

**“Our Relationship with God:  
Give, Pray, and Forgive” (Matt 6:1-15)**

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**A. Introduction**

**1. Looking good**

Naturally, we want to “look good”. We want to do well, succeed, and impress others. We love other people’s approval. Whole industries are built on making people look good. Think of the beauty products, self-help books, and how products are sold—all to make us look good.

The common wisdom in our culture is we need to impress other people, promote ourselves, and blow our own trumpet. But should we try to impress others with our spirituality? And, more importantly, can we do anything to impress God?

**2. What pleases God?**

What pleases God? Matthew chapter 6 addresses the question: How can we please God or how can we have a right relationship with God?

Jesus offers five spiritual disciplines that, if practiced, will put us in a healthy, symbiotic relationship with God:

- Giving (1-4)
- Prayer (5-13)
- Forgiveness (14-15)
- Fasting (16-18)
- Simplicity (19-34)

**3. What is a spiritual discipline?**

What is a spiritual discipline? A spiritual discipline is a practice that enables us to experience the power of the Spirit in greater and greater degrees.

Spiritual masters tell us that practicing spiritual disciplines help accelerate our spiritual growth from one stage to the next and help us attain a holistic life with divine power.

Practice is essential for growth and gaining expertise in anything. Think about professional athletes or profession musicians. Consider the martial arts and the daily practice that martial artist must do to attain expertise.

Is being a Christian any different? Can we expect to grow and develop and attain spiritual competence without spiritual practices?

The Christian life is not a static existence. The Christian life is journey through several stages of spiritual growth. Spiritual disciplines position us for receiving divine power and help us advance through the stages of spiritual growth. There are many developmental theories. Here are two such schemes:<sup>1</sup>

Fowler's Faith Development <i>Stage</i> -Theory	Underhill's <i>States</i> of Development
Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective	1. Awakening
Stage 2: Mythical-Literal	2. Purification
Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional	3. Illumination
Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective	4. Dark night of the soul
Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith	5. Unification
Stage 6: Universalizing	

Spiritual disciplines help us to grow. There are many spiritual disciplines. Jesus focuses of five—giving, praying, forgiving, fasting, and simplicity—we will look at the first three today.

## B. Giving (6:1-4)

The first spiritual discipline that positions us to experience God's presence and power is **giving**. Last week, we briefly looked at the practice of almsgiving or giving to charity.

**Matt 6:1-4.** <sup>1</sup>"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. <sup>2</sup>"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup> But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (NRSV)

Last week I noted that Jesus expects all his followers to give charity. Giving is a spiritual discipline. When we give, we exercise our faith in God. When we give, we are trusting that God will provide for us and we don't need to be so self-reliant.

Last week, I noted two observations about what Jesus taught about giving:

1. First, there is a wrong way to give, which is called, *Blowing a trumpet*. This is a metaphorical way to talk about calling attention to oneself as the "hypocrites" (actors), who pretend to be something they are not.
2. Second, there is a right way to give: *Not let the left hand know what the right hand is doing*. I suggested this means giving as quietly and unobtrusively as possible—"in secret" (v. 4).<sup>2</sup>

The overall thrust of the passage is about our relationship to God. We give because we love God or we want to please God. Of course, we cannot give material things to God. So we do the next best thing. We give to God's creatures, who have unmet needs. When we give to people, expecting nothing in return, it is like saying, "Here, God, I love you, this is for you."

<sup>1</sup> See the helpful discussion on states and stages by Ken Wilber, *Integral Spirituality* (Boston: Integral Books, 2006) 84-102.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Gardner, *Matthew*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1991) 116.

**Proverbs 14:31** says that whoever gives to the poor, honors God.

We expect nothing in return, but we do receive. **Proverbs 19:17** says, “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full” (cf. Prov 22:9).

We receive an inner satisfaction that we have done something that transcends our own self, something that moves us toward union with God. I think that in every act of charity, opens our eyes to the Kingdom of God.

