



FOCUS VERSE

Matthew 6:4

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

LESSON TEXT

Matthew 6:1-18

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.

9 After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

10 Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

11 Give us this day our daily bread.

12 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

14 For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you:

15 But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

16 Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

17 But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face;

18 That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.



FOCUS THOUGHT

Jesus calls us to live a life of authenticity.



CULTURE CONNECTION

The Case Against Hypocrisy

Nobody likes a hypocrite. Some individuals even use hypocrisy as an excuse to leave the church and backslide. Why would people want to spend eternity with those whom they cannot even bear to spend a few minutes with every week?

North Americans' distaste for hypocrisy has driven many individuals to become disillusioned regarding politics. They feel they become educated about national concerns, develop their ideology, research the positions of politicians, and vote for the ones who would best represent them. Then the elected representative forgets all his promises and compromises what he once claimed to believe, abandoning those who elected him to political office.

According to author Steven I. Weiss in his article "The Political Virtues of Hypocrisy," former Congressman Barney Frank

views flip-flopping on issues as "inherent to democracy" rather than "a necessary evil." Although Frank probably would not characterize such ideological shifts as hypocrisy, he views ideological inconsistency as a useful tool to legislators.

Weiss concludes, "Frank's view of hypocrisy is a self-serving narrative, to be sure, but it's also a very rare example of a legislator choosing to actually explain such behavior, rather than pretending that such behavior does not exist" (www.theatlantic.com, accessed August 18, 2015).

In contrast to what may sometimes exist among inconsistent legislators or churchgoers, Jesus taught us to be real—to be authentic. We must not live for show or pretense, but live as individuals changed by the power of Jesus Christ.

OUTLINE

I. OLD COVENANT TRADITIONS

- A. Almsgiving
- B. Praying
- C. Fasting

II. IDENTIFYING THE HUMAN BONDAGE—HYPOCRISY

- A. Hypocritical Almsgiving
- B. Hypocritical and Heathen Prayer
- C. Hypocritical Fasting

III. THE TRANSFORMING INITIATIVE—MAINTAIN RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM WHO SEES IN SECRET

- A. Right Attitude
- B. Sincerity and Humility

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

In 1988 Nike began an ad campaign that has lasted more than a quarter century. Nike used an eighty-year-old runner, Walt Stack, to get everyone to "Just do it!" After all, if he

could run seventeen miles every day, then the rest of us should be able to "Just do it" also.

Jesus' kingdom teaching and relationship with the disciples confronted the "Just do it" approach to spiritual practices. God's covenant with humanity has always been about a restored relationship rather than just a behavioral checklist. Jesus calls His followers to an authentic relationship with Him that cannot be mimicked by just acting as if we are good people.

The Sermon on the Mount advanced the principles of the old covenant by fulfilling the promise to write on the hearts of His people (Jeremiah 31:33). In fact, all the Law is summed up in the call to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Luke 10:26–28). Through a few examples, Jesus contrasted Kingdom life with other religious systems of the day. Jesus calls us to look beyond the hours prayed, dollars given, and meals fasted to determine our motive: to receive rewards from other people or to receive rewards from the Father.

As we continue to study Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6, we should anticipate both comfort and challenge. God's gracious work in our lives calls us to celebrate the relationship that exists and convicts us of areas where we need to mature. This process should continue to transform us into the image of Christ (Romans 12:2) throughout our lives.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. OLD COVENANT TRADITIONS

God gave the old covenant as a wonderful gift to the Israelites. The God who first called their father Abraham into a relationship with Him so "all families of the earth [shall] be blessed" (Genesis 12:3), called ex-slaves into a special relationship with Him. God called Israel to witness to the world so others would see the blessings of following the true God. God's grace was freely offered, but it was conditionally received. If they followed God's commands, then they would be blessed. If they did not obey, then a curse would be their inheritance (Deuteronomy 11:27–28).

A. Almsgiving

"He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment. Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:18–19).

One marker of being the covenant people would be caring for the poor. Long before a descendant of Abraham could lay claim to a wheat field in Canaan's Promised Land, God gave the Israelites guidelines for caring for less fortunate people. They were to leave the corners of the field unharvested to sustain those in need (Leviticus 19:10). Every three years farmers would celebrate God's bountiful provision by dedicating a tithe back to God by sharing the tithe with the poor, landless Levites, strangers, and servants in need. As a result the Lord would bless them. (See Deuteronomy 14:28–29.)

