

St. Paul's Anglican Church;  
7<sup>th</sup> Trinity; August 4, 2019  
Matthew 6

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May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, oh Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Please be seated.

Our Lord and Master, Jesus, has been preaching and teaching to the multitudes. Two weeks ago, we heard the beatitudes, the declarations of blessedness. Last week Jesus' lessons regarded a higher righteousness: For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter the kingdom of heaven. So, we heard about anger, reconciliation, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, neighbors and enemies. In each instance, it is not just the letter of the law, but what is in our hearts and minds that matters.

Today we turn toward piety and exercises of devotion to God. In Ronald Knox's excellent New Testament translation, Jesus begins this discourse: Be sure you do not perform your acts of piety before men, for them to watch; if you do that, you have no title to a reward from your Father who is in heaven. What are these practices? Almsgiving, prayer and fasting are three great Jewish and Christian duties.

The giving of alms is a great duty. The Jews called the poor box the box of righteousness. But while there can be great reward in giving to the poor, it can be lost if done with hypocrisy. What was the practice of the hypocrites about this duty? They did it, but not from any principle of obedience to God, or love of man, but in pride and vanity, not in compassion, but purely to show off. They chose to give their alms in the synagogues and in the streets, where the greatest number of people could watch them. Note that it is not wrong to give alms when men see us; but not that men *may* see us. The hypocrites sounded a trumpet to proclaim their charity.

Now the doom that Christ announces about this is very clear: Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. It is a reward, but it is *their* reward, not the reward that God promises them that do good with a pure heart. It is the reward which they promise to themselves, and a poor reward it is: they did it to be seen by men, not by God. It is a reward, but it is a present reward, they have it, and there is none reserved for them in the life hereafter. What is this about let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth? We must not be self-absorbed and self-congratulatory; we must not applaud and admire ourselves. What is Jesus' promise to those who are humble in their giving? Let your alms be in secret, and thy Father which sees in secret shall reward thee openly. What a terror to hypocrites that God sees in secret. From him no things are hid.

Jesus now turns to prayer, and he gives two great faults they were guilty of in prayer: pride and vain repetitions. The hypocrites loved to stand and pray in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets. Again, just as in almsgiving, the hypocrites were after their own glory. Jesus says thou shalt not be as the hypocrites, Verily, I say unto you, they have their reward. This is the same warning of doom as with almsgiving, but worse, because in prayer we are speaking with God himself. They will have their reward today, but not the eternal reward. Again, pray in secret. They did it to be seen of men and to be praised by men. But we do not pray to men. They are not our judges, they are dust and ashes like ourselves. Jesus gives encouragement to pray in secret. Isaac went into a field (Gen 24:63), Christ to a mountain or garden, Peter to a housetop. Thy Father sees in secret, his eye is on thee to accept thee when the eye of no man is there to applaud. He will reward thee openly. It is called a reward, but it is of grace, not of debt.

Do not use vain repetition, as the heathen do. It was the practice of pagans to recite long strings of the names of their gods, in hopes that they could get their attention. Do not use much speaking. Ostentatious, long prayers, either out of pride or an opinion that God needs to be informed, or argued with, and

because men like to hear themselves talk. This need not be our way, because our Father in heaven knows what things we have need of before we ask him. But we need to ask, because it is our duty to show we honor, hallow him, and acknowledge our dependency on his mercy. But succinct sincerity and humbleness are his due.

Having condemned what was amiss, Christ directs us to do better, and provides the model prayer. This perfect prayer is concise and consists of three parts: the preface, petitions, and conclusion.

*Our Father, who art in heaven.* We must solemnly address to whom our business lies: our Father. He is a common father to all mankind through creation; Jesus calls him father. We have access with boldness to him, and have an advocate with the father. Though God is not contained by heaven, he is everywhere, we are directing our spiritual prayers to the throne of glory in heaven.

