

The Book of Matthew Study Guide

Chapter 6

It is important to recognize that the Sermon on the Mount is not a collection of random sayings. It is a methodical treatise on godly living for citizens of the kingdom of God. So when chapter 6 begins, it is merely a continuation of His train of thought in chapter 5, and that means He is still teaching about the high standard of inner, not external, righteousness regarding Torah. The key indicator of failure in that regard is if we practice things of a religious nature with the intent of being noticed by others.

6:1-18

In this section he deals with three particular religious issues—giving alms, fasting and prayer. It is easy to overlook the fact that these are all covered among the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) of Torah:

- Giving alms (Deut 15:7-11)
- Fasting (Lev 16:31; 23:27)
- Prayer (Num 11:12; Deut 9:26)

So in keeping with His intent in the previous chapter, Yeshua addresses the need to apply each of these practices with an inner self-control.

It is also easy to miss the connection between vv 1-2. Alms are gifts to the poor. But there is no Heb word for alms, although the concept of giving to the poor is established in the Torah. Over time, however, the concept of alms-giving became associated with the word *tzedakah*, which literally means “righteousness.” This is reflected in the modern Jewish culture where people will have a *tzedakah* box for saving money to give to the poor. So while the word literally means “righteousness,” giving alms or charity is considered to be a way of demonstrating one’s righteousness. And Yeshua makes that connection by warning in v. 1 about “practicing your righteousness before men to be *noticed* by them” and in v. 2 about “giving alms. . . that they may be *honored* by men.”

It’s all about playing the righteousness game. You do something that might be considered as a good thing, but you do it with an ungodly motive, making yourself look good religiously in the eyes of others. When you do that, Yeshua calls you a hypocrite.

The Gr. word *hypokrites* refers to an actor on a stage who would wear a mask and impersonate a character. So Yeshua is making the point that giving money in a way that gains attention from others, is hiding behind a mask that appears to represent a character of righteousness. But, in reality, it is deception, for it is all about gratifying yourself through the praise and recognition of others.

How do people fail today in terms of receiving the praise of others when giving charitable contributions? One way is by giving money at a fundraiser and having your name and the amount announced.

The same can be true when it comes to prayer. v. 5 talks about praying in such a way that you draw attention to yourself, and Yeshua declares that it is equally hypocritical. It is more of a religious act than simply communicating with God. But there is more. In v. 7 Yeshua warns

against meaningless repetition in our prayers (KJV vain repetitions). The Greek word used here—*battalogo*—is not found in any other place in Scripture or classical Greek literature. There are two ways of looking at this word. It could be related to the Gr. *battarizo*, meaning “to stutter or stammer,” which would have the sense of repeating yourself in prayer. But since Yeshua would be thinking Hebraically, it could be related to the Hebrew *batel*, meaning “null or void.” Either way, Yeshua says it is the kind of prayer that pagans do (Gentiles). That would include repeating words over and over again. An example is found in 1 Ki 19:26 (on Mt Carmel) the prophets of Baal were crying out, “O Baal, answer us” from morning until noon.

Pagans considered the repetition of words to be like a formula or incantation that would release the power of the gods. But their words were not answered because Baal was not God. So they were also calling out words that were “null and void.” The bottom line is that their prayers were meaningless. And just like praying as a means of getting attention or a sense of religiosity, it can be an act, and Yeshua says, “don’t be like them.”

With this specific concept in mind, how can our prayers become meaningless repetitions? The danger is in praying in such a way that you have to repeat a certain phrase a specific number of times to get a desired result, which is akin to an incantation.

This teaching is followed up by an example of praying righteously or the right way, in a passage known as the Lord’s Prayer. But in order to keep the continuity of the three religious elements of Torah that are susceptible to hypocrisy, it is helpful to consider His teaching on fasting in v. 16 before returning to the Lord’s Prayer.

Fasting (*nesteuo*, “not to eat”) is one of the applications of God’s commandment to the Israelites in Lev 16:29 to “humble your soul” on the Day of Atonement. The failure regarding fasting attributed to hypocrites in Yeshua’s day was pretty blatant. The Talmud (tractate *Ta’anit*) informs us that the Pharisees would fast on every second and fifth days of every week. That coincides with the market days in Jerusalem. So they made sure to pass through the market on those days in order to let everyone know that they were so spiritual. Of course that also meant looking the part. So the Talmud goes on to describe how they would wear sackcloth and would rub ashes on their heads, thus adding to the gaunt appearance of their faces.

We can we fail in the same way today by fasting in any way that it draws attention to ourselves.

In each of these three cases—giving alms, prayer and fasting—when you do them for the purpose of getting attention from others, Yeshua says. “they have their reward in full.” That means the praise of others provides an immediate gratification, but it does not endure and ultimately it makes no significant difference in your life or the lives of others.

6:9-15

In the midst of this teaching on inner, not external righteousness, Yeshua gives a prayer that is supposed to be a contrast to the meaningless repetitions of the pagans. It has come to be known as The Lord’s Prayer. He introduces it by saying in v. 9, “Pray, then, in this way...” or “Pray, then, like this (*houtos*)...” So He gave a model for prayer that people can emulate.

The format of the prayer is very Jewish in style. The words of v. 9 are similar to the prayer known as the *Kaddish* that sanctifies God’s name. Verses 10-13 are consistent with the petitions of the Jewish *Amidah* prayer of antiquity.

The pronouns are significant. They are all in the plural. Based on that usage, Yeshua wants our prayers not to be used as a means of getting the things that we want selfishly (similar to an

incantation). Instead He wants them to be a reflection of our understanding of what it means to be part of the kingdom of God, which is a community or a body, not individuals living in isolation.

6:19-24

Yeshua moves on from the inner workings of the heart to address what means to function in this world. His message centers around making sure that your priorities are right as a citizen of the kingdom of God while still living under the conditions of this world. Those conditions reach two extremes:

- vv. 19-24 – Being too focused on thriving in the things of this world, not just our “daily bread.”
- vv. 25-32 – Being too focused on not having enough of the things of this world (at least what we perceive to be “enough”).

In this latter section Yeshua employs one of the ways of communicating meaning that was used by rabbis/teachers and writers in the Jewish culture. It was called *kal-ve-homer*, meaning “simple and complex.” This was one of the seven formal rules formulated by Hillel, who was a contemporary rabbi in Yeshua’s day. It was a practice of deductive reasoning. Namely, that a logical conclusion can be derived from a simple situation to a more complex one. Literally the word *kal* means “light” and *homer* means “heavy.” It gives the sense that if something is true in a simple, light situation, it will also be true in a more complex, heavy one. An indicator of this kind of reasoning is the phrase, “much more” or “how much more...”

- v. 26 – light = birds
- v. 30 – light = lilies (both kinds of these living things get by just fine)
– heavy = God will care for us better than these things

6:33-34

“Therefore seek first His kingdom (of God) and His righteousness (having His Torah written on our hearts)...” The Hebrew word for seeking—*baqash* literally means “filling your thoughts about something.” So in this case it would be filling your thoughts about the kingdom of God and His righteousness, not the circumstances or concerns of this world. And when we do that, He says, “all these things shall be added to you.”

The phrase “all these things” connects back to v. 32 where the same phrase is used. There it refers to both the things non-believers seek and we need. So another way of stating this is that when we have concerns, it will all work out if our priorities are right. Somehow the Lord manages to take care of the problems anyway as He sees fit.

Trusting in this way is not easy to do. But imagine what it is like to go through a crisis of any sort without the Lord, without His kingdom and His righteousness to fill our thoughts. How richly blessed we are. And how great the need is to help others to find their way to the kingdom.