Giving alms was a part of being in a relationship with God because everything the people owned came from heavenly storehouses.

Others may give alms as an obligation, but God invited Israel to give from the heart.

B. Praying

Authentic relationships always include some type of conversation. God's covenant with Abraham and Israel began with God taking the first step in Genesis 12:1–3. The Lord's invitation of covenant included the effort to restore communication as seen between the first humans and the Creator. Sin broke the open conversation between God and humanity by introducing shame, fear, and blame. Reconciling the relationship required reopening the channel of communication. Abraham and Israel followed God's offering. Abraham's covenant relationship positioned him to intercede on behalf of Lot and his adopted hometown, Sodom, and its sister city, Gomorrah (Genesis 18:22–32) as well as remind God that conditions of the covenant were not being met (Genesis 15).

Jehovah called Israel to a life of prayer and faith. Prayer would have an effect, but it would not manipulate God. Prayers with sacrifices acknowledged God's sovereignty and provision; they did not force God to protect them or continue blessing them. Even a casual reading of Moses' prayers when Israel sinned miserably (Exodus 32–34) illustrates the role prayer played in God's covenant with Israel. Even when Israel failed, she had the opportunity to remember the better way of covenant relationship and cry out to God for deliverance. (See Judges 10.)

On the other hand, Israel's neighbors believed prayer rituals could force their gods to guarantee the fertility of crops, cattle, and wives. False prayer is belief in manipulation of gods and spirits in an effort to force longed-for outcomes in the material world.

C. Fasting

God used multiple ways to teach Israel of His care and her dependence on Him. Sacrifices, offerings, tithes, care for the poor, and prayer worked together to illustrate God's offering of authentic relationship with His people, and by extension, His desire for relationship with all humanity. The paradoxical practices of feasting and fasting also served to form Israel into her covenant identity.

Jesus expected His disciples to know when to rejoice and when to mourn. As the preacher said in Ecclesiastes 3:4, we have “a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” For example, Israel’s annual celebration cycle linked life to deliverance and provision. Passover’s special meal and national holiday commemorated deliverance from Egypt. Pentecost, another national feast, celebrated God’s blessings during the harvest.

The Law also called for a national holiday when Israel was to fast. The Day of Atonement was God’s gift of a national fast day when everyone considered God’s gracious provision of a covering for sin. Fasting provided a time to reflect on ways God’s people had fallen short of His commands and to seek divine forgiveness for those sins. The high priest offered the annual atonement sacrifice in the context of fasting. On other occasions the sacrifices were celebrated by feasting on a portion of the offering in commemoration of the authentic relationship with covenant God. But on the Day of Atonement, the only relevant participation in atonement was fasting and waiting on the word that God had received their sacrifice and rolled their sin ahead until a more permanent solution was available.

In the Book of Isaiah, the Lord corrected Israel’s fasting practices. Israel had begun to view fasting as a way to control God. The people wanted to keep their oppressive, evil ways while fasting in sackcloth. Yet they felt betrayed when God refused to approve that kind of fast (Isaiah 58:3–5). If they wanted to live in the favor of Jehovah’s atonement, then they would have to include setting captives free, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and making the marginalized feel at home (Isaiah 58:6–7). If they returned to that kind of fast, then light, health, righteousness, and the glory of the Lord would be theirs.

II. IDENTIFYING THE HUMAN BONDAGE—HYPOCRISY

By giving the old covenant, God sought an authentic relationship with His estranged creation. Sadly the Law served to illustrate both the way to relationship with God and the greater depths to which people could sink when they tried to use tools of righteousness for their own advantage.

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount opened the door to living in His kingdom. Kingdom living would not be automatic. Such living would be rooted in the Incarnation and would require new birth and faithfulness to Jesus’ teaching (Matthew 28:18–20). Jesus’ teaching contrasted Kingdom living with failed human attempts to control the relationship with God. Such human attempts always lead to ever-tightening human bondage.

