

Prayer

Thank You God our Father for the many gifts you give us even though we do not always recognise them. Accept our thanks for all Your sustenance, each word of help, each surprise and encouragement, and each miracle of grace. May we hold on firmly to the truth of our faith and to the constancy of Your love, and may we praise You every day of our lives. Thank You, Lord God, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: World Politics

Pray for the countries of Eastern Europe, many of them emerging from decades of decline with much hope for the future. Pray for their leaders and the enlarging European Union.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the technologies which aid communication
- Pray about scientific work on the very edges of knowledge
- Pray for people who live on the streets within your country

Meditation

This is the glory of God we have seen;
The joy on the face of a mother with her child,
And the purity of love in a family committed to Christ.

This is the glory of God we have seen;
The delight of those who have overcome their fears,
And the beautiful fruit of forgiveness and peace.

This is the glory of God we have seen;
The joy of new birth through the waters of baptism,
And the glorious work of the Gospel, saving souls.

This is the glory of God we have seen;
The real presence of Christ in the heart and soul
And the awesome difference He makes to real life.

This is the glory of God we have seen;
The beauty and grace of true friendship in the church,
And the powerful message of God's love for His world.

Bible Study - Matthew 6:1-6

¹ 'Beware of doing good deeds in front of others so that they can see you; for then you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² So whenever you give charitably, do not sound a trumpet all around you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. In truth, I tell you, they have had their reward. ³ But when you give a gift, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ 'And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. In truth, I tell you, they have had their reward. ⁶ But whenever you

pray, go into a private room and shut the door. Pray to your Father secretly, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'

Review

These teachings of Jesus about charitable gifts (alms) and prayer follow those in the previous chapter which call God's people to a higher moral code than that taught in the 'Law' of the Old Testament. They are examples of what Jesus meant when He said '*unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven*' (5:20), and what He said may at first sight seem easily achievable. Yet as the teaching unfolds, we discover that these religious acts expose uncomfortable truths about human attitudes, and Jesus calls His disciples to the highest of standards of conduct before God and others.

In verse 1 to 4 of our passage, Jesus' teaching raises some important questions; principally, what is 'doing good deeds' or giving 'charitable gifts'? In addition, how should we do it in a way that is right before God? It is important to realise that Jesus was talking about giving gifts to people who were needy, which was regarded as a religious duty in His day, and one which was so highly thought of it was reckoned that the giving of gifts for the poor was not far short of buying 'righteousness' with God. Jesus' teaching was intended to show up the fallacy of such thinking. There is no evidence that anyone in Jesus' day did have trumpets blown in front of them when they came into the synagogue to present alms for the poor, but He was probably joking with His listeners about how easy it was to spot rich people who liked to parade their wealth by giving it away publicly so that they could get general credit for their giving. No-one could buy credit with God, however much they enjoyed the human credit and praise they might achieve for giving gifts of money which were affordable to those who gave them.

There are always those who need the help of others in every time and place, and it is clear from this teaching that Jesus expects His disciples to engage in charitable giving. Jesus' advice here is to give secretly, so that you take no credit. For us who live in a world of credit cards and electronic money transfer, this may seem relatively easy to do, but it was not so easy in Jesus' day when the poor needed food or shelter rather than money. The early church quickly found a way of keeping to Jesus advice by getting people to 'pool' their resources so that the poor could be catered for (see Acts 2:43ff, Acts 5:1-11, and Acts 6), but here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' concern was to expose the way that strict observance of tradition had led God's people to practice self righteousness rather than true kindness to the poor; this was not the way of God's Kingdom.

Jesus continued to expose the hypocrisy and self righteousness of religious people, by describing a parody of true prayer. Those who liked to make their prayers public and be venerated for their piety were not serving God (6:5). What Jesus was really describing was the way in which people positioned themselves so that they might have the privilege of leading prayers in the synagogues. This was a social as well as a religious honour which was highly valued, but Jesus dismissed this with the same sad dismissal as before 'in truth, I tell you, they have their reward'. Something had gone wrong between God and His people if prayer had been reduced to this kind of social manoeuvring.

Set against this difficult and sad example, Jesus gave his advice to go into a 'private room' to pray. In the clutch of buildings around a courtyard that formed a 'home' for a Jewish family, there would be a storehouse in the middle of the main building, with no windows. It would not have been a very pleasant place, depending upon what, and how much, was kept there! This was Jesus' suggestion as a good place to go to pray, so that the soul could commune with God, rather than engage with the social manipulations of the

synagogues. We can only interpret this teaching personally, and each of us must find our own private place for prayer where we are alone with the Lord.

It is interesting that this passage contains two pieces of straightforward advice for a follower of Christ, one is about a social responsibility to the giving of help to the poor, and the other is about the maintenance of one's relationship with God through prayer. Both appear relatively easy, but the evidence is that both of them are hard to do effectively and regularly.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How easy is it to give charitably today in the different financial world in which we live?
2. What 'reward' might there be in the Kingdom of Heaven for charitable giving and for praying?
3. Do you find it hard to find time to give to God in the course of a day? How, Where, When?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Giving and praying are both important aspects of the spiritual life, but we sometimes take them for granted. I often feel that these two are closely related. Prayer is needed to help us decide how to give our gifts, and the giving of gifts often leads us to get to know more about the needs of people, and our prayers are therefore better informed. I reckon Jesus knew this, and taught about the two together precisely so that the one could help the other.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *What charitable giving do you do? How can you do more and do it in the spirit which Jesus taught? Perhaps only you can answer this, or it may be something you need to discuss with others.*
- *Set some aims for your prayers this coming week, focussing on prayers for those in need. Do your best to stick with the pattern you have agreed.*

Final Prayer

Thank You, Lord God, for the gracious way You deal with us. You have given us Your Word, and You never tire of helping us to understand it. You have created and sustained us, and always wait patiently to help us. Forgive us for being slow in our response to You and lead us on to become more secure in You. AMEN