

# **BaptistWay Bible Series for Dec. 19: Make God the focus of giving, prayers, fasting\_120604**

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## **Make God the focus of giving, prayers, fasting**

Matthew 6:1-18

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While no sensible individual admires spiritual pomposity or hypocrisy, no honest person can deny being susceptible to putting on religious airs or playing religious charades. Being a follower of Jesus in no way immunizes one from the temptation to put on a spiritual show or masquerade as a saint.

Jesus' awareness of the human proclivity to parade one's piety before others coupled with his observation of spiritual grandstanders in his own day prompted him to warn his disciples against making their spirituality a spectacle.

He cautions the faithful in Matthew 6:1 to avoid practicing their righteousness before people so they might be noticed by them. To do so,

Jesus insists, is to cash in prematurely any heavenly reward one might have accrued for the transitory thrill of human applause.



Discontent to leave his exhortation against piety for the sake of self-promotion on a general level, Jesus proceeds to apply the basic principle he articulates in verse 1 to three particular expressions of spirituality regularly practiced among his Jewish contemporaries—almsgiving (vv. 2-4), prayer (vv. 5-15) and fasting (vv. 16-18).

Before considering Jesus' instructions to his disciples regarding these spiritual exercises, it is worth noting that he presupposes his followers will in fact give alms, pray and fast. And lest we break our arms patting ourselves on the back for being people of spiritual sincerity, we must remind our neglectful, undisciplined selves that at least the hypocrites pilloried in this passage were concerned enough about piety to practice it, even if it was with pride and pretense.

Jesus first addresses almsgiving. Charitable gifts on behalf of the poor often were given by Jews in their synagogues on the Sabbath. Contributions for the impoverished also might be collected in public places. Jesus propounds that those who draw attention to their donations and who seek the affirmation of others for their feigned generosity should expect no spiritual return. The fleeting praise of impressed people is the only dividend they can hope to receive. On the contrary, Jesus calls his disciples not to be self-absorbed in their giving. Instead of seeking to give at those times when others might be looking, Jesus charges his audience to forget about false fronts and to remember they have a Father who sees in secret and rewards in full (vv. 3-4).

Jesus also enjoins his listeners to forego play-acting in their praying.

Instead of joining hands in prayer with spiritual pretenders at the front and center of synagogues or at strategic places on street corners, followers of Jesus are instructed to pray in private where no one is watching but God. The purpose of prayer, Jesus implies, is to communicate with the heavenly Father, not to impress others.

It is reported that President Lyndon Johnson once exhorted Bill Moyers to pray more loudly as he was offering a public prayer. In response, Moyers is reported to have said, "Mr. President, with all due respect, I am not talking to you."

To be sure, Jesus does not prohibit praying in public. Furthermore, when praying aloud in a group, we should speak loudly enough that others might hear. Be that as it may, all of our prayers are to be directed to God. While we are to pray on behalf of people, we are not to pray to impress people, who in the final analysis are mere mortals as are we.

Setting structural symmetry to one side (Note the presence of "when(ever)" in vv. 2, 5, and 16 as well as "but" in vv. 3, 6, and 17. Negating the way hypocrites practice piety (vv. 2, 5, 16), Jesus instructs his disciples how to give alms (vv. 3-4), pray (v. 6), and fast (vv. 17-18).), Jesus continues to teach his followers more fully about prayer. They are not to pray for publicity like the scribes and the Pharisees-the people Jesus most frequently calls hypocrites in Matthew's Gospel (22:18; 23:13-21)-nor are they to pray like Gentiles, who erroneously equate length of prayer with strength of prayer (v. 7). Rather, Jesus' followers may approach the heavenly Father as trusting children, knowing God is aware of our needs and will answer our prayers (6:8; 7:7-11).

When God's people pray, we may do so with simple, intimate reverence-"Our Father, the One who is in the heavens, may your name be blessed" (6:9). Acknowledging our allegiance to God's rule and will (v. 10), we can call upon him for daily provision (v. 11), spiritual restoration (vv.

12, 14-15) and deliverance from temptation and the source thereof (v. 13).

Rounding out this section of instruction on doing righteousness, Jesus tells his listeners not to draw attention to themselves when they fast by disfiguring their faces—smearing ashes or the like on their heads and faces. Instead, Jesus instructs them to go about their regular routines of oiling and combing their heads and washing their faces as they fast (v. 17). As with almsgiving and praying, the disciple's fasting is to be motivated by and directed toward God. Ulterior motives and alternative audiences are unacceptable to a God who sees, knows and loves all.

### **Discussion questions**

- ♦ What is the biggest danger in playing religious games?
- ♦ What preventative measures can be taken to assure that God remains the focal point?

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