In Jesus’ day, the religious elite only acted as if they were in a holy relationship with God. Using masks of righteous practices (as seen in giving alms, praying, and fasting) could bring only temporal rewards. In receiving accolades from others, they lost any hope of eternal blessings from the Father. Humanity cannot adopt a “Just do it” attitude in carrying out religious practices. Motivation matters. Spiritual practices must flow from a response to God’s invitation to right relationship with Him. Everything else is mere hypocritical stage work meant to impress people. Jesus’ teaching still challenges us today.

A. Hypocritical Almsgiving

Students of human behavior in our modern world try to understand how people are motivated. How can consumers be motivated to buy new shoes? How can families be encouraged to exercise more? How can saints be encouraged to support metro missions or a children’s home?

The old covenant removed motivation of appeasing vengeful gods and goddesses by showing God’s loving call of Abraham. While the covenant relationship called Israel to respect God, it sought to demonstrate God’s preference for grace over destructive punishment. A prime example is Jehovah’s self-identification at the Mount Sinai crisis. When Moses approached God to intercede on behalf of the people, God reset the relationship by naming His own name and defining His leading attributes of mercy, grace, long-suffering, and abundance in goodness and truth (Exodus 34:6). God brought life rather than death.

Almsgiving is a Kingdom test Jesus instituted. The way of a hypocrite is to give alms for recognition or self-justification rather than out of relationship with God. Fallen motivation is

the acclaim or respect of people. Pragmatic care for the poor, elderly, disabled, and others in need suggests we should use forms of motivation that work. Such care then motivates givers by connecting the giver's desire to be valued by superiors, respected by the less fortunate, or to appease a guilty conscience born from conspicuous wealth generated by questionable economic practices instead of giving out of gratitude or a relationship with God. While children may be fed, the givers have substituted the King's eternal gratitude for the momentary acclaim of mortals. The givers fail to remember they serve as stewards of God's bountiful resources. When they have given only if others notice, they have exchanged heavenly regard for a brass plaque.

B. Hypocritical and Heathen Prayer

Spiritual leaders spend considerable effort trying to get people to value prayer. They hope they can motivate people to love to pray and look forward to prayer meetings. Jesus' kingdom test explores spirituality by contrasting Kingdom prayer with hypocritical and heathen prayer practices. "Just doing it" is not enough in Christ's kingdom.

Kingdom citizens bear fruit in prayer because they abide in Christ and His words abide in them.

Hypocritical people who pray will fail the Kingdom test in a way similar to hypocritical giving. They pray because others notice rather than viewing prayer as a relationship with God in which He invites us to participate with His eternal design. Kingdom citizens bear fruit in prayer because they abide in Christ and His words abide in them.

"If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (John 15:7).

Jesus called His followers to a life of faithful prayer that begins in private. Jesus did not teach against corporate times of prayer, which we see in the early church's response to persecution (Acts 4) or in an effort to see God's mission fulfilled in them (Acts 13). Rather than rejecting corporate prayer life, He reset the motivation to be a relationship with the Father.

In the Kingdom prayer test, Jesus used a contrast with heathen prayer, something He did not do with almsgiving or fasting. Prayer is common to all forms of religious practices, from organized formal religions to private eclectic spiritualities seen in our postmodern world.

The Mount Carmel contest between the prophets of Baal, and Elijah, the prophet of Jehovah, illustrated this distinction. Baal's worshipers spent most of the day in escalating prayers to no avail. They prayed louder than before, jumped higher than before, and cut deeper than before, yet Baal did not respond. Their actions could parallel a concept made popular by Malcolm Gladwell; if they could just get enough unified noise, then a tipping point would be achieved where something supernatural would have to happen. In contrast, Elijah's powerful prayer was recorded in just two short verses (I Kings 18:36–37). Fire fell as God consumed the sacrifice, stone altar, water, and dust. God won the contest.

Jesus taught Kingdom praying to keep His disciples from such heathen prayer forms. They did not need vain repetition because they lived in relationship with the Father. Authentic prayers may be demonstrative at times, but their exuberance is a result of relationship rather than an effort to get God's attention. The Father needed no convincing since He already knew what they needed. Lengthy, wordy prayer is no substitute for consistent relationship with God where prayer is rooted in Kingdom vision rather than personal need or vindication.

