

**SERIES: The Good News, as reported by Matthew**

**SERMON: A Sermon for the Ages: *The Horrible Horizontalizing of Holy Things***

**SCRIPTURE: Matthew 6:1-18**

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Intro: Matthew 6:1-18 is a call to a radically God-oriented way of giving, praying and fasting. Highly valued religious practices such as these are fraught with spiritual dangers, among which is doing them to be seen by men, or doing them in a man-oriented way. We, like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, have an insatiable appetite for the attention and approval of others. This is not bad in itself, but when it becomes more important than the approval of God, it renders our giving, praying, and fasting valueless in the sight of God. How can we find an appropriate balance as we carry out these fundamental Christian practices?

Jesus said, "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men to be seen by them."

"What's it all about Alfie, is it just for the moment we live?" That's the opening line to one of Dionne Warwick's signature songs. Written in 1966, it is still played on the "Oldies but Goodies" stations. The title of today's message may throw you, but it could be re-phrased in this manner: When you do holy things like giving to the poor, praying, or fasting, what's it all about? Is it just for the moment in the spotlight you give, or pray, or fast? Is it all about you, or is it all about God? Jesus told his followers they were not to be hypocrites, not to be like the Pharisees when it came to doing holy things.

### **Why did Jesus call the Pharisees hypocrites?**

The definition of a hypocrite is "a person who puts on a false appearance of virtue or religion". The word is borrowed from the Greek theatre, and speaks of the masks worn by actors to portray a character in a scene.

It seems at first glance that the one who does not look like he is fasting, but really is, would be the hypocrite.

The Pharisees fasted and they looked like they were fasting. They prayed, and they looked like they were praying. They gave, and everyone saw them give.

Is all public giving, praying, and fasting wrong? Of course not. In fact Jesus commended the widow who gave publicly of her mite, and made an example of her offering. Jesus prayed publicly on several occasions. The Jews fasted publicly, sometimes nationally, so it was far from a private fast.

Jesus called them hypocrites because their main reason for giving, praying, and fasting was to gain the favor of men. They were doing holy things in a horribly Horizontalizing way. Their whole focus was "man-oriented", not "God-oriented". Religious acts that bring the pleasure and reward of God are done from the heart, done for God's glory. The

“God-oriented disciple” is one who from the heart gives to share God’s goodness, that prays to enjoy God’s presence, who fasts to place all other hungers beneath his hunger for God.

In his book, Renovation of the Heart, Dallas Willard says, “The heart is precisely what God observes and addresses in human beings. He cares little or nothing for outward show. He responds to the heart because it is, above all, who we are: who we choose and have chosen to be. What God wants of us can only come from there.”

As was noted in an earlier sermon in this series, Jesus condemned the Pharisees for their hypocrisy in Matt. 23:1-7 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’

To avoid being hypocrites the Pharisees would have had to wear a sign about their necks that stated, “The reward we seek in almsgiving, in praying, and in fasting, is the praise of our fellow-man.” They would have been openly, honestly vain, but not hypocritical. But instead they cloaked their vanity in “a pretence of love for God”. This was their hypocrisy.

The point of this whole section is not that public displays of giving, praying, and fasting are wrong, but that doing these things **for the notice and praise of men** is wrong. It is better to give than to be known as someone who gives. It is better to pray than to be known as someone who prays. It is better to fast than to be known as someone who fasts. The **ultimate motive** for giving, praying, and fasting is what matters, not whether the acts are public or private. The warning of Jesus in chapter 5:20 still applies to this section of the Sermon on the Mount,

“For I tell you that unless your righteousness (or we could say, righteous acts), surpasses that of the Pharisees...you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

A desire for the approval of our fellowman is not wrong in itself, nor is it incompatible with piety. However it must take second place to the desire that God be pleased, and that he be glorified in all we say and do.

We turn first to what Christ had to say about giving to the poor. He assumed that his disciples gave to the poor. What he evaluated was **how** they gave.

### **Man-oriented Giving vs. God-oriented Giving – Matt. 6:2-4**

Giving to the poor and disenfranchised is commanded in both the Old and New Testaments. Gary Thomas said, “Throughout history, an authentic faith has been marked by a compassionate response toward those the world tends to forget.” Verse 2 says,

“So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.”

