

Matthew 6:14-15 NLT - 14 "If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. 15 But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.

3. Fasting

The third practice addressed here is fasting. Once again, we are warned not to be hypocrites on display for the approval of others. For the third time we are told that we can either be rewarded by the world, or the Lord.

Matthew 6:16-18 NLT - 16 "And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. 17 But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. 18 Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

As Jesus said, "When you give", and "when you pray" he says, "when you fast." These practices are not exceptional but expected to be integrated into our life of faith. John Piper describes fasting this way, "We fast from something good, like food, in exchange for something greater — namely, God."

Have you ever fasted? Is so, what would you say was the purpose of your fasting? Describe what you gained from your fast.

Wrap Up

The observance of spiritual disciplines including generosity, prayer and fasting should be a natural part of our Christian lives. They should flow from a heart aligned with God, not from seeking the praise of men.

Memory Verse

"Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven..."

-Matthew 6:1-4. NLT

PRAYER (20 MIN)

Ask your group to pray for you regarding one area where you can apply this study in your life: _____

Pray for your group members' needs. _____

Challenge- If there is anyone who comes to mind that you have been unwilling to forgive, ask God to help change your heart toward them.

"Practices of the Heart" Upside Down Kingdom- #4

INTRODUCTION

In Matthew Chapter 6 Jesus continues to turn conventional wisdom upside down. He tells His followers their good deeds should not be done to put on display but rather done privately for God alone to see. Although our motive shouldn't be to collect rewards, we should desire to please God, and receive His approval. Once again God is looking at the motives of our hearts, not our outward actions. Our practices of generosity, prayer and fasting should be a natural expression of Christ at work in us.

Ice Breaker (Optional—8 min)

Have you been the recipient of an anonymous gift?

STUDY QUESTIONS (45 MIN)

1. Giving to the Poor

Matthew 6:1-4 NLT - 1 "Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. 2 When you give to someone in need, don't do as the hypocrites do--blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. 3 But when you give to someone in need, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. 4 Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

Jesus statement in verse 1 reveals the heart of this passage. We can settle for the rewards of this world or receive God's reward, but we won't get both.

The first practice Jesus addresses is giving to the poor. You might be aware that Jesus spoke frequently about money, but He spoke even more frequently about God's Kingdom. Both are relevant here. As citizens of God's kingdom, we acknowledge that everything we have or need, including our money, is provided by God.

What is the basis of our confidence in God's provision? (see Phil 4:19, Rom 8:32)

Philippians 4:19 NLT - 19 And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:32 NLT - 32 Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else?

When the truth of God's loving provision is established in our hearts, the natural response is to share our provision with those in need. It is in fact a reflection of loving our neighbor as ourselves. But even the act of giving to the poor can be marred by wrong motives.

What is the motivation we are warned against in Mat 6:1-2?

The poor will benefit whether their gift comes from the hypocrite or the righteous, but the difference is in how the giver is rewarded. The word hypocrite comes from a word meaning an actor or impersonator.

Who is the audience of the hypocrite, and who is the audience of the believer? What is the difference in the way each is rewarded?

We face unique challenges giving anonymously in our culture. Who is typically aware of our gifts to the poor, and what would it take to make a totally anonymous donation?

2. Praying

Because God is the provider of all we have need of, we seek Him in prayer to express both our needs and our gratitude for His provision. But Jesus warns us about two pitfalls in prayer.

Matthew 6:5-8 NLT - 5 "When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. 6 But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. 7 "When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. 8 Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!

What was Jesus warning about in Mat 6:5 and 7?

What are the occasions we might encounter these pitfalls?

How do you think public or corporate prayers should differ from private prayers? What is the difference between the Gentiles hoping to be heard "for their many words", and the repeated prayer Matthew encourages in Matthew 7:7?

Matthew 7:7 NLT - 7 "Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you

Jesus next gives His followers an example of how to pray. This is similar to the prayer He instructed His disciples to pray when they asked Him to teach them how to pray. (Luke 11:2-4)

Matthew 6:9-13 NLT - 9 Pray like this: Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. 10 May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. 11 Give us today the food we need, 12 and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. 13 And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.

In verse 6 Jesus says pray to your Father in private, but this prayer is for "our" food, "our" sins and rescuing "us". Why do you think it isn't for "my" food, "my" sins and rescuing "me"?

As we recognize our need for forgiveness in verse 12, we must also remember our need to forgive others.

In chapter 5 we learned God's will includes loving our enemy and loving our neighbor as ourselves. If we wish to be forgiven of our debts, we should also wish our neighbor (and our enemies) to be forgiven of their debts to us.

How does doing so qualify us to call God "our Father"?

Matthew 5:45 NLT - 45 In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.

What do verses 14 & 15 indicate about God's view of unforgiveness?