Peter and John were on their way to a normal prayer time when God healed the lame man. Since they already lived in relationship with Jesus, they did not need a lengthy or notable prayer to get their Master's attention on behalf of the disabled man. They simply prayed, Peter took the man by the hand and lifted him up, and immediately he was healed.

“And he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God” (Acts 3:8).

C. Hypocritical Fasting

Ironically the underlying motivation for all forms of hypocrisy is to cover one’s sins by misusing religious practices. In actuality the hypocritical actors compound their sin by trying to deceive others about their real spiritual state and by accepting the glowing assessments of others who do not give as liberally, pray as fervently, or fast as consistently as the actors do. Consequently the actors and possibly the audience wind up further from Kingdom living than before the act of devotion began.

Jesus’ critique of hypocritical fasting actors was that they succeeded in making people think they were authentic. They wore their fasting masks so well that everyone noticed. Their sorrowful look gave an appearance of contrition—exactly what they were trying to do. However, Jesus called for Kingdom reality of contrition before God rather than people. He suggested extra efforts in appearing normal on fast days so only the Father would notice.

Fasting does not manipulate God into doing what we want. Forgoing our own pleasure for the good of others advances Kingdom living far more than trying to make God do our bidding by missing a few meals.

III. THE TRANSFORMING INITIATIVE—MAINTAIN RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM WHO SEES IN SECRET

Throughout His life, teaching, miracles, suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus Christ modeled right relationships that all can follow. As we follow Jesus’ kingdom teaching, we worship Him as Lord and are transformed by the relationship.

A. Right Attitude

The Hebrew mind frequently looked for the great commandment out of the 613 old covenant commandments. On one occasion a lawyer asked Jesus what the greatest commandment was. Jesus answered: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This

is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 22:37–39).

Attitude toward God. The key beginning point in Jesus’ model prayer is having a right relationship with the Father: “Our Father” (Matthew 6:9). Jesus’ followers pass the Kingdom tests by rooting their spiritual disciplines in the Father’s care. Rather than starting with worship, as some have suggested, they start by acknowledging their relationship with the heavenly Father.

This correct orientation removes the possibility of finding satisfaction in hypocritical acting. The Father always knows. His children live to faithfully obey. Eternal assessments gain priority over acclaim by others. Children of God place all key evaluations in the hand of their Master and seek to do His good pleasure. (See I Corinthians 4:1–4.)

Reordering life around attitudes and relationships to God happens with new birth (John 3:3) and by adoption (Romans 8:14–17). These two key Kingdom descriptors convey critical realities. Kingdom citizens come as new babes in water and spirit. They come in simple faith, must be disciplined, and are expected to mature beyond being milk consumers. On the other hand, they are adopted because of their ability and giftings to carry out the Father’s purposes.

No wonder Jesus spent so much time teaching on right praying. Through their prayers, Jesus’ disciples would be empowered to continue their fruitful ministry for the Father’s good pleasure. Worship reorders priorities and opens the doors to eternal reality. Hypocritical play-acting may convince the audience and even the actor that spiritual things are happening, but nothing has changed. Seeking the Father’s pleasure, as Jesus did, participates in bringing the Kingdom to earth as it is in Heaven.

Attitude toward others. Authentic living is not just between the Father and worshipers; authentic living always includes the worshipers’ relationship with others. Jesus’ incarnation repositions Kingdom living as a call to service. All spiritual disciplines will lead the worshiper to be more concerned with ways to serve others rather than the appraisal of others. Acting masks are ripped away. Authentic

self is revealed in relationships with others in service. Those who claim to love the unseen God while not actively loving seen neighbors are not living truthfully (I John 4:20–21).

The old covenant call to serve others was demonstrated by Christ's example of washing the disciples' feet at the Last Supper (John 13). Individuals who pray authentic prayers look for ways to serve others, beginning with their neighbors.)

Those who claim to love the unseen God while not actively loving seen neighbors are not living truthfully.

Attitude toward self. Reorienting Kingdom tests of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting will bring about a significant change in Kingdom citizens' self-awareness. The change finds its genesis in the Father's forgiveness. This one reality changes everything. Once worshipers bask in the luxury of a forgiven life, they find the courage and faith needed to multiply the grace of forgiveness in all of their relationships.

