

MAY DAYS

Pastoral Bible Study on:

“Foundational Discipleship Instructions”

May 1(TH), 8 (TH), 14 (W), 22 (TH), 29 (TH)

7:00 pm – 8:15 pm weekly

(in-person & online)

Instructor:

Rev. Dr. Leslie D. Braxton

Week 2

“Prayer and Fasting”

Text:

Matthew 6:5-18

Section Overview

This section on Prayer (and fasting) functions as the theological center of the Sermon on the Mount, with the Lord’s Prayer the core of this center. In this section Jesus (as recorded by Matthew):

- Contrasts “Gentile” prayer and authentic prayer of his disciples (v.7-8).
- Provides a template for his disciples’ daily prayer life.
- Establishes the forgiveness of others as the condition for his disciples’ prayers to be acceptable to God.

(5) And when you pray, do not be like the Hypocrites’, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. (6) But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

This passage parallels vv. 1-4 and 16-18. It rejects ostentatious praying aimed at applause from a human audience and commands that prayer be directed to God alone. Like all worship, prayer is to be God-centered and understood as an objectively real event in which God hears the worshiper.

However, Jesus does NOT here legislate against public community prayer, in which he expects the church to engage (18:19-20). Rather, he commands that prayer be made to God alone. As in the preceding unit against ostentatious giving of alms, it is not the act itself that is condemned, but the motive in performing for the applause of a human audience. This is the “hypocrisy” that Jesus condemns here. So then, prayer does not necessarily require a holy place but is sanctified when honestly addressed to God.

(7) And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. (8) Do not be like them, for you Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

In this section, authentic prayer is contrasted not only with hypocrites in the synagogue but with perverse Gentile practices. The “many words” of pagan prayer refers to the invocation of many gods; to the ritual repetition of prayer formulas; to empty, insincere talk; or to glossolalia (speaking in tongues). All such speaking supposes that one must impress or gain the attention of the deity or use the correct formula to ensure the effectiveness of the prayer and thus understand prayer to be a manipulative function for the self-interest of the one praying. In contrast, Jesus teaches His disciples to pray as an expression of trust in a God who knows our needs before we ask. Asking, then, is not a matter of informing or manipulating God, but of aligning ourselves in trust and acknowledging our need.

**The Lord’s Prayer
(6:9-13)**

Matthew relocates the Lord’s Prayer to make it the structural and the theological center of the Sermon on the Mountain. The prayer consists of an address and two sets of three petitions.

v. 9.....*This then is how you should pray:*

Address.....***Our Father in Heaven,***
First set of 3 petitions.....***hallowed be [your] name***
v.10.....[your] kingdom come
[your] will be done on earth as it is in Heaven

Each of the first three petitions begin with a third person imperative and end with “your(s)”.

v.11. Second set of 3 petitions.....*Give [us] this day our daily bread.*
Forgive [us] our debts, as [we] forgive our debtors.
And lead [us] not into temptation but deliver [us] from the evil one.

Each member of the second set of three petitions contains a form of the word for “we”, known as the three “we petitions.”

For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Scholars universally believe that this phrase was added to later manuscripts.

v.9*Our Father* (Ara, abba)

It was characteristic of Jesus to pray to God simply as “**abba**”. “Abba” is not only a child’s term of endearment (like Papa, Mama) but was also used by adult children in addressing their fathers.

For Jesus (and Matthew), “*abba*” was not a general term for God. It was Jesus’ word for his own relationship to God. It connotes the intimate personal relationship of Jesus to God. He then included his disciples, and then human beings as such in this relationship. As children of the one God, they are “*brothers and sisters*” not only of one another but also of Jesus, sharing his personal relationship with God. “*Father*”, for Jesus, means the one who loves, forgives, and knows how to give good gifts to his children (7:11).

V. 9b-10. Three “Your” [thou] Petitions. Like all authentic worship, the Lord’s Prayer is God-centered. It begins not with human needs and desires, but with the honor of God as God. The first three petitions are not for three separate items. They are for the eschatological (end time) event in which God’s name will be hallowed, God’s kingdom will come, and the will God will be done.

“Hallowed be your name.”

“*Hallow*” means to honor as holy. The initial petition is that God will be honored as God, the Holy One. The prayer is intimate and direct, but not chummy. It preserves the awesome holiness of God and prays for it to be acknowledged by all.

“Your kingdom come.”

The eschatological nature of the whole prayer is focused in this one petition, which sums it up. Yet there is a present dimension. For Jesus and his disciples, the kingdom was not only a future reality at the end of the world, but a present experience. The prayer acknowledges that God is God, and that God is finally responsible for bringing in God’s rule, but Jesus’ and his disciples must submit themselves to God’s rule in the here and now.

“Your will be done.”

Just as God’s will is already done in Heaven, the rebellious earth will be brought back under the rightful sovereignty of the Creator.

v. 11-13. Three “We” Petitions.

“Give us today our daily bread”

Bread has been understood for normal this-worldly needs, for survival. The prayer represents Jesus’ own solidarity with the poor and his concern that they have the minimal means of survival. Praying this prayer, the church unites with the hungry and poor of the world, and hence the prayer constitutes a readiness of those who have bread to share with those who have not.

“Forgive us our debt, as we also have forgiven our debtors”

Jesus assumes universal sinfulness. He assumes that every person who comes before the Holy One in prayer comes as a guilty one who needs God’s forgiveness. Sin is here thought of as a debt owed to God – a debt one cannot repay (cf. 18:21-35). Without presumption, but in confidence, the disciple is taught to ask for God’s forgiveness. God’s forgiveness is unconditional, precedes human forgiveness of other human beings, and is ground and sure. Yet, prayer for God’s forgiveness’ is unthinkable for one who is intentionally an unforgiving person (cf. 18:21-35). Jesus magnifies the danger of presuming on God’s grace and, therefore, being an unforgiving person oneself.

“Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from the evil one.”

This last petition, like the prayer overall, is best interpreted in eschatological terms. In Jewish apocalyptic thought, just before the final victory of God and the coming of the kingdom, the power of evil is intensified, and the people of God endure tribulation and persecution. The disciple is instructed to pray that God will not bring them into this time of testing, when the pressure might be so great as to overcome faith itself (26:42). Although originally primarily eschatological, the petition for deliverance from the final testing and the evil one also has a present dimension. “Ordinary” testings and temptations are seen not as mere petty disturbances, but as manifestations of the ultimate power of evil. The disciple is instructed not to take them lightly, but to see them as a threat to faith and to pray for God’s deliverance from them.

V.14-15

“For if you forgive men when they sin against you your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sin.”

Here Jesus builds upon what was already stated in verse 12. He drives home the point that those who pray for God’s forgiveness must themselves forgive.

v.16-18

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Fasting means the voluntary abstention from food for a prescribed period as a sign of religious devotion. It was often accompanied by wearing sackcloth, placing ashes on the head, and abstaining from washing the body. The OT prescribed only one public fast, on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). There were, however, voluntary private fasts in which Jews could participate as a sign of repentance, mourning, or devotion to prayer. As in the preceding sections on almsgiving and prayer, Jesus instructs his disciples not to be ostentatious in their practice of fasting but to do so only as an act of devotion to God, and for God’s notice only.