individuals would fast to express mourning, repentance, or humility or to intensify their prayers. Even though fasting was customary, it was given a less significant status than almsgiving and prayer and there was no firm opinion about why, how, and when one ought to fast. The people Jesus referred to in the Sermon on the Mount would make it obvious that they were fasting. They wouldn't practice their usual habits of daily hygiene: washing their faces, visiting the baths, and anointing their faces with oil. Jesus' instruction to them was to act normal and not to call attention to themselves.

I imagine that for most of us, our experience of fasting has been associated with health or self-improvement. The main religious connection may be giving up something – fasting from something – for Lent. Fasting could involve not eating a particular kind of food or refraining from a certain activity. This spiritual practice has the most meaning when it's connected with something else. For example, instead of eating, spend that time in prayer. Or donate the money saved by not buying food to some charitable organization. Or use the time usually spent playing a game or watching a show to participate in some kind of spiritual practice. The purpose of fasting is to connect with God and remember God's provision.

The themes found in Matthew 6 connect to several important themes that run through the entire Bible. First of all, this passage about the proper way to practice acts of devotion to God is directly connected to the two greatest commandments Jesus lists in Matthew 22 and Mark 12. The first is to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is to love your neighbor as yourself. These two commandments sum up the major themes of the Bible: the sovereignty of God, the requirement for human beings to respond to God with their whole

selves, the guidelines for living with other humans, and the function and the necessity of the law and the prophets.

The prophets often drew the connection between worship and motivation or between worship and the authentic, moral living that Jesus talks about here. The proper goal is to seek God, but God won't honor that search if the people don't practice right living and right relationships. God desires acts of piety but not if the people are pursuing their own interests.

Both Jesus and Paul expand on this theme of performing actions for the glorification of God instead of for self-glorification. Jesus condemns those who seek accolades and pray just to be seen and honored. He discusses this in detail in Matthew 23 where he condemns those who teach the law but do not follow it or who follow the tiniest letter of the law while ignoring the weightier spirit of the law requiring justice, mercy, and faith. Paul analyzes his own motivations in Galatians 1. *Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.*<sup>3</sup>

Another theme from Matthew 6 that is found throughout the entire Bible is the idea that God sees what is secret. Specifically, God looks at the heart. In Psalm 51, David acknowledges that God desires truth in the inward being. He asks God to teach him wisdom in his heart and to create a clean heart within him. The prophet Jeremiah recognizes that the LORD of hosts sees the heart and the mind.<sup>4</sup> Praise from other people as a result of external appearances does not guarantee praise from God who sees what is inward.

A theme that seems to oppose what Jesus teaches in Matthew 6 is also located in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus instructs his followers to let their actions be seen by others in the same way that a city on a hill can be seen and a light gives light to the whole house. However, this teaching about light makes it clear that the source of that light is God and the purpose of the light is to bring glory to God, not to individual people. God sent the light into the world to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. The followers of Christ are not to proclaim themselves, but to proclaim Jesus.

Matthew 6 highlights the fact that Jesus is the son of God, the God who demands righteousness and authentic worship. Jesus came to earth to demonstrate to us how to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. Jesus' priorities of working for the kingdom, bringing honor to God, reconciling the world to God, and being authentic are to be our priorities. In order to love God completely, honor God, and work for the kingdom, we must put our beliefs into action and demonstrate our devotion to God. The religious practices of helping others, praying, and denying ourselves are to be done for God's glory, not for our own. They are to reflect accurately who we really are.

We can continue placing our donations in a public offering plate, making noise when we drop our money into the penny jar, praying out loud in public, and publicizing the acts of service in which we are involved – all actions we might think Jesus is condemning in this passage. However, if we do any of these things solely to be noticed by and praised by those around us, Jesus would not be pleased with us. He might even call us hypocrites!

God wants us to perform our acts of piety well. This is the message Jesus is emphasizing in these verses – practice your piety out of an authentic relationship with God in order to bring honor to God, not to yourself. Allow God to refine you so you aren't a hypocrite. It's probably not possible to act out of truly unselfish motives, but God asks us to be as authentic as we can be. May God strengthen and equip us to do just that.

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<sup>3</sup> Galatians 1:10, *New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 17:10