

# Praying the revolution—Matthew 6:1-18

**Theme:** Jesus' revolution can only be sustained by a close walk with God—nurtured by habits of devotion

Having challenged his followers to have a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20), Jesus now turns to those 'acts of righteousness' (6:1) that will help to sustain the revolution. Those who effectively live the beatitudes in the world are those whose lives are marked and governed by these secret habits of the heart: generosity in giving, persistence in prayer and seriousness in fasting.

## Questions:

1. why do you think Jesus describes giving, praying and fasting as 'acts of righteousness'?
2. How do you organise your 'devotional life' or 'Quiet Time'? [Share helpful stories around the group]
3. What do you think Jesus means by reward in 6: 1, 4, 6 and 18?
4. If we are meant to be anonymous in our devotions, should we be telling people that we're Christians?
5. Why do you think Jesus talks about giving to the poor and not to the church in 6:2?
6. Are we meant to pray the Lord's Prayer as written or use it as a model for constructing our own prayers?
7. What principles about how we pray do we derive from the Lord's prayer?
8. Do we believe that our forgiveness by God is dependent on our forgiving one another? What does this mean for our relationships in our home group and at church?
9. Have we ever fasted? Did we find it helpful? If so, why? Should we encourage church fast days?
10. How do giving, praying and fasting as Jesus speaks about them here help us to live his revolution?
11. What do we think it means to pray 'your kingdom come'?
12. Is our righteousness greater than that of our Muslim or new age neighbour?

## Your stories:

## Potted summary

Jesus talks about how those committed to his revolution conduct their devotional lives. Addressing the three key areas of giving, praying and fasting that mark the religious life, he outlines how a principle of anonymity ensures that we do these things not to draw attention to ourselves but to deepen our relationship with our Father in Heaven. It results in a community of disciples that models forgiveness and grace to one another  
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# What the passage is about....

Jesus turns his attention to our devotional lives in chapter 6. In particular he talks about prayer, giving and fasting – the three pillars of the religious life of the Galilee where he grew up. These three are important in any religious tradition – whether a formal one like Islam (three of the five pillars – the other two being reciting the creed and a pilgrimage to Mecca) or an ad hoc one like much new age spirituality. We live in a world of religious devotion, so it matters how we practice ours

Jesus' desire is that we learn habits of devotion to God that nurture and nourish our ability to live the revolution he's called us to. And while the focus is on individual behaviour in this section, it's always in the context of the believing community.

He sets out the principle in 6:1 and then gives three examples of how this works in our lives (2-18). Prayer is in the middle of this trio because it's the most important.

Two things to note before we look at the passage:

**i) righteousness**—Jesus describes our devotional practice as 'acts of righteousness' (6:1). This links back to 5:20 and he is contrasting the true devotion needed to live the revolution with the high profile but shallow practice of the Pharisees.

**ii) reward**—devotion reaps 'a reward' (6:1b, 4, 6, 18). Clearly Jesus is not saying that if we do these things we'll be saved. Salvation is a gift from God as he's already made abundantly clear in 5:1-12. Rather he's saying that as we give, pray and fast, so we draw closer to our Father, get to know him better, share his heartache for his world and get caught up in his Kingdom. What greater reward is there?

So, if we're going to embody the values of the revolution laid out in chapter 5, we need to stay close to the one at the heart of that revolution—God. Like the fruit of the spirit that Paul talks about in Galatians 5:22-23, our ability to live the beatitudes, to shine in a dark world, depends on our lives with God being perpetually nourished by him.

Jesus lays down a simple principle which he unpacks in the three key areas of religious devotion. The principle is that our acts of piety should be anonymous, so that our good works are natural, not done to draw attention to the doer, but to God. The Greek word translated 'honour' in 6:2 is the same as that rendered 'giving glory' in 5:16. Anonymity is the key to giving, praying and fasting in a way that helps us reflect God's character. We do these things not to draw attention to ourselves but to grow in trust and knowledge of who we are serving – our Father in heaven (a phrase used ten times in the Sermon on the Mount).

## 1) giving

All Christians should give. Indeed at the heart of Jesus' revolution is a radical redistribution of wealth on the basis of need (see Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 2 Corinthians 8-9, especially 8:13-15; Galatians 2:10). Giving shows that we know that all we have comes from God; it's a token of our gratitude for his goodness to us. Let's note carefully what Jesus says here.

First, he has in our mind our giving to the poor (6:2). In pre-welfare state societies, only charity made the difference between the poor living and dying.

Second, he is not suggesting that God is a kind of escalating investment plan where the more we give, the more we get. The blasphemy of the prosperity gospel, though based on this and other texts, is as far from Jesus' mind as heaven is from hell. Rather, the issue for Jesus is obedience and gratitude, seeking the Kingdom of God (which he will come on to talk about in 6:19-34).

## 2) prayer

The longest section is about our conversation with God. Now we can and should talk to him at all times and in all places (1 Thessalonians 5:17). But if we are serious about getting to know God, then we will set time aside to be private and pray.

If God knows what we need before we ask him, why does he ask us to tell him about it? At the heart of

the mystery of prayer is our relationship with our heavenly Father. Prayer is not an exchange where we put 'all our begs in one ask-it'. Rather, it's a meeting and blending of lives.

So, God doesn't hear us because we're eloquent but because we're honest and humble. And Jesus gives us a pattern for praying that reflects this: concentrating on who God is and what he wants for the world, not just for us (9-10), asking for what we need—food and forgiveness (11-12), seeking God's power and protection in a world that will mistreat us if we live the values of the revolution.

The reality of our prayer life will be seen in how we treat one another as Jesus makes abundantly clear in 6:14-15 (see 5:23-24), teaching that he unpacks at length in 18:15-35. Clearly a sign that we getting to know better is that we forgive one another, show grace as God does—this is truly a revolution in our behaviour!

## 3) fasting

The Jews were expected to fast two or three times a year, the Pharisees did it twice a week!

Fasting can be a Spirit-led act of self control in an age of indulgence and so it's good. Just don't brag that you're doing it. It's between you and God and your reward is that you'll have heard his voice when you break your fast.

### Three reflections:

- there's a **temptation** to play all this down. We are activists who live in the now and get on with it. Let's draw on the rich heritage of devotion and deepen our lives with God
- it's crucial to remember that these are **targets** not conditions of entry. If we want to know God better, we'll give, pray and fast but we won't do it perfectly from day one.
- we're in this **together**—so let's encourage one another in this area of devotion, especially prayer. Let's pray for and with one another and let's pass on ideas and resources that have worked for us and so might help our brothers and sisters to grow in their relationship with our Father in heaven.