

Up until this point in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been talking mostly about our relationships with other people—anger, reconciliation, honesty, love of enemies, mercy, and peace. But here in Matthew 6, the focus shifts. Now Jesus begins to speak about our relationship with God.

What does genuine worship look like? What does real prayer look like? What does it mean to give, to pray to fast—not as performance, but as love? And Jesus begins with a warning in verse 1.

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

Now notice what Jesus does not say. He does not say, “Never do anything publicly.” He does not say, “Never pray where anyone can hear you.” He does not say, “Never let anyone know that you helped somebody.” Jesus is warning us about the temptation to turn worship into self-promotion. He is warning us about the danger of using prayer, generosity, and sacrifice as ways of polishing our image. And then he gives us three examples: giving, praying, and fasting.

Jesus begins with almsgiving. Now almsgiving simply means giving materially to someone else as an act of mercy. It means helping someone in need. It means sharing what you have because someone else does not have enough. And Jesus says: when you do that, don’t blow the trumpet. Don’t make your generosity into a spotlight moment. Don’t turn compassion into self-advertising.

We know how easy it is to want credit. We know how quickly the ego can creep into even the best things. We know how easy it is to confuse being generous with being seen as generous. And Jesus says, if what you wanted was public admiration, then public admiration is all you get. That’s your reward.

But if what you want is to participate in the life of God—if what you want is to love as God loves—then give quietly, humbly, and unobtrusively. Because the true reward of giving is not that someone notices you. The true reward is that for one holy moment, you get to take part in the generosity of God.

You get to love someone because God loves them. You get to become the kind of person whose hands are open. You get to remember that what you have is not only for you. And I think the deepest truth here is this: The reward comes when you’re not doing it for the reward at all.

The point is not to become the hero of your own charity story. The point is to become the kind of person whose life is so rooted in God that generosity becomes natural.

Then Jesus turns to prayer. Prayer was central to Jewish life. There were daily prayers, synagogue prayers, festival prayers, family prayers, private prayers. Prayer was part of the rhythm of faithful life. So, Jesus is not critiquing prayer itself. He is criticizing what prayer can become when it is used for the wrong reasons. Again, the issue is not public prayer. Jesus himself prayed publicly. The early church prayed publicly. We pray publicly every Sunday. The issue is not *where* the prayer happens. The issue is *why*.

If prayer becomes a performance—if prayer becomes a way to show off our spirituality, our eloquence, our theology, our emotion, our holiness—then we have missed the point entirely. Jesus suggests we find a place where you don’t need to impress anyone, a place where no one is grading your prayer, a place

where you can be honest before God. Because Prayer is a relationship.

Similarly, don't think prayer needs perfect language, grand phrases, or eloquent theology in order to be heard. You do not need to impress God. You do not need to come up with the prettiest sentences in the room. Jesus says, your Father already knows what you need before you ask.

But, if God already knows what we need, then why pray? We do not pray because God lacks information. We pray because prayer is how we enter relationship; prayer is how we place ourselves before God. Prayer is how our hearts are opened, softened, and reoriented. Prayer is not about informing God; prayer is about surrendering ourselves to God and that is why Jesus gives us this prayer.

“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”

This first line is the key to the whole prayer. Here Jesus gives us a name for God that is intimate and relational: Father. Not merely the God of our ancestors; not simply a distant ruler in the heavens; not an abstract force, but One who is near in the way a loving parent is nearby.

Now I also want to say this carefully: for some people, father-language is comforting, but for others, it is painful. It's Fathers' Day today we are grateful for our fathers including God, our Father. But not everyone has known a father who was loving, trustworthy, or safe. So when Jesus teaches us to pray this way, I do not think he is trying to trap us to use what can be painful human language. Instead, I think he is naming a relationship. Jesus is inviting us to approach God as beloved children approach a loving parent—with trust, with honesty, with dependence, knowing that whatever they request or present, they will still belong.

And there is another crucial word here: Not **my** Father; **Our** Father. The Lord's Prayer is not an individualistic prayer. Even when we pray it alone, we never pray it only for ourselves. To say Our Father is to remember that I belong with my siblings all over the world and through the millenias to a family where love reigns supreme. My prayer is never just about me and my life; it is always tied to the lives and needs of others.

And then we say, hallowed be your name; may your name be holy among us; may your name be sanctified; may your name be treated as holy in our lives. In other words: God is not an accessory to our agendas, a mascot for our causes or a tool for our self-importance. God is holy. And prayer begins by putting us back in our proper place — not in shame, but in wonder and awe.

Then Jesus gives us the first set of petitions. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. These are dangerous words. If we really pray for God's kingdom to come, then we are asking for the world to be reordered according to God's mercy, justice, and peace. We are asking for our own priorities to be rearranged. We are asking for our hearts to be changed. We are asking for our lives, our church, our habits, our assumptions, our fears, and our comforts to come under the rule of God. And I'm not sure whether that'll be everything I always wanted.

So, what is the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is the world as God intends it. To pray “your kingdom come” is to ask for that and it is also to ask that we become kingdom people— people whose yes is yes and whose no is no; people whose generosity is real, whose mercy has substance, who are willing to be transformed.

