

UNIT 1: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Lesson 3

March 22, 2026

The Christian's Devotion:

God the Father is honored when Christian disciplines are practiced.

THE LESSON OVERVIEW

This lesson focuses on three key practices often referred to as Christian disciplines: giving, prayer, and fasting. Christian giving emphasizes proper motivation, avoiding public displays for recognition, and practicing humility in charity. Christian prayer focuses on sincere communication with God, with insights into private prayer that God rewards, and the model commonly called the Lord's Prayer. Guidance on Christian fasting instructs believers to avoid outward displays of piety and instead fast in a way that honors God privately. Together, these teachings encourage authentic, God-centered devotion in all aspects of spiritual life.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During the time of Jesus, the devout Jewish people placed great importance on various religious practices, with giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting being among the most significant. Rabbis traditionally taught these acts as ways to honor and draw closer to God. However, over time, some individuals began to perform these practices in an effort to gain recognition and admiration from others, rather than focus on their spiritual purpose. It was this shift toward seeking external acknowledgement that Jesus sought to address and correct, emphasizing the need for sincerity and devotion. Christian disciplines are to be directed to God and no one else.

THE LESSON OUTLINE

1. CHRISTIAN GIVING: Matthew 6:1-4.

- A. Proper Motivation, (1)
- B. Proper Action, (2-4)

2. CHRISTIAN PRAYER: Matthew 6:5-15.

- A. Prayer the Father Rewards, (5-8)
- B. The Lord's Prayer, (9-15)

3. CHRISTIAN FASTING: Matthew 6:16-18.

- A. How Not To Fast, (16)
- B. How To Fast, (17-18)

DISCUSSING THE LESSON

1. CHRISTIAN GIVING: Matthew 6:1-4.

A. Proper Motivation, Matthew 6:1.

Jesus began His discussion on practicing piety with a warning about motives. What He said in verse 1 applies to all three of the practices of giving, prayer, and fasting. Throughout chapter 6, Jesus referred to two kinds of rewards from God. He also assured His audience that they would receive the reward that was most important to them. Those who desire most to be seen and rewarded by God do their acts of piety for His eyes alone. Therefore, they do not need to make a spectacle of their actions. God the Father will see and grant what they desire: His blessing.

On the other hand, those who most want to be rewarded by others become actors. They make a spectacle of giving, prayer, and fasting so others will see and honor them. They will get what they want: praise from people (vv. 2,5,16), but their aim is too low. Showy, pious people do themselves a disservice by failing to receive the best, while defaming God at the same time. These people believe the only reward is the praise of people, which is why they do what they do and essentially rob themselves of God's blessings.

B. Proper Action, Matthew 6:2-4.

With this warning about proper motives, Jesus proceeded to teach how we ought to go about doing these deeds. In each case, the assumption is that His disciples will do these things. Jesus said, "Therefore, when you do a charitable deed ..." (v. 2 NKJV). Elsewhere, Jesus talked about giving offerings and tithes (Matthew 23:23; Mark 12:41-44), but here, Jesus was specifically talking about giving to the poor. Some see a significant difference between doing acts that seem more spiritual (prayer and fasting) and other acts, such as engaging in charitable acts for the poor, which they see as more social. Jesus did not separate them. His disciples were expected to practice the various Christian disciplines.

Jesus also addressed the intent or motivation of giving. He condemned showy displays in almsgiving. Jesus was likely using humor and hyperbole when He said that some people make such a display of their charity that it was like they were blowing a trumpet to get everyone's attention. These people are "hypocrites" (Matthew 6:2). They pretend to care about the poor but really want to look good to others. Jesus directed His disciples to make their donations to the poor in such a way that they would not draw attention to themselves. Again, using symbolic hyperbole, He said, "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth" (v. 3). Charitable giving should be motivated by a genuine care for the poor and a desire to honor God (v. 4).

The reward of the Father to the secret giver is rooted in His goodness and the power of trusting Him fully. Jesus often emphasized the importance of relying on the Father's love and embracing the holy life He desires for us. When we give without drawing attention to ourselves, it opens a pathway for God to free us from the grip of materialism and fear, allowing us to live more abundantly. Practicing the discipline of quietly giving to help others or meet needs in the church can bring peace and spiritual growth to us.

2. CHRISTIAN PRAYER: Matthew 6:5-15.

A. Prayer the Father Rewards, Matthew 6:5-8.

Prayer was essential in the Jewish way of life. The rabbis taught the people that it was the greatest of good deeds they could perform. Jewish people were expected to pray twice daily: in the morning and the evening (Psalms 5:3; 92:2; 1 Chronicles 16:40). This practice was maintained by the early Christians in the New Testament (Acts 3:1). During these prayer times, Jews would recite the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) and a list of prayers called (in English) “the eighteen.” The hours for these prayers were set at fixed times, or at least to be completed no later than specific times. Consequently, it was not uncommon for someone to stop in a public place to ensure that they completed their prayers by the required time. Such persons would be noticeable since the Jewish posture for prayer was standing with outstretched arms, palms upward, and head bowed.