### **Man-oriented Giving is Pretentious and Self-serving**

Using actual trumpets to draw attention to their almsgiving was not likely what the Pharisees did. Jesus is speaking in hyperbole here, as he did earlier when he suggested we cut off the offending hand or pluck out the offending eye. What Jesus condemned was their “parade-like” methods that guaranteed anyone in the temple area was sure to notice their practice of almsgiving. God takes no notice of giving done in this fashion, none at all. It has no eternal reward coming. To the extent that the Pharisees were gazed at and admired by their fellow man they had received in full every bit of reward coming to them. The Greek word used by Matthew was a commercial term, meaning that a bill was paid in full, and no further payment was required. Once the almsgiving show was over, and people left, it would have been appropriate to play the concluding jingle of a Warner Brother’s Looneytoon, “That’s all folks”; the rewards ended when the show was over.

### **God-oriented Giving is Compassionate and Private**

Jesus encouraged His disciples to give as if only God could see the gift and the motive; no one else would ever need to know. Verse 3 says,

“But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

The scenario suggested is that of a disciple of Jesus passing by a poor person whose hand is extended for money. With his left hand the disciple deftly places a coin in the open hand of the needy person, while with his right he shakes the hand of a friend on the street. If it were possible, his right hand would not be aware of what his left hand had done. What motivates a person to give in this fashion? The follower of Jesus recognizes her own spiritual poverty, her bankruptcy before God, and from a heart of gratitude shares what she has received from God. She also understands that to give to those in need is to give to Jesus himself. (Matthew 25:35)

Does our use of offering bags rather than open plates lend itself to unpretentious, private giving? That may be the case. But it is in the heart of the giver that examination must be made. How important is it for me to be recognized when I have given a sizable gift?

Pretension can take many forms. For years it has been assumed that secular or religiously liberal people gave more generously to the poor, and to charities than conservative Christians. After all, doesn't liberal imply liberality? However, a recent study done by The Social Capital Community Benchmark Group indicates that just the opposite is true. Conservative Christians give 25% more to their local church than their liberal counterparts, and give 50% more to charitable causes.

The question we need to ask ourselves is this: "Are we willing to settle for God's approval, for his recognition alone, to do what pleases him no matter what others may think? Will we be generous regardless of who does or doesn't know what we give? Is it wrong to have public testimonies from those who are generous with their financial resources? It all depends on the motive in doing so.

Jesus assumed his disciples gave to the poor. Do we? If so, how do we give to the poor? Can you point to specific ways you consider the needy in Wichita? in KS? in the US? in the world?

**When you give, give to be seen by God. Giving is an intensely God-ward act, so do it toward God, because he sees when and what others don't.**

### **Man-oriented Prayer vs. God-oriented Prayer – Matt. 6:5-15**

Jesus' assumed his disciples prayed, but he cared about **how** they prayed. Verse 5 says,

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full."

### **Man-oriented Prayer is Ostentatious**

Jesus didn't like how the Pharisees prayed because again, their purpose for praying was to be seen by men. Praying in the synagogue or in public streets was not wrong, but to do it to impress men was wrong. Christ did not find fault with them for standing while praying. Standing to pray was an approved posture for prayer, as was kneeling, or lying prostrate on the ground.

We can imagine the hypocrites stood in the most visible place in the synagogue, and prayed with a loud enough voice to be heard by all. These same people timed their daily schedule so when it was the accepted time to pray, they just happened, by coincidence, to be at the corner of 21<sup>st</sup> and Rock. What could they do but be devoutly obedient. Was it their fault that thousands of passers by saw them praying there? Their purpose was fulfilled, they were seen by many, and received their reward in full. In contrast...

### **God-oriented Prayer is Personal, Intimate**

What did Jesus ask his disciples to do instead? Verse 6 says, “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

I believe Jesus was speaking figuratively again. The typical Jewish home was not made up of several rooms with doors, as we have, but only one room would have a door, and that would be a very small closet or storeroom. Such a room may not even have had space enough for a person to enter and shut the door. What Jesus was telling them to do was to pray privately, alone, in a secluded place, a habit he had formed and modeled himself. After all, what is prayer, if it is not time alone with God. The unseen Father in Heaven will see, hear, and repay the praying disciple.