Then we pray, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

This is not passive resignation. “Well, whatever happens, happens.” No—this is a plea for the world to become what God longs for it to be. It is a plea for shalom, for wholeness, healing, justice, right relationship, and peace. And if we mean it, then we are asking God not only to change the world “out there,” but to change the world in here—inside us.

Then the prayer turns toward our needs. “Give us this day our daily bread.” Bread is simple, ordinary and yet it is the daily stuff that keeps our body alive. So this part of the prayer is like a confession. We are dependent creatures who can’t sustain ourselves by our own strength alone. We receive life as gift.

“Daily bread” means enough for today. Enough for the next step; enough to keep going. This is not a prayer for luxury, it is not a prayer for abundance piled high in the pantry, it is a prayer for provision. Because the prayer says give us, not *give me*, this petition is also social. I cannot faithfully pray for daily bread while ignoring those who do not have it. I cannot ask God to feed us while hoarding my loaf.

Sometimes **we** are the means by which God answers someone else’s prayer for bread. Sometimes the church becomes daily bread. Sometimes generosity becomes daily bread. Sometimes a meal, a check, a ride, a grocery bag, a casserole, a warm coat, a kind word, a place at the table—that becomes daily bread. So, when we pray this petition, we are not only asking God to provide for us, we are also offering ourselves to be part of God’s provision for others.

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

Matthew uses the word ὀφείλημα (ofielima) which is translated as *debts*. Not trespasses but Debts. A debt is an unmet obligation, a failure, a wrong, something broken and something left undone. And when we ask God to forgive our debts, we are asking God to release us from what we owe and to let begin again. And thanks be to God—God does.

But Jesus refuses to let forgiveness stay abstract. We cannot ask for mercy while clenching our fists around everybody else’s failures. We cannot ask God to release us while refusing to release anyone else. That is why Jesus comes back to forgiveness immediately after the prayer: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you...”

This is not a mathematical formula or a “be nice enough and God will reward you” statement. This is about integrity. If I refuse even the possibility of mercy toward others, then I have not yet understood the mercy I am asking for. If my heart is closed to forgiveness, then I am resisting the very life of God.

Now forgiveness is not easy. Sometimes it is painfully hard. Forgiveness does not erase harm, nor does it excuse abuse nor does it mean pretending everything is fine. But it **does** mean refusing to let resentment have the final word and opening the possibility that grace can do what bitterness never could.

And then the prayer ends with this plea: “And do not bring us to the time of trial but rescue us from the evil one.” Or put another way: Do not let us be overwhelmed by what would destroy our faith. Rescue us from evil. Protect our relationship with you. Hold us fast.

This is a prayer of vulnerability for people who know they are not invincible. This “the Lord’s prayer”

is for people who know that suffering can shake us, who know that fear can overtake us, and for people who know that despair, bitterness, pride, and exhaustion can threaten our life with God. So, we pray: God, do not abandon us there. Deliver us. Rescue us. Keep us near.

And then Jesus returns to the pattern one more time—with fasting. Fasting was a serious spiritual practice. It was tied to repentance, mourning, humility, and longing for God. But even fasting can become performance and sacrifice can become theatre.

Jesus says: don't do that. If you fast, don't wear your suffering like a badge. Don't make your sacrifice into a stage prop. Wash your face and go about your day. Let it be between you and God.

Again, the point is not secrecy for secrecy's sake. The point is sincerity. The point is this: don't do holy things to make yourself look holy.

So, what is Jesus teaching us in all of this? He is teaching us that God cares about the why as much as the what. Jesus is teaching that giving matters, prayer matters, fasting and worship matters. But what God wants even more – what God desires from us most of all is integrity—where your insides match your outsides - hearts and actions that belong together.

Jesus is saying: Do not settle for religion as image management. Do not settle for spirituality as performance. Do not settle for saying holy words while your heart remains untouched.

God is not impressed by polished appearances. God is not dazzled by public religiosity. God sees in secret all your hidden motives and fears and longings and love. God sees the parts of us nobody else sees. And somehow, that is not bad news. It is grace. Because the God who sees in secret is also the God who loves in secret.

The God who sees in secret is also the God who feeds, forgives, and rescues. The God who sees in secret is the God Jesus teaches us to call Our Father. So when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are not just reciting words we memorized long ago, we are stepping into a way of life, claiming God as the center of our lives, asking for God's kingdom, not our own, asking for enough, not excess, asking for forgiveness and opening ourselves to mercy, asking for rescue because we know we need it, and we are asking all of it as a people—not as isolated individuals.

And we pray it like we mean it because genuine worship is a life where whatever happens in public and whatever happens in secret are not at war with each other. So maybe the invitation of this passage is very simple: When you give, give out of love. When you pray, pray honestly. When you fast, do it humbly. When you say Our Father, remember who you belong to. When you say Your kingdom come, be prepared to be changed. When you ask for bread, notice who else is hungry. When you ask for forgiveness, leave room for mercy. When you ask for rescue, trust that God hears.

Because in the end, piety is not about appearing holy, it is about belonging wholly to God. And the God who sees in secret, the God who knows what we need before we ask, the God who gives bread, forgives debt, and delivers from evil, is already drawing us deeper into that life.