

WEEK THREE: “Giving and Prayer”

Opening Reflection

When did you learn The Lord's Prayer? Who taught it to you?



Read **Matthew 6:1-18 (NIV)**:

¹“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²“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 others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

⁵“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 others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ 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. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ “This, then, is how you should pray:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,

¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,^[a]
but deliver us from the evil one.^[b]

¹⁴ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

¹⁶ “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to others 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.

1. What do you notice in this passage? What resonates with you?
2. Amy-Jill Levine suggests that Jesus is advocating for a style of giving (verses 2-4) that shows a concern for the dignity of all persons, in which both the giver and the receiver are unknown to one another. The Jewish Temple had a system for this, allowing the rich to contribute and the poor to take what they needed (58). How can we maintain dignity for all persons today in giving and receiving help?
3. “Do not keep babbling like pagans....” Non-Jews often repeated long lists of the names of their gods in their prayers, hoping that one of them might be able to help them. In other words, the more words that were said, the more chance of being heard. Does this way of thinking still persist today? If so, in what ways?
4. What is the relationship between Jesus’ teaching about prayer in verses 5-8 and the prayer He taught His disciples in verses 9-13?



Rev. Dr. Kimberlee Johnson has been serving as the Interim Dean of Palmer Theological Seminary since 2021 and has taught at Eastern University’s undergraduate and graduate programs for over 25 years. A pastor, educator, and social justice advocate, she founded and directs the Prison Education Program at Eastern which facilitates college education for those in prison. She has served internationally and is a strong advocate for women in ministry.

Listen in as Dr. Johnson shares her insight on this text:

Please see me and honor me. Perhaps none of us says those words, but the motive of our hearts reveals if pride is at the root of our actions.

Matthew 6:1 summarizes the theme of verses 1-18 which are warnings against doing pious acts in such a way as to garner attention, affirmation, and reward from people. “Be careful,” Jesus warns, “not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them...” (v. 1). Then he provides three examples of honorable practices through which we can become glory-hogs—giving, praying, and fasting—all of which are particularly relevant to Christians during the Lenten season.

In this digital age where everything from yesterday's lunch to one's recent life accomplishment is routinely published on worldwide platforms for the others to appreciate and in mediums where scholars indicate narcissism is fostered, Jesus' warns against vainglory. That's not a word we hear everyday, huh? Vainglory is that ancient term used to describe our prideful preoccupation with others' attention to us.¹ As Christians who *should* do good deeds, Jesus challenges us to examine the motives of our hearts. Are we overly concerned about appearing to be Christ-like people, or concerned about actually being like Jesus? Are we obsessed with cultivating an image? Are we constantly publicizing our works? Are we easily offended if our great works get few likes on social media? Do we find ourselves trying to outperform those around us? Is the desire for human approval—from parents, employers, teachers, church members—impacting what we decide to do and how we do it? Jesus' use of hyperbole like “go into your secret closet” describes the need for believers to have a relationship with God that is not performative but devotional, that does not draw attention to us but to God.

What does this mean for the Church at large? Jesus states in Matthew 5:16 that His followers should let their lights shine in order that their deeds be seen and God may be glorified. God—not people. At a time when church attendance is declining and Pew Research Center is projecting a decline of U.S. Christians to below 50% of the population by 2070 if current trends persist,² will remaining churches increase efforts to make their piety known and their concern for community evident? If so, Matthew 6:1-18 invites the Church to contemplate the questions, “To what end? With what motive?” The beatitudes, and this passage in particular, remind us that the Kingdom of God belongs to the lowly and the sincere. And so the body of Christ ought to model a piety that is sincere and a model of outreach that centers and magnifies the goodness of God, rather than itself.

1. What did you hear Dr. Johnson say? Did anything challenge or inspire you?

¹ [Rebecca Konyndyk De Young](#) provides an excellent overview of vainglory in her books, *Vainglory* (2014) and *Glittering Vices* (2019).

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>

2. Dr. Johnson draws attention to this paradox: “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16) and “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them” (Matthew 6:1). What does it look like to, in Dr. Johnson’s words, “model a piety that is sincere and a model of outreach that centers and magnifies the goodness of God, rather than itself”? How might you embody that? How might the church?
3. If you could ask Dr. Johnson one question, what would it be?



At the heart of the matter

Bonhoeffer says that we are not to hide our light from other people, but from *ourselves*. “Genuine love is always self-forgetful in the true sense of the word” (Bonhoeffer, 178).

1. What does it mean to be self-forgetful? Do you find this difficult? Why or why not? How can we practice this more intentionally?
2. What is the reward (verses 4, 6, 18) for practicing acts of piety (prayer and fasting) and acts of mercy in secret?

Closing Reflection

“Prayer suggests a relationship: regardless of how angry we may be with God...prayer says that we are still connected. Prayer in anger is *not* hypocrisy; it is honesty. Prayer that asks ‘why’ is *not* a sign of disbelief; it expresses our human resistance to chaos” (Amy-Jill Levine, 60).

How does this thought encourage you this week? What emotions or feelings might this give you “permission” to offer to God?