Then follow six petitions. The first three relate more immediately to God and his honor, the last three to our own concerns, both worldly and spiritually. This is not unlike the ten commandments, the first four teach our duty toward God (to love him), and the last six our duty toward our neighbor. 1. *Hallowed be thy name.* We give glory to God; it may be taken as a petition, but also as adoration. We must begin our prayers with praising God and giving glory to God before we expect to receive mercy and grace from him. 2. *Thy kingdom come.* This petition has plainly a reference to the doctrine which Christ preached at that time, which John Baptist had preached and that Christ sent his apostles out to preach: the kingdom of heaven is at hand. 3. *Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.* We pray that God's kingdom having come, we and others may be brought into obedience to all the laws of it. Thy will be done, in this sense Christ prayed: not my will, but thine, be done. That it be done on earth, in this place of our trial and probation, as is done in heaven. We pray that earth may be made more like heaven by observing God's will. 4. *Give*

*us this day our daily bread.* Because our physical well-being is necessary to our spiritual well-being, we must pray for the necessary support of life, our bread, which is the gift of God and we must ask for it. God provided the Israelites with bread, manna, from heaven. And Jesus provides the bread of life. 5. *And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.* Our sins are our debts to God. Our hearts' desire and prayer to our Father every day should be that he would forgive us our debts, that the obligation to punishment may be canceled and vacated, that we may not come into condemnation. Note, also, *as we forgive our debtors.* This is not a plea of our great merit in forgiving others, but a plea for grace. Those who come to God for forgiveness without having forgiven others actually put a curse on themselves. Remember the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35. A king pardons the debt of his servant who owes him ten thousand talents. But that same servant refuses to pardon someone who owes him only 100 pennies! When the king (God) learns of this, he delivers him to jail. As Jesus ends: So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye forgive not every one his brother their trespasses. 6. *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* Now some have concerns with this phrasing, for as James 1:13 says, God tempts no man. So this phrase must be used in the sense of permitting. Do not allow us or permit us to be tempted to sin. In this it is implied that God has such control over the tempter, as to save us from his power if we call on God to do so. Lord, do not let Satan loose upon us, chain up that roaring lion, for he is subtle and spiteful. Lord, do not leave us to ourselves, for we are very weak. The word temptation however, sometimes means a trial or affliction, anything that tests our virtue. If this is the meaning here, the prayer is "Do not afflict or try us." As in saying Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will but thine be done.

The conclusion: *For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever.* This is first of all, a form of plea for the foregoing petitions, particularly for the first three: Father in heaven, *thy kingdom come*, for thine is the *kingdom*. *Thy will be done*, for

thine is the *power*. *Hallowed be thy name*, for thine is the *glory*. It is also a form of praise and thanksgiving. The best pleading with God is praising him. It is the way to receive further mercy, as it qualifies us to receive it. We praise God and give him glory, not because he needs it -- he is praised by a world of angels -- but because he deserves it, and it is our duty to give him glory.

In verses 16 to 18, we are cautioned against hypocrisy in fasting, as in almsgiving and in prayer. Fasting is a duty required of followers of Christ: When the bridegroom is taken away, then shall they fast. The Jews fasted. It was not the Pharisees fasting twice in the week, but their boasting of it, that Christ condemned. Again, they have *their* reward. Private fasting is an act of self-denial, and mortification of the flesh, under the hand of God. Christians must own that they are unworthy of their daily bread. It is a means to curb the flesh and our desires, to make us more lively in our religious acts. Paul was in fastings often, and so he kept under this body, and brought it into subjection.

As we contemplate our Lord's words, acts of piety and how to perform them, let us consider what our problems are today: we are sinners and are self-centered, exactly the criticism of the Pharisees. And we are incapable of fixing ourselves. What can we do? Prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We know how to pray and must do so often to our Father. Fasting allows us to control our appetites. We are both body and spirit. They must work in harmony, but there is a hierarchy: the spirit must control the body. Yet we become slaves to our passions. By fasting we deny ourselves something good temporarily for something better. By fasting we can break the bonds of slavery to the flesh. Fasting takes our desires away from self-centeredness, and points toward greater realities of the pure spirit and Holy God. Almsgiving -- whether it be money, things or time -- is giving to those in need. But it must be given in the spirit of sacrifice. We don't just give from our excess; we give from our want. Almsgiving powerfully redirects us from self to others. And it has a paradoxical effect: the more we give away, the more we receive. Not material things, but in things that matter: joy, peace and love. Finally, in

overcoming self-centeredness we give of ourselves so much that one forgets oneself. As Jesus said, whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, power, dominion, and glory, both now and evermore. Amen.

He that soweth little shall reap little; and he that soweth plenteously shall reap plenteously. Let every man do according as he is disposed in his heart, not grudgingly, or of necessity; for God loveth a cheerful giver.