

WEEK 7: A GODWARD LIFE

Matthew 6:1–8



The Place of the Passage

In Matthew 5:17–20 Jesus called his disciples to pursue a “righteousness” that “exceeds,” or is greater than, that of the scribes and Pharisees—a righteousness from the heart and through all of life. Jesus illustrated this new standard with six contrasting ethical examples of what this new righteousness looks like (5:21–48). Jesus now continues to explain this true righteousness by focusing on three examples of religious devotion and piety: giving to the needy, prayer, and fasting (6:1–18). Here in verses 1–8 Jesus focuses first on how his disciples must give and pray with sincerity rather than with a desire to be seen and praised by others. This is a vision of a Godward life—a life lived not for the sight and praise of others but for God.

The Big Picture

Jesus’ disciples must give and pray not to be seen by others but with sincerity and to be seen and rewarded by God.

Reflection and Discussion

Carefully and thoughtfully read this section of Jesus' teaching, Matthew 6:1–8. Then use the provided questions to help you think more deeply about the text. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on page 1831; online at www.esv.org.)

Warning about Practicing Righteousness in Order to Be Seen (Matt. 6:1)

Jesus begins this section with a warning: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them" (Matt. 6:1). What is the deep issue of the heart against which Jesus calls us to guard?

Read Matthew 6:1 and compare it to what Jesus says in 5:16. How does this at first seem like a contradiction? Yet how do these two statements actually complement, rather than contradict, each other? Consider the particular actions and motives in view for each statement.

How does this warning in Matthew 6:1 relate to Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:20?

Giving to Those in Need (Matt. 6:2–4)

Jesus contrasts what his disciples must do with what the "hypocrites" do (Matt. 6:2). What do you learn about the meaning of hypocrisy from Matthew 7:5; 15:7–8; and 23:26–27? How would you summarize what it means to be a hypocrite?

Jesus says that, when hypocrites give to the poor, they "sound a trumpet" in the synagogues and in the streets—both locations where giving would take place (Matt. 6:2). What is their motivation and goal in broadcasting their piety? What are a few ways today by which people "sound a trumpet" when they give?

What does it mean not to let your left hand know what your right is doing when you give (Matt. 6:3)? What is a practical example of what this can look like in your life?

After Jesus warns against a hypocritical desire to be seen for our generosity, we may expect him to say that we should give because it is right, good, or our duty. But what does he use to encourage us in Matthew 6:4, and why might this surprise us?

Praying to the Father (Matt. 6:5–8)

How do the hypocrites in Matthew 6:5 misuse, and miss the point of, prayer?

Matthew 6:6–8 is not so much about the length or frequency of our prayers but about our underlying view of God and our trust in him. What do we learn about the Gentiles' (pagans') view of their God or gods from the way in which they pray?

What do we learn about God from the way in which Jesus encourages us to pray?

Throughout this passage Jesus addresses the danger of intentionally displaying our goodness, piety, or virtue so that others notice and think well of us. What examples of this do you see in your culture's physical or digital public areas?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

YOUR FATHER. Three times in this short section Jesus draws our attention to God the Father (Matt. 6:1, 4, 6). This is his characteristic way of referring to God throughout the Sermon on the Mount. And yet it is not that Jesus simply draws attention to the fatherhood of God in general. In each case he references not *the* Father but *your* Father. There is gospel-wonder in that little pronoun. There is an infinite difference between knowing that God is *the* Father and knowing him as *your* Father. One of the greatest blessings of the gospel is that those who are united to Jesus by faith are adopted¹ into God's family. As Ephesians 1:5 says, God "predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ."

