

# Right in The Middle

## Matthew 6:1-18

Moving from the first section of Jesus' sermon on the mount we come to this middle section. Here in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives instructions about giving (vv. 2–4), praying (vv. 5–15), and fasting (vv. 16–18). When I first began preaching, I would preach on each of these in one sermon. However, I've come to understand that they are better suited as three disciplines together. I want to observe nine quick points for your consideration. Jesus taught these as critical elements of worship, discipleship, and spiritual communion with God.

### **1. Giving, praying, and fasting make up the center of the Sermon.**

From the structure of the sermon, verses 1–18 should be read as the center of the sermon. Specifically, giving (2–4) and fasting (16–18) form a ring around Jesus's instructions about prayer (5–15), which is centered around the Model Prayer. Because of this shaping of giving and fasting around prayer, we may find that these various disciplines are not as independent as we often think. In fact, to get the full meaning of Jesus's words we should read them together. It may well be that we gain our best access to our heavenly Father when we put these three together!

### **2. I've come to believe that we should read these verses together.**

One could say we read these passages together because they are all in the same location. But I see reasons for reading them as one point of instruction, not three. **First**, Jesus isn't focused on studying spiritual disciplines – He is training new followers on how to properly commune with God. Further Jesus stresses that worship is to be God centered – not hypocritical. **Second**, each section repeats: *“And your Father who sees in secret will reward you”* 4, 6, 18. From this we see that the main point is an approach to worship that is God-centered, sincere, and not hypocritical. Jesus is showing how each element relates to “practicing righteousness.”

### **3. Jesus is talking about “practicing” not “imputed” righteousness.**

We've been introduced to the word "righteousness" in chapter 5 and it will continue to be a theme until the end. His discussion of "practicing righteousness" is an instruction to the way disciples of Jesus and members of the new covenant live their lives in communion with God. In other words, He is teaching—again to borrow later language—how to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel of the kingdom. He is highlighting the way Jewish leaders have wrongly given, prayed, and fasted i.e. Luke 18:9–14, and He is teaching how His disciples will give, pray, and fast. True righteousness seeks first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; it is not for pleasing men and trying to gain their favor or applause.

#### **4. Each aspect of worship illuminates a significant contrast.**

Jesus knows how to divide what is holy from what is common, what is clean from what is unclean (Lev 10:10), and what is evil from what is good (Heb 5:14). So, He uses a series of contrasts in these verses to separate false and true righteousness based on the motives of the heart.

True giving is not done to gain the praise of others; true giving is done in secret where the Father sees all. True praying is not done to be seen by others; true praying is done when we go to the Father to petition needs that extend his glory and supply our needs. True fasting is not done to solicit the comfort of others; true fasting seeks the comfort of the Father and the reward of his presence. So, true righteousness is God-centered.

#### **5. The Father is the focus of Matthew 6:1–18.**

God the Father is the focus of these verses. This is evident by the number of times He is mentioned—10 times in 18 verses. It is also evident by what Jesus says about his Father. The Father invites us to come to Him; the Father is the one addressed in the prayer, "*Our Father*" inviting us to come to Him in prayer; we will appear like our Father in mercy, forgiveness and love 14-15. All in all, as I have stressed before Jesus's Sermon is dramatically God the Father centered and this theme of communion with God should be seen as the major theme of these verses.

#### **6. The primary focus of the Sermon is not many things, but one—communion with God in private and public.**

If this is so, then we should see giving, praying, and fasting as a means to that end. First, these activities bring us into communion with our heavenly Father in secret. But also, because they are actions with earthly benefits—giving blesses those in need; praying does “work,” and fasting does train our bodies to long for God—these actions teach us how to commune with our heavenly father while on earth. This, I believe, is why “on earth as it is in heaven” is at the center of his prayer and the Sermon.

Jesus teaches us how to be heavenly-minded so that we cannot be anything but good in this life. So, the three components in Matt 6:1–18 are three parallel lines of communication with our Father each motivated by the same reality—God is our great reward.

## **7. God the Father is our great reward.**

With respect to giving, praying, and fasting, the motivation is the same: *“And your Father who sees in secret will reward you”* 4, 6, 18. Indeed, this seems to be the main point of each discipline. Heb 11:6 says, faith that pleases God believes Him to exist and reward those who seek him. God’s command to give, pray, and fast is motivated by the promise of pleasing Him. Jesus’s knows the hearts of his disciples, so He is not harshly demanding obedience; He is warning of false devotion motivated by earthly glory. In contrast, He presents the glory of God as the reward.

Here He teaches his disciples, to forsake the glories of this world and to prefer with their whole hearts to do that which will please God. God does not turn hearts through heavy commands but rather through the offering of a relationship with Him and treasure in heaven eternally.

## **8. Practicing giving, praying, and fasting.**

When we come to applying Jesus words, we find that each section begins the same:

- . . . when you give to the needy (v. 2)
- . . . when you pray (v. 5)
- . . . when you fast (v. 16)

Amazingly, Jesus does not command these things. He expects his disciples to do them—he doesn't say "if," but "when" anticipating that his disciples will give, pray, and fast. The more we taste and see the goodness of God, the more we will (want) to give, pray, and fast. So, Jesus induces our actions with honey not harshness. As the true shepherd, He leads His disciples to living water. He doesn't abolish the law, instead He tells us the right way to practice these things. And when we practice them in this way—even fasting—we will learn to love these practices, which in turn will produce greater righteousness. Oh, how good and wise is our Lord! May we follow Him and be true children of God!

### **9. Giving and fasting go together.**

While Jesus motivates us with the treasure of God's glory, this doesn't mean that giving, praying, and fasting are natural or easy. Rather, they are each intended to be difficult. Faithful prayer is impossible without the power of the Spirit, and the same is true for giving and fasting. In fact, each discipline not only needs the reward of the Father; instruction of the Son; they demand a Spirit-filled heart that pleads for God's help.

When this happens, we will see growth in praying, giving and fasting. In a coastal harbor, when the tide comes in, all the boats rise. Likewise, growth in prayer will result in hearts desiring to give and bodies willing to fast. Also, giving and fasting work together to focus our prayers.

Ultimately, all that Jesus says is to bring disciples into the presence of his heavenly Father. It is there where weary disciples find life-giving water. And thankfully, Jesus teaches us tangible ways for us to drink from God's fountain of life.

From all this I learn that if I am not giving, praying and fasting then I am missing the full joy of God's presence and strength in my life. Jesus teaches us that if we are parched and powerless in our spiritual lives, it is because we are not giving, fasting, and praying to gain full access to all the peace and blessings found in a relationship with God that gets ever stronger as we strive to please Him. We please Him most when we obey Him, and His reward is He will draw near to us! James 4:8