

MATTHEW CHAPTER 6

Throughout the sermon on the mount, Jesus is attacking popular religion when it is hypocritical and false. Sincerity of heart, honest intentions, and a desire to glorify God rather than draw attention to ourselves is what he teaches. His re-interpretation of the law and the prophets (the scriptures) is aimed at getting at the heart of God's will, rather than using scripture to bang our own drum, serve our own agenda, or ease our own conscience when the demands are uncomfortable or inconvenient.

6: 1-4 – Concerning Almsgiving

When you give, give anonymously where possible. The more anonymous the greater the reward, for there is no-one but you and God who know what you have done. The more others know, the more you are acknowledged and praised, the less spiritual value you get from the act. Jesus was attacking the religious elite and those well off who would give larger sums of money, even though such giving would not be a great sacrifice to their overall life-style.

6: 5-15 – Concerning Prayer

The context for the Lord's prayer is given to us. Again, Jesus attacks those who make a show of their piety, or those who over-pray because they lack faith in God by constantly having to remind God. In response, Jesus offers them a pattern for prayer in the Lord's prayer.

- 1) Prayer is always addressed to God – "Our Father", and God is in heaven. Heaven is not a physical place but a dimension of reality. Prayer includes a petition/hope that God's kingdom come and will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In other words, heaven is a state of being where life is lived according to kingdom values and structures. God's dream is for the world to be organized and inspired by the same values and structures. Jesus' coming is about challenging people to take up this dream and begin living it in their own lives, relationships and commitments. This is in advance of the kingdom coming by God's design some time in the future, as it is in heaven at the present.
- 2) Daily needs are important and a part of prayer. Bread represents all that we need to sustain life. Forgiveness is also important, for life in society, in family, among people is impossible without some measure of forgiveness for wrongs, or for people disappointing our expectations of them. In fact, when we cannot forgive others, the door of our heart closes to God's forgiveness of us. Love is the casualty in all our relationships.
- 3) Even though Jesus will suffer his time of trial, and those who follow him will also suffer, there is always the danger of succumbing to the evil one, and breaking down in the face of life's troubles. We compromise doing what is right or cave in to defeat so that we lose our dignity or capacity to reflect grace and love. We need to pray for help, recognizing that without God constantly inspiring and strengthening us, we will fall.

6: 16-18 – Concerning Fasting

Again, Jesus challenges hearers to focus on their heart rather than making a show of their piety. In a highly religious society, showing your religiosity is a way of being praised, respected and accepted. Jesus sees how the religious leaders set the standard of showing off their religiosity. Jesus represents a total alternative. Let it be between God and you. What you show to others should be your love, not how arduous your personal sacrifices or suffering.

6: 19-24 – Concerning Money

The key here is who we serve, not so much what we have. Clearly, if we have an abundance of riches and do not share it, we are a slave to our money. But if the focus of our lives is aimed at blessing the world around us, we will give of our time, money, thought and prayer to the needs around us and discover rich personal blessing and joy in so doing. Treasure is where we discover it is. Most people think of treasure in material terms – money, status, reputation, popularity, honours, accomplishments, victories. Jesus challenges us to seek those treasures the eye cannot see or people cannot detect in any obvious way. Again, it is primarily between us and God, and then it moves out accordingly into the world around us. It then comes back to us in terms of rich blessings that money, awards, and honours can never match or sustain.

The eye in relation to our body is like the headlights in a car. Without light, we descend into darkness. If our focus in life is distorted, then all our energies, gifts, talents, resources, ingenuity, intelligence, etc., are devoted to the wrong things.

6: 25-34 – Do not Worry

Jesus challenges his audience not to worry. These are people who have plenty to worry about, as does Jesus. But he sets the example for others to follow. We worry about legitimate things – what we will eat, what we will wear, where we will live, how we will pay the bills, our health, our work, our families, our communities and world. We worry because we care and because we are human and therefore have basic needs.

But think about what worry does in our lives. It diminishes our capacity to focus, to move forward, to trust, to walk with others, to let them into our own lives, to contribute to others and receive a blessing in return. Jesus challenges his audience to invert their focus. Instead of focusing on those things we can worry about, let us focus on God's will according to God's kingdom. What we will find is that our worries are put into perspective, they shrink in their ability to overwhelm and overtake us. We are better equipped to engage them, and we find reasons for gratitude and hope in spite of them, which helps us cope with them much more constructively.

Live in the moment and give yourself to the moment, to the person, to the situation you are engaged with. Live life to the full and see how the worries of life will not be as large. Jesus knows what he is saying and he will show by his life how he manages his worries. Of course, this is easier said than done. And so, we pray...