This was not Jesus’ only prohibition related to prayer in this passage.

### **Man-oriented Prayer is Manipulative**

Verse 7 says,

“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.”

Another pattern his disciples were to avoid was that of praying like those who served multiple gods. The purpose of pagan prayer was to manipulate the gods, entreating as many deities as possible in case one would take their request seriously enough to answer. Pagans also used prayer to remind their gods of favors owed them based on recent sacrifices they had made, seeking an answer on contractual grounds.

The word Jesus used, translated “Babbling”, means stuttering, or the indistinct speech of young children, or any confused or repetitive babble.

Illus: Our 21 month-old twin grandsons, Nathan and William, talk a mile a minute, with very sincere expressions on their faces, but we cannot understand a single word they are saying. They are just babbling.

A Biblical example of this pagan form of prayer is found in I Kings when the prophets of Baal called on their gods saying “O Baal, hear us”. This four-hour prayer time consisted of each prophet crying out by himself, creating a confusion of voices for anyone who would be listening. Terence, A Roman playwright of the second century BC, gave the following advice to vain babblers, “You must judge your gods to have no more sense than yourselves, to think that they do not understand anything unless it has been said a hundred times.”

Modern day examples of such pagan prayers are numerous. Worshipers of Buddha are

reported to cry out the syllable “Um” for days at a time. Some Muslims “turn about in a circle and repeat the name of Allah until they drop on the ground”. After an Islamic funeral in some countries, devout Muslims repeat “Allah is Allah” 3,000 times. In Tibet, prayer requests are written and attached to a large wheel, that is turned with a crank, with the belief that each revolution of the prayer wheel sends the petition on its way. How different is this from the instructions given to people today to say so many “Hail Mary’s” or “Our Father’s”?

I wonder if we who consider ourselves innocent of the charge of using vain repetitions in our prayers really listen to ourselves when we pray. I have never counted to make sure, but I have heard well-meaning Christians pray, and four out of every ten words are “Lord,” “Jesus,” or “Father.” They are using God’s name as a punctuation mark.

Also, when they pray their tone of voice changes, or they use words they would never use in normal conversation. Does this qualify as meaningless repetition, or vain babbling, or maybe meddling on my part? Are we trying to impress others with our prayers, or our devotion? If so, then we are no different than the hypocrites of Jesus’ day. I think we often turn off our minds and pray mechanically, using our “prayer language” as we have done for years, without really engaging with God in a fresh and genuine way. In contrast,

Jesus was very clear in his dislike of this practice as seen in verse 8,

Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Three important observations:

1. The fact that God knows what we need before we ask does not imply we should not ask for anything at all. If this was the case, then Jesus’ pattern prayer would be incorrect. It clearly suggests asking for things from God. We pray, in order to tell God the desires of our heart, and to ask that His will be done.
2. The fact that God knows what we need before we ask does not imply we can only ask for something once. In his own prayer in the Garden, we read that Jesus “prayed the third time, saying the same thing.” Paul asked three times that the thorn in his flesh be removed. The difference between these examples and the practice condemned should be plain. Augustine distinguished between “much speaking in prayer and much praying”.
3. That God knows what we need already cannot mean that long seasons of prayer are improper, for Jesus himself spent a whole night in prayer (as seen in Luke 6:12).

Thankfully, Jesus gave us a pattern for prayer, a prayer that is a model for us to follow.

### **God-oriented Prayer is Worshipful and Dependent**

He introduced this model in verse 9,

**This then is how you should pray....**

This pattern prayer is comprehensive in scope, simple in form, and brief in wording. It is the very opposite of boisterous showmanship, of much speaking, of meaningless repetitions. Tertullian observed that it was “as copious in meaning as it is condensed in expression.”