GOD SEES YOU. Jesus taps into a deep motivation of the human heart: the desire to be seen and honored. Our problem is not that we want this but that we look for its fulfillment in the wrong places. We seek to be seen and honored by others rather than to be seen and honored by God. This is not merely misguided; it is idolatry.² This is also what leads to a hypocritical life of projecting the image of praising God while actually seeking praise from others. But Jesus has come not just to expose this idolatry but graciously to invite us to fulfill this desire in God alone. Jesus does so by drawing attention to God's kindness. God sees every good work done in secret and hears every prayer offered in private, and he will honor us for them. No one else may know, but the one whose opinion really matters does know. We have a God who sees and who delights to bless.

Whole-Bible Connections

GOD LOOKS ON THE HEART. Jesus warns against practicing righteousness in order to be seen by others—sounding a trumpet when we give, praying on street corners to be seen by others, and so forth (Matt. 6:1–8). Jesus calls us instead to heart-rooted righteousness. He calls us to actions that may not be valued by others but that God sees and honors. We see this theme prominently in the narratives contrasting Saul and David in 1 Samuel. The people desire a tall and powerful king like Saul even though he lacks character, but God knows the heart and chooses David. As God tells Samuel when he sends him to anoint David, "Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

Theological Soundings

REWARDS. Jesus motivates generous giving and sincere praying with the gracious promise of reward. He promises, “Your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:4; see also vv. 1, 6). This may at first sound like talk of merit and earning. But it is not. Jesus is speaking of rewards. Rewards are the gracious result of embracing and expressing Jesus’ teaching. Nothing we do prior to our salvation is worthy of reward, and even after we are saved our good works will still have something in them that needs to be forgiven. So, we always stand in need of God’s forgiving grace, and no good thing he gives us is earned or deserved. Nevertheless, his grace is so great that he not only forgives us but he empowers us by his Spirit to do good works—and then he promises to reward them. A day is coming when Jesus will assess our works, commend that which is good, and invite us to “enter into the joy of your master” (Matt. 25:21, 23; see also 1 Cor. 4:5; Heb. 11:6; 1 Pet. 1:6–7). Seeking reward from God is a proper motivation for Christian obedience.

GOD’S OMNISCIENCE. As Jesus encourages his people to practice devotional acts in secret, he motivates them with the truth that “Your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:4, 6). God sees everything we do because God is omniscient, which means he is all-knowing. As the apostle John puts it, God “knows everything” (1 John 3:20). This is the doctrine of God’s omniscience, and it is affirmed throughout the Bible. God knows everything about us, including the very thoughts of our hearts (1 Kings 8:39; 1 Chron. 28:9; Pss. 44:21; 139:1–4; Acts 1:24).

PRAYER AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD. When Jesus calls us to pray, he says that we do not need to use empty phrases and the repetition of many words to get God to hear us, “for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matt. 6:8). This raises a common question: Why should we pray, if God already knows what we need? Jesus’ statement sounds at first like a disincentive rather than a motivation to pray. But when we remember that prayer is a central part of a relationship with God as our Father, we can see how Jesus’ words encourage prayer. A human father may know what a daughter wants before she asks, but he often waits for her to ask before he gladly gives it. In a similar way, God knows what we need before we pray, but he invites us to participate in the process of his blessing us. Prayer is an essential part of a true relationship with God.

Personal Implications

Reflect on how to apply what you have learned in this text to your everyday life. Make notes below on personal implications of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the

Whole-Bible Connections, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole. Also write down what you have learned that can lead you to praise God, repent of sin, trust his gracious promises, and live in obedience to him.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Matthew 6:1–8

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment to pray and ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of the Sermon on the Mount. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.

Definitions

¹ **Adoption** – The legal process by which a person gives the status of son or daughter to another person who is not his or her child by birth. The NT uses the term to describe the act by which God through the Spirit makes believers his children through the atoning death and resurrection of his one and only true Son, Jesus (see Romans 8; Galatians 4).

² **Idolatry** – In the Bible, idolatry usually refers to the worship of a physical object. Paul's comments in Colossians 3:5, however, suggest that idolatry can include covetousness, since it is essentially equivalent to worshipping material things.