In Luke 17:1–5 we see the disciples' assessment of this Kingdom challenge. When commissioned to heal the sick and cast out devils, they did so without a second thought. When commanded to forgive as they had been forgiven, they begged for greater faith! Perhaps this is why "acting" discipleship is so tempting—hypocrisy manipulates favor while authentic discipleship calls for the more difficult task of humbly restoring relationships.

Finally, authentic Kingdom citizens live on behalf of the world. They are satisfied with daily bread rather than parading material wealth before others as a way to find value in themselves. God's covenant invitation is always given to help people live their lives so the world can know the One they serve. They seek to live as salt and light in a fallen world (Matthew 5:13–16). They have lavishly benefited from God's reconciliation to His people

in Christ and joyfully accept the challenge to carry words and deeds of reconciliation to the nations (II Corinthians 5:18–19). They live out covenant purposes in a way Israel could not because Kingdom citizens have a better covenant established on better promises (Hebrews 8:6). Jesus Christ was a better sacrifice and a better high priest. (See Hebrews 7:25–27.)

B. Sincerity and Humility

Stripping away hypocrisy's stage masks leaves people vulnerable before God and others. Since Adam and Eve's fall in the Garden, human beings have tried to cover their shame. But only in Christ is all shame finally removed. Paul's thesis in Romans 1:16 is that the gospel is the power of God to salvation and it will never bring shame. Rather than limiting face-to-face meetings to a Moses-like leader, Kingdom living provides access to the King for all citizens.

Jesus' kingdom tests in Matthew 6 open the door for His followers to live in honesty without the need for pretense. Toward the end of his life, Peter wanted to leave this kind of legacy to the saints who would follow. The apostle called believers to submit to each other and to God (I Peter 5:5–6). Such submission is possible only to those who can face God, others, and self without masks. The grammar of Peter's call to humility shows he included casting all cares and anxieties on God (I Peter 5:7). Masked, hypocritical behavior is exposed when we fail to disclose and cast those cares on the Master.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Living in the Kingdom creates a new set of norms. Rather than comparing ourselves to surrounding society, Jesus calls us to evaluate ourselves against authentic Kingdom living. New normal living is more about being alive in the Kingdom than trying to perform a certain set of behaviors to justify ourselves to others. The Father certainly sees through the masquerade.

While removing masks seems foreign to our existence prior to coming to Christ, authentic living liberates all who take the risk. Disciples can surrender to the Kingdom's claim in all

areas of life. Such surrender provides a means to receive grace in both pointing out stains of hypocrisy that still resides in us and providing the next step of transformation.

Repentance becomes a common trait in Kingdom living. Turning from hypocrisy provides an opportunity for authentically moving into God's purposes for us as both individuals and local congregations of believers. Such purposeful submission is normal in the Kingdom. The consequence of surrendering our masks to the King is joy and confidence in being sons and daughters, princes and

princesses with authority to live out His mission in the world.

Considering the coming Kingdom reveals our degree of authenticity. Those who have practiced faithful almsgiving, praying, and fasting have already begun living in the Kingdom here on earth. For them, the Kingdom's final arrival is a forgone conclusion that brings peace and rest. Conversely, mask wearers have no choice but to face the King's return with fear; they know all will be revealed on that day. ■

REFLECTIONS

- Conduct a review of your giving, praying, and fasting for the past six months. If you had the opportunity to share your findings with Jesus over a cup of coffee, how would you feel about the findings?

- Would you give more or less to the needs of others if your efforts were not recognized? If you no longer received tax exemptions for giving, would you continue to give? Since Jesus' teaching on almsgiving fits primarily in public space rather than organized church offerings, where does this lesson call you to consider giving to the poor, elderly, children, or those pushed to the margins of society?

- Consider the call in James 5:16 to confess our faults one to another. How does Jesus' kingdom teaching in Matthew 6 highlight areas needing confession? How might this confession lead to the "effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man"?

- Why are we so easily tempted to revert to long, loud, and repetitive prayers as the heathen pray? What conflicts do you see between Jesus' teaching here and His call for persistent prayer in other places? How might you resolve that tension?