To give only a few minutes to this prayer, does not do it justice. It is worthy of an entire sermon, if not six sermons. However, in the time remaining this morning, I want to make several observations in keeping with the theme and context of the larger section, that of God-oriented prayer.

**God-oriented prayer is based on an intimate relationship with God.** It is made to “Our Father in heaven....” The wording of the prayer expresses both loving intimacy, and humble dependence. Unlike the pagans who were unsure of the dependability of their gods, we can come with confidence to “Our Father in heaven”, someone who loves us, someone we can depend on, who will only give us what is best for us.

**God-oriented prayer seeks God’s glory first, not our own.** The first three of the six petitions are petitions for the expansion God’s glory, kingdom, and will. Notice the pronouns:

“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven.”

**God-oriented prayer longs for the coming of God’s kingdom and doing of God’s will.** Such longing should manifest itself in how we live in the present. We should be people who work for God’s righteousness and seek his will in our personal, public, and corporate lives. John Piper said in his book , A Hunger for God, “For years I have argued that prayer is meant by God to be a wartime walkie-talkie, not a domestic intercom. Prayer is not for the enhancement of our comforts but for the advancement of Christ’s kingdom.” We pray in a time of war, because the spiritual forces of wickedness are aligned against the righteous purposes of God. Our prayers should reflect “this present danger”.

If you are a movie-goer, and have not yet seen “Amazing Grace”, it is an excellent summary of the life of William Wilberforce a member of the English Parliament who dedicated 15 of his 44 years in Parliament to the fight for the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. After this victory he continued to work in the parliament for the correction of many other social evils. In his personal journal he wrote, "God Almighty

has set before me two great objects, the Suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners."

William Wilberforce gave his life and political career to advance God's kingdom on earth.

**God-oriented prayer reflects an attitude of humility, contrition, and dependence.** It does not come from the mouth of the complacent or self-satisfied of heart.

Give us today our daily bread.  
 Forgive us our debts,  
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
 And lead us not into temptation,  
 but deliver us from the evil one.

The fourth petition asks for "daily bread" which could also be translated "daily rations" or "things essential for survival" or "bread for tomorrow". A prayer that expresses dependence on God for daily bread, and asking only for bread is a prayer of someone who is willing to live simply, satisfied with the basics, and is thankful for the provision of shelter, food, and clothing. (I Timothy 6:6-8 "we will be content")

The fifth request, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors," asks God to release the debts we have against his account book, as we release any debts owed to us.

Most of Jesus' hearers would have been borrowers rather than lenders, so the debts referred to were probably not financial debts. Sins are debts too. The petition is made with a forgiving spirit.

This does not mean that our forgiveness is the ground of our being forgiven, nor is our forgiveness the measure of God's forgiveness of those who have offended us. God forgives perfectly, which we can never do.

When we say we have forgiven our debtors, we are letting God know that there is no lack of forgiveness on our part to create an obstacle to our being forgiven by him. This caution is repeated in verse 14,

"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

The final petition, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one," pleads for God's protection in times of testing, times of temptation. The Evil One's purpose in testing is to bring people to ruin, but God's purpose in allowing testing is to build perseverance, to develop Christ-like character. The primary test these early

Christians were facing was persecution, the temptation to apostasy. We see this clearly in I Peter 5:8-9,

“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.”

Jesus wanted his followers to experience deliverance from the schemes of the evil one. He did not imply that they could avoid tests of their faith. The issue is not whether testing would come, but whether it would find the disciples unprepared.

As he did with almsgiving, Jesus assumed his disciples prayed. Do you pray? When, how often, in what settings? Does it include both private prayer, as well as prayer in public?

**When you pray, pray to be seen by God. Praying is an intensely God-ward act, so do it toward God, because he sees when and what others don't.**

### **Man-oriented Fasting vs. God-oriented Fasting – Matt. 6:16-18**

The third and final application of the general principle laid down in verse 1 is to fasting. What is Biblical fasting? Biblical fasting involves abstaining from food for religious purposes. It is not like a hunger strike, done to gain political power or draw attention to a good cause. Nor is it to be compared to health dieting which is done for purely physical or medical reasons. These other forms of “fasting” are not necessarily wrong, but their objective is different from Biblical fasting.

