

Main Street UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 6:1-4, 16-18 **“Who’s Your Audience?”**

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(4th Sunday In Lent)

Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646
Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumc1.org

“Following Christ From City Center!”

IIIE. MATTHEW 6:1-18 "WHO'S YOUR AUDIENCE?"

Right Deeds & Attitudes, Shame/Honor Culture

E1) 6:1 GENERAL PRINCIPLE: KEEP YOUR FOCUS ON GOD (M).

//5:17-20, Dt. 6:4, Thesis

1 "Beware of *practicing your piety* before men (others) in order to be seen by them; Warning Against Show, 5:48
for then you will have no reward from your **Father** who is in heaven. 5:16, True Goal, Reason: Loss Of Reward
doing righteousness = lived faith, //23:5, Rom. 2:28-29, Full Compensation

E2) 6:2-18 THREE EXAMPLES SECRET DISCIPLINES: GIVING, PRAYING, AND FASTING.

Hypocrisy = Gap Between Outer & Inner Reality

DO **a) 6:2-4 Secret Alms: Not Like The Hypocrites (Short Unit) (M).** //Tobit 4:7-11, 12:8-9, Mt. 23:5

2(-) a1 "Thus, when (not if!) you give alms, = Mercy, Aid To The Poor, Topic: Alms, Trumpet As Brass? Hyperbole
2 sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites (*actors*) do in the synagogues and in the streets, - Ex., Mk. 12:41-44
3 that they may be praised by men (others). Sir. 31:11b, Wrong Audience, //23:1-15
b Truly (Amen), I say to you, they have their reward. Reward = Commercial Term, Fully Compensated

3(+) a'1 But when you give alms, singular you, Only 2 Possibilities: Bold Contrast To Shock Conscience
2 'do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,' Proverb: Utter Secrecy, Again Hyperbole

4 3 so that your alms may be in secret; m. Shek. 5.6, Are Rewards Extrinsic (Added), Intrinsic (Included)?
b' and your **Father** who sees in secret will reward you. Shift, Not Theater But Worship! Promise, 1 Sam. 16:7
//Bab. Talmud texts; vv.1-4, 5-6, 16-18 = Piety Is For God/Seen/Rewarded!

SAY **b) 6:5-15 Praying In Secret: Not Like The Hypocrites (Long Unit).**

Jesus Affirms Public Prayer In 21:3

1) vv.5-6 Secret Prayer (M). Tobit 12:8, Not A Criticism Of Public Prayer But Showy Prayer

5(-) a1 "And when (not if!) you pray, - Example, Realistic Way To Live Out Our Faith, Not Perfection
2 you must not be like the hypocrites; Goal Is Not Privatized Piety, But Right Motive
3 for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, Public Prayer Not Prohibited, Prayer Is Act Of Love To God
b Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. Warning: Jewish Ostentation

6(+) a'1 But when you pray, Honest Prayer Must Be Vertical
2 go to your room and shut the door and pray to your **Father** who is in secret; 2 Kgs. 4:33-34, Dan. 6:11
3 b' and your **Father** who sees in secret will reward you. Promise, Melkita Ex. 15:25, Philo Life 35,
"You call in secret, but I answer you in public."

Model **2) vv.7-15 Concise And Confident Kingdom Prayer (M + Q).** Polytheism = Many Titles

7(-) And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; No Flattery, Warning: Pagan Babbling
1) Few Words for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Attempt At Control, Golden Ass 11:2

8 Do not be like them, Elijah 1 Kgs. 18:26-29 (-), 36-38 (+), Positive Example
2) Theology for your **Father** knows what you need before you ask him. Ps. 139, God's Good Character, Is. 65:24

9(+) 3) Right Focus "Pray then like this: //Kaddish, Eighteen Benedictions, //Lk. 11:2-4, Didache 8:2

Our **Father** who art in heaven, ADDRESS Ps. 89:26

10 A1) Hallowed be thy name. 3 THOU PETITIONS

A2) Thy kingdom come, FOR GOD IN HEAVEN

A3) Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

11 B1) Give us this day our daily bread; 3 US PETITIONS 8:11-12

12 B2) And forgive us our debts, FOR US ON EARTH

As we also have forgiven our debtors; God Defines Our Needs!

