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The Sermons, Parables, and Teachings of Jesus Christ

Session 11 – The Sermon on the Mount, Part Six, October 25, 2022

Almsgiving, Fasting, and Prayer

In Matthew 6:1-18, Jesus addresses almsgiving and fasting, and then addresses prayer, with an expansion on prayer later, in Luke 11:1-13. The section on almsgiving begins in 6:1-4 and continues with fasting in 6:16-18.

Matthew 6:1-4

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

Matthew 6:16-18

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

Note that the Pharisees of this time actually fasted each Monday and Thursday, and presented themselves in the synagogues, in poor attire with ashes on their face, so that all could see that they were fasting.

Compare to contrasting instruction from Matthew 5:16

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

Believers cannot act in service to God and in service to themselves, i.e., to their own reputation, especially an artificially cultivated reputation. In order for us not to fall into this trap, we need to keep our good works as secret as possible. This is not contradictory to Matthew 5:16, our light will shine all by itself as we live in service to God – people see others pretty clearly...

Regarding fasting,

Mainstream American Protestant denominations do not normally teach or promote fasting, but fasting frequently accompanies biblically recorded prayer sessions of unusual intensity. It is especially associated with grief and repentance, but not as an exclusive association. The Jews fasted as a requirement for the Day of Atonement. Examples of Jesus, the Apostles, and early churches fasting are included in Acts and the Gospels. Believers are instructed to pray, but are not specifically instructed to fast, or not to fast.

Prayer:

Jesus teaches about prayer in Matthew 6, and then later in Luke 11.

Matthew 6:5-15

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

After this manner therefore pray ye:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Luke 11:1-13

And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.

And he said unto them, When ye pray, say,

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth.

Give us day by day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us.

And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.

And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves; For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him? And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee. I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity (persistence) he will rise and give him as many as he needeth.

And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?

Luke 18:1-8

And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;

Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man: And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.

And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?

While prayer can be the subject of exhaustive studies, there are three aspects of prayer presented in these passages:

1. What we need to be praying for
 - a. The glory and will of God
 - b. Our daily needs and also the burdens of our hearts
 - c. Forgiveness and protection from sin
2. That we need to pray often
3. That God will hear and answer our prayers

1 Thessalonians 5:17

Pray without ceasing.

James 5:16

The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

Philippians 4:6-7

Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.