



# SERMON ON THE MOUNT DISCUSSION GUIDE

## Matthew 6:1-8

### INTRODUCTION

Jesus spent much of Matthew 5 illustrating the principle he stated back in 5:20: that his followers' righteousness should be an inner one that delights to obey God's commandments. This theme of inner righteousness carries over into this next section (Matthew 6:1-18) where Jesus contrasts hypocritical and authentic faith. In 6:1, he states a principle and illustrates it in the areas of giving (vv. 2-4), prayer (vv. 5-15), and fasting (vv. 16-18).

### MAIN POINT

Christians model Jesus not only in their righteous acts but in their motives as well.

### REFLECT

Giving, prayer, and fasting were three of the pillars of Jewish society and religion, and Jesus uses each to illustrate the principle he lays out in Matthew 6:1 – “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”

The words “in order to be seen by them” are significant. They alert us that Jesus is now turning to address the motives behind our actions. He takes it for granted that his followers will give, pray, and fast (“*when* you give” ... “*when* you pray” ... “*when* you fast”, never “*if*”). But even such good things as these can be corrupted by impure motives. Since God looks at our hearts (1 Sam. 16:7), he is not only concerned with *what* we do but also *why* we do it.

Jesus begins unpacking this by looking at giving (vv. 2-4). The Bible clearly highlights the goodness of giving (Deut. 15:11; Ps. 41:1; Prov. 19:17), and it's to be expected that those who have experienced God's generosity will extend that generosity to others (1 John 3:17-18). And yet a “selfless” act like giving can be quite selfish. The Pharisees gave “in order to be seen” and “praised by others”. They weren't concerned with meeting needs but with building up their reputation as generous people. They are “hypocrites”, Jesus says. This word came from the world of theater and referred to actors who would wear masks to play their parts. The only reward for this kind of pretend righteousness was the fickle praise and approval of man.

This same attitude was carried over in the way that they prayed (vv. 5-8). The Jews dedicated specific times of the day to prayer, and it was expected that you would stop whatever you were doing at those times to pray. Apparently, the Pharisees made sure they were in public places at these times so that their devotion to God would be seen. But they weren't praying to God so much as they were performing for other people.

By contrast, as Jesus' followers, we are to give and pray out of love for God our Father rather than love of reputation (vv. 3-4, 6). Jesus isn't saying that we shouldn't pray in public or that no one should ever know what we give. He's saying that the purpose for our prayers and gifts should be to please God rather than to draw attention to ourselves.

Another instruction on prayer follows in verses 6-8. The Gentiles of Jesus' day had many gods to pray to and felt that the longer their prayers were, the more likely it was that they would get answered. It seems that many Jews were following suit, heaping up "empty phrases" and "many words". The problem with this is that it assumes that God is distant and uncaring. But because God knows what we need before we ask, we're not burdened with having to inform him of things he doesn't already know. And because he's our "Father", we don't have to convince him to take care of us. A deep awareness of his nearness and care should mark our prayer lives, making prayer something we joyfully do privately as well as with others.

- Has your giving ever been motivated by what you get out of it (recognition from others, a feeling of self-righteousness, etc.) rather than love for others?
- Charles Spurgeon once wrote that "a neglected prayer closet is the beginning of all spiritual decline." Is your "prayer closet" neglected? If so, why? How can you make private prayer a more regular part of your life?
- Do you ever find yourself offering up "empty phrases" to God or thinking that he's more likely to hear your prayers the longer they are? Why?
- Jesus continually refers to God as our "Father" in this section. Why do you think that is? How does seeing God this way counteract the kind of hypocrisy we see in this passage?

## **MEMORIZE**

Matthew 6:1 – *"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."*