13a B3) And lead us not into temptation (*the time of trial, testing*), 4:1, 24:4-26, James 1:13

b (Missing) but deliver us from evil (or, the Evil One). Doxology: 1 Chron. 29:11-12

Goal of 6:1-18 Is Not Only Private Piety But Pure Motive

14 4) Relations For, if you forgive men (others) their trespasses, 18:23-25, Commentary On Forgiveness, //v.12

your heavenly **Father** will also forgive you; //Mk. 11:25-26, Forgiveness Never Earned

15 but if you do not forgive men (others) their trespasses, Block Generosity //Sirach 28:1-2

neither will your heavenly **Father** forgive your trespasses." Needs Free Flow, Warning

Honor/Shame Culture, Honor Virtue Over Honor Precedence = Counter-Cultural

DO **a') vv.16-18 Private Fasting In Secret: Not Like The Hypocrites (Short Unit) (M).** //9:14-17

16(-) a1 "And when (not if!) you fast, Tobit 12:8, Lev. 16:29-31, Num. 29:7, Discipline Of Sacrifice, Humility Towards God
2 do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces See Pharisees, Mk. 2:18-20, Lk. 18:11-12
3 that their fasting may be seen by men (others). In Pain For God! Is. 58:3-12

b Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. Voluntary Non-Required Fasting, Warning

17(+) a'1 But when you fast, //Test. Of Joseph 3:3-4, Did. 8:1, Zech. 7:5, Dan. 9:3. 2 Sam. 14:2, Wash/Oil = Normal Activity
2 anoint your head and wash your face, (18) that your fasting may not be seen by men (others) + Example, Ps. 104:15

3 but by your **Father** who is in secret; Father (10x), Secret (6x), Presumes God's Omniscience, On Grace See

b' and your **Father** who sees in secret will reward you. Reward, God Knows Our Hopes For Happiness

A Brief Treatment Of Matthew 6:1-4, 16-18

The next section of the Sermon on the Mount is IIIE. 6:1-18. It is the central unit of the sermon as a whole. As in the preceding section (IIID. 5:17-48), there is a thesis using the word *righteousness* (5:17-20 // 6:1) followed by six sections (vv.2-4, 5-6, 7-8, 9-13, 14-15, 16-18). The new righteousness is now extended from a new interpretation of Torah (5:21-48) to the three pillars of Jewish practice (alms-giving, prayer, and fasting). That these three are present in Tobit 12:8-10 indicates Jesus is correcting classic Jewish practices, not offering new ones. In an honor-and-shame culture in which public perception was everything, Jesus changes the audience from what people see and applaud to what God sees and rewards. We live *Coram Deo*, before the invisible God *who is in secret*, who *sees in secret*, and who *rewards*. Each disciple, while living in community, is to have a secret and direct relationship of love and devotion with the Father. When each practice the secret life of devotion, the whole community is indirectly strengthened, and when we play only to one another, God goes into eclipse and the community crumbles internally.

The outline of 6:1-18 falls into two parts: 1) a thesis (v.1), and 2) an exposition in three examples, two that are short and act as frames (a. vv.2-4 on alms // a' vv.16-18 on fasting) and a long one on prayer at the center (b. vv.5-15). This places the Lord's Prayer (vv.9-13) at the center of the center of the center. The jewel is well set! To move into this prayer is to risk seeing the world through Jesus' eyes. A second ordering consists of three sections (vv.2-4 on alms, vv.5-6 on prayer, vv.16-18 on fasting), each with the same eight parts in two stanzas: 1. the discipline, 2. a negative example of display, 3. the negative motive of praise, 4. the loss of reward from God // 1' the discipline restated, 2' an alternative practice of secrecy, 3' the positive motive of secrecy, 4' a bestowal of reward from the God who sees our focus. Jesus' argument is not with the practices but their misuse to increase human honor. They are worship, not theater. Alms relieve the poor and participate in God's compassion; prayer is a conversation in which we are drawn deeply into God's purposes; fasting is a means of humility and repentance before God. Whatever the rewards, they are first intrinsic. The goal, as in the apt phrase of Todd Hunter, is to be *a cooperative friend of God* in following Jesus. To be transformed is the reward; we get to know and work with God in the new realities of the kingdom. Tying the unit together are the terms *Father* (10x) and *secret* (6x). That the only parallels are the Lord's Prayer (Mt. 6:9-13 // Lk. 11:2-4) and the brief comment on forgiveness (Mt. 6:14-15 // Mk. 11:25-26) indicate the compilation and editing of this material are thoroughly Matthean.

Jesus assumes a relationship with the Father leads to practices that find expression on three axes: horizontally (alms), vertically (prayer), inwardly (fasting). He warns that *doing righteousness* (i.e. deeds of piety or disciplines) is not for building a public resume. Motive matters. In a culture where honor and reputation were sought by all, Jesus' is counter-cultural. His teaching is pithy and laced with hyperbole. Don't *toot your own horn* when giving to the poor; be so discrete your left hand isn't aware what your right is doing, and the God who *sees in secret* will not forget you. So with prayer. Don't be like an actor who plays before an audience of many; let your audience be the Father alone, and the script is provided (vv.9-13). Come into alignment with the God of Jesus and watch what happens! There was only one required fast, the Day of Atonement, yet voluntary fasting had become common as an expression of repentance and hunger for God. That disciples were not to fast during Jesus ministry since it was the rolling feast of God's kingdom but were to return to fasting after he was taken away in death and resurrection, is clear (9:14-17). Fasting, the voluntary discipline of going without food for a time, is an expression of grief over the state of the world and of our lives. Avoid display; look normal! The reward of repentance is fresh intimacy.

