

Prayer

Jesus, Saviour of the World, renew us by Your Salvation.

Lord God, Father and Creator of all, sustain us in Your Love.

Holy Spirit, Comforter Divine, touch our hearts with Your Power.

Holy Trinity of power, love and peace and great God of wonders,

Work in us now, and never cease, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: World Politics

Pray for the islands of the far South East, sometimes called the Pacific Rim, which vary from very large to very small. All of them have much potential; pray for the churches there.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those who are disadvantaged because of sickness*
- *Pray for solutions in Zimbabwe*
- *Give thanks for the technologies which aid communication*

Meditation

Great God of Wonders and God of Love:

Create days of joy, when we are happy with life and content in faith;

Create days of mercy, when our hearts go out to all who are in need;

Create days of faithfulness, when we will not let other people down;

Create days of grace, when we look with favour on everyone around us;

Create days of kindness, when our actions speak louder than our words;

Create days of patience, when we are prepared to wait alongside others;

Create days of blessing, when we give happiness to others, and they to us;

Create days of peace, when all is well with the world, and we may rest in You;

Great and Mighty God, create Your Kingdom in our hearts.

Bible Study - Matthew 6:16-24

¹⁶ *'When you fast, do not look gloomy, like the hypocrites, for they leave their faces dirty and unsightly in order to be admired by others for fasting. In truth, I tell you, they have had their reward. ¹⁷ As for you, when you fast, wash your face and present yourself well, ¹⁸ so that you are not seen to be fasting by others. However, your Father, who knows all in secret, will see and will reward you.*

¹⁹ *'Do not stockpile food and belongings for yourselves on earth, where it is used up or eaten by vermin, and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but stockpile resources for yourselves in heaven, where it is not used up nor eaten away and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your precious belongings are, there your heart will be also.*

²² *'The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light; ²³ but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be in darkness. If then the light in you is really darkness, how great is that darkness!*

²⁴ *'No one can serve two masters. He will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.'*

Review

Jesus' teaching continues to compare the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees with that of the Kingdom of God. In this passage, he teaches about fasting (6:16-18) and wealth (6:19-21) and then starts a series of brief sayings about Kingdom values; firstly about the 'eye' of the body' (6:22,23) and then about the impossibility of serving two masters (6:24). At first reading these teachings appear to be just randomly collected sayings, but the closer we look, the more connections we will discover between them.

Fasting was an important way of life for a Jew. What they did was to indicate their fast by covering their faces with (cold) ashes as a sign of mourning and repentance; however, some used so much ash that they looked dirty and almost unrecognisable (6:16). Jesus felt this show prevented the spiritual truth of fasting from being valued, and it distracted people from the Godly reasons for fasting. Fasting was connected with mourning (1 Sam 31:13 Psalm 35:13) and as such it was a proper way of approaching God in worship (e.g. see Exodus 19 and Deut 9:9). In Jesus' day, regular fasts were held on Mondays and Thursdays, and meant abstaining from food and other luxuries from sunrise to sundown; such a time being determined by whether one could see the difference between a white and a black thread! We might think that Jesus was dismissive of fasting here in our passage, but this is not so. He did dismiss the 'show' of fasting, and abhorred the hypocrisy of people using a religious practice to obtain credit in the eyes of others, but He did not condemn it or tell people not to do it. Rather, He told them how to go about fasting properly. He assumed that people fasted, as on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:31), or before the other great Old Testament festivals, but His spiritual instruction was that people should fast privately and without show.

Jesus went on to teach about a different form of hypocrisy, that of stockpiling earthly goods. My translation is a little different because it does not use the more common word 'treasure', but it helps us realise that Jesus was not talking about keeping buried treasure. He was describing the way people gather food, clothes and goods for future use far beyond foreseeable future needs. What happened in Jesus' day (and still happens today) was that if someone stored up more than they needed then over time it deteriorated in various ways until it was unusable. In the storeroom of a first century household compound, the excess gathered would go mouldy or be eaten by vermin, or perhaps even stolen, well before it could be used for the family for whom it was intended (6:20). This simply tells us what the Kingdom of God is not. The succinct verse 'for where your precious belongings are, there your heart will be also' (6:21) explains Jesus' point. Nothing stored on earth can be taken to heaven, because only spiritual things such as the 'things of the heart' can be stored in God's Kingdom. Whilst we live, we face a choice as to whether we give ourselves to this, or to earthly things that disappear when we die. This saying of Jesus is arguably more pertinent today than it was when He said it! So much is at our disposal today, yet we should focus not on our possessions, but on how we prepare for the Kingdom whilst we live, through living spiritual lives given to God, not the world.

The next saying, 'the eye is the lamp of the body ...' (6:22,23), is like a proverb or mini-parable slotted into the text, and it reads like an aside spoken by Jesus before he continued with His theme of wealth in verse 24. It is like Jesus saying 'now you either really 'see' this, or you don't!' Taken like this, the 'eye' represents 'seeing', and the 'darkness' represents not being able to discern what Jesus was talking about! There are other possibilities to the meaning of this saying, but few scholars agree on the details, so I will leave this for further

study. The message therefore is simple; if you understand Jesus' teaching, then your whole body (and soul) will be illuminated by His teaching. If you don't, the darkness of your soul will be truly catastrophic.

This merely serves to emphasise the final verse of our passage today, which is a point Jesus made most strongly. He had spent most of His teaching describing the Kingdom of God, and contrasting it with the Law and the supposed righteousness of the Scribes and the Pharisees (5:17-20). Now he presented His first direct challenge. In the Kingdom of Heaven there was only room for those who had made one choice and decided to live by it. It was a choice for God to the exclusion of all else; 'you cannot serve God and wealth' (6:24). If we find Jesus' challenge too hard, then we will miss out on everything still to come in His teaching and ministry, and there is certainly much more. Clearly, the Pharisees would have known where they stood with what Jesus had said!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss fasting. Is this something you have fixed ideas about? What do you think Jesus is saying about fasting in this text?
2. What do you like to collect or hoard? Is it contrary to Jesus' teaching?
3. Do you believe Jesus' challenge to serve God (not 'wealth', or 'mammon') exclusively is one that we can realistically respond to? In what way?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

These teachings of Jesus are significant and impressive in their scope and depth. They have intrigued people for centuries and many have sought to live by them to the best of their ability. It is very important to remember however, that all Jesus was after was the commitment to live according to God's ways, and the wisdom to know what was contrary to this and mere hypocrisy.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Take one of the issues in this passage which challenges you most deeply, and decide on a plan of action to do something about it in the coming week; fasting, things stored up, or other issues to do with wealth, for example.*
- *This passage has a core message. Read it several times and discern for yourself what you believe this central message to be, and memorise it.*

Final Prayer

Lord God almighty, free those in bondage to religious systems which trap them in legalism, the evil treatment of women (or men) and the brainwashing of children. Help us who believe in You wholly and completely, to honour the choice you have given us to serve you, and guard that, for the sake of others, with our lives. AMEN