The most common type of fasting was abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water. In Matthew 4 we read about the 40-day fast of Jesus after which he was tempted by Satan. The prophet Daniel practiced another kind of fast, a partial fast, limiting his diet to particular foods, while excluding others. He observed this type of fast when he refused to eat food set before him by the king. At a later time Daniel mourned and fasted for three weeks, explaining in Daniel 10:3, “I ate no delicacies, no meat or wine entered my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all.” On rare occasions the Bible records the observance of an absolute fast, abstaining from both food and water, a desperate measure to meet a dire emergency.

This type of fast was encouraged by Queen Esther when she told Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews...and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do.” (Esther 4:16).

Is fasting obligatory? Some who have found fasting to be of great spiritual benefit have sought to find scriptural support for making it mandatory for all Christians. Their search is in vain. There are no biblical laws that command regular fasting. However, we are free to fast, as led by the Spirit, at any time and for whatever spiritual reason we desire.

As in giving and praying, Jesus **assumed** his disciples would fast. He cared about **how** they fasted.

### **Man-oriented Fasting is Showy and Vain, verse 16**

Jesus condemned fasting done just for the attention of men. The practice of personal fasting was at stake, not corporate fasting. The pious Jews of Jesus' day fasted twice a week, choosing the second and fifth days of the week because tradition held that Moses went up on Mt. Sinai on the fifth day and came down on the second. The custom among the Jewish people when observing a national day of fasting was to dress in sackcloth and put ashes on their heads and faces. However, the Pharisees dressed in sackcloth and ashes for their twice-weekly personal fast, in order to bring attention to their piety. Look at verse 16:

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.”

### **God-oriented Fasting is Done in Secret**

But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

In the Old Testament God spoke through the prophet Joel saying,

“‘Even now,’ declares the LORD,  
 ‘return to me with all your heart,  
 with fasting and weeping and mourning.’  
 Rend your heart  
 and not your garments.  
 Return to the LORD your God,  
 for he is gracious and compassionate,  
 slow to anger and abounding in love,  
 and he relents from sending calamity.” (2:12,13)

The purpose of fasting is to draw close to God. John Piper says, “God wills to know the actual, lived-out reality of our preference for him over all things. And he wills that we have the testimony of our own authenticity through acts of actual preference of God over his gifts”. Biblical fasting can show us how much we depend on God's gifts.

Richard Foster, in Celebration of Discipline says, “More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us.” Fasting can be a powerful tool in the arsenal of the hungry disciple of Jesus Christ.

Piper says again, “Fasting reveals the measure of food’s mastery over us, or television, or computers, or whatever we submit to again and again to conceal the weakness of our hunger for God.”

Do we find spiritual communion with God sweet enough, hope in his promises deep enough to get us through the dark times of our lives? Or do we instead turn to other things to mask the pain, deaden the hurt, block out the memories that haunt us. What did the prophet Joel recommend?

“‘return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting and weeping and mourning.’

Rend your heart  
and not your garments.  
Return to the LORD your God,  
for he is gracious and compassionate,  
slow to anger and abounding in love,  
and he relents from sending calamity.”

Yes, there is a place and reason for fasting, but it is solely for drawing close to, and basking in, and receiving from the resources of God, not for the attention and praise of our fellow man.

Jesus assumed his disciples fasted. Have you ever fasted? From what did you fast? Will you be open to fasting if that is something you feel God is leading you to do?

**When you fast, fast to be seen by God. Fasting is an intensely God-ward act, so do it toward God, because he sees when and what others don’t.**

Caution: The one who truly seeks God’s glory as he gives, prays, and fasts may be able to do all three publicly without danger. However, the one who is not sure of his motives had best do them in secret.

There are members of our church whom I could in all good conscience ask to share publicly the blessing they have received through giving, or fasting, because I know they would never do so unless asked.

There are a few people whom I love to hear pray publicly, because I know the depth of their relationship with God; in fact to hear them pray is like listening in on one side of a conversation between two old friends.

What’s it all about Alfie, is it just for the moment we live? Jesus said, “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men to be seen by them.”