THE RIGHT AUDIENCE?

“... and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

There is delight in a secret relationship with the Almighty.

M A T T H E W 5 : 4 b

It was a huge breakthrough. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Commander Joe Rochefort broke the Japanese codes. From an intelligence base on Oahu, he predicted an attack on Midway for June 3, 1942. On June 4 the United States surprised the Imperial Navy with its first defeat in 350 years. Four carriers, one cruiser, 2500 men, 322 aircraft, and the best of their pilots were lost over four days. The tide turned; Japan never recovered momentum, and Rochefort never received proper credit. Staff in D.C. falsified reports and claimed the fame, even though they predicted an attack on June 10, a week later. Washington sealed the records for 40 years. The true hero was moved from intelligence and assigned to a dry dock in Frisco. In his book *Deceit at Pearl Harbor*, Ken Landis tells of a note on Rochefort's desk; it read: “We can accomplish anything providing no one cares who gets the credit.” “That,” says Landis, “was the attitude that won the battle of Midway.”¹

This story highlights a character quality that stands out in our world of image management and celebrity seeking, where style is substance and visibility virtue. Some label it modesty, others humility. Whatever the name, the measuring stick is internal and vertical, not external and visible. The right thing to do is the right thing to do, particularly if no one's looking, because there is One who's always observing, One who- as Jesus said- *is in secret* and *sees in secret*,² the fancy names for which are God's attributes of *omnipresence* and *omniscience*.³ Our God is an everywhere all-

¹ Edited from PreachingToday.com search under Mt. 6:1-4.

² 6:17b.

³ For a summary of John's Wesley's teaching on these attributes and their preservation in our *Articles of Religion*, see Thomas Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), Vol. 1, “God and Providence,” 41-44, 53-55.

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the-time God, a know-it-all God and a see-it-all God, One from whose gaze we can never escape! In paraphrase of Psalm 139, verse 8: “If I go the church, there you are, and if I run off to some prodigal pigpen, there you are even before I arrive.”

Our God is fully aware of all there is to know, not just outward actions but our internal states, our thoughts and desires, even the ones that escape our attention. There is a depth and complexity in us we do not see, but God does! We are open books to the divine reader who invites us to invite him into the writing of life’s chapters as our co-author. Life with Jesus is life unfolding under divine editing and inspiration because God loves a good story with genuine characters and all sorts of heart-stopping, high-stakes drama;⁴ no clones allowed, no cookie-cutter saints, and a fresh page before us every morning. How often I pray, “You, O God, know me full well; that you love me anyway is beyond reason, and that is my hope.” Then sometimes a second prayer, “I am at your disposal. What story shall we write today?”

Precisely because he know it’s the best way to live, Jesus calls all his followers to nurture a *secret* relationship with God the Father, a life demonstrated in the compassion of alms, in an ongoing conversation with the Lord’s Prayer as the template, and in the self-control and repentance that accompany fasting, but then to leave to God the management of what others think about us. And if he hides you away in obscurity, it’s no loss; and if he puts you on display, it’s no distraction because either way you’re the same person who has *this trust thing* going on with God which is its own reward.⁵ There are people, I am told, who actually do what Jesus said; they *seek first the kingdom of God* and find God more than able to provide on-time delivery for whatever they need to stay faithful.⁶ And if I know the God and

⁴ On the importance of genuine drama in the Christian life, see J.P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), Chapter 1, “The Hunger for Drama in a Thin World,” 17-37.

⁵ The Wesley Covenant Prayer (*Hymnal*: 607) comes to mind, “I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, exalted for you, or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing: I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal. And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”

⁶ 6:33.

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Father of Jesus, and if I pay attention to the relationship by carving out *secret time*, it will soon show up in public along three axes: *horizontally* as care for the poor,⁷ *vertically* as a lifelong journey into the depths of the Lord’s Prayer, and *internally* through one of the forms of repentance which is fasting. I live in and identify with a broken world through the resources of compassion, prayer, and self-denial. The Jews knew this and- at their best- had been practicing these three disciplines as foundational for hundred of years.⁸ But because sin spoiled everything and shaped a culture where public image and receiving honor while avoiding shame was literally everything,⁹ they- and most especially the disciples- needed correction on who the primary audience was, and it wasn’t the opinions of people. It’s why Jesus opens with the word *Beware* as if something dangerous was about to be exposed. It was. They’d been doing religion for the wrong audience and keeping score on one another. They’d learned to play to the crowds and quit listening to the quiet voice that said, “Remember me? Your forgotten God? I am your audience.”¹⁰