## C. Prayer (6:5-13)

So, giving is an important spiritual discipline. **Prayer** is another important spiritual practice that puts us in a healthy, symbiotic relationship with God.

### 1. Prayer in general

**Matt 6:5-13.** <sup>5</sup> "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup> But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. <sup>7</sup> "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

#### a. How often?

Look at verse 5. Notice the phrase, “**whenever you pray.**” Jesus presupposes the three hours of prayer—morning, noon, and evening—that Jews were required to pray (cf. Acts 3:1; 10:30; Did. 8:3).<sup>3</sup>

#### b. What is Jesus condemning?

What is Jesus is **condemning**? He is condemning prayer that has the wrong intention. He is condemning “performance prayer,” prayer that is not addressed to God, but designed to impress other people.

#### c. Pray with “right intention” (Heb. *kavvanah*)

For Jews, regular prayer (*tefillah*) and blessing (*berachah*) must be done with the “**right intention**” (Heb. *kavvanah*) and not just mindlessly or for the sake of impressing others.<sup>4</sup> The Rabbis taught: “All depends on the intention of the heart” (*b. Meggillah* 20a). If our intention is right, we can pray in public just as Jesus did (Matt 11:25-30; 15:36; 26:36-46).

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<sup>3</sup> So Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 110.

<sup>4</sup> See Ted Falcon and David Blatner, *Judaism for Dummies*, 47-48.

## 2. The Lord's Prayer

Next, we turn to the **Lord's Prayer**.

<sup>9</sup> "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. <sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. (NRSV)

### a. Verbal and nonverbal prayer

There are two types of prayer—verbal and nonverbal.

- **Verbal prayer** is a type of conversation with God and would include: blessings (Eph 1:3), petition (Col 4:12), adoration (Ps 95:6), confession (1 Jn 1:9), thanksgiving (1 Thes 5:18), and praise (Eph 3:20).
- **Nonverbal prayer** is a type of silent, meditative prayer that moves toward a mystical oneness with God and would include listening prayer, centering prayer, and contemplative prayer.

### b. Our Father

With the Lord's Prayer, Jesus is teaching about verbal prayer, especially petitionary prayer. He invites us to talk with God *as if* God were our Divine Parent.

- When we say **Our Father** (6:9), we are imitating Jesus, who called God, *Abba*.
- When we call God, "Our Father," we are saying we will live as God's children—we will live up to God's image.
- When we call God, "Our Father," we are reminded of God's power and protection, but we may also think of God in motherly images (e.g., Isa 66:13, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you").<sup>5</sup>
- When we say, "Our Father," we affirm our communal, non-individualistic, status as children of God's family.

### c. First three petitions focus on God

The first three petitions focus on God—*thy* name, *thy* kingdom, *thy* will—and also expresses our commitment.

In the first petition, we commit ourselves **to hallow or honor God's name**. In effect, we are praying "that God will vindicate his name—that all may see who he really is—and fulfill his promises for his people."<sup>6</sup>

In the second, we affirm our desire for **God's kingdom to come**, especially as Jesus described it in the beatitudes (Matt 5:3-12).

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<sup>5</sup> Also see Isa. 49:15, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you."

<sup>6</sup> William W. Klein, *Become What You Are: Spiritual Formation According to the Sermon on the Mount* (Tyronne, Ga: Authentic Books, 2006) 148.

In the third, we dedicate ourselves to **God’s will**, making God’s reign (in heaven) a here-and-now reality (on earth). This includes enacting Jesus’ six sayings about reconciliation, adultery, divorce, truth-telling, peacemaking, and love of enemies (Matt 5:17-48).

#### d. Second four petitions focus on us

The second four petitions focus on us—give *us*, forgive *us*, lead *us* not, deliver *us*:

In the fourth petition, we ask God **to give us bread**. We’re asking God to meet our needs. Whatever our needs are—food water, clothes, jobs, car repairs, money, love, children, friends, justice—whatever is needed, we are to ask God for it.