Jesus did not have a problem with the fact that prayer was valued or that specific prayers were offered at certain times. Neither was there a problem with public prayer – Jesus often prayed publicly. The key to understanding Jesus’ point is the motivation “that they may be seen of men” (Matthew 6:5). This is similar to the problem with those who make a spectacle of their giving. Like the hypocrites who put on a show for human attention to their giving, they get the praise they desire and nothing more. Jesus said it was better to find a hidden inconvenient place to pray than to show off. The “closet” is a key concept here since this was the only space inside most homes of the time that had a door (v. 6). The point is that prayer directed to the Father alone is prayer that the Father rewards.

Jesus also criticized the Gentle way of praying. The translation “vain repetitions” (v. 7) comes from a Greek word that is similar to the English word ‘babble.’ It means to stutter, stammer, or repeat the same syllables, words, or phrases over and over. It carries the idea of nonsense. It is possible that Jesus was referring to the pagan practice of stringing syllables or certain words together in repetitive fashion, like a magical incantation. The idea behind such pagan practices was that by doing so, they badgered the gods into granting their request. This was not how the disciples of Jesus were to pray. Christ’s followers have a loving Father who is aware of their needs before they ask Him (v. 8). Therefore, we as His disciples can approach the Father in confidence with clarity and simplicity.

B. The Lord’s Prayer, Matthew 6:9-15.

Beginning in verse 9, Jesus gave His disciples an example of how to pray. This is traditionally referred to as “The Lord’s Prayer.” However, some believe it should be called “The Disciples Prayer” or “The Model Prayer.” Jesus provided it as a pattern for His disciples, even though He did not need to ask God for forgiveness. While Jesus did not need to ask His Father to forgive Him, since He never sinned, His incarnation meant that He fully identified with sinners. If Jesus did pray this specific prayer, He would have prayed it on behalf of sinners.

How should we practice this prayer? Is repeating this prayer an example of “babbling”? As noted above, the Greek word interpreted as “vain repetitions” is likely related to magical rites in pagan practices, unlike the Lord’s Prayer. Further, the petitions in this prayer are anything but nonsense. Since the Jewish people were already used to formal prayers, it is possible that Jesus

was adding this prayer to their collection. Besides reciting the prayer as written, it can also serve as a structure for composing individual prayers. It is helpful to slowly move through each petition and name those things in particular that we need as we pray.

There is a warning in this passage: We must be willing to forgive (Matthew 6:14-15). Forgiving others is essential to accessing God's forgiveness and the blessings of His kingdom; otherwise, our prayers lose their power. The Lord's Prayer provides a daily opportunity to bring before God those who have wronged us, allowing us to forgive them in His presence and seek His guidance. While our emotions may take time to align with this act of forgiveness, we can trust that God hears and responds to our prayers. Embracing forgiveness not only frees our hearts but also deepens our connection with God's grace and love.

3. CHRISTIAN FASTING: Matthew 6:16-18.

A. How Not To Fast, Matthew 6:16.

The final act of piety that Jesus addressed received the same treatment as charitable giving and prayer. Jesus taught that fasting is to be done before God and for God, not for the sake of praise from others. Fasting held great importance among first-century Jews, serving as a meaningful spiritual practice tied to religious observances and communal mourning. It offered an opportunity for reflection, repentance, and strengthening their connection with God. Major fast days like the Day of Atonement and Tisha b'Av (which marked the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem), along with minor fast days commemorating key historical events, were central to Jewish life. Far from being a private act, fasting was often communal, guided by a shared calendar detailing specific days and times. Through fasting, individuals expressed gratitude, sought atonement, and honored moments of collective remembrance. It was a special time for communities to unite in prayer and reflection, fostering a deeper relationship with God while reinforcing bonds of togetherness and shared faith.

Fasting by Jewish people was a Scriptural mandate practiced during times of national penitence (Judges 20:26; I Samuel 7:6; Nehemiah 9:1) or when preparing for a revelation from God (Exodus 24:11; Daniel 9:3). Fasting would be practiced during times of mourning and as an appeal to God (Esther 4:16). Though Jesus was critical of some practices that had developed around fasting, as a Jewish man He also practiced fasting (Matthew 4:2). Like almsgiving and prayer, the people found ways to let everyone know they were fasting so they could be honored as being particularly pious. They would make their hair and clothes deliberately disheveled. They would adopt a "sad countenance" (6:16), which elsewhere is used to describe situations of extreme distress, such as extraordinary guilt, mourning for a lost loved one, or sorrow over a devastating defeat. The people would "disfigure their faces" likely through dirt or whitening to make them unrecognizable (v. 16). Like actors on a stage, they made a spectacle of their fasting. Sadly, the applause they received from others was all the reward they would receive (v. 16).