Each of us has a private life and an inner world. Only we know the inward map, and only God who sees the heart knows the unexplored depths for which we have no map. We know in part, but we are already fully known to the eye of our heavenly Father with whom there are no secrets, therefore no privacy.¹¹ We are naked before God, therefore highly vulnerable. What we think and feel, what we hope for, our besetting sins, the passions that drive us, our fears, and what we dream about at

⁷ See Ben Witherington, III, *A Shared Christian Life* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2012), Chapter 9, “The Works of Charity as Spiritual Formation,” 147-177.

⁸ The Book of Tobit 12:8-10 lists prayer, fasting, and alms as our text does; thus, they were basic to second temple Judaism. Tobit is a deuterocanonical book in the Roman Catholic but not the Protestant canon. The date of composition is 225-175B.C.

⁹ On the dynamics of an ancient honor and shame culture, see Ben Witherington, III, *Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 140. See Charles Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (Columbia, SC: USC Press, 2004), 107 on how *precedence* honor (inherited public status) and *virtue* honor (good works in the sight of a divine being) differ. For Jesus to put such weight on secrecy is an indicator he is after virtue honor among his followers.

¹⁰ On the false self, see Albert Haase, O.F.M., *Coming Home To Your True Self: Leaving The Emptiness Of False Attractions* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2008).

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

night. Each of us is an irreducible mystery of layer upon layer, which is at least part of what it means to be made in the image and likeness of a God who can never be exhausted. You are not a problem to be solved; you are a mystery to be explored in concert with the One who made you and offers you a remake in Jesus Christ.

There are ways to heighten our awareness of the inner world. If we take up silence and solitude, which is a form of fasting from distractions- including people- the inner world eventually bubbles to the surface.¹² If we take up journaling, which is the discipline of setting up a leisurely correspondence with your own soul, it comes out on paper. If we open our heart to a friend or pastor, which is spiritual direction, they may see what we do not and offer insight and encouragement.

One of the benefits of spiritual disciplines is that they are self-revelatory. The discipline of voluntary fasting reveals all the things we are attached to in order to feel good; secret giving reveals our attitude towards money and security. Prayer is being vulnerable with God and risks God speaking back, which can be startling when it happens. Your thoughts are interrupted; you know you've been addressed. It's distinctive, and often funny; I sometimes laugh, but sometimes I cringe. If you are not aware of this dynamic, spend some time with John 10:27, "My sheep *hear my voice*, and I know them, and they follow me...."

I remember one Thursday in Georgetown. It was the last night of Bible school. After the children sang and my heart was warmed by their naive faith, an offering was taken, almost as an afterthought. I heard *The Voice* nudge me, "Empty your wallet out of gratitude." I didn't know how much cash I had, so I looked, and there was a single crisp twenty. I quickly argued myself out of generosity since I was already a tither, and at that very moment I was leaning up to put my wallet back into my pocket, the man behind me - a disabled man who was not a member of the church and had very little money- leaned over my pew from behind and dropped in a twenty without even breaking the conversation about fishing he was having with a man sitting next to me. I winced; my disobedience was exposed to me alone by divine timing. I gave it later, but the joy was gone; it was now repentance. If you pray, God will speak; if you fast you will develop new hungers, and if you seek the virtue of generosity, God

¹² On the soul-shaping power of solitude and silence, see Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1998), 357-364. On the loss of solitude in the digital world, see Mark Fischetti's interview of Dr. Sherry Tuckle of M.I.T., "The Networked Primate," *Scientific American*, Sept. 2014.

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will expose all the cheapskate hidden in your little soul! Don't say I didn't warn you!

The primary effect of the spiritual disciplines is the formative influence they have on us.¹³ To get a tan, you lay in the sun. To grow fitter, you exercise and eat better. To learn to think, you read and listen and ponder and write. To grow in grace and the spiritual wisdom of the Christian life, you pay attention to which disciplines the Lord is calling you to at this point in your life.

A spiritual discipline is a practice taken up in response to God's call. Some are for all and at all times: public worship, immersion in Scripture, tithing, acts of service, honoring the body with self-care, prayer, witnessing, confession and repentance, chastity and fidelity, receiving the Lord's Supper- the standard package. Each Sunday's worship is a smorgasbord of spiritual disciplines on display. Others are taken up from time to time as needed: pilgrimages, journaling, retreats, extraordinary giving, extended silence, seeking justice, formal counseling if needed, other forms of abstinence and engagement.¹⁴ A physician has many therapies to heal; the church has a treasury of spiritual disciplines through which grace is available.