In the fifth, we ask God **to forgive us** of our “debts” (*opheilēma*). Literally, it refers to what we owe financially. Luke’s version has “sins” (*hamartias*). The point is, this petition implies that we owe God something—and we need God’s forgiveness. Moreover, forgiveness is conditional; if we forgive, we are forgiven (see Matt 5:7; 6:14-15).

In the sixth, we ask God not to allow us “**to be tempted**” (RSV). The Greek word, *peirasmōs*, can also be translated “the time of trial” (NRSV). In effect, we are asking God not to test our faith beyond our endurance (1 Cor 10:13).

In the seventh, we ask God **to rescue us from evil** or the “evil one.” Either translation is permissible. When testing does come, give us the wisdom and the fortitude (strength, courage) not to make evil choices.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Questions about our prayers

Many of our prayers are probably “gimme lists” of what we want from God—quick “machine oil” prayers that ask God to make life go smoothly.

That’s not what the Lord’s Prayer is about. The Lord’s Prayer is a model for how we can pray. When we look at the seven elements or the seven petitions, we can ask seven questions about our prayers:

- a. When you address God, what words do you use? Do you talk to God as your **Divine Parent**? As your creator and caregiver?
- b. How do you want **God to be honored** in your life? What would it look like for God to receive glory in your life, in our church, in our world?

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<sup>7</sup> The last line on the Lord’s Prayer is in italics—“for thine in the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever”—indicating it was probably not in the original prayer. The earliest manuscript that includes that line dates from the fifth century (the Washington Codex).

c. Do you really want **God's will** for your life? If so, submit yourself to God's purposes as you understand them. Can we pray for God's will to be done if we have no desire to discover or submit to what God wants?

d. When it comes to **daily bread**, if you are receiving enough, how do you thank God for providing for you?

When you think about the bread you eat—that you bought it from a grocery store, who got it from a distributor, who purchased it from a producer, who bought the flour from a mill, who bought the grain from a grain distributor, who got the grain from a farmer, who planted the seed, cultivated the land, and harvested it—what part did you play in that process? What part did God play?

e. When you realize you fall short of God's expectations, how do you take hold of **God's forgiveness**? Jesus says, when we forgive others, we know God forgives us.

f. When we face **temptation or testing**, pray for spiritual victory. Identify the crises of faith you face, and ask God for wisdom and strength to prevail.

#### **D. Forgiveness (6:14-15)**

Jesus thinks that forgiveness is so important he adds a footnote to the Prayer. This is an elaboration on the fifth petition.

**Matt. 6:14-15.** <sup>4</sup> For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (NRSV)

Forgiveness is not unconditional. For Jesus and the early Christians, forgiveness required repentance—turning away from evil and any harmful activity. When we holding a grudge against someone or when we fail to forgive someone, we are not turning from evil. We are embracing it. We need to release that grudge and forgive people. When we fail to forgive, it blocks the flow of divine forgiveness. And that hate festers in us and destroys us.

We can consider forgiveness to be a spiritual discipline. We can make this a daily practice. When you go to bed at night, consider who harmed you, insulted you, not given you proper respect—see them as sinners, just like you. Forgive them and you will feel God's love and embrace (hug).

#### **E. Reflections**

We began by noticing that our culture encourages us to impress other people. But that is not the teaching of Jesus. Jesus teaches that we need to be humble, especially when it comes to spirituality and our relationship with God. God is not impressed by anything we do. God wants sincerity and right intention or *kavvanah*.

But it takes more than sincerity and right intention to grow spiritually and to have a good relationship with God.

– Having “right intention” is necessary, but not sufficient for spiritual growth.

- Having “right intention” is necessary, but not sufficient for experiencing the power of the Spirit.

For that—like anything—we must practice, practice, practice. For having a strong, healthy, symbiotic relationship with God, Jesus tells us to practice giving, practice praying, and practice forgiving.