B. How To Fast, Matthew 6:17-18.

Jesus placed great importance on authenticity in spiritual practices, urging His disciples to avoid drawing attention to themselves when fasting. He instructed them to carry on with their regular grooming, remain cheerful, and keep their fasting discreet, trusting that their heavenly

Father would acknowledge and reward their sincerity (vv. 17-18). This prompts a thought-provoking question: Is fasting ever appropriate as a public act? While fasting is to be a private practice, there are times when complete secrecy may not be practical – such as within a family setting where skipping a meal could easily be noticed. Jesus’ teachings centered on the motivation behind fasting, emphasizing humility and devotion rather than seeking praise or approval from others.

Additionally, corporate fasting represents another exception, in such contexts, the shared knowledge of fasting can offer encouragement and solidarity among participants. However, even in these circumstances, Jesus’ call for openness of heart and humility remains paramount. The risk of disobeying His teaching is seen in actions such as embellishing one’s struggles during the fast or projecting oneself as spiritually superior. Ultimately, whether carried out privately or in a community, fasting should demonstrate a genuine pursuit of spiritual growth and alignment with God’s will, rather than an effort to garner admiration or acknowledgement from onlookers.

Fasting, when done as Jesus teaches, brings spiritual rewards from the Father. It becomes a pathway for the Holy Spirit to guide us in relying less on worldly things, breaking habits, or learning to live with less. Fasting also helps center our hearts on a more profound desire for God. If we are feeling overwhelmed, distracted, or stuck in bad habits, fasting might be a way to declutter our spirit and refocus our lives. It is an opportunity to quiet the noises and seek God more fully. We should consider asking the Holy Spirit if fasting could benefit us during this season of our lives. Through fasting, we may discover clarity, strength, and a renewed connection with God’s presence.

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

The practice of spiritual disciplines requires the proper motives to have eternal value. Through sincerity and commitment to God, we align our motivations and practices to please Him.

MINISTRY IN ACTION

Provide time for repentance if some have approached spiritual disciplines with wrong motives. Ask the class to consider if the Lord is inviting them to engage more in spiritual disciplines.

WORKSHEET

Two Versions of The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer is found in two locations in the New Testament. It is part of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:9-13, and it is found in Luke 11:2-4 as a response by Jesus to His disciples' request to be taught how to pray (v. 1).

Vast numbers of Christians routinely say the Lord's Prayer as part of the liturgy of their public worship every Sunday. Other Christians object to making the Lord's Prayer a routine part of public worship. If the Lord's Prayer is spoken in one's private devotions or in public worship, it should not be merely recited but always prayed with understanding and sincerity.

Regarding how the Lord's Prayer should be used in our private or public worship, the language in Matthew 6:9 suggests a pattern or model for the content of our praying: "In this manner, therefore, pray." However, in Luke 11:2, the language is: "When you pray, say."

The version of the Lord's Prayer known and used by virtually all Christians is that found in the Sermon on the Mount. While the two versions are almost the same, the differences between the two are noteworthy.

In the petition for daily bread, in Matthew, it is, "Give us this day our daily bread." In Luke, it is, "Give us day by day our daily bread."

In the petition for forgiveness, in Matthew, it is, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." In Luke, it is, "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us." In both instances, sin is seen as debt. (Read the story told by Jesus in Matthew 18:21-35.

The Doxology (praise to God) found at the end of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:13 ("For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.") is not found in Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer. Many Bible scholars believe the Doxology was not part of the original prayer but was added by early Christians.

Personal Peity

1. When do giving, praying, and fasting bring no reward from God (Matthew 6:1, 2, 5, 16)?

“Our acts of mercy should allow God’s love to flow through us to others, even if we are not certain they deserve it.” – Keith Whitt

2. Explain Jesus’ statement about our two hands in verses 3 and 4.

3. How should we begin our prayer, and why (v. 9)

“Prayer can be no more divorced from worship than life can be divorced from breathing.” – R. T. Kendall

4. What are “vain repetitions” (v.7), and why is it easy for our prayers to become full of them? How can we guard against this?

“Jesus encouraged the people to wear their sackcloth and ashes on the inside for God to see, instead of on the outside for man to see.” – Billy Wilson

5. How does God want His people to fast, and why? (vv. 17-18)?

6. Describe the corporate fasting that took place in Acts 13:1-2.