To work in a garden or on a house, multiple tools are needed; each one does a different job, and with all of them together crops are grown and homes built. Same with our following of Jesus and our partnership with our immediate supervisor, the Holy Spirit. They offer us the use of certain tools, what we have come to call *means of grace*. Every Christian needs to understand the basic theology and practice of spiritual disciplines, just as you need to have a practical understanding of the gifts of the Spirit and the strategies of spiritual warfare. There are just some things you have to know, and I can't know them for you. They can't be delegated, but they can be learned from books and living examples and the school of trial and error.

I cannot change me at any depth. Unaided will is not strong enough to wrench my life into a new path for very long. Change comes through cooperation with the God of grace who has many avenues of approach, and the name for that cooperation is one or more of the disciplines that are grounded in Scripture and proven in church tradition. Spiritual disciplines are places I am saying a deliberate Yes to God. Of

¹³ On spiritual disciplines as *means of grace*, see Witherington, *A Shared Christian Life*, Chapter 6, "The Believer and the Means of Grace," 81-106.

¹⁴ Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, lists 62 possibilities!

themselves they make nothing happen; in fact, each contains its own temptation to pride and self-deception, as Jesus noted. They work when God works through them.

Here a story come to mind. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach once said to a student, "Full experiences of God can never be planned or achieved. They are spontaneous moments of grace, almost accidental."

The disciple responded, "Esteemed Rabbi, if God-realization is just accidental, why do we work so hard doing all these spiritual practices?"

The rabbi answered, "To be as accident-prone as possible."¹⁵

This story leaves us with the insight that the benefit of spiritual disciplines is always indirect. They hold us open to the surprising work of God, and the result from God's side is always out of proportion to the effort from ours. It takes energy to respond to God's grace, but even the desire to take up the effort is itself a gift which can be refused. The God who offers the discipline also offers the desire to take it up and the ability to persevere. John Ortberg gives us a visual image to understand the interplay of what only God can do and what we must do with God's aid. He writes:

“Significant human transformation always involves training, not just trying. Spiritual transformation is a long-term endeavor. It involves both God and us. I liken it to crossing an ocean. Some people try, day after day, to be good, to become spiritually mature. That's like taking a rowboat across the ocean. It's exhausting and usually unsuccessful.

Others have given up trying and throw themselves entirely on *relying on God's grace*. They're like drifters on a raft. They do nothing but hang on and hope God gets them there.

(But) neither trying nor drifting are effective in bringing about spiritual transformation. A better image is the sailboat, which if it moves at all, is a gift of the wind. We can't control the wind, but a good sailor discerns where the wind is blowing and adjusts the sails accordingly.”¹⁶

¹⁵ PreachingToday.com search under *spiritual disciplines*.

¹⁶ Idem.

TURNING TO THE TEXT¹⁷

If we aim at being followers, it's important to admit Jesus knows what he's talking about. He's the expert; if it disagrees with him, it's wrong; and if it coheres with what he says, then it contains a measure of truth no matter where it came from. This is how we deal with other religions and philosophies. We are clear on the center and open around the edges. Jesus Christ is the living center around which life is rightly organized. And make no mistake, what he's aiming at is our transformation, for us to become a new kind of kingdom people whose life together makes his message available and credible; people need to see him reflected through us as a whole.

I look up at the beauty of the night sky, but not often. I'm so focused on tasks and spend so little time outside I forget there are a moon and stars on display each night. Months go by. Then, all of a sudden, I look up, "Stars and moon, I forgot you were there; the cosmos is a large place. I'm nothing but a mole burrowing in the earth. Have mercy on me, O Lord." Same with God. Christians go days, even weeks or months, so busy we pay no attention to the God who is there. Then we look up or look inward or get a divine tap on the shoulder and are startled at the One we've ignored. This is one of the many meanings of being a sinner and experiencing the debilitating effects of spiritual amnesia. We forget the One who's always there.

But for Jesus this was not a problem. It's why we call him Sinless and Savior and Rabbi and Lord and why the Nicene Creed states he is *one in substance* with the Father and the Spirit. He lived in our world, was more aware of its depths than we are, but in the abiding center of his attention was the person of the Father whom he always obeyed and the presence of the Spirit he always followed in order to obey. So that when he spoke to his followers of receiving a *reward from your Father who is in heaven*, for him it was not a theoretical idea but a constant experience into which he invites us for show and tell. To Jesus heaven was as viewable as earth and the Father nearer than the closest friend. Jesus lived by vision and by voice; he was

¹⁷ The Standard Sermons of John Wesley, which are doctrinal standards for the U.M.C. contain two sermons on these texts: 1) "Upon Our Lord's Sermon On the Mount: Discourse VI, Matthew 6:1-15," 572-591, 2) "Upon Our Lord's Sermon On The Mount, Discourse VII, Matthew 6:16-18," 592-611, in Albert C. Outler, editor, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 1, Sermons 1: 1-33 (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1984), 572-591.

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divine revelation walking around on foot.¹⁸ He lived in the midst of many but before an audience of only One. He loved people, but aimed to please only One. The secret of Jesus was his secret, invisible life. He was able, as we are not, to maintain full contact on two dimensions at once: with whoever stood before him and also with the Father through the intermediary Holy Spirit. Secure in the Father’s love, Jesus did not need his ego stroked. He had much to display, but no need for show. “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.... *Listen to him.*”¹⁹

The Spiritual Discipline of Loving Charity (vv.1-4).

Jesus assumed, as did his fellow Jewish teachers, that faith in the God of Israel was not just an inward thing, a feeling or disposition of mind, but that it had visible practices and supportive disciplines, two of the most important of which were giving aid to the poor and voluntary fasting. People who know this God do these things. They share their goods; they know that we do not live by bread alone but by every one of God’s words. They sometimes fast from food in order to feast inwardly on God’s secret things. It seems that a little less money and- from time to time- a lot less food have ways of keeping us open to the One from whom all blessings flow. The one curbs our acquisitiveness for things; the other acts as a brake on our out-of-control bodily appetites. This is why the greedy can’t tithe and the gluttonous resist fasting. When you first take up the disciplines of generosity and fasting, you will feel like you are dying! It will surface every mean and ugly thing that dwells within. All kind of stinky muck will be dredged up, and that’s a good thing!

Because he knew the human heart, Jesus issued a warning against the misuse of such disciplines. “Beware,” he said in verse 1, “of practicing your piety before men, in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.” As long as we are on this earth under its current oppressive regime, we will be tempted to play to the wrong audience. But Jesus wants each of us to have a secret life with God, to have a bit of what he lived with constantly and to find a delight no one can take away. This is the sweet center of faith, not just outward conformity to doctrines and duties but intimacy and adventure with God.²⁰

¹⁸ See John 5:19-30 for Jesus’ self-description of his mode of operations.

¹⁹ Mark 1:11, 9:7.

²⁰ On this theme, see Roger E. Olson and Christian Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism: Reviving and Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

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Douglas Coupland is the postmodern literary icon who coined the term *Generation X* by his novel of the same name. He grew up secular, but in one of his books he discloses a spiritual quest common to many. He writes:

“Now, here is my secret. I tell it to you with an openness of heart I doubt I shall ever achieve again.... My secret is that I need God, that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.”²¹

A good bit of my time is taken up with the poor, the materially poor and those who admit they are poor in spirit. I take it as a compliment the Lord sends them my way, and when I feel overwhelmed with their stories and needs it drives me to prayer. Like Douglas Coupland, they need God, and I do too! So when God puts a poor person of either category in your path, it’s an opportunity from heaven, and if you see it as anything else- as an embarrassment or an interruption- you’ve lost touch with the heart of Jesus. Some need food, others medicine; all need time, a listening ear, a sense of respect, the guidance of Scripture, much prayer and encouragement. Greenwood is full of poor, unchurched people no one is reaching. Some have empty bank accounts and some have full, and both are poor.

Jesus did not say *if* you give alms, but *when*, and he was speaking to the disciples. Jesus expects his folk to have enough to give away. Helping the poor, not just through taxes and institutions and social service programs, but personally and face-to-face is the responsibility of every disciple. If you are not personally involved with anyone on the desperate edge of life to the point that their face and tears fills your prayers, you are becoming increasingly distanced from God’s heartbeat.

The quickest way I know to relieve spiritual boredom and to recover the joy of the Lord is to acquaint yourself with someone in real need, not just as a project but one as beloved of God as you are. It makes prayer edgy and real; it makes the Bible come alive; it makes the gifts of the Spirit necessary equipment instead of optional extras. It raises all sorts of social justice questions for which slogans and ideologies of the left and the right are inadequate. We don’t have a homeless problem in America, we have a love problem in the church. Too many of God’s people are

²¹ *Life After God* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994).

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hiding and hoarding in fear rather than helping in faith. Jesus assumed we would all be involved with the poor who need our friendship and our faith and our wisdom about time and money and life management. His only concern was that we not play to the wrong audience. It's not about building a resume but about being a secret partner with God. No trumpet fanfares, no keeping score with your conscience. God knows, and that's enough to have a grand ole time together doing the kingdom stuff!

So what is Jesus after? He's after a people so transformed by the kingdom that engaging the poor is something they no longer have to think about. It's so much a habit that they're not aware of doing it any longer, like riding a bike or knitting. They are so lost in the work that the impossible has happened: *their left hand does not know what their right hand is doing*. C.H. Spurgeon put it this way:

“Let us hide away our charity- yes... even from ourselves. Give so often, and so much as a matter of course, that you no more take note that you have helped the poor than that you have eaten your regular meals. Do your alms without whispering to yourself, ‘How generous I am!’ Do not thus attempt to reward yourself. Leave the matter with God, who never fails to see, to record, and to reward. This is the bread, which eaten by stealth, is sweeter than the banquets of kings. How can I indulge myself today with this delightful luxury?”²²

Jesus is not trying to make your life miserable and narrow, just the opposite. We are heirs of the riches of the kingdom. But neither can we have what we want on our terms. If you want kingdom rewards, you have to walk the kingdom way, which means God gets the right to squeeze you often that the poor in this world and the poor in spirit may find hope and help in Jesus Christ and his church. The only real reward God has to give is more of himself. At this point in life I'd rather have more of the anointing of the Holy Spirit than more money, a bigger heart over a fatter wallet. All the stuff is his, and there's nothing wrong with enjoying some of it, as long as you don't set your heart on it and think the goal of life is to pile it up and protect it.

The Spiritual Discipline of Voluntary Fasting (vv.16-18).

Fasting was a second spiritual discipline Jesus assumed his followers would practice

²² C. H. Spurgeon in “Faith's Checkbook,” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 32, no. 5.

after his death and resurrection.²³ To fast is to go without food, and sometimes even without drink, for a specified time, in order to humble yourself and give the time to intense spiritual activity, especially prayer. It says I want God more than food, and it uses the pains of the belly to remind us that our real hunger is for God. If you can't do this for medical reasons, I will help you find an alternative with similar effects.

I spoke to a woman who had not eaten in four days, not because she was fasting but because she had no food. She'd lost her job. This is not the fasting we are after; this is the fasting we must work to eliminate. The fasting Jesus spoke of was not involuntary, it was not a weight-loss technique, it was not a means to coerce God,²⁴ and not for display to make other people think you particularly holy. It's a serious denying of the belly in order to draw more deeply on the grace of God.

Speaking of the lack of spiritual vigor in some early Methodist societies, John Wesley commented that the neglect of fasting was "sufficient to account for our feebleness and faintness of spirit." He went on to say, "We are continually grieving the Holy Spirit by the habitual neglect of this plain duty." Wesley required all his early preachers to fast *two days* during the week- Wednesday & Friday- in imitation of ancient practice, would not ordain any who would not keep this pattern, and called a general fast for his followers once a quarter.²⁵ I've practiced fasting off and on for forty years, both as an aid to prayer and as a remedy against besetting sins. I sometimes cry when I fast, not because of low blood sugar but because I see my sins with new clarity and fresh grief. Quietness steals over my soul as true motives are unmasked. I find I cannot fast and remain hardhearted toward God. As we humble our bodies by kneeling, so we humble our souls with fasting. Fasting has the remarkable property of revealing all the things to which I am overly attached.

It is my habit most weeks to fast from Wednesday evening till Thursday after our prayer meeting. If something comes up- say a visit from a friend or a meeting that requires a meal to be hospitable- I change the day or miss that week. It's a profitable

²³ Mark 2:18-20 // Matthew 9:14-17.

²⁴ On the bad theology surrounding certain contemporary teaching on fasting, see Scot McKnight, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 93-94.

²⁵ Quotes from Judith Woodward, "Fasting: Relic or Relevant," *Circuit Rider*, January 1986, 3.

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discipline, not a straight jacket. On occasion I fast for longer periods if so guided. For one year before I asked Lori to marry me I fasted every Tuesday and sought God's guidance for our future. Every day I reap the benefits of that year of prayer in a loving marriage. In times of great temptation I have fasted, once for five days until the temptation vaporized like a mist before the sun. Jesus was in the wilderness forty days; I was in it for five, and it was quite enough! Several times in life I've felt utterly crushed; I held my ordination papers in my hand and almost turned them in and quit. All I knew was to fast, lay on my face, and weep before God until relief came after what seemed like forever. I share my experiences not as a matter of show but to encourage you to follow me as I follow him with stumbling steps.

Not all can fast; some have medical reasons. But they can help the rest of us find other ways to practices the disciplines of self-denial for the sake of the kingdom of God. How about abstinence from TV and media a day a week? What hours might be freed up for something other than mind-numbing entertainment and useless information? Might we then have time to get to know our neighbors and have something as silly as a game night or a neighborhood gathering? Read our Bibles? What a novel idea! How about fasting from the interruptions of cell phones? Or fasting from criticism and gossip forever? A day of silence and listening in which I speak only when necessary and with as few words as possible? Or fasting from consumer culture and asking God to make us content? Don't buy anything for a week. Make do; see what you can do without; see how hard it is to say No to more. Fasting brings focus and intensity to seeking God; it whets our appetite. It's a tool of humility and repentance. As with charity, Jesus words are not *if* you fast, but *when*. There are many good books I can recommend.²⁶

Now to the controversial issue of rewards, which Jesus was not at all skittish about. Those who believe rewards are not a motivational don't understand how we are designed. We remain children before God; our behavior is purposive and oriented toward pleasure. This is not a defect; it's how God made us; we are made for the enjoyment of all things in God, and in this fallen world addiction is when we seek to

²⁶ Some of the best are Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998); Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), *Soul-Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You* (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 2014); Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Workbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2005).

enjoy something apart from God and ask it to deliver satisfactions it was not designed to offer. Our desire gets stuck, and we can't get free. All addictions have spiritual roots, which is why twelve step programs or outright miracles are the only real cure.

But it's OK, I think, to be hooked on God. Jesus was; over him the heavens were open, the Spirit descending like a waterfall. Opening blind eyes must have been fun, even better raising the dead so the funeral director had to return the fees! The disciples got drunk on the Spirit at Pentecost. Divine joy is intoxicating. I did not say addicted *to religion*, which can- in the ultimate perversion of intent- the last place to hide from God; I say hooked on God, wanting more. God has many rewards, the best of all is nothing other than more of the divine life filling more of us. The rewards of seeking God are intrinsic, meaning part of the thing itself. A man who marries for the reward of money is a mercenary; a man who marries for the reward of love is a true husband. One scholar wrote, "The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but the activity itself in consummation."²⁷ The reward for years of practicing violin is the joy of playing a Beethoven sonata or a blue grass tune in which you enter *the zone*, a place of purity and ecstasy where you merge with the music. Nothing is better than the reward that comes from God.

CONCLUSION

In one area of Africa where Christianity began to spread, converts were zealous about daily devotions. They'd find a spot in the thickets and pour their hearts out to God. The spots soon became well-worn; paths were created. Without a thought, one's prayer life was made public. If someone began to neglect their prayers, it would soon be noticed. Believers would gently remind them, "Grass grows on your path."²⁸

Are you practicing the disciplines of the kingdom, or is there grass on your path? What will you do about it? Jesus said, Not *if*, but *when* you give alms. Not *if*, but *when* you fast. That is an invitation to the secret joys of the kingdom of God, and they are freely offered to all who take him up.

²⁷ A.W. Hunter as quoted in Charles Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (Columbia, SC: USC Press, 2004), 106.

²⁸ PreachingToday.com search under *spiritual disciplines*.

THE PRACTICES OF JEWISH PIETY IN JESUS' DAY

Tobit 12:8-10 Same Three Jewish Duties As Mt. 6:1-18 = Prayer, Alms, Fasting

Prayer And It Three Accompaniments

“Prayer is good

when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving, and righteousness.

Deeds

Further Comments On Alms

A little with righteousness is better than much with wrongdoing.

It is better to give alms than to treasure up gold.

For almsgiving delivers from death, and it will purge away every sin.

Those who perform deeds of charity and of righteousness will have fulness of life; but those who commit sin are the enemies of their own lives.”

A SAMPLE OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Recommended: Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998); Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

- A. Disciplines of Abstinence:** These are ways of denying ourselves something we want or need in order to make space to focus on and connect with God.
 1. Solitude: Refraining from interacting with other people in order to be alone with God and be found by him. (Solitude is completed by silence.)
 2. Silence: Not speaking in a quiet place in order to quiet our minds and whole self and attend to God's presence. Also, not speaking so that we can listen to others and bless them. More...
 3. Fasting: Going without food (or something else) for a period of intense prayer; the fast may be complete or partial
 4. Sabbath: Doing no work to rest in God's person and provision; praying and playing with God and others.
 5. Secrecy: Not making our good deeds or qualities known to let God or others receive attention and to find our sufficiency in God alone.
 6. Submission: Not asserting ourselves in order to come under the authority, wisdom, and power of Jesus Christ as our Lord, King, and Master. (If you think of this as submitting to a person as unto Christ then it's a discipline of engagement.)

- B. Disciplines of Engagement** These are ways of connecting with God and other people, conversing honestly with them in order to love and be loved.
 1. Bible Reading: Trusting the Spirit-inspired words of Scripture as our guide, wisdom, and strength.
 2. Worship: Praising God's greatness, goodness, and beauty in words, music, ritual, or silence.
 3. Prayer: Conversing with God about what we're experiencing and doing together.
 4. Soul Friendship: Engaging fellow disciples in prayerful conversation or other spiritual practices.
 5. Reflection: Paying attention to our inner self in order to grow in love for God, others, and self.
 6. Service: Humbly serving God by overflowing with his love and